

Moorland-Spingarn Spawns A Beautiful, Table-top Historical Tome

By Arnesa Howell



Although an ocean away from his home country where literary and intellectual ideologies mixed effortlessly with the rich jazz and blues of the Harlem Renaissance, a young Langston Hughes proclaimed from Italy in September 1924, “I, Too, Sing America.” Amid rough times — jumping ship to France and Italy from a transatlantic freighter only to be robbed of money and passport and

stranded abroad — a depressed Hughes mused, “I am the darker brother,” and one day “...they’ll see how beautiful I am.” He scribbled these words down on the back of a letter to friend Alain Locke before finally gaining passage back to the United States on a ship with an all-Black crew.

“He had written a letter to Locke...saying he had just sold his radio and was selling everything to make money. And by the way, I

have this poem — I don’t have any more paper — so I’m writing on the back of this letter and I want you to read it and see what you think about it,” explains Donna M. Wells, prints and photographs librarian for the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, of the poem that would be first published in a magazine edited by the architect of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke.

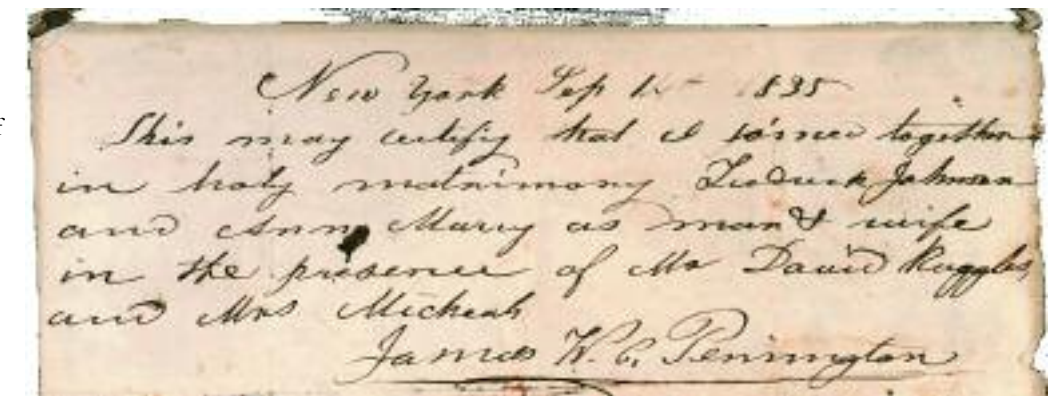
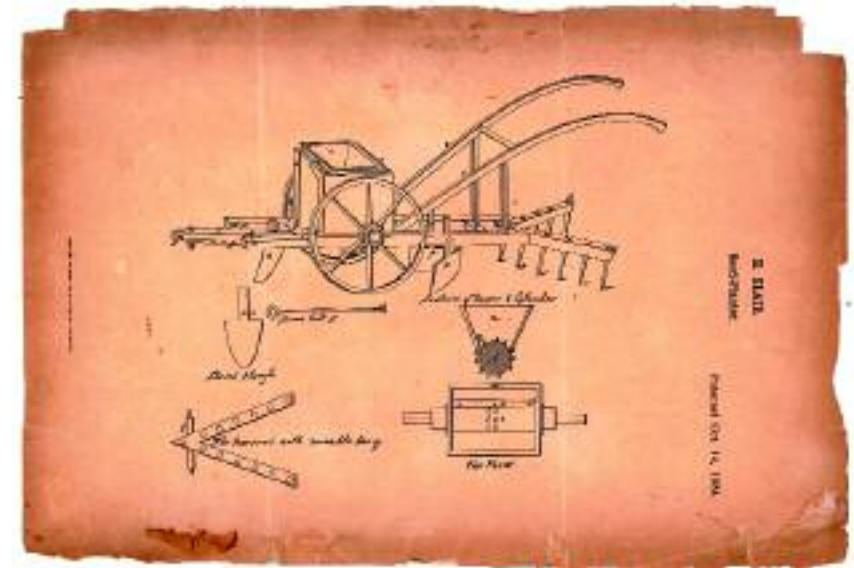
It’s a poem widely known for

the reflections of a young writer longing to be judged by the content of his character, instead of the color of his skin, in America. Lesser known is how this literary masterpiece came to be, until now. This letter — along with over 150 other jewels of history exploring more than 500 years of the Black experience — is showcased in the newly released book, “Legacy: Treasures of Black History.”

Published by the National Geographic Society, Legacy traces Black history from the trafficking of human beings from Africa in the 1400s to the explosion of the Harlem-based Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and beyond. The journey through eras of the transatlantic slave trade, abolitionism, the Civil War, Jim Crow, and Civil Rights are told through essays of 24 scholars from Howard University and elsewhere, and are illustrated by rare photographs and many never-before-seen images, documents, and artifacts from the collection of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. And “Legacy” editors say this is the first time the collected works of Moorland-Spingarn have been compiled in this unique format.

“Regardless of race and ethnicity, it will be a great benefit to anyone who’s interested in learning more about Black history and culture,” explains Thomas C. Battle, Ph.D., director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center and book co-editor. “Scholars will appreciate it, but for many it will be an introduction to the riches of Howard University as well as Black history.”

With contributions from some of the countries most renowned scholars in African-American



history and culture — including historian and former Howard professor John Hope Franklin — “Legacy” offers a narrative of the Black experience that will benefit those both within and outside of academia.

“This is not just a history book. There are things here that will help you move into the next generation. You have to know your past in order to know your future,” says book co-editor Wells, adding that past stories of prejudice, family, and the American dream offer inspiration and capture lessons of hope that can be applied to life moving forward. “Here you can learn about slavery — here’s a photograph of someone who was a slave, here’s a document from that period — you don’t just read about it. You actually get to see beautiful reproductions of



Opposite page: Donna Wells, prints and photographs librarian for the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center; Thomas C. Battle, Ph.D., director.

Center collection pieces included in the book: Henry Blair’s patent for seed planter; Frederick Douglass’ marriage certificate; a 18019th century Ghanaian Kudu urn; U.S. Treasury War Bonds poster featuring Lt. Robert Diez of the 99th Pursuit Squadron of the Tuskegee Airmen.



the items that were created during that time.”

On a Fast Track

The journey to bring rare images and stories from the Moorland-Spingarn collections — such as the marriage license of Frederick Douglass — to the light of day began in the fall 2005 with conversations with National Geographic. The project quickly took shape and was put on a fast track, a roughly nine-month process from conceptual outline to press, to ensure Legacy hit the market by the 2006 holiday season.

“It was a tight deadline,” admits Barbara Brownell Grogan, executive editor of National Geographic Society’s Book Division. With the help of Moorland staff, Donna [Wells] had to go through the collections — thousands of images, photos, manuscripts, letters,

and journals — and could only have about 200. She honed in on the greatest of the jewels.”

Not only did Wells spend months pouring over countless images, but she and other editors worked together to outline the 12 chapters of the book that spanned significant eras of Black history from the removal of Africans from their homeland to the present.

“Once we outlined the major time periods, we asked, ‘Who are the leading scholars in this area?’” says Wells, whose office is crammed with rows of cabinets filled with prints and photographs that are just a sampling of the treasures held at the more than 90-year-old research center. “We wanted to make sure as many scholars as possible had some affiliation to Howard University or Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.”

Greg Carr, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Afro-American Studies at Howard, was among the scholars tapped to write an essay for Legacy. In writing about the transatlantic slave system, Carr says he tried to give a sense of the scope, magnitude, and ending



impact of the slave trade, the “largest forced migration in human history.”

“Up to the eve of the Civil War, Africans of a certain age and quality were worth as much as \$30,000 in contemporary U.S. dollars. Black people were worth more than all the real population and all the money in the banks in terms of dollar value,” explains Carr, whose essay is accompanied by a vivid image of slaves in the hold of a ship.

National Geographic’s Grogan notes the book division has a history of producing heavily illustrated works, and Legacy is just one in a line of books published by the National Geographic Society focusing on African-American studies.

“Telling a complete history of Black America is one of our important missions,” says Grogan, also the acquisitions editor for Legacy. Within the pages of this treasure chest, she adds, there are contributions to history that shouldn’t be lost.

“People will learn how much of a legacy of art, music, science, and leadership exist in America and what contribution has been from Black America,” stresses Grogan, noting that former presidential advisor and Howard trustee Vernon E. Jordan Jr. (J.D. ’60) contributed a back cover quote. “People will be exposed to unknown nuances that have been locked away in a vault.”

Buzz and Fanfare

With Legacy hitting bookshelves in late October, National Geographic is already planning

to host a lecture with Wells and Battle (B.A. ’69) in February for Black History Month. And Grogan expects the book’s success to be bolstered by Barnes & Noble including it as one of its special holiday offerings.

Meanwhile, Howard University is planning segments to air on both WHUR-FM and WHUT-TV’s award-winning television program, “@ Howard.” Also, a book signing with “Legacy” editors Wells and Battle is slated for the HU Bookstore this fall.

Battle hopes the release of this book will increase attention to the wealth of resources available at Howard University, and in turn, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, which relies primarily on donations for its manuscripts division. “We hope that Legacy demonstrates that we are important and that we are deserving of support of all kinds — including financial and technological — to help us to carry out the documentary work that we do, which is the preservation of history and culture,” he says.

Concludes Carr, “I hope this book signals to those serious about telling our story to future generations that Howard University is a place they should aspire and become keepers of the culture and custodians of the memory of our people across the African Diaspora.” **H**



Opposite page: A Wynotta automated doll, ca. 1880; Button from uniform of Sergeant-Major H. Lewis Douglass, 54th Massachusetts Regiment; Desk belonging to Congressman Joseph Hayne Rainey.

This page: A slave deed of sale, April 22, 1844; Bruce’s Stock Company; Cover of the forthcoming “Legacy” book; Illustration for “The Modern Medea-the Story of Margaret Garner” from Harper’s Weekly, May 18, 1967; and Pages from “Slavery in the District of Columbia” pamphlet.

