

Voices From The Past

BY DAVE WIECZOREK

She was a black woman, alone on a late summer night, making her way up the long, dark, narrow lane to the old plantation house on the James River in Virginia. The thought of slavery and all of the horrors that defined it made her skin crawl.

Edna Greene Medford, AM '76 LAS, felt closed in by the silhouetted trees looming on either side of the dirt road, by the aloneness, by the unsettling images filling her head. She thought she heard someone calling, a voice connecting her to the past. She didn't dare stop until she drove all the way up the lane to the Westover Plantation house. Before getting out of the car, she took a moment to compose herself, to make sense of these strange, unnerving feelings.

"It all came home to me that night, the pain, the suffering, the longing for freedom, all the work the slaves did on that plantation and the attachment I'm sure they felt to that place," said Medford, a widely respected Abraham Lincoln scholar and associate professor of history at Howard University in Washington, D.C., as she recalled that moment in 1996.

"In a sense, the plantation was their home. But in a lot of ways, it was their prison, their hell on Earth."

Medford, who grew up in Charles City County in Virginia among several former plantations, had returned for a meeting of the Center for Local History, of which she is an officer and the only professionally trained African-American historian. Until that chilling experience at Westover, she had not fully understood the searing significance of the plantations' existence.

"Slavery had only been a curiosity to me when I was growing up," said Medford, whose rural home county (current population 7,000) is located between Richmond and Williamsburg. "But that night, driving onto the plantation, I really felt a connection with the folk who had labored there. The enormity of the situation dawned on me."

'One of the great treasures of the American history field'

As a teacher, writer, scholar and historian, Medford has spent her life since that epiphany doing all she can to help others make a connection to the past, the period of slavery and emancipation in particular.

"Edna Greene Medford is one of the great treasures of the American history field," said Harold Holzer, one of her collaborators on "The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views" (Louisiana State University Press, 2006). "She is that rarest of scholars who combines interests in documentary history, social history, political history and forensic anthropology. And all the while, she maintains a devotion to teaching her students at the highest levels of engagement."

On Feb. 7, Medford and 29 others who have brought honor to the state by their achievements will receive the state's highest recognition – The Order of Lincoln – from the

Lincoln Academy of Illinois at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield.

"Dr. Medford is probably the pre-eminent scholar of the Emancipation Proclamation, particularly when viewed from the African-American perspective," said Thomas Johnson, chairman of the academy's Lincoln Bicentennial Committee. "It was that stature that led to her selection."

Medford's compelling experience at Westover drew her even more closely into the study of Lincoln and her desire to bring history alive to her students. She got a big assist when Barack Obama, a huge admirer of Lincoln, ran for and won the office of 44th president of the United States in November.

"The connection is a logical one," she said of Obama's affinity for Lincoln. "Both from Illinois, both from humble beginnings, both very idealistic but could also be pragmatic. It's interesting that Obama was elected at this point in history when [in 2009] we're celebrating the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth. Lincoln believed in equality of opportunity, and that's what we're seeing with Obama."

Medford has her own strong link to the 16th president. As well as co-authoring "Three Views," she contributed to "Lincoln Lessons: Reflections on America's Greatest Leader" (Southern Illinois University Press, 2009). In April, she will host "Race and Emancipation in the Age of Lincoln," a conference at Howard co-sponsored by the national Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, on whose advisory board she sits.

Medford, in her two decades as a professor of history at Howard, has accumulated a list of achievements both inside and outside the classroom as long as an inauguration speech itself. Along with her books and dozens of scholarly papers, she has made numerous appearances on The History Channel's "Civil War Journal" and C-SPAN history programs. Medford is a recipient of Howard's 2006 "Outstanding Graduate Faculty of the Year Award." She has also received a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to study community building across cultural boundaries among 19th century African-Americans in Charles City County and African-Canadians, many of whom were her relatives. So far, she has traced both sides of her family back to the early 1800s and found they were all freemen. "I suspect the folk before that were slaves," she said.

A student and a scholar

Fellow historian Holzer described Medford as "a professional of distinction, a person of enormous charm and a scholar of high originality." Those characteristics were already evident when Medford was a rookie graduate student finding her way at the University of Illinois.

"I was broken-hearted when Edna didn't stay at Illinois to get her Ph.D., because I saw how good she was. It was a

THE ALUMNI INTERVIEW

Edna Greene Medford



Amy Joseph Photo

'I didn't grow up in the kind of environment where people worshipped [Abraham] Lincoln,' says historian Edna Greene Medford. Today, she ranks as perhaps the pre-eminent scholar of the Emancipation Proclamation.

great loss for Illinois," said Orville Vernon Burton, former UI history professor, author of "The Age of Lincoln" (Hill and Wang, 2007) and a scheduled panelist for the Howard conference in April. "I taught Edna in my very first graduate lecture course in 1974, and she was an outstanding student then.

"Now she is one of the great mentors in our profession, not just of minority students but of all students."

Medford arrived on campus in 1973 with her husband, Thomas Medford, JD '76 LAW, both bearing history degrees from Hampton University in Virginia. With Thomas starting law school, Edna took a job assisting the library's African-American bibliographer, then decided to enroll in school, too.

"It was a little unnerving at first," Medford said. "This was my first experience at a major white university. There were very few white students at Hampton and no white students or teachers at my high school. So when I came to Illinois, I

doubted my abilities. I wasn't sure I had the credentials or that I'd be able to keep up."

She did. After receiving a master's degree from the U of I in American history, Medford moved on to the University of Maryland, College Park, where she earned her doctorate in 1987. She joined the faculty of Howard, a historically black college, as an assistant professor in 1988.

Invariably cheery and tireless, Medford remains remarkably accessible – and attentive – to her students, particularly for someone with so many irons in the fires of academia and history. "Some students will come by and ask, 'When do you have office hours?' and I say, 'I don't, because I'm in my office most of the time. Feel free to come by anytime,'" she said.

Using her distinctive voice as a wedge, Medford is equally devoted to her writing and scholarly endeavor in a period that has grown as competitive as rail-splitting once was.

"There's almost a Lincoln industry, and just breaking into it is difficult," Burton said. "Professor Medford has brought a perspective that is unique: an African-American woman and scholar and what Lincoln has meant to African-Americans."

And while Medford is an esteemed Lincoln scholar now, her interest in him developed relatively late, sparked in the mid-1990s by the Civil War-era programs she worked on for The History Channel and C-SPAN.

"I didn't grow up in the kind of environment where people worshipped Lincoln," said Medford, who now lives in Bowie, Md. "The only white people on the walls were pictures of the Kennedys. I don't recall talking about Lincoln in school."

Perhaps that distance has helped Medford maintain a cooler, academic perspective. "She has not been hesitant to be critical of Lincoln and his slowness in moving toward certain things and his attitude toward African-Americans," Burton said.

Nowhere is Medford more forthright than in her essay in "The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views," co-authored by fellow Order of Lincoln honorees Holzer and Frank J. Williams.

"The Emancipation Proclamation initially fortified black people in their struggle to win recognition as Americans, and as its author, Lincoln became [in their eyes] the principal guarantor of the document's promise," she wrote in her essay, "Imagined Promises, Bitter Realities."

"African-Americans came to realize, however, that the promise could not be realized without the nation's cooperation. Over the years, the legacy of slavery – racism, discrimination and violence – often intervened to thwart sustained progress, and it continues to block certain segments of the African-American community from equal access to America's bounty."

Over the decades, she said, Lincoln's image as the "Great Emancipator" lost some of its luster when the descendants of former slaves realized equality would not come with freedom. By the 1960s, Medford noted, African-Americans saw themselves as their own liberators. When they reached back into history, they remembered the Nat Turners, the Harriet Tubmans and the Marcus Garveys.

"African-Americans didn't dislike Lincoln [in later times]. Yet they didn't see him as any more special than any other president, except perhaps as the man who preserved the

Union and did have something to do with black freedom," she said, offering the critical appraisal for which she is respected. "They certainly had a higher regard for him than for those presidents who were slaveholders. But they didn't have the kind of affection for Lincoln that the former slaves [freed people] did."

Beyond Lincoln

Although Medford admitted that Lincoln has "consumed my life," it isn't all Lincoln all the time. Since 1996 she has served as the director of history for the African Burial Ground Project, which helped establish a national monument to 16th- and 17th-century free and enslaved Africans who were buried in an unmarked cemetery in what is now New York's Lower Manhattan. Medford has been on the board of directors of Borders Books since 1998 ("director of a Fortune 500 company – that's something in my wildest dreams I never expected," she said). Medford and her husband, an attorney with State Farm Insurance, travel as frequently as possible, and not surprisingly, "We never go any place unless we can throw history in." Their daughter, Lark, a Howard graduate, is something of a history buff, too. She works part time at President Lincoln's Cottage at the Soldiers' Home in Washington, D.C., where the First Family spent its Civil War summers.

Somehow, Medford also found time to move into music and master the steel pan. Well, "master" might be stretching the historical truth.

"I am a member of the board of directors of the Cultural Academy for Excellence. That organization teaches steel pan to at-risk youth, kids who might otherwise end up making bad choices in life," she explained. "The woman who started the program was born in Trinidad and wanted to use the steel pan and music to reach these kids. So I learned to play, too." Medford laughed, then confessed: "I can play one song – 'Lean on Me' – and a little bit of 'I Shot the Sheriff.'"

History, obviously, is her natural instrument, the one with which Medford strives to reach students of all ages and backgrounds, whether in her classroom or through her scholarly writing. She wants them to hear the voice she heard that unnerving night on the plantation, to connect with people from the past, to feel their pain, their suffering and their longing for freedom.

"What I want my students to get from me is that they have a responsibility to make other people's lives better," Medford said. "I want them to know our nation's history so well that at some point they will help make sure we don't repeat the mistakes that were made in the past."

"If I can teach them that, then I've done everything I set out to do."

Wieczorek is a freelance writer and editor in the Chicago area.



Amy Joseph Photo

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