

## “Ushered into the Kitchen”: Lalia Halfkenny, Instructor of English and Elocution at a 19th-Century African American Women’s College

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Volume 41, numéro 2, summer/autumn 2012

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad41\\_2art03](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad41_2art03)

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Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Harris, J. (2012). “Ushered into the Kitchen”:: Lalia Halfkenny, Instructor of English and Elocution at a 19th-Century African American Women’s College. *Acadiensis*, 41(2).

Résumé de l'article

*Cet article évoque la vie de Lalia Halfkenny (1870-1897), la première personne noire connue des Maritimes à avoir obtenu un diplôme d'un établissement d'enseignement postsecondaire de la région (l'Acadia Ladies' College, en 1889). Il s'intéresse particulièrement au parcours de Halfkenny qui, après avoir connu l'illégitimité et la pauvreté dans la région, atteint la respectabilité et la sécurité en tant que professeure de diction dans un établissement pour femmes noires de Richmond, en Virginie. Ce faisant, l'article traite aussi de l'expérience d'autres pionniers parmi les premiers Noirs diplômés et éducateurs des Maritimes, en mettant l'accent sur les difficultés qu'ils rencontrèrent pour obtenir un emploi satisfaisant dans leur localité et leur province, de même que sur les conséquences qui en résultèrent pour les autres Noirs des Maritimes (qui n'eurent pas la possibilité de bénéficier de leur contribution).*

# “Ushered into the Kitchen”: Lalia Halfkenny, Instructor of English and Elocution at a 19th-Century African American Women’s College

JENNIFER HARRIS

*Cet article évoque la vie de Lalia Halfkenny (1870-1897), la première personne noire connue des Maritimes à avoir obtenu un diplôme d’un établissement d’enseignement postsecondaire de la région (l’Acadia Ladies’ College, en 1889). Il s’intéresse particulièrement au parcours de Halfkenny qui, après avoir connu l’illégitimité et la pauvreté dans la région, atteignit la respectabilité et la sécurité en tant que professeure de diction dans un établissement pour femmes noires de Richmond, en Virginie. Ce faisant, l’article traite aussi de l’expérience d’autres pionniers parmi les premiers Noirs diplômés et éducateurs des Maritimes, en mettant l’accent sur les difficultés qu’ils rencontrèrent pour obtenir un emploi satisfaisant dans leur localité et leur province, de même que sur les conséquences qui en résultèrent pour les autres Noirs des Maritimes (qui n’eurent pas la possibilité de bénéficier de leur contribution).*

*This article examines the life of Lalia Halfkenny (1870-1897), the first identified black Maritimer to graduate from a post-secondary institution in the region (the Acadia Ladies’ College in 1889). Particular emphasis is on Halfkenny’s trajectory from illegitimacy and poverty in the region to respectability and security as an instructor of elocution at an all-black women’s institution in Richmond, Virginia. In so doing the article also discusses the experiences of other early black Maritime graduates and educators, with particular emphasis on the difficulties they encountered in obtaining rewarding employment in their home community and province as well as the consequences for other black Maritimers (who were denied the benefit of their contributions).*

IN 1883, A YOUNG MARITIME BLACK WOMAN stepped off a train in Richmond, Virginia, with the intent of beginning a secure career as the newly hired instructor of English and Elocution at Hartshorn Memorial College. A recent graduate of Acadia Ladies’ Seminary in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Lalia Annie Laura Halfkenny had already proven herself in academic circles. Moreover, through her work on the behalf of Baptist causes she had demonstrated her dedication and piety while in her speaking engagements in Halifax she had established her ability to hold a crowd.<sup>1</sup> But now, at Hartshorn, Halfkenny would no longer be doing so as a member of a racial

1 Halfkenny attended and presented at the meeting of the African Baptist Association in 1892. See “Minutes of the African Association,” in *Baptist Year Book of the Maritime Provinces of Canada*

minority. Nor would she be the only educated black woman, no doubt a novel experience for her as the only black graduate in her class of 1889.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that the Ladies' Seminary held the same status as regional colleges and universities, but Halfkenny is the first identified black woman to graduate from any seminary or institute of standing in the region at a time when black Maritimers had to overcome significant barriers to accessing education based upon assumptions about their intelligence and their place in society overall. It was an achievement of which she was no doubt very much aware during her journey from Nova Scotia to Virginia.

Until now the assumption has been that the first black female graduate of a Maritime institute beyond the secondary level was Mary Matilda "Tillie" Winslow (later McAlpine) of Woodstock, New Brunswick, who graduated from the University of New Brunswick in 1905. Her sister, Alice Mabel, followed, while a third sister went on to Wilberforce University in Ohio.<sup>3</sup> Not only does Lalia Halfkenny precede them, she also anticipates Edwin Howard Borden of Truro, Nova Scotia, who completed his degree at Acadia University in 1892. By comparison, the only black individual known to predate Halfkenny was Arthur St. George Richardson of Bermuda, who had enrolled at the University of New Brunswick two years before Halfkenny arrived at the Ladies' Seminary and who graduated in 1886.<sup>4</sup> This makes Halfkenny's academic career and subsequent professional life all the more noteworthy.

(Halifax: Holloway Bros, 1892), 180, as well as "Note: Miss Lalia A. L. Halfkenny," *Acadian Recorder*, 23 May 1891.

- 2 Halfkenny's fellow graduates were Mabel E. Archibald, Alice M. Brown, Ella Chipman, Ina M. Chipman, Bliss M. Franklin, M. Bessie Nelson, Evelyn E.A. Lowe, and Jennie S. Walker. See *Calendar of Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia 1904-1905* (Truro, NS: News Publishing Company, 1904), 73. Kirkconnell does not include graduates of the Ladies' Seminary in his survey of Acadia graduates, but as Archibald went on to complete a degree at Acadia in 1895 she is included. She retired to Saint John, New Brunswick. See *Acadia University, The Acadia Record 1838-1953*, revised and enlarged by Watson Kirkconnell (Wolfville, NS: Kentville Publishing, 1953), 53.
- 3 Helene Ertha Vann, "The Power of Images: History, Identity, and Representation," in *Maine's Visible Black History: The First Chronicle of Its People*, ed. H.H. Price and Gerald E. Talbot (Gardiner, MA: Tilbury House, 2006), 102-9. Ellen Elizabeth Winslow attended Wilberforce University in Ohio (107-8). A number of black Ontario residents also pursued education in Ohio, including Anderson Ruffin Abbott (who attended Oberlin before graduating from the Toronto School of Medicine in 1857). Abbott's brother, William Henson, attended Victoria University, as did Alexander Thomas Augusta (later a doctor and mentor to Abbott). The United States-born Augusta moved to Canada specifically to attend medical school, after being rejected in the United States. See M. Dalcyce Newby, *Anderson Ruffin Abbott: First Afro-Canadian Doctor* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1988), 31, and George Hendrick and Willene Hendrick, *Black Refugees in Canada: Accounts of Escape During the Era of Slavery* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2010), 111. Alfred Schmitz Shadd would follow in his footsteps, graduating in 1898. Abbott was not the first black graduate in Ontario; he was preceded by Robert Sutherland, who graduated with honours in classics and mathematics from Queen's University in 1852 before attending law school. His 1878 bequest to Queen's enabled it to separate from the University of Toronto. Compare these earlier dates to James Robinson Johnston, the first black individual to graduate from Dalhousie in 1896. See *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online 1911-1920*, XIV, Colin Argyle Thomson, "Alfred Schmitz Shadd," and Judith Fingard, "James Robinson Johnston," <http://www.biographi.ca/>.
- 4 "Acadia Celebrates its African History: Saluting Acadia Athletes of African Descent," *Acadia University Bulletin* 93, no. 1 (summer 2010): 22. Richardson's uncle, Thomas Richardson (also

Highlighting Halfkenny as an early seminary graduate is not to suggest she differed substantially from those who followed her – though such differences, primarily a matter of her path to education, are worthy of consideration. Once she entered the Ladies' Seminary, Halfkenny's experience more closely matched those of other early black New Brunswick graduates: singular in their racial status among their academic cohort, highly visible on campus, and no doubt aware of the pressure to succeed on behalf of "the race." Yet even more compelling is their uniformly shared predicament upon graduation: these early black graduates were unable to obtain rewarding academic employment in the Maritimes that reflected their educational qualifications. As UNB graduate Tillie Winslow recounted to a niece, despite having won the prestigious Montgomery-Campbell Prize for excellence in Classics, "wherever she applied to teach at a school she was quickly ushered into the kitchen."<sup>5</sup> As a result, these individuals cast their nets farther afield – ultimately to the United States.<sup>6</sup> In this way, while the story of Lalia Halfkenny might easily fall into the study of "black firsts," a tradition in which this article participates, it is also more – signalling larger racial and regional issues. In making a case study of Lalia Halfkenny's trajectory from black Maritime seminary student to southern college instructor, we see the effort – and potentially even the synchronicity – necessary to access education in the Maritimes. We also witness the path to employment in the United States for black graduates who pursued an academic career, having been denied the opportunity to reach their potential at home. We also see, correspondingly, the subsequent consequences for Maritime black communities, denied access to and thus unable to benefit from the presence of their most educated members.

Bermuda-born), was a teacher in Saint John. Richardson lived with him while completing high school. In 1883 Richardson entered the University of New Brunswick and graduated in 1886 with an honours degree in Classics. See Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1881, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1881/>; W.A. Spray, *The Blacks in New Brunswick* (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1972), 60; and the biographical statement about Richardson that precedes his essay in *Twentieth Century Negro Literature or a Cyclopaedia of Thought on the Vital Topics Relating to the American Negro*, ed. D.W. Culp (Atlanta, GA: J.L. Nichols & Co., 1902), 330.

5 See Vann, "Power of Images," 105-6.

6 While out-migration has long been a fact of life in the Maritimes, little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of race. For black Maritimers, the economic rationale motivating out-migration was further complicated by a racial logic that would deny them opportunities according to the colour of their skin. The epilogue of Harvey Amani Whitfield's *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860* alludes to this in passing (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006), 117-19. I also attend to race and out-migration in relation to a specific New Brunswick community in Harris, "Black Life in a Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick Town," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 46 no. 1 (Winter 2012): 138-66. See also Maureen Elgersman Lee, *Black Bangor: African Americans in a Maine Community, 1880-1950* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005). Important general studies of out-migration in the era include Betsy Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single Maritime Women in Boston, 1870-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); Alan A. Brookes, "Out-Migration from the Maritime Provinces, 1860-1900: Some Preliminary Considerations," *Acadiensis* II, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 28-9; and Patricia A. Thornton, "The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921: A New Look," *Acadiensis* XV, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 3-34.

### The path to post-secondary education

In comparison to the United States, little research has been done on early black graduates in Canada's three Maritime provinces. This is in part because discussions of 19th-century education for black Canadians in the Maritimes have been dominated by wider-spread concerns about access and integration, with battles waged more in terms of opportunities for education in rural and urban areas, education at the secondary level, and quality of resources.<sup>7</sup> It is also due to the lack of coverage of black students in the histories of early Maritime universities and the biographical focus in scholarship on those 19th-century individuals who achieved higher education, particularly those whose achievements were celebrated.<sup>8</sup> Thus,

7 As almost every scholar who touches to some degree on black Maritime life invokes, references, or comments on education, an exhaustive list of such work is beyond the scope of this article. The most valuable sources for this investigation include the following: Mohamed H. Abucar, *Struggle for Development: The Black Communities of North and East Preston and Cherrybrook, Nova Scotia, 1784-1987* (Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1988); Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis W. Magill, *Nova Scotian Blacks: An Historical and Structural Overview* (Halifax: Institute of Public Affairs, 1970); C.B. Fergusson, *A Documentary Study of the Establishment of the Negroes in Nova Scotia Between the War of 1812 and the Winning of Responsible Government* (Halifax: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Publication No. 8, 1948); Judith Fingard, "Attitudes Towards the Education of the Poor in Colonial Halifax," *Acadiensis* II, no. 2 (Spring 1973): 15-42; Fingard, "Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 20, no. 2 (May 1992): 169-95; Jim Hornby, *Black Islanders: Prince Edward Island's Historical Black Community* (Charlottetown: Island Studies press, 1991); Greg Marquis, *In Armageddon's Shadow: The Civil War and Canada's Maritime Provinces* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998); Peter E. McKerrow, *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia and Their First Organization as Churches, A.D. 1832* (Halifax: 1895); Bernice Moreau, "Black Nova Scotian Women's Educational Experience, 1900-1945: A Study in Race, Gender and Class Relations" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1996); Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in Late-19th-Century Halifax County," *Acadiensis* XXII, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 61-83; Pearleen Oliver, *A Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953* (Halifax: African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, 1953); Bridglal Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks, Volume II: 1800-1989* (Hantsport, NS: Black Educators Association of Nova Scotia, 1990); Spray, *Blacks in New Brunswick*; James W. St.G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (New York: Dalhousie University Press, Holmes and Meier, 1976); and Robin Winks, "Negro School Segregation in Ontario and Nova Scotia," *Canadian Historical Review* 50, no. 2 (June 1969): 164-91.

8 Biographical writings are cited in this article where appropriate in reference to the relevant individual. It is important to note that such references are scattered throughout various sources; unlike in the United States, where encyclopaedias of African American individuals and accomplishments in various fields proliferate, there is no comparable trend in Canada. In surveying histories of Maritime universities, I have limited myself to those institutions established prior to 1900, reflecting the period under consideration in this article; these histories generally also address the other academic institutions such as ladies' seminaries and the like absorbed in successive years: University of King's College (1789), St. Mary's University (1802), Dalhousie University (1818), Acadia University (1838), St. Francis Xavier University (1853), Mount Saint Vincent University (1873), and Université Sainte-Anne (1890) – all in Nova Scotia – as well as University of New Brunswick (1785) and Mount Allison University (1839). Representative institutional histories that address the 19th century include Fenwick Williams Vroom, *King's College: A Chronicle, 1789-1939* (Halifax: Imperial Publishing Company Limited, 1941); Peter Murphy, "Draft Saint Mary's History Manuscript," Saint Mary's University Archives; Daniel

less attention has been paid to those who did not achieve the same public recognition, and the broader trends their paths to academics or their academic careers might highlight have been obscured.

When Tillie Winslow is invoked, for instance, it is independent of her educated sisters or her family's ambition, sacrifices, and support, reducing her endeavour to one that reflects on the university culture or celebrates the individual rather than elucidate the context and forces at play. Oddly, Acadia University has come to celebrate Edwin Howard Borden more for his athletic prowess than his scholarly accomplishments (which were significant).<sup>9</sup> It is as if these individuals are frozen in time, isolated from their worlds and other black peoples. But these early graduates are important for multiple reasons, including how they draw attention to the history of black education in the Maritime Provinces that was fraught with difficulties. In many ways, the claim made by the University of New Brunswick that Arthur Richardson's entry was "completely non-controversial" – which does not mean his time there was without incident – elides a series of more complex issues.<sup>10</sup> Being academically prepared to attend an institution of higher education in a region that did not foster black academic achievement was one thing. Being financially able to attend a seminary or university given that many economic opportunities were closed to black residents was another. Not having one's education impeded by hostile treatment on account of race was also a matter of concern. Yet triumphing over any such factors and graduating is not the end – or even the beginning – of the story, as the narrative of "black firsts" would seem to suggest.

In the case of Lalia Halfkenny, that she managed to attain an education at all is remarkable. Born to an unwed mother, Susan, in October of 1870, Halfkenny would not have seemed to have many opportunities ahead of her.<sup>11</sup> At the time of Lalia's birth, Susan was only 18 years of age. The 1871 Census found them living with Susan's widowed mother, Matilda (née Firman) Halfkenny in Dorchester, New Brunswick, as well as five of Susan's siblings (one of whom was also an unwed mother of a one-year-old child) and a sister-in-law and her two young children.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the Winslow sisters of the University of New Brunswick came from an intact nuclear family – one that was more economically secure as their father was a labourer and had an ash business and their mother, assisted by her daughters,

Cobb Harvey, *An Introduction to the History of Dalhousie University* (Halifax: McCurdy Publishing Co., 1938); Ronald Stewart Longley, *Acadia University, 1838-1938* (Wolfville, NS: Kentville Publishing Co., 1939); James Cameron, *For the People: A History of St Francis Xavier University* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); René LeBlanc and Micheline Laliberté, *Sainte-Anne: collège et université, 1890-1990* (Pointe-de-l'Église, NE: Université Sainte-Anne, 1990); Albert William Trueman, *Canada's University of New Brunswick: Its History and Its Development* (New York: Newcomen Society in North America, 1952); and John Reid, *The History of Mount Allison University, 1839-1989* (Jolicure, NB: Anchorage Press, 1989).

9 "Acadia Celebrates its African History: Saluting Acadia Athletes of African Descent," *Acadia University Bulletin* 93, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 22.

10 "Historical Sketch of UNB," <http://www.unb.ca/aboutunb/history/historicalskeetch>.

11 Anglican Church Records, Westmorland, NB, reel 21, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (PANB), Fredericton, NB.

12 Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1871, reel F1628, F1629, F1630, PANB.



specialized in hairdressing and the making of wigs and extensions<sup>13</sup> – it seems likely the Halfkennys were experiencing a period of marked financial instability when Lalia arrived. As of 1861 they constituted one of only four black households in Sackville parish, all of whom lived side-by-side. The deaths of parents in two of the families, however, meant that the other households could not be sustained and, as a consequence, the families relocated to secure better opportunities and more stable support systems.<sup>14</sup> Matilda, who had been farming following the death of her husband, would have had to decide between remaining without community protection on the farm in Sackville, where she had expended so much energy, or likewise migrating. In the latter case, she had two logical options: to join the Firmans – she was a Firman by birth – in nearby Green Hill (a black community in Westmorland parish), or remove to Dorchester, also in Westmorland County, where her deceased husband's family resided.

Choosing Dorchester appears to have been a strategic move on Matilda's part: there she might secure apprenticeships for her children with other Halfkenny relatives, who followed – as Matilda's husband had – the trade of stonemasonry. The Halfkennys, notably, had never been enslaved in the region and had first arrived mid-century as skilled independent contractors, giving them an advantage over some other black residents. As of the 1860s the family was firmly established, extending their reach into mineral rights and grindstone quarries.<sup>15</sup> By the time Lalia was born the family had secured a reputation for themselves in the trade that would continue well into the 1930s.<sup>16</sup>

If improved employment opportunities were a sufficient lure, Dorchester offered an additional attraction: the possibility of education. Greg Marquis has written about racial segregation in the three 19th-century Maritime provinces, characterizing it as normative. Schools were not exempt because, as he notes, “white school children

13 According to a descendant, the family published a newspaper in Woodstock. In 1949, another Winslow sister recalled their father was the proprietor of an ash business. Evidence of either claim has not been found. Alfred Fairfax Winslow's occupation is consistently listed as labourer, including on his daughter Gertrude's birth registration, across censuses for 1881-1901, and in the Woodstock directory for 1896. Only in 1911 does his occupation change, when he is identified as a teamster. Alfred's wife, Sarah Ann Deboise Winslow, was a hairdresser who also fashioned wigs, specializing in “short stemmed switches.” It is known the family was able to educate the majority of its members, and the children all received piano and violin lessons. Photographs represent the family as being relatively well-off, especially when compared with the single surviving photo of Matilda Halfkenny's family. See Vann, “Power of Images,” 106; “Randolph Joseph Winslow” and “Gertrude Blanche Winslow,” *Late Registrations of Births*, RS141A1b and RS141A1b, PANB Vital Statistics from Government Records; Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1881, LAC, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1881/>; Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1891, LAC, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1891/>; Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1901, LAC, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1901/>; Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1911, LAC, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1911/>; and “Hairwork,” *Press Newspaper* (Woodstock, NB), 11 February 1901.

14 For an extended discussion, see Harris “Black Life in a Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick Town,” esp. 151-6.

15 Michael Liddell, e-mail communication, 17 February 2011.

16 *Bricklayer, Mason and Plasterer*, vol. 33-34 (Washington, DC: Bricklayers, Masons, and Plasterers International Union of America, 1930), 59.

shunned their darker-skinned classmates, a situation that eventually produced segregated schools.”<sup>17</sup> In his study of black New Brunswick, W.A. Spray paints an even bleaker picture of 19th-century education, with black children excluded from most public schools and segregated schools operating haphazardly or not at all.<sup>18</sup> Reminiscences of black Maritimers born in the first and second decades of the 20th century speak to the prevalence of such patterns.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, 19th-century Sackville and nearby Westmorland parish, where the Firmans resided, were representative in that there appeared to be little access to education for their black residents. Certainly no black children appear in the school records of Sackville parish during the 19th century, and census records, which indicate the number of months spent in school in the previous year, consistently indicate black children in the area were not in attendance.<sup>20</sup>

In part, this exclusion might be due to the history of the region. Black Westmorland County residents were a statistically small population, descended from slaves imported or purchased by white United Empire Loyalists and New England Planters. Unlike larger New Brunswick and Nova Scotia populations descended from or intermarried with Black Refugees and Loyalists, Westmorland’s black population was never statistically significant enough to form a coherent bloc and lobby for their own schools as some did in other regions – if segregation was indeed a factor in this locality. Furthermore, as the descendants of slaves for the most part, Westmorland’s black men and women had been excluded historically from the land grants other settlers had received; this rendered them even less influential in an era when land ownership was often tied to exercising civil and political rights such as voting. Ultimately, the legacy of slavery meant that most black families were at an economic disadvantage when compared to their white counterparts – and thus the labour of younger family members might be needed or the costs associated with schooling beyond the reach of some. As one woman born circa 1900 recalled, blacks “did not have the opportunity to learn. Schooling was looked on as unimportant, and many blacks simply grew up with little or none.”<sup>21</sup> Those who wished to continue their schooling despite such widespread prejudices and deficits in opportunity might find themselves further thwarted by the lack of access to secondary schooling. In late-19th-century Halifax, for example, schooling for black residents ended with

17 Marquis, *In Armageddon’s Shadow*, 63-4.

18 Spray, *Blacks in New Brunswick*, 53-60.

19 In the two-volume *Traditional Lifetime Stories: A Collection of Black Memories* (Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1987 and 1990), those interviewed repeatedly attest to leaving school at or before the completion of grade eight. In only one instance, the case of Mrs. Madeline Symonds (née Francis), do we see higher education achieved. Educated in Truro, she is recorded as the first black individual to graduate from the Provincial Normal School (1928). See 1:103-4. This is intriguing, as in volume two the editors note that most black Maritimers born during the second decade and attending segregated schools had some experience of black teachers. The suggestion is that these teachers were not as likely to possess advanced credentials (41).

20 I am indebted to Rhianna Edwards, formerly university archivist, Mount Allison University Archives, for sharing her research on 19th-century Westmorland schools.

21 Raylene Fairfax, “Blacks in Cumberland County, 1600-1920” (unpub. manuscript, 1984), Mount Allison University Archives.



grade seven. Judith Fingard cites the example of Henry Russell, a Halifax resident who sent his daughter Blanche for further education in Boston in 1882-1883 after segregation resulted in her being unable to enter a local secondary school. In 1884, Russell became the first black woman to enroll in a Halifax public high school; her daughter would become the first black student at Halifax's Conservatory of Music.<sup>22</sup> That they, like Halfkenny, were exceptional even within the context of a better-established black community is telling.

Whatever the combination of factors that kept black children out of school, the end result was that for black residents of Sackville and Westmorland parishes schooling was not a right nor even a privilege – it just did not seem to be an option. However, despite being in Westmorland County, practices in Dorchester varied more. The reasons for this diversity are unknown, though the area was less exclusionary than Sackville and it was undeniably more economically vibrant and diverse than the area in which Green Hill was located.<sup>23</sup> It may also have been due to the town's status as a way-station for a variety of peoples or the acceptance of Halfkennys and others as skilled labour with significant value; regardless, in Dorchester black children proved able to access education with greater frequency than other Westmorland parishes. The Halfkennys, in particular, placed an emphasis upon literacy, evident in their ability to sign (rather than mark an X) on legal documents at a time when many other black men and women could not.<sup>24</sup> For Matilda Halfkenny, the advantages of literacy would have been clear when comparing the opportunities available to her husband's family and those open to the Firmans and other Green Hill residents. Ergo, in moving to Dorchester, Matilda secured important opportunities for her children and, subsequently, grandchildren.

In addition to being documented in the 1871 Census, Lalia appears in the baptismal records of St. Paul's Anglican Church, 24 May 1874, as Laliah Annie Laura Gabriel – daughter of spinster Susan Gabriel.<sup>25</sup> Susan herself had died in Dorchester in March of that year. Obviously, some mystery surrounds Lalia's parentage. The burial record for Susan records her as Susan Gabriel, née Halfkenny, even though the baptismal records indicate Susan was not married. Whether or not a "Mr. Gabriel" is Lalia's father is uncertain. The best – and only – black candidate by that name was Isaiah Israel Gabriel, who was married to Susan's sister Mary.<sup>26</sup>

22 Fingard, "Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax," 182; Judith Fingard, "From Sea to Rail: Black Transportation Workers and Their Families in Halifax, c. 1870-1916," *Acadiensis* XXIV, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 53.

23 It has been said that a gentleman's agreement kept white residents of Sackville from selling or renting land to black people up to and including the early-to-mid-20th century. See Arthur Macready, personal interview, 19 March 2010. Sackville, NB, handwritten notes in author's possession. Other local residents maintain Acadians have also been historically excluded from purchasing property. See Kathleen Lord, e-mail communication, 31 January 2012.

24 Michael Liddell, e-mail communication, 17 February 2011.

25 She is one of four local black residents baptized that day, all residing on Woodlawn Road. in Dorchester, New Brunswick. See Anglican Church Records, Westmorland, New Brunswick, Maritime Conference Archives, Sackville, NB.

26 Whereas the Halfkennys had passed their trade down through the generations, the Gabriels' first appearance is in Loch Lomond, New Brunswick, in 1840 (a settlement of black refugees from the

Whether or not Isaiah Gabriel was Lalia's father, or simply claimed paternity to cover a less palatable reality, is unknown. Certainly Isaiah was not one to shirk responsibility, raising his own eleven surviving children and more he adopted or informally fostered. His respectability is evident in that it continued to spill over into the obituaries of others, which described him as "a man of very fine character who was highly respected" and "well known for his upright life and his excellent mason work."<sup>27</sup> Thus it would not seem out of character that he claimed paternity where it was untrue, and more unlikely that he denied it.

For whatever reason, Lalia chose not to use the name with which she had been baptized; instead, she preferred Halfkenny – either an acknowledgement of her illegitimacy or of the illegitimacy of any Gabriel paternity. Under this name she was next enumerated in 1891, in the home of Yates Hamilton (her mother's uncle).<sup>28</sup> However, the census records do not even begin to hint at the events of the intervening years for the young woman: in 1885 Lalia Halfkenny had entered the Acadia Ladies' Seminary as a preparatory student.<sup>29</sup>

### Life in Wolfville, Nova Scotia

By the time Halfkenny enrolled at the Ladies' Seminary it was almost forty years old, having been affiliated with Acadia University for just over eight years. Described by some as a Baptist finishing school for young ladies, its curriculum clearly surpassed the secondary school level. Halfkenny and her classmates could study – as well as more artistic subjects – Latin, Chemistry, Ancient History, Algebra, Astronomy, Botany, Zoology, Geometry, and Physical Geography. At the seminary's heart was the intent "to provide a broad and thorough education for young women, which will prepare them for the different walks of life. It seeks to train and develop the mind, to cultivate the heart, to mould the character, and to impart lofty aims and ideas."<sup>30</sup> Lalia Halfkenny would seem to have been either a

war of 1812). Isaiah is possibly the child of Ann Gabriel, with no father in sight. As Gabriel is later described by some as a stone mason, it seems possible that he learned his trade through his time in Dorchester and from the Halfkennys before departing in later years for Springhill, Nova Scotia. For Gabriel in Loch Lomond, see his signature on a petition included in *Spray, Blacks in New Brunswick*, Appendix XI. While no marriage record has been located for Isaiah Gabriel, his first known child with Mary was born 4 August 1874, less than five months after Susan's death. See William Gabriel's death certificate, Book 87, Nova Scotia Vital Statistics, Pugwash County (1939), <https://novascotiagenealogy.com/>.

27 Obituary for Gabriel's widow, later Mrs. Edgar Martin, *The Springhill Record*, 22 June 1944; "Gabriel Family Chart," Cumberland African Nova Scotian Association (CANSA), 2006, (unpub.), CANSA office, Amherst, NS; George Gabriel obituary, Clyde Gabriel scrapbook, Clyde Gabriel's private collection, Amherst, NS.

28 Hamilton first married Adeline Halfkenny and, following her death, married her sister Matilda in 1880. In 1897 he remarried for a third time, to Jane Cooper. See "Halfkenny Family Chart," CANSA office, 2006 (unpub.); Book 1826, Nova Scotia Vital Statistics, Kings County (1880), 131; Book 1819, Nova Scotia Vital Statistics, Halifax County (1897), 146. No trace has been found of Lalia Halfkenny in the 1881 census, under that name or Gabriel, including in any household associated with the Halfkennys, Gabriels, or Hamiltons.

29 See Acadia Ladies' Seminary Collection, 1900.006.ALS/1/5, Acadia University Archives.

30 Additional subjects of study included Piano, Vocal, Elocution, French or German, Book Keeping, English, Arithmetic, Ethics, Rhetoric, English Literature, and Composition. See "List of Marks,

good fit or a good convert. Her Baptist affiliation is not without precedent: her great-grandfather, Edward Halfkenny, had been baptized in the Maccan Baptist Church circa 1827.<sup>31</sup>

At the Ladies' Seminary Halfkenny would join a number of young women, some of whom may have known her family (such as Mabel Evangeline Archibald of Sackville), who shared Halfkenny's commitment to the temperance movement.<sup>32</sup> While the student records do not note race or ethnicity, a preliminary survey indicates that the students were Anglophone and, with the exception of Halfkenny, white. Halfkenny's initial academic efforts were less than exceptional, generating lukewarm grades in Drawing and Painting. By her senior year she had turned to the study of Literature and Elocution, and was one of the Ladies' Seminary's top students. Still, her interest in art remained apparent as the program for the closing exercises records that an essay entitled "Three Great Pictures" was delivered by Lalia Annie Laura Halfkenny. According to an auditor, "Miss Halfkenny is a natural elocutionist and a true artist, possessing a peculiarly rich and mellow voice. She gave a graphic description of the three great pictures. Her graceful gestures and easy manner added much to the literary excellence of her paper."<sup>33</sup> The description of her voice would appear to be accurate, as a later review described her "mellow, winning voice."<sup>34</sup>

How Lalia Halfkenny came to be a student at the Ladies' Seminary is a matter of speculation. Baptists, on the whole, were relatively progressive in matters of race, which explains why black men and women were attracted to the religion in significant numbers (particularly in the United States). As Rev. W.P. Oliver noted in 1953 on the centenary of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia: "The Baptists of the Maritimes . . . at an early stage in our history accorded our church and parishioners the same support as other churches of their constituency in similar circumstances."<sup>35</sup> Certainly, Halifax's black Baptist church occupied a crucial role in the community. Yet, since Halfkenny and her achievements are unmentioned in the chronicles of Maritime black Baptists, as written by key members of its constituency, it seems unlikely that such connections facilitated her enrollment.<sup>36</sup>

Most significantly, it cannot be just a coincidence that from 1882 or earlier Halfkenny's great-uncle, Yates Hamilton, was a janitor at Acadia University; he was

1880-1893," Acadia Ladies' Seminary Collection, 1900.006.ALS/1/5, Acadia University Archives, and "Thus far shalt thou come but no farther," *Acadia Ladies' Seminary*, <http://libguides.acadiau.ca/content>.

31 "History of Maccan Baptist Church," *Scrapbook of Edith Theresa Fuller*, [www.telusplanet.net/public/bobhh/scrapbook.htm](http://www.telusplanet.net/public/bobhh/scrapbook.htm).

32 Her membership in the Women's Christian Temperance Union is cited in "Death of Miss L. Halfkenny," *Amherst Daily News*, 1 April 1897. During her time as a missionary in India, Archibald served as the editor of *The Indian Temperance Record*, the subcontinent's official organ of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. See Tarini Prasad Sinha, "Pussyfoot" Johnson and *His Campaign in Hindustan* (Madras, Tamil Nadu: Ganesh and Co., 1922), 344.

33 "Closing Exercises of Acadia Seminary," *Acadia Athenaeum* 16, no. 8 (June 1890): 91-2.

34 *Acadian Recorder*, 23 May 1891.

35 Pearleen Oliver, *A Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953: In Commemoration of Centennial Celebrations of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, Inc.* (Halifax: The Association, 1953), 15.

36 This includes McKerrow and Pearleen Oliver.

described by one president at the time as “the only member of the Acadia Negro colony.”<sup>37</sup> He is also listed as her sponsor in all official records. The expense of attending the seminary was not insignificant, with costs estimated anywhere from \$140 to \$200 or upward per year. Given that Acadia’s janitors earned \$25 a week during the 1940s and 1950s, Hamilton’s salary some 70-odd years earlier would have barely stretched to cover such expenses.<sup>38</sup> No doubt Halfkenny saved some money by staying with her uncle, who in turn would have benefitted from her domestic labour. Widowed and with his son grown and married, it appears Hamilton took Lalia under his wing and his sponsorship was fundamental to Halfkenny having access to the university.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Linda M. Perkins has demonstrated in her research of early African American graduates of exclusive women’s schools in the United States (as compared to normal schools formed to educate African Americans in the wake of the United States Civil War) that those African American female students who were the first to attend such institutions were more often than not products of elite middle and upper class households – virtually indistinguishable from their white counterparts (sometimes even physically so) except by their racial classification.<sup>40</sup> Halfkenny’s background does not suggest that she shared a comparable status in Nova Scotia’s black community; indeed, everything we know about her suggests she was working class in upbringing and family life. How she became the first identified black Canadian to enter the educational world of Acadia, then, merits scrutiny.

It is undeniable that both Hamilton and Halfkenny draw attention to the role that paternalism may have played where early black students were concerned. A surprising number of public writings recollect the special relationships of Acadia janitors and presidents, not unusual when one considers that janitors were essentially responsible for maintaining facilities and presidents for administering them and overseeing the costs of upkeep. Thus, it would seem that the families of Acadia’s black janitors accessed opportunities that might not have seemed possible to some other black families.<sup>41</sup> This is borne out in another example – William Oliver – who

37 “Yates Hamilton,” *Acadia Bulletin* 1, no. 8 (1 September 1912): 1. He is listed as a labourer in the 1881 census for Wolfville, but his employer is not identified. See Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1881, LAC, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1881>, and George B. Cutten, “William Oliver,” *Acadia Bulletin* 20, no. 4 (June 1834): 9-10.

38 “Expenses,” *Acadia Seminary, Wolfville, N.S. September 4th, 1889-June 4th, 1890* (Halifax: S. Selden, 1890), 18. See Donald Oliver on his father’s salary: “Gifts My Father Gave Me,” *In Our Own Words: In Celebration of Black History Month*, 4 February 2009, <http://blogs.canoe.ca/blackhistory/our-stories/senator-donald-oliver-gifts-my-family-gave-me/>.

39 In 1871 Amos Hamilton is in River Hébert with the Harrison family. See Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1871, reels F168, F169, F1630, PANB.

40 Linda M. Perkins, “The African American Female Elite: The Early History of African American Women in the Seven Sisters Colleges, 1880-1960,” *Harvard Educational Review* 67, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 718-56; <http://www.cgu.edu/>; James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

41 Acadia’s staff and faculty numbers were small during the 19th and early-to-mid 20th centuries. For example, during the 1930s the plant supervisor was credited as having “a staff often larger than the faculty,” which numbered 32 in 1938. This meant that most if not all employees would have been known to the university president by sight if not by name. See Watson Kirkconnell, *Acadia’s Fifth Quarter-Century, 1938-1963* (Wolfville, NS: Governors of Acadia University, 1968), 9, 33.

was the second black employee at Acadia. While Hamilton was still employed at the university, Oliver began as the carrier of the seminary mail in 1894. When Hamilton left in 1896, with the resignation of then-president Dr. Artemas Wyman Sawyer, Oliver assumed his duties and was superintendent of buildings and grounds for over 25 years. That the sons of both Oliver and Hamilton would also serve as janitors at Acadia indicates that patronage was in place. More broadly, the same year Oliver died his grandson, William Oliver, Jr., would graduate from Acadia – his path no doubt eased in some way by the family’s long-standing affiliation.<sup>42</sup> This is not to suggest that Halfkenny or William Oliver, Jr. were not exceptionally capable students, but rather that any barriers – real or perceived – to entering the institution as a black student would have been smoothed by an existing personal relationship.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, such connections could not have ensured Halfkenny’s protection from particular attitudes and practices based on beliefs and biases about racial differences. In particular, a memoir of Hamilton published in the *Acadia Bulletin* upon his death in 1912 provides some insight into racial attitudes prevalent on campus at the time. While the presumably white author remembered Hamilton’s “kind heart, and his quiet helpful ways” with genuine fondness, he also did so with uncritical racism by invoking the minstrel tradition in recalling Hamilton as “Uncle Ham” and “Snowball.” Despite being a formidable figure, “quiet, dignified, and at times severe,” students took liberties with him. His successor, lacking his gravitas, was memorialized as “Billy” and “enjoyed on account of his quaintness.”<sup>44</sup> It is undeniable the individuals remembering the men expressed genuine attachments, yet the tenor of their reminiscences also expose a culture that exhibits a lesser respect for black peoples and an implicit condescension. Considered in tandem with the systemic racism that pervaded New Brunswick and Nova Scotia at the time, we cannot sustain the expectation that Halfkenny would have been immune. As Suzanne Morton has noted, in late-19th-century Nova Scotia black women could expect to be mocked for aspiring to be ladies (even in matters of dress). This inability to accept black expressions of feminine propriety may have been aggravated by the reality that, reflecting the economic realities of race, a disproportionate number of Halifax prostitutes were black, creating an “association between prostitution and

42 See Cutten, “William Oliver,” 9, and obituary for William Oliver, *Acadia Bulletin* 20, no. 4 (June 1934): 22. Hamilton would go on to be a shopkeeper in Halifax. See Book 1819, Nova Scotia Vital Statistics, Halifax County (1897), <https://novascotiagenealogy.com/>.

43 It is possible that such a connection made the Ladies’ Seminary the obvious choice over, say, Mount Allison and its Ladies’ College, which was geographically closer to Halfkenny’s larger extended family. Sackville posed problems though, in terms of housing: post-1871, Sackville’s black population dispersed – reduced to a single female domestic who remained the only black resident well into the 1940s. It seems possible that the ethnocentric practices of the town, which deliberately excluded Acadians, also kept would-be black residents at bay. Mount Allison’s earliest student of African ancestry has yet to be identified; references to a Creole girl may be misleading given the multiple meanings of Creole. See John G. Reid, *Mount Allison University: A History to 1963*, vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 214. It does seem possible that at least one Bermudian family of mixed heritage may have passed as white during the late 19th century; see Harris, “Black Life in a Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick Town.”

44 For account of students “tossing” him, see “Yates Hamilton,” 1. In 1891 the Olivers were in Wolfville, with William employed as a farm labourer. See Census and Statistics Office, Census of Canada, 1891, LAC, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1891>.



African Nova Scotians” in the minds of many middle-class whites.<sup>45</sup> Together with more general prevailing prejudices about black female sexual availability and licentiousness, black women could expect imputations or assaults – whether overt or covert – on their virtue. Presumably, Halfkenny’s status as a Baptist “lady” may have shielded her within the world of the seminary and the university from prejudices regarding black female sexual availability, just as her connection with Hamilton may have guaranteed some protection. But as Senator Donald Oliver, who boasts William Oliver as a grandfather on one side and another black Acadia graduate, William Andrew White (’03), on the other, commented in 2009: “I experienced racism as a young boy, when my family was the only Black family in Wolfville. I felt its lash as a young man, when I was not welcomed in certain restaurants and denied opportunities because of my colour.”<sup>46</sup>

As Senator Oliver’s testimony suggests, being exceptional was not protection in and of itself. Notably, for early black Acadia students it may have even obscured certain practices. For instance, it seems likely that – by unwritten agreement – both male and female dormitories were reserved for white students. Studies of black women in education attest they were repeatedly denied spaces in residences throughout the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. When integration did finally occur, it was most often at the level of the dormitory itself and not the shared rooms.<sup>47</sup> It would be presumptuous to suggest that the Ladies’ Seminary or Acadia more generally differed significantly in its practices from any other institution of its era. It is therefore not surprising that Halfkenny lived with her uncle, especially given the family ties and economic considerations. It is more noteworthy that Edwin Howard Borden, whose term overlapped with Halfkenny’s, boarded off campus with Hamilton’s son’s family. Still, while it may be the case that black students could only be accommodated in the homes of black families – of which there were all too few – we should also consider that by offering such accommodations black families may have also been taking a proactive stance on matters of education.<sup>48</sup>

### Life after graduation

As her later grades attest, Halfkenny excelled academically and evidence suggests she exhibited significant abilities as an elocutionist. An article in the *Halifax Acadian Recorder* in 1891 announced that she would be holding two recitals with musical selections, one at the Tabernacle, Brunswick Street, and the other at the

45 Morton, “Separate Spheres in a Separate World,” 75-6.

46 See Oliver, “Gifts My Father Gave Me.”

47 See Perkins, “African American Female Elite.” That this was not limited to women’s colleges is evident in the testimony of Margaret Perea McCane (Radcliffe class of 1927), who recalls: “In those days Black students could not live in the dormitories at Harvard or Radcliffe. It wasn’t until my junior year in college that a Black girl was admitted to the dormitory at Radcliffe and it was a few years later that the Black boys at Harvard could live at college.” Perkins provides evidence that such exclusionary practices occurred at every institution she surveys. See also Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), 48.

48 See Census and Statistics Office, *Census of Canada, 1891*, LAC, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/census-1891>.



Baptist Church, Cornwallis Street. A follow-up piece confirms her success and notes her interest in attending the Boston School of Elocution. In Boston, she would have found an extended network of former black Westmorland residents and benefitted from a vibrant black culture. While the school was not Baptist, the transcendentalism of its founder, Anna Baright, fostered a belief system not foreign to Halfkenny – namely, that the individual is capable of overcoming all obstacles, and should strive to attain the highest ideal of “manhood and womanhood.”<sup>49</sup> It is in this vein that we might read Halfkenny’s choice of elocution as a subject matter: while some elocutionists were speakers or specialized in coaching actors and vocalists, or teaching recitation, others worked with individuals with speech impediments or other issues of voice or annunciation. The Boston School of Elocution employed the famed Alexander Graham Bell, who specialized in “improving speech of the deaf, of stuttering, and articulation” (he would later become their chancellor).<sup>50</sup> This emphasis on the therapeutic would seem to resonate with Halfkenny’s Baptist outreach more broadly. Yet for reasons unknown, perhaps financial in nature, Halfkenny did not enroll.<sup>51</sup> She chose instead to become an educator in an African American institution – a role embraced by many black men and women with a liberal arts education during this era – in part because it was one of the few available opportunities to fully use one’s training.

It is not that many Maritime women did not participate in out-migration; indeed, as Betsy Beattie and others have demonstrated, the United States was a favoured destination of Maritime female out-migrants. Of the approximately 308,000 Maritimers who left for the United States between 1871 and 1901, the majority were female. Characterized by one commentator as “lower middle class,” the most common occupation for single female out-migrants was domestic service.<sup>52</sup> Some of these women no doubt saw their journey as temporary, hoping to return home when fortunes shifted.<sup>53</sup>

Female graduates of institutions of higher education were no exception to this trend towards out-migration. For example, of the 29 female graduates of Acadia University between 1885 and 1897 a full 14 would become residents of the United States and 1 of England. It is difficult to determine how many of those women relocated independently for work, or because their partner’s employment benefited from migration (of those 15 women, 9 were married – some to Acadia graduates). In several cases, though, it is explicit that a woman’s movement was tied to her spouse’s occupation.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, that their careers predominantly took shape in

49 “Curry College: Past,” <http://www.curry.edu/>.

50 Judy Duchan, “The Elocution Movement: Pre-Civil War Elocution 1800-1865,” in *Getting Here: A Short History of Speech Pathology in America Nineteenth Century*, [http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~duchan/new\\_history/hist19c/elocution](http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~duchan/new_history/hist19c/elocution).

51 Frances Reino, e-mail communication, 28 February 2011.

52 Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity*, 4-6, 35, 10. Brookes cites a sample of Nova Scotian out-migrants from 1873, demonstrating that the vast majority of these women were under 40 years of age. The most likely to migrate were Scottish Presbyterian women (35-7).

53 This was the case of the sisters Jessie and Annie McQueen, Nova Scotian teachers who contemplated migration to various parts of the United States before finally relocating to western Canada. See Jean Barman, *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives and Letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 4.

54 Kirkconnell, *Acadia University, The Acadia Record*, 28-62.

the United States speaks to the matter of additional opportunities and rewards in that country. As one would-be migrant imagined it, leaving home to teach was a matter of doing “something worthwhile.” That one might also be better remunerated in the process probably was not incidental.<sup>55</sup>

For black Canadian graduates during the 19th century – especially those from non-professional programs – the issue of what to do with one’s degree was a matter of some concern. The problem would seem to be most pressing in the case of Halfkenny, as graduates of Baptist institutions were expected to go forth and labour in the Baptist tradition of education and uplift. However, the problem in the Maritimes was one of employment. Educated in a tradition that valued education for the purposes of moral progress and citizenship, black Maritimers were for the most part excluded from professions because of their skin colour – with the exception of the clergy, an option closed to women – that would allow them to practice such principles. This extended to the field of secondary and higher education itself; if black students were not generally permitted to attend such schools, as the above-cited example of Russell suggests, adults were certainly not welcome to teach in them. Maritime Baptist institutions with white students were not immune, attested to by their rosters of consistently white instructors. Black teachers were clustered in primary education in black schools, widely acknowledged to be underfunded. This exclusion might in part be due to the lack of accreditation available to black teachers: until the 20th century they were denied entry to the Provincial Normal School, where they might earn the qualifications enabling them to teach in “better” schools.<sup>56</sup> In this way, more doors were closed to the Maritimes’ black educators than were open.

It is therefore not surprising that black Maritime graduates looked elsewhere. After a year of employment at Wilberforce Collegiate Institute in Ontario, Arthur St. George Richardson found that his best opportunity for employment was in Atlanta, Georgia, at Morris Brown College. Richardson never returned to Canada again to work.<sup>57</sup> Both Tillie and Alice Winslow likewise went south, teaching at Booker T. Washington’s famed Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.<sup>58</sup> Borden’s path was consistent with this trend, although it varied somewhat. He went to the United States following his degree, where he was employed both as a clergyman and as a professor in various locations, having completed additional studies at the University of Chicago and in Germany. In the end, he combined both professions in his life in Beaumont, Texas, where he lived until his death.<sup>59</sup> Whether Halifax native William Harvey Goler ever sought employment in Canada is unknown; he had been working as a bricklayer in Boston for three years before he entered Lincoln University in 1873, completing both an undergraduate degree in 1878 and a bachelor of divinity in 1881.

55 Barman, *Sojourning Sisters*, 28.

56 See Marquis, *In Armageddon’s Shadow*, 63-4. An exception would be the ministry. Morton also discusses the limited opportunities available to black women (esp. 69-72).

57 See Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, 330.

58 See Vann, “Power of Images,” 108.

59 Frank Lincoln Mather, *Who’s Who of the Colored Race: A General Biographical Dictionary of Men and Women of African Descent* (Chicago: n.p., 1915), 30; Donna Byard Sealey, *Colored Zion: The History of Zion United Baptist Church and the Black Community of Truro, Nova Scotia* (Wolfville, NS: Gaspereau, 2000), 215-17.

But from the vantage point of the presidency of Livingstone College in North Carolina (a post he assumed in 1894), he must have known it was a position he could never have achieved in his province of origin.<sup>60</sup>

Inevitably, the United States offered more opportunities for black educators in the late 19th and early 20th centuries than other regions in Canada (especially given its larger black population). With the end of the United States Civil War and the threat of slavery, black out-migration – or, in some cases, returns – to the United States accelerated. Some Maritimers sought work there, recognizing more opportunities for advancement in business ownership; others sought education. The larger black population, and an established African American middle and upper class in some cities, attested to the greater possibilities of black mobility. In Bangor, by 1900, black Canadians constituted “approximately 94% of the city’s non-native Black population,” or a full thirty-five per cent of the total black population. Many of these individuals had been born in New Brunswick.<sup>61</sup> While no statistical analysis has been undertaken of Boston’s black Canadian population, census records demonstrate that it was home to an extended network of black Canadians, including many former residents of Westmorland County, New Brunswick, and nearby Cumberland County, Nova Scotia. As the case of Goler suggests, some may have migrated seeking work and then found even greater opportunities available. That the Maritimes might not compare favourably seems evident in that the majority of African American Baptist ministers recruited from the United States soon returned home.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to opportunities for advancement, the United States also provided more opportunities for socializing with similarly educated individuals. The lack of a critical mass of educated black men and women in the Maritimes may have been a serious draw-back, meaning that some sought intellectual community elsewhere. Stephanie Y. Evans observes the particularly difficult position women might face: “Black women scholars of the past found themselves in an ambiguous social position . . . : college women were less likely to marry and have children because they did not fit neatly into either the black communities, which were undereducated and resource poor, or the white society to which their education acculturated them.”<sup>63</sup> That said, in the United States many African American men and women, spurred by examples such as educator and activist Anna Julia Cooper and journalist-turned-anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett, saw educated black women as having a vital role to play in racial uplift and politics. Other women rose to roles of prominence through their work in black women’s social, activist, religious, and literary organizations and societies. Such groups provided a space for intellectual companionship and activism for many African American college-educated women.<sup>64</sup> When the first national convention of black

60 William Stevens Powell, “Goler, William Harvey,” *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography: Volume 2* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 314.

61 Lee, *Black Bangor*, 13-19; Harris, “Black Life in a Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick Town.”

62 Pearlleen Oliver, *Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia*, 32.

63 Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*, 8.

64 Melinda Chateauvert addresses Cooper, as well as education as a suitable female enterprise, in “The Third Step: Anna Julia Cooper and Black Education in the District of Columbia, 1910-1960,” *Sage 5* (Student Supplement, 1988): 7-13. Elizabeth McHenry discusses women’s literary societies in the fourth chapter of *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

women's clubs occurred in 1896, it accessed an existing network of African American women's societies, including the Congress of Colored Women that had been held in Atlanta in 1895.<sup>65</sup> The acknowledged contributions of women, however, did not necessarily translate into full equality in African American intellectual communities. As Cooper noted, the American Negro Academy, founded in 1897, confined its membership to men.<sup>66</sup> Still, Halfkenny's opportunities in the United States would seem to far surpass any available to her in the three Maritime provinces.

In the case of Lalia Halfkenny, Hartshorn Memorial College appears to have been her first and last post. Founded in 1883 by the American Baptist Home Mission Society in cooperation with Virginia's African American Baptist communities, Hartshorn is considered a Historic Black University and College (HBCU) of some note. It is estimated that more than 130,000 black Baptists resided in Virginia, and the college represented an important step forward in their cause – racial uplift as inseparable from spiritual uplift – and that of African Americans more generally. Conceived of as a Baptist institution of higher learning dedicated to the education of African American women, the institute was consciously modelled on existing exclusive women's colleges such as Vassar and Wellesley. Specifically, Hartshorn aimed to educate African American women in the tradition of “moral education” for the purposes of “raising up a body of thoroughly educated Christian women.”<sup>67</sup> Perceived by some as missionary in orientation and “bookish” in practice, the college has been credited with producing some of “the best-trained elementary school teachers” in the American South and its graduates would go on to teach in other institutions of higher education. The standards of education were so high, in fact, that during the first decades of the 20th century standardized tests revealed Hartshorn was producing the best-educated students – white or black – in the southern United States.<sup>68</sup> It seems probable that Halfkenny was referred to or recruited by Hartshorn through Baptist networks looking to best utilize her talents. That she was deemed a worthy instructor at a post-secondary institution of such rigorous standards attests to her merit.<sup>69</sup>

65 This was the formation of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, where Fisk-graduate Margaret James Murray Washington, wife of Booker T. Washington, was elected president. See Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (1933; repr. New York: G.K. Hall, 1996): 14-15, 21.

66 Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996), 128. Joy James makes the argument that W.E.B. DuBois recognized the role African American women played in the role of racial uplift, including them in his definition of the “Talented Tenth” in his essay by the same name. Yet James also claims that DuBois obscures the contributions of the activist women with whom he worked by not adequately crediting them, their contributions, or their ideas. See James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 37-46.

67 Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*, 45; William H. Brackney, *Congregation and Campus: Baptists in Higher Education* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008), 173, 185-8 (quotation on 187).

68 Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 224, 325; Brackney, *Congregation and Campus*, 185.

69 “Note: Miss Lalia A. L. Halfkenny,” *Acadian Recorder*, 23 May 1891.

In Richmond Halfkenny found herself in a city in transition, recovering from the Civil War but also from an economic depression in the 1870s that had severe consequences for the city's African American working class.<sup>70</sup> The promise of Reconstruction, which included voting rights for African Americans and representation on civic bodies, had been partially realized, but it was now threatened by a variety of legal and extra-legal measures.<sup>71</sup> While African American entertainments, speakers, and causes were covered regularly in the *Richmond Planet*, so too were lynchings and accounts of other injustices committed upon the nation's black citizenry. In many ways, it was a world dramatically unlike the one from which she had come.

At Hartshorn Halfkenny would have found an all-black undergraduate body, a black service staff, and – with one exception – an all-white teaching and administrative staff. That exception was Rosa Daniel Kinckle Jones, an alumnus of Howard University and the New England Conservatory of Music, one of just more than 130 African American women to boast degrees at the time.<sup>72</sup> As the wife of Joseph Endom Jones, a professor at neighbouring Virginia Union University, Rosa was one half of “a fairly comfortable and prominent middle-class black couple in Richmond.” In that capacity, Rosa may have provided an entrée into black Richmond society for her new colleague.<sup>73</sup> Certainly Halfkenny was quickly initiated into the entertainments of the town, meeting many influential African American residents of Richmond. Her teaching efforts were appreciated, as the *Richmond Planet* lauded the “the excellent training of Miss Halfkinney.”<sup>74</sup> The late 19th century was a time of significant growth for African American businesses and social organizations in Richmond, driven in part by segregation. Most African Americans in Richmond belonged to at least one or more of the 45 independent societies and fraternal lodges that met in “over 150 separate councils, lodges, and tents.”<sup>75</sup> It seems likely that Halfkenny was among them.

Halfkenny's contacts were not limited to the middle and upper classes, or to those she might otherwise meet as students or through associations. According to an

70 Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia 1865-1890* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 70-3.

71 An economic boom in the 1880s did not reverse the long-term losses. For instance, of those African Americans who entered the almshouse during the 1870s half did not leave. See Rachleff, *Black Labor*, 72-3, 199.

72 According to W.E.B. DuBois in *The College-bred Negro American* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1900), as of 1890 there were 132 African American women whom held degrees (56). This is substantially higher than the 30 estimated by Anna Julia Cooper in “Higher Education of Women” in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including A Voice From the South and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 84-5. The variance reflects the differences in their methodologies as well as the resources available to them.

73 Felix L. Armfield, “Jones, Eugene Kinckle,” in *African American Lives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 472-3. That they belonged to an exclusive set is evident. See “The Nonparell Club,” *Richmond Planet*, 27 January 1894.

74 “Rhetorical at the Hartshorn,” *Richmond Planet*, 3 February 1894.

75 Steven J. Hoffman, *Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2004), 145-9.



unnamed Hartshorn colleague, she “made friends among all classes of people” (perhaps enabled by her work among them).<sup>76</sup> She assumed responsibility, notably, for Baptist missionary work at the “colored almshouse,” which boasted 260 residents in 1890. Some were victims of economic recessions; others were impoverished women who had come to the almshouse specifically for the purposes of giving birth. As one report noted: “In the almshouse are old men and women, some blind, some sick, some crippled, some joyful in the hope of a blessed hereafter, and some spending the little remnant of their lives in sin. Besides these, there are the young, wandering far from the path of virtue. The work has to be adapted to the various needs.” Intriguingly, records show that a disproportionate number of African American clients of the almshouse reported having no religious affiliation, versus white clients, making the subjects ideal for Baptist missionary endeavours. Sundays saw Halfkenny and three students visiting, with one delivering an address in the chapel, followed by visits and prayer meetings in the wards.<sup>77</sup> While ostensibly engaged in a religious mission, it does seem likely that their assistance was also enlisted in other ways in line with discourses of racial uplift. As UNB graduate Arthur St. George Richardson observed of African American teachers in 1902, “Aside from his professional duties, the Negro teacher is often called upon to decide on matters of grave importance. . . . From early morn till late at night the Negro teacher is besieged by questions of every sort and kind, which he must satisfactorily answer to the benefit of the inquirer.”<sup>78</sup> Halfkenny’s outreach activities no doubt opened her up to many such responsibilities beyond the specificity of Baptist conversions.

There is thus a fundamental irony in the careers of the earliest black Maritime graduates. As Halfkenny walked the wards, discussed education and religion, and possibly read a letter or a newspaper aloud, or helped fill out a form or craft a missive, she – like most other black Maritime graduates of the era – was performing these services in isolation from the world where she had been raised, received her own education, and where her family still resided. Certainly individuals such as James Robinson Johnston, the first black graduate of Dalhousie in 1896, and then from their law school in 1898, and James Alexander Ross Kinney, who graduated from the Maritime Business College in 1897, found work in their hometown of Halifax. Johnston was employed first by the law firm of John Thomas Bulmer, before striking out on his own in 1901, specializing in criminal and military law. Kinney served for more than 30 years as the advertising manager of William Stairs, Son and Morrow, a ship chandlery company, and also invested in forestry and mining. But those who sought to blaze trails in education – or even simply pursue academic careers – lacked opportunities. This was exacerbated in part by prejudices

76 “Lalia A.L. Halfkenny,” *Richmond Planet*, 27 March 1897.

77 See Rachleff, *Black Labor*, 72-3; Elna C. Green, *This Business of Relief: Confronting Poverty in a Southern City, 1740-1940* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 165-6; and Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society, *Annual Report of the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society*, Issues 15-18 (1894): 38, 92.

78 Arthur St. George Richardson, “What is the Negro Teacher Doing in the Matter of Uplifting his Race?” in Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, 332.



against black education, and the inability to envision black men and women as competent educators. But also lacking were local black institutions of higher learning. Johnston's desire to form an industrial school in Halifax based on Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute was endorsed by local community members, especially black Baptist institutions. That it was never realized – instead reworked as the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children – speaks not to a lack of willpower, but rather a paucity of resources to support multiple endeavours.<sup>79</sup>

Thus even as black Maritime families might subscribe to the tenets of racial uplift and band together to assist in the education of an individual or individuals, the end result had less effect at the local or regional level than was hoped. As Arthur St. George Richardson wrote, black teachers had “been the means of enlightening the masses of the colored people that lay claim to any degree of education whatever. What the Negro teacher has accomplished has been done not from a selfish motive or a mercenary point of view, but primarily because he has endeavoured to do his part toward elevating the race with which he is identified. If it is true that the salvation of the Negro lies in his being educated, then to the Negro teacher must be attributed the greater portion of his salvation.”<sup>80</sup> Unable to find work at home these graduates still served, but for their communities they could not serve as more than examples. An article on Edwin Howard Borden emphasized this – however unintentionally – in its very title: “A Truro Boy Away Up the Ladder.”<sup>81</sup> Ergo the majority of early black Maritime graduates remained exceptional rather than representative, unable to function as accessible role models or mentors at home. Johnston and Kinney might have been crucial to the founding of the Children's Home – as well as the Colored Hockey League – which benefitted local communities, but the local communities that benefitted from the efforts of Borden, Halfkenny, the Winslows, and others were no longer their worlds of origin.

This removal from any Maritime community further exacerbates the contemporary tendency to see these black academics in isolation. Instead, we remember these individuals today as markers of progress or distinction, rather than active agents, in the region's history. They appear in photos prominently featured on websites, as examples resurrected during Black History Month, and on lists meant to commemorate progress. Further traces of their existence can be found in brief newspaper notices, census records, and the like, but they are not the subject of studies of education or attitudes towards race.

Unfortunately for Lalia Halfkenny, the primary means by which her life was recorded was not through her deeds or words but through her obituaries. Sometime in 1896 Halfkenny became ill; as reported by an unnamed colleague: “Early in the

79 Charles R. Saunders, *Share and Care: The Story of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1994), 18–31. See also George Fosty and Darril Fosty, *Black Ice: The Lost History of the Colored Hockey League of the Maritimes, 1895–1925* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2008), 49–80. For more on Johnston, see Justin Marcus Johnston, *James Robinson Johnston: The Life, Death and Legacy of Nova Scotia's Black Lawyer* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2005), and Barry Cahill, “The ‘Colored Barrister’: The Short Life and Tragic Death of James Robinson Johnston, 1876–1915,” *Dalhousie Law Journal* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 336–79.

80 See Richardson, “Negro Teacher,” in Culp, *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, 332.

81 “A Truro Boy Away Up the Ladder,” *Wolfville Acadian*, 14 April 1902.

year one of our corps of teachers, Miss Half Kenny, began to fail in health. One week before Christmas she heard her last class. For a short time we hoped she would soon be able to resume her work, but that hope was not realized; she failed rapidly, and suffered much till the fourteenth of March, when through the gates of death, she passed on to eternal life. Having first showed how a Christian can live, she showed how a Christian can die.”<sup>82</sup> Halfkenny died in Richmond on 14 March 1897, surrounded by friends. Two days later her students turned out at the Richmond train station to ensure she received a proper send-off, drawing up in a double line as Halfkenny’s coffin travelled between them while they sang “We Shall Meet Beyond the River.” In Wolfville, her coffin was met by unidentified friends who conveyed it to the Baptist Church for a service followed by her interment.<sup>83</sup>

The problem with exile is, of course, how easy it is to be forgotten.<sup>84</sup> And so Tillie Winslow, who retained ties to the province, became the woman remembered and celebrated – even as her siblings and family have been neglected. Halfkenny, whose progress at the Ladies’ Seminary may have served as a model for Borden’s at Acadia, is additionally effaced by both distance and early death. Yet in arguing that we recognize her as preceding the Winslows, I do not wish to simply replace one individual with another. Rather, we should broaden our thinking about how “firsts” are remembered and memorialized – beyond celebrating the achievement itself as the end of the story – as well as thinking through more broadly what such a first might mean. In simply celebrating firsts as overcoming a particular adversity, and ending the story there, we shortchange ourselves of a much more rich and potentially revealing narrative about the contributions – realized or thwarted – of early black pioneers in academia.

82 Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society, *Annual Report of the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society*, Issues 19-22 (1897): 93.

83 See “Lalia A. L. Halfkenny” and “Death of Miss L. Halfkenny.” No mention of Halfkenny has been found in the Westmorland papers, but located as they were in Sackville this is not surprising. In general, the papers paid no attention to local black residents during the 19th century.

84 Halfkenny was not included in “Report on Obituaries,” *The Baptist Year Book of the Maritime Provinces of Canada 1897* (Halifax: Wm. McNab, 1897), 113-16.