

# **Son of Virginia**

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A Life in America's Political Arena

By L. Douglas Wilder

In 1981, the Commonwealth of Virginia took its first baby steps towards the modern vibrant state it has become today. For decades, the Virginia Democratic Party had been dominated by “the Organization,” a political machine led by former Governor and U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr. which relied on segregationist policies and the “old boy network” to maintain power and order. But that year, Charles Robb rejected the machine and started a new Virginia Democratic Party in his campaign for governor.

Instead of running against African Americans, Robb reached out to me, the state’s only African American State Senator and other leaders in the African American community, to rally voters of color to support the Democratic ticket. With the help of a heavy African American turnout, Robb won and the Byrd machine was crushed. Within months, Harry Byrd Jr. announced that he would not seek re-election to the U.S. Senate in 1982.

However, this victory appeared short lived. Governor Robb, along with most of the state party establishment, rallied behind Owen Pickett of Virginia Beach to be the party’s nominee for the Senate that year. In his Senate campaign announcement speech, Pickett offered praise not only for the outgoing Senator Byrd, but also his father, Harry Byrd Sr., the architect of Virginia’s most pernicious Jim Crow segregation laws. All of the gains of 1981 were immediately put at risk.

The Democratic Black Caucus, which I had organized, was strongly urging that something be done. First, Pickett was asked to repudiate his comments, and he refused. Next, we appealed to Governor Robb to put pressure on Pickett to step down. Robb demurred, not

wanting to upset the delicate balance of the new and old Democratic Party. Running out of options, I decided to risk everything.

I made it clear to party leaders that if Owen Pickett were to become the state's nominee in 1982, I would run for the office as an independent. My goal was not to win the office myself, but to demonstrate to Democrats that the old electoral coalition in Virginia was dead and buried and if they believed they could win in 1982 without African Americans, Latinos, women and progressives, they were free to give it a try.

Governor Robb wisely intervened in this no-win situation for the party (and his political future), advising Pickett to withdraw from the race, as I had already told Robb that I would drop my independent bid if he did so. It cemented Robb's reputation as a party builder and enhanced his national stature, even after Republican John Warner won the Senate seat that fall.

As for me, I considered the Pickett withdrawal the first real display of what consolidation and sacrifice for the greater good could produce. Many thought that my political career was over. I was a pariah to many party loyalists, particularly in Pickett's Virginia Beach home area. Within three years, however, I would win the party's nomination for Lieutenant Governor against the cries of "Virginia isn't ready" and later that year, defied the naysayers by being elected to that office. Within seven years, I would become the first elected African American governor in American history.

My political career is a series of events like these. Often, I would have to risk everything – or as they say in friendly poker games "be willing to sleep in the streets" – to do what was right

for the people. Time and again, pundits would step forth and announce that Virginia wasn't ready or that, to quote the great Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato in 1984, "I almost think the Democrats would be stronger electorally if they appeared to be standing up to some of those constituents."

Those constituents, of course, are taxpayers and voters – and an ever-growing percentage of the American people at that. It is those people who always stood with me for change in Virginia. It is people like them who stood with Deval Patrick in Massachusetts when he became the nation's second elected African American governor, and with Barack Obama, when he won two overwhelming popular elections as our president.

My book, SON OF VIRGINIA, will use events from my biography to paint a portrait of the changing face of America. It will be a story of constant struggle and conflict, not only my struggle, but also that of courageous people who stood up to decades of discrimination, corruption and greed. Furthermore, SON OF VIRGINIA will be a roadmap for continued American progress in our elections and laws and a stark warning of what may happen – even to Hillary Clinton – if we relax our commitment to this progress.

I will tell my story in this episodic and dramatic fashion because the outline of my biography is already well known. There were two well-received political biographies published about my early political career in 1989: WHEN HELL FROZE OVER by Dwayne Yancey (Taylor, 1989) and VIRGINIA'S NATIVE SON by Judson L. Jeffries (Purdue University Press, 2000). In 1996, the filmmakers responsible for THE WAR ROOM made a major documentary

film about the 1994 U.S. Senate race in Virginia entitled A PERFECT CANDIDATE and I was a major player in that film. Given that I am already in the fourth grade history books in Virginia, no doubt there will be more writers and historians who will try to set down the definitive history of my political career. I am the only writer who can tell this story from the inside and who understands what it means to be a SON OF VIRGINIA.

Furthermore, I am a rare person on the American political stage – one who was center stage as African Americans attained political freedom and power; one who worked with, and competed against, former Presidents George HW Bush and Bill Clinton; one who invited heads of state like Nelson Mandela to our shores even before he assumed the South African Presidency and one who, through it all, maintained a centrist, independent political eye that sees through the paper thin partisanship of our day. This will give my book a historical sweep and a reach into all forums of our political debates.

SON OF VIRGINIA will be to the next generation of politically astute readers what Richard Ben Cramer's WHAT IT TAKES (Random House, 1992) was to the last generation and it will have a similarly long shelf life. Fortunately for the publisher of this work, it will be coming out at a time when there are far more politically astute readers than there were in 1992. Narratives about the heroism of individual political candidates do not reflect the world we live in. As Tolstoy wrote, "the movement of people is produced, not by power, not by intellectual activity, not even by a combination of the two, as historians used to think, but by the activity of all the people taking part in the event." Political upheavals around the world prove this. Only

leaders who understand the changing face of America and the need to make dramatic changes in order to win the trust of the people will thrive in this culture.

I know the demand for this book from the political class in Washington because I hear it first hand from reporters when I appear on their talk shows. The political ruling class in Washington now – Peter Baker at *The Washington Post* (474,000 weekly circulation), Mike Allen and John Harris of *Politico* (4.6 million unique visitors in 2013), John King of CNN – all cut their teeth covering my term as Governor in Richmond. They never fail to mention how eager they are to read a political memoir from me – and no doubt would be eager to help me promote the book when it is published. As one of the few political voices frequently invited to appear on all three major cable news outlets, my book has the potential to reach both Bill O'Reilly's (*The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News Channel) 470,000 daily viewers and Chris Matthews's (*Hardball*, MSNBC) 260,000 daily viewers.

In addition, my stories about seeing Jackie Robinson play in 1946 and, while Governor, pardoning likely 2015 Basketball Hall of Fame inductee Allen Iverson will have considerable interest to sports fans across the nation, and would appeal to the 1.3 million daily viewers of ESPN SportsCenter. I have refused numerous interviews on the Iverson pardon to preserve the value of my story and the fact that Iverson's Hall of Fame induction should happen around the time the book is published will make for strong marketing opportunities with sports audiences.

There will be plenty of fodder for readers on the right and the left in SON OF VIRGINIA. It will have special appeal to inside the Beltway political readers of *Governing*

(85,000 readers), *The New Republic* (53,000), *Campaigns and Elections* (30,000) and *Roll Call* (18,000). It will also appeal to the 1.2 million unique readers of *Political Wire*, 1.4 million *Huffington Post* readers and 2.2 million *Drudge Report* readers.

Of course, this book is more than political analysis, it is also a living history of the new American South and people who have risen from being counted as a fraction of a human being in the U.S. Constitution to the highest offices in our land. In this way, it will bear another similarity to *WHAT IT TAKES*: it will offer mini biographies of Virginians from the past half century, people who have not merited their own books or who never lived to tell their own tales, as well as the cities and towns that have evolved with their citizens. Among those most eager to read such tales are the residents of my home state. Virginia has a wealth of high circulation magazines, which attests to the Commonwealth's high readership and interest in Virginia-based stories. *Richmond Magazine*, for example, boasts a paid circulation of 55,000 monthly. *Northern Virginia Magazine* has a print circulation of 40,000 and a total circulation of more than 150,000. *Coastal Virginia Magazine* has a circulation of 30,000 and an online readership of 300,000.

Stories of the African American experience are popular purchases in public school districts, especially for high school students. The success of *DREAMS FROM MY FATHER* by Barack Obama (Times Books, 1995) is evidence of this large and growing market. I feel confident that *SON OF VIRGINIA* will be required reading for young political science students

who want to understand how America's changing demographics fit with the ongoing struggle for equality in our nation.

While it is often assumed that African Americans do not buy enough books to support a publishing industry, the numbers paint a dramatically different picture. Mass market magazines have been in slow decline for decades, yet two magazines aimed at African American readers – *Ebony* and *Jet* – have astounding circulation rates of 1.4 million and 700,000 respectively. Memoirs by African American authors – such as Arthur Ashe, Sidney Poitier and Sammy Davis Jr. -- have had very long shelf lives. Furthermore, there's an empty shelf where the unwritten memoirs of Martin Luther King Jr., Thurgood Marshall, Jackie Robinson and countless others should reside. I hope mine will help fill some of that space.

There will be those who want to compare this book to *DREAMS FROM MY FATHER* by Barack Obama. As a description of the African American experience, there will be some similarities. My book, however, will be significantly less introspective and more descriptive of the people and places that defined me and the times I lived in.

Furthermore, while my story lacks the unique circumstances of President Obama's, it tells something more universal in the American Experience. It starts with people who were brought to the shores of Virginia, and forced to take part in building the greatest nation the world has ever seen. My family history, and in turn mine, is what became of those people who were forced here against their will, were told to exist as second class citizens for generations and who must still continue to demand a full and equal share of America's beautiful liberty.

Some of the history of what it was like growing up in Richmond during the waning days of Jim Crow was described in Arthur Ashe's beautiful biography *DAYS OF GRACE* (Random House, 1993). Arthur was a dear friend and his descriptions of Richmond are ones I will be proud to echo and amplify. As a professional athlete and symbol of American tennis, Arthur had a diverse fan base that I can't deliver.

However, *SON OF VIRGINIA* will have one important leg up on *DAYS OF GRACE*. While Arthur courageously spoke out on important political issues of his day, I was in the middle of those struggles for decades and can bring to readers a more historically significant perspective on how those issues played out from the outside and inside.

Along those lines, the most similar book to mine was Nelson Mandela's magisterial *LONG WALK TO FREEDOM* (Little Brown and Company, 2008). I met Nelson Mandela on several occasions and was deeply affected by his recent passing. What made Mandela's book so powerful was the way he took himself off the pedestal and brought himself down to the level of his beloved South African compatriots. People come away from Mandela's book feeling that they have had something akin to a religious experience.

I humbly don't expect to evoke similar feelings, but like President Mandela, I believe that a life fully lived must have a place in the public square, even after the greatest triumphs of that life are long past. My book will have more immediate resonance with American readers because it tells a story closer to home, one that is still unspooling. President Mandela and I share a deep and abiding faith in the people to overcome the lazy prejudice of the powerful. The people are

always ready for change, they hunger for change, and if given a chance, they will always rise to the occasion. His book will be an inspiration to mine from cover to cover.

## Chapter Outline

### **Chapter 1: A Grandson of Slaves**

The sample chapter included is Chapter 1. People always highlight two facts about me: (1) that I was the first elected African American governor of a U.S. state and (2) that my grandparents were slaves. Who were those grandparents, and how did they affect my family generations after their gained freedom? On a macro level, this chapter is about my family.

### **Chapter 2: The Boy Who Could Not Sit Still**

It was my good fortune to grow up in a household where asking “why not” was encouraged. My mother stimulated the Wilder children to have thoughts, to expand them and express them. She fortified my desire to read constantly, to speak well, and to participate in the activities the “smart boys” did to showcase their abilities. And speak out I did. If they had Ritalin back in the 1940s when I was a child, I no doubt would have been diagnosed as ADHD. My teachers eventually had to discourage me from raising my hand in class because I couldn’t stop myself from dominating the discussions. This chapter will focus on my parents’ emphasis on education for their children and the peers who inspired me. It will showcase Dr. Jean Harris Ellis, a classmate of mine in kindergarten, elementary school, high school, and college, the first woman African American to be admitted to and to graduate from the Medical College of Virginia.

### **Chapter 3: Sergeant Wilder**

My service in the Army was formative. It was my first extended time outside of Virginia and outside the South. President Truman had integrated the Army by Executive Order, so it also was my first experience not only living with White Americans, but interacting with them in any meaningful way. I fought on the front lines in Korea. I saw comrades and friends die and escaped death through sacrifice and sheer luck. In this book, for the first time, I will write in detail about how a fellow soldier and I captured 19 North Korean soldiers during the Battle of Pork Chop Hill, for which I was awarded the Bronze Star.

### **Chapter 4: The Barrister**

I returned from Korea a changed man, and *Brown vs. The Board of Education* soon made it a changed world. The *Brown* decision opened my eyes to the power of the law to break down barriers and I knew that I had to be part of it. This chapter will detail my life as a highly successful Richmond lawyer, respected and recognized throughout the state. It will also reveal, for the first time, my role in the landmark case that led to the medical definition of brain death.

### **Chapter 5: On the Shoulders of Giants**

Some people dream of holding political office as long as they can remember. I was not one of those people. I wanted to be successful and I wanted to be engaged in public life, but I had no desire to beg endlessly for money and to continually ask for public approval. Over time, I saw that change cannot come from being an outsider and a critic, that real change required sacrifice. I was fortunate to have a mentor in Spottswood Robinson, who appointed me as the Registered Agent for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, upon the approval of Thurgood Marshall. This chapter is about the generation of forgotten heroes like Robinson who made it possible for

people in my generation to dream bigger dreams. And it will serve as a warning to our current African American leaders to do their part to lay a foundation for future success, otherwise the paths that have been blazed will run barren from neglect.

## **Chapter 6: A Life in the Arena**

In 1969, I became the first African American State Senator since the Reconstruction era, the first Event of my political career. This chapter is about the Senate colleagues who took me under their wings and taught me the lost art of legislative politics. I will discuss how, on one of my first acts in the State Senate, I took up the cause to ban the state song “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” and how I learned that a single legislative vote can have tremendous power if you learn how to marshal that power. This chapter will also detail what a political life takes away from a personal life and the toll the non-stop political battles (and continuing law practice) took on my family, including my divorce in 1978. I will also – for the first time – write about my near-decision to run for the U.S. Senate in 1982.

## **Chapter 7: The Breakthrough**

Bluntly put, “they” didn’t want me to run. “They” didn’t want to support me. “They” didn’t think a black candidate could win statewide in Virginia. Who were “they”? “They” were the Democratic powerbrokers — black, white, and all kinds,— who believed their hands controlled the levers of power in Virginia. “Friends” also were included in the group, even a law school classmate, that I had supported for his political office. But I knew “they” didn’t control who was nominated by the Democratic Party of Virginia, and I knew I could trust the people of Virginia with this decision. Many of those same people didn’t want me to run for the State Senate. I knew what to make of their estimation. This chapter will be about why I decided to run

statewide that first time and how I was successful. “They” lost. The people of Virginia proved that someone who looked like me who had a background like mine could win. It will also detail my 30-year political relationship with former Virginia Governor and Senator Charles Robb, a man who, after many years of rivalry, has become a close and trusted friend. For those who follow Virginia politics closely, this will be the most widely cited and surprising chapter in the book.

### **Chapter 9: Trusting the People**

This chapter will discuss the jockeying for Virginia’s gubernatorial nomination in 1989, the attorney general’s decision not to run, the subsequent campaign against my fellow former senator, Marshall Coleman, and how I won. “They” didn’t want me to run for governor or think I could win. “They” were wrong again. I will discuss the so-called “Wilder Effect,” that purported to show how public opinion polls overstated support for African American candidates. And I will go into some of the running controversies of the era – from our staunchly Pro Choice campaign position to the major donors to my campaign, to my relationship with Patricia Kluge, which was the subject of endless rumors during my term as Governor.

### **Chapter 10: And Then You Have to Govern**

I didn’t run for governor to be a historic totem. I didn’t want the job just to have the nice title, house and car. I ran because I wanted to get things done. During those four years, I got things done. New faces were appointed to significant positions across Virginia. Coalitions were built across party lines in the General Assembly — necessary bills were passed. The budget was revamped and a rainy day fund was created and put into our State Constitution. Guns were removed from the streets. But the pundits only wanted to discuss my supposed “feud” with

Chuck Robb and the possible campaign for President. In this chapter, I will write about how it felt to live up to the incredible expectations of being America's first elected African American governor – similar expectations to those faced by President Obama during his terms -- and the intense scrutiny that I placed under even while we were receiving national plaudits for our successes during a major economic downturn. This chapter will also include several pages on the Allen Iverson pardon, a matter that has been of interest for sports fans and writers for many years that I have held back from discussing publicly until now.

### **Chapter 11: Three Campaigns**

For better or worse, people's most vivid memories about politicians are formed in campaigns. Much of my legacy was shaped by three elections held within three years: the 1992 Presidential election, the 1993 Virginia Governor's Election and the 1994 U.S. Senate race in Virginia. Ultimately, my name was not on the ballot in any of these races, yet I played a major role in each. I threw my hat into the 1992 Presidential race at a time when President George H.W. Bush seemed invincible. Virginians were not pleased that I was making this run and I soon discovered that running for our nation's highest office was a full time job and that I was not willing to put aside a job as Governor that I loved dearly. I participated in some debates, scared Bill Clinton's campaign to a degree that he attacked me aggressively in one candidate forum, and showed genuine traction in polls in numerous Southern states. I dropped out before a ballot was cast; but even afterwards, Sen. Bob Kerrey promised me the Vice Presidential nomination if he were to take the Democratic nod and Ross Perot's campaign manager made numerous entreaties about my availability for Perot's number two slot. These are stories that have not been told before.

In the 1993 race, I made numerous efforts to warn Mary Sue Terry about the tidal wave that was about to hit her campaign, to no avail. And in 1994, I took part in one of the wildest U. S. Senate races in American history, running as an independent against Senator Robb and Oliver North. Not wanting to have a North win on my conscience, I endorsed Robb with weeks to go in the campaign and helped turn out the vote to defeat North. The story of why I decided to make this race – and ultimately get out – has never been told in detail. This chapter will gain the most interest and scrutiny from national political reporters.

## **Chapter 12: Remaining in the Ring**

Over the past 20 years, I have remained a figure in politics, both in Virginia and nationally. I helped redesign the City of Richmond's political infrastructure, then, against my initial desires, accepted a draft to run and serve as Richmond's first genuine citywide elected Mayor. This chapter will detail what it is like to remain entrenched in politics even after the peak of a political career has passed and why it is vital for politicians to cultivate a new generation of leaders to take our place. It will close with a detailed discussion of Deval Patrick, the governor of Massachusetts who at long last became America's second elected African American governor.

## **Epilogue: Passing the Mantle**

There was great promise when Barack Obama ran for president. I endorsed him and believed in what he could accomplish. This concluding chapter will offer a detailed but constructive critique of the Obama years. The lessons to be learned from our differing styles and philosophies of governance, and how America's demographic future will soon clash with a political culture that still does not recognize the role of African Americans, Latinos, women, the

GLBT community and others in our national landscape. The people are ready for a continued American revolution, but the pundits cling desperately to the disappearing world that they comprehend. The center cannot hold.

## Sample Chapter

### Chapter 1

#### Grandson of Slaves

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce our featured speaker tonight, former Virginia Governor L. Douglas Wilder. This grandson of slaves went on to become ..." I can't count how many times I have heard some variation of that introduction -- "the grandson of slaves" -- over the years. At this point, I'm somewhat startled when I don't hear it.

It wasn't always the case, but I don't mind hearing myself introduced that way anymore. The description centers me and reminds me that I am not an island. It whispers in my ear that nothing that I've done in life is mine and mine alone. Every success that I had would have been impossible without James and Agnes Wilder.

James and Agnes Wilder are the two paternal grandparents so often mentioned in connection with my story. It's a joy to be reminded of them on a daily basis and to consider them smiling from heaven at where the Wilder name has since dwelled.

Each and every audience I am introduced to speak before also gets a reminder that most American dreams started by stepping off a ship other than the *Mayflower* or *Susan Constant*. I am a son of Virginia and it's good to remind my fellow citizens of that fact as often as possible.

James and Agnes came from slavery, but that is not what they were or are. They were people who respected education and yearned for their children to be educated, they were driven people, they were family people, they were homeowners. They were part of the American Dream

-- Lincoln's emancipated American Dream. They fought to change and morph America by refusing to be anything other than Americans, so they dreamed and did. I have always known that I was the grandson of slaves. Yet by not having ever met any of my grandparents, I never had direct knowledge as to what that meant. What was it like? What it was to exist in a society that said what ours did in the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision -- that those of African descent whether free or enslaved could not be citizens of this nation, but deemed by the court to be no more than "chattel," like horses and cows, etc. I have never reconciled how that could come about in a place that so desperately wanted to see itself as a Christian nation.

To me, the lives of James and Agnes Wilder are naturally where my story begins. I wish it could begin earlier, perhaps with the lives of great African leaders, but their story more than suffices. The greatest gift they bequeathed our family was not anything material. It was the gift of being able to look to the future. To take what God has given you, and to decide what to do with it next in order to move the black and broader human position further -- no matter the obstacles.

When did the first of my ancestors come to the New World? We'll likely never know. An author researching my background in 1985 asked a state archivist when the first of my family was brought to North America from Africa. No words were minced in response: "They didn't keep track of their property in those days anymore than we keep track of people's automobiles today." Actually, we keep better track of automobiles today than they kept of the lives of slaves in antebellum Virginia.

I have no direct memories of any of my grandparents, paternal or maternal, because I never met any of them. No one in the family remembers anything of my maternal grandfather, even his first name. He did not participate in my mother's life. My maternal grandmother, Mary Richards Tolan, died of cancer, leaving my mother an orphan at about the age of 14.

This much is known, though: my mother's family came from a line of free blacks. The Wilder line of the family was not quite so fortunate.

James Henry Wilder was born in Goochland County, Virginia, on November 18, 1838. His future wife, Agnes W. Johnson, saw her first peek of daylight in Richmond, Virginia, a little more than a year later, on December 8, 1839. Both were born into servitude, and knew nothing but that status until President Lincoln's troops liberated the capital of the Confederacy in April 1865.

Again, we know surprisingly little about the upbringings of either James or Agnes. One suspects that they kept better records of thoroughbred racehorses and pure-bred dogs on plantations in that day. It would have been nice for there to have been more formal records of the black people who were helping to build this nation.

What prologue led to their union? Like so many black American families, what could not be remembered and passed on by my older relatives is difficult, if not impossible, to piece together. It's not that we don't want to know. In many cases, we just can't. We can imagine about the decades, perhaps centuries of slavery that our family endured, but we'll never know with 100 percent certainty from what exact soil James and Agnes grew. My father, Robert, never talked

about anything he may have heard from his parents about the years they were slaves. He always looked ahead -- planned what was next, as Wilders still are wont to do.

My family still does have our paternal grandparents' marriage certificate. It shows they were joined in holy matrimony at a plantation, Braggs Farm, in Henrico County, Virginia, on April 25, 1856. As they were not allowed to formally marry in those days, it is a decidedly informal document. It was signed by a "Mea Wilder" -- who that is and why he participated in or allowed James and Agnes to marry we are still trying to determine. But we do think that may be from whom the "Wilder" surname was adopted for our family.

No marriage certificate could keep James and Agnes from dealing with a dreadful reality that faced many slave families: being sold separately. James was taken to another plantation in Henrico, while Agnes and the two young daughters (Emma and Sallie) she had then given birth to became the property of a slaveholder in Hanover County.

Agnes worked in the house for the family and was entrusted with the care of the children -- one of which was severely handicapped and completely under Agnes' daily caring supervision. To this day every member of the Wilder family hears incessant reminders about the importance of education that has its roots in that Hanover County slave master's house. A tutor was brought in to educate the children, and Agnes sat in the same room with them to do her daily sewing. She paid strict attention to the lessons, and as such she learned to read and write in an era when it was legally forbidden to teach a slave such skills. During the evenings, she would return to her own little dwelling on the plantation and share the lessons with her own children.

From before emancipation, the value of education has been sewn into the essence of the Wilder family's being -- we've always known how important it is to learn. That, likely, accounts for the generations-long pattern of reaching and achieving far more than the prevailing times say we should be able to accomplish. For more than 40 years, any number of people have heard me use every public mantle with which I have been entrusted as a platform to extol the virtues of education. That wasn't because it sounded good in a 30-second advertisement. It was because of the example Agnes ingrained into generations of Wilders.

The young Wilder family may have been separated by the cruelty of slavery, but my grandfather did not allow that to completely disconnect him from his wife and children. On Sundays he was given a pass by the plantation's overseer to walk from Henrico to Hanover to visit Agnes and the girls. With modern interstates and cars, a trip from Henrico to Hanover takes about 15 minutes these days. A century and a half ago it was quite a distance by foot. James often returned from the journey late. To enforce discipline among the slave workforce the white overseer had to beat James as punishment. The overseer did not, however, have it in him to beat my trustworthy grandfather as often as his late return to the plantation warranted, by their rules. Over time, the two men developed a ruse by which the overseer would pull James into a private area and beat a saddle instead of his master's slave. And my grandfather was to react as if he was actually being whipped.

The beginnings of the Wilder family were not permanently reunited until Union troops entered Richmond in April 1865. But James's and Agnes's reunion almost didn't take place -- ever. For days, as the entrance of Ulysses Grant's troops into the city became inevitable,

Richmond's newspapers had been filled with stories of what unscrupulous humanity comprised the North's troops. All of Richmond was warned to be ready to face the very worst atrocities ever to confront a community of people, because Lucifer's own were on their way. James's master and his overseer made sure the slaves on the plantation were well aware of the terrible fate that awaited them if Federal troops moved into and gained control of Central Virginia.

When, in fact, the fall did happen, James couldn't have been more filled with abject terror. To avoid contact with the Union Army, 26-year-old James jumped into a grain silo thinking it might save his life. Instead, it almost killed him -- he nearly suffocated to death.

Fortunately, James somehow found a way to make it out of the silo and its deadly, grainy grip. And what did he find? Satan's soldiers? Absolutely not. James Wilder found Lincoln's army of liberation, and a freedom he had never before known. He gathered his free wife and their two free children and headed out to make a new, free life in Richmond on Church Hill. That's all we know about their lives during slavery or the beginnings of the Wilder family.

I marvel at the life my grandfather and grandmother made for their family in the immediate aftermath of slavery. Agnes became a homemaker, giving birth to 13 children and taking care to keep an orderly household. She put her education to good use, and made sure her children could read and write, and handle their way around mathematics. Her children were no longer slaves or barred from learning, and she made use of that good fortune. James became a Teamster, owning and operating a wagon for the transport of meal.

Incredibly for the era, the two managed to build and own a home across the street from our family home at 933 N. 28th Street in Richmond. When I take time to think about that, it

amazes me. The times were not conducive to any man with a full brood of children building and owning a home -- never mind one who happened to be merely years removed from servitude. I bet just a few years prior to them stepping into their own home James and Agnes couldn't have imagined it, either. But as best I can tell, it didn't occur to them to dwell on their former lives. They just got busy raising a family -- on a little square of land that would shelter several generations of Wilders for decades to come.

On July 10, 1886, a then 47-year-old James and his 46-year-old wife Agnes welcomed the thirteenth and last of their children, Robert Judson Wilder -- my father.

It was hard to notice that my father stood only 5 feet 7 inches tall. He didn't need height to be formidable. Robert Wilder had presence. He didn't need to say much for people to know he had entered a room. And really, he didn't say all that much. But when he did, people listened. He was quite a good singer. He traveled with a group that performed well enough to book shows beyond Church Hill and Richmond. He was a deacon and a trustee in our church, as was his father before him. And he was a counselor to any and all in our neighborhood. The porch on 933 N. 28th Street was where he held court. Our house was at the end of Richmond's street car line, so it was convenient for people to stop in -- and they weren't shy about doing it.

My father, Robert, also had a reputation of being quite a stern disciplinarian. Other members of our family would send their children over to our house to receive correcting that hopefully they would not forget. He demanded order, even from the children in our family. And he got it, too. Robert Wilder was a formidable man.

He never earned more than \$50 a week, but he held a steady job at Southern Aid Insurance Co. throughout the Depression. He sold policies and collected premiums for Southern Aid Life Insurance Company, which was the first black-owned insurance company in the nation. From that salary he supported not only our large immediate family, but often other members of our extended family who were not as fortunate as he was to have a job during that time of economic distress. He was considered a person of quality because that's what he was. My father stayed at Southern Aid throughout his career, but that was not how he planned his life.

I became the first lawyer in my family, but that shouldn't have been the case. Robert Wilder wanted to be a lawyer, and he had a plan to get it done. Robert would support his brother, my uncle Charles, as he went through medical school. Then once Charles was finished with his medical education and had his practice established, he would support my father Robert as he sought his legal education. The Wilder family would have both a doctor and a lawyer just one generation out of slavery.

My father kept his part of the bargain, supporting Charles through medical school at Shaw University in North Carolina. Charles finished, and set up his practice in Washington, DC.

On Christmas Day 1925, my 30-year-old uncle Charles Wilder died. He had been the inspiration for his generation of Wilder family. They all looked up to him, and he wore that mantle well. What he must have gone through as a black man fighting to get a medical degree in the first part of the first century since the end of slavery. With Charles's example and financial support, my father would have braved his own challenges and become Church Hill's first lawyer years before I did.

But it was not to be. And the loss of his brother crushed him. It robbed him of a beacon, and killed his ability to make that dream happen. He surely didn't become some kind of lowly, neighborhood ne'er-do-well. He was a pillar of Church Hill, and he provided for our family during a time when many could not. But the loss of Charles affected him more deeply than he ever wanted to let on.

He never did lose his determination, though -- even staring down the drafters of Virginia's 1902 state Constitution. I like to watch the looks on the faces of historians when I say something to the effect of, "My father couldn't stand Harry Byrd. He thought of him as an uneducated man. He always *voted against* Byrd and Byrd supported candidates."

Virginia's turn of the 20th century constitution was written for one reason. One of the document's prime movers was clear and unrelenting when he publicly stated its primary purpose: "Discrimination! Why that is exactly what we propose; that is why this Convention was elected - - to discriminate to the very extremity of permissible action under the limitations of the Federal Constitution with the view to the elimination of every Negro who can be gotten rid of -- legally -- without materially impairing the strength of the white electorate." They wound up successfully disenfranchising most blacks and most poor white Virginians until the mid-1960s. Southern historian V.O. Key once wrote compared to Virginia "Mississippi is a hotbed of democracy." The reason why was that discriminatory 1902 constitution restricted the electorate with ruthless precision. Very few people could exercise the right to vote during that time.

Despite that, Robert Wilder registered in Richmond and voted in pre-Civil Rights era Virginia. He paid his poll tax scrupulously, and showed up at the polls to vote against the Byrd Organization. That was my father.

On July 8, 1913, Robert Wilder married Beulah Olive Richards, my mother. They had met when she went to Harvey Peace's grocery store, where my father was a delivery man -- a job he carried out with a horse and wagon.

My mother was born on April 26, 1892, in Charles City, Virginia. She never knew her natural father. As I said, to this day we don't even know his name. Early in life Beulah's mother, Mary Richards, brought her to Richmond to live with Beulah's grandmother, but the pair didn't stay long. They moved to Newark, N.J., where Mary found work as a housekeeper. She also found a husband, Robert Tolan. He was the chauffeur of the family for whom both of them worked.

Tolan treated my mother as if she was his own child. She always described him as a wonderful man who was good to her and her mother, Mary. My mother always talked fondly of her time in New Jersey, where she excelled in an integrated school system.

Then everything changed in the worst way it can for a child barely entering high school. My grandmother Mary was diagnosed with cancer. My mother was about 14 years old as she watched her mother succumb. She had lost both her parents, and most of her already small family.

Unable to help my mother grow into a young woman, Tolan sent her back to Richmond to live with her two remaining known relatives, her grandmother -- a woman known as Pinky --

and Mary's sister, Kate Watkins. We came to know her as Aunt Kate. Tolan never forgot my mother, though. He stayed in contact during the years, always sending little reminders around holidays and birthdays.

My mother graduated from Richmond's segregated high-school system in 1909. She had ambitions to be a journalist. She would have been a good one. An excellent writer who loved words, my mother commanded the English language. She had a gigantic vocabulary, and could persuade as well or better than anyone else I've ever met. She would whip a Sunday crossword puzzle with ruthless efficiency. My siblings and I inherited her love of words. We have a number of prolific writers in the family, and it all can be traced by to the guiding influence of my mother's example and lessons.

When she married my father she didn't just gain a husband, she was warmly received into a large family, the Wilder family. With her love of words and strong appreciation of education, she had found the right group of people to call her own. They loved and accepted her right back. The newly married couple moved in with Agnes Wilder, and several others from Robert's generation, at 933 N. 28th Street. My grandfather James had died in 1912 at age 74.

In 1919 my mother and father bought the house on 28th Street outright. As the family began to grow, they knew they needed to build something bigger. In 1923, they moved with their young children across the street, in with other family members, and tore down the house that had become known as the *Old Homestead*. For the sum of \$2,875, builder Roscoe Bailey contracted the place that we would call home for many years. Pillars on the large porch. A large kitchen window on busy P Street that became my mother's window on the world. The barn with the

animals out back and the wonderful yard for us to use. It was a beautiful new house – and again, it belonged to the Wilders of Church Hill.

When introduced as “The grandson of slaves,” I don't struggle with the notion of an enslaved ancestry in the same way others do. I've had to grapple with the concept so often I suppose I know its place, and from where American black people – Wilder people – came.

America – and especially Virginia – is a land of great contradiction. We believe in our hearts that all men and women are created equal, endowed by our Creator with inalienable rights. And yet, we know that this land was soiled with the greatest sin against freedom imaginable. This is the land of the great American Dissonance -- those most lofty and most base ideas and ideals can't be reconciled. The reconciliation that people such as James and Agnes, gave this country -- by living a life of full citizenship, and demanding such by their everyday actions -- is what can help to end the nation's irreconcilable rift. That is the life they set out to live. And that is the life that I have sought to live as well -- an American life. Not mentally half slave -- all free in mind, body, and resolve.

I am the grandson of slaves -- James and Agnes Wilder. But they, former slaves, are the grandparents of America's first elected black governor, L. Douglas Wilder.

## Author Bio

During more than 50 years of public life, L. Douglas Wilder has been at the forefront of many historic moments. In 1969 he won election to the Senate of Virginia from his hometown, Richmond, and in the process became the first African-American elected to that body since the end of Reconstruction. While serving in the Senate he rose to the chairmanship of several powerful standing committees during 16 years of service. By the time he began his 1985 campaign to become Virginia's 35th lieutenant governor, Wilder was recognized as one of the commonwealth's most powerful legislators. Many pundits predicted Virginia was not ready to elect a black statewide official in 1985, but Wilder set out on an extensive tour that took him to all 130 counties and cities in the commonwealth. He won the election, becoming the highest elected black official in the country at that time.

Four years later he again set out on a tour of the commonwealth, this time as a candidate for governor of Virginia. Again, some pundits doubted Virginians were ready to elect a grandson of slaves as their state's chief executive. Again, voters of the commonwealth proved they were ready, choosing Wilder to serve as the 66th governor of Virginia.

During his term, Governor Wilder faced a severe budget crisis during a deep recession, but managed repeatedly to balance the budget without raising taxes. Virginia was twice recognized as America's best managed state during his tenure as governor.

Following Wilder's years as governor he became a respected political, social, and economic commentator in addition to teaching classes at Virginia Commonwealth University.

In the early 2000s, a broad array of Richmonders reached out to Wilder and asked him to help lead an effort to reform the governing structure of the city of Richmond. Ultimately, residents of the city voted overwhelmingly in 2003 to restructure city government to create a strong-mayor form of government. In 2004, Wilder was persuaded to run to become Richmond's first popularly elected strong mayor in a half century and it's first popularly elected African American mayor.

When Wilder retired from the office of mayor in 2009, he returned to his role as a Distinguished Professor at the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University, while also serving as a national commentator on public affairs.

Wilder graduated from Virginia Union University in 1951 with a degree in chemistry. He earned his juris doctorate from the Howard University School of Law in 1959. He is the father of three children, Loren, Lynn, and Lawrence Douglas Jr., and resides in Richmond, Virginia.

## Prominent National News Stories about L. Douglas Wilder

“Lawrence Douglas Wilder; From Confrontation to Conciliation,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 1989, <http://nyti.ms/1mfLHny>

“Wilder Sworn In As Virginia’s Governor,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 1989, <http://nyti.ms/1fFrj7a>

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“Governor Wilder Grants Clemency to Iverson,” *The Daily Press*, December 31, 1993, <http://bit.ly/1izVa67>

“Wilder Becomes the 4<sup>th</sup> to Enter Virginia’s Fractious Senate Race,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 1994, <http://nyti.ms/1gy6uL5>

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