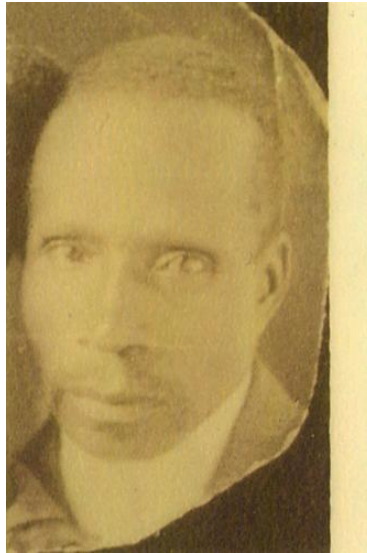


# Son of Nelson County slave, believed to be last of his generation, remembered

Emma Martin  
Dec 7, 2022



Daniel's father, Abram (A.B.) Smith, pictured in this undated photo, was born on a plantation near Massies Mill in 1863.  
Emma Martin

**D**aniel Smith, believed to be the last surviving child of an enslaved person in the U.S., recently died at age 90. His father, Abram Smith, was born into slavery in 1863 on a plantation near Massies Mill in Nelson County.

Abram Smith was 2 years old when the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery, yet he remained in the Massies Mill area, working as a child laborer for five more years up until 1870. He later moved north and worked as a janitor at a clock factory. Dan was born in 1932 in Winsted Connecticut; Abram was 70, and his wife Clara was 23.

Beyond that extraordinary lineage, Dan Smith lived an extraordinary life, participating in the 1963 March on Washington, marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery, and directing and founding federal programs to fight poverty.

In the last years of his life, Smith, who died Oct. 19, uncovered new information about his ancestors while researching for his memoir, "Son of a Slave: A Black Man's Journey in White America," published posthumously.

Certified genealogist and former Nelson County Historical Society President Deborah Harvey helped Smith identify and place some of his ancestors by studying census data and records of enslaved people.

She spoke with Smith over Zoom calls in 2020, and described him during a November phone interview as a fascinating man, humble, gentle and soft-spoken.

Harvey said census records show the Smiths resided in the Massies Mill District, but explained that district once covered much more than the current Massies Mill area in Nelson County. Based on her research, she believes Abram Smith was enslaved in an area further south in Nelson County.

Harvey found a William Smith with sons Nelson, Abram and Spotswood in the 1870 census, living two dwellings away from the family of a Soloman Smith. She thinks Soloman could have been William's brother and Abram's uncle. Harvey also found a marriage record for Soloman Smith that listed his parents as Daniel and Elvira — if Soloman was William's brother, these would be Dan's great-grandparents, and he could be named for his great-grandfather.

Harvey's research suggests the Smiths might have been enslaved by a family listed adjacent to them in the 1870 census — she explained in an email that enumerators listed families in the order they came to each household, and a Black family listed next to a white family in the census means they likely lived next to each other and were connected through bondage.

While slavery had ended by 1870, most formerly enslaved people didn't have the opportunity to purchase land or move elsewhere, so they often lived and worked on the same plantations where they were enslaved after emancipation, Harvey explained.

### **'The strongest of the strong'**

Little is known about Abram Smith's early life, but Dan wrote in his memoir that his father moved to Iowa with his first wife, and by 1900 was living in the town of North East, New York. He married Dan's mother Clara, his third wife, around 1924 while both were living in Winsted, a Connecticut town with a mostly white population of about 10,000.

Abram Smith was employed there as a janitor at the Winsted Gilbert Clock factory, working 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. shifts and walking at least half an hour to work even in bitter New England winters.

The second youngest of six siblings, Smith recalled growing up poor but governed by strong principles. His parents stressed cleanliness and good manners would get their children farther than money. His father brought home \$16 per week, but the family was always well dressed for church on Sundays, with Abram wearing a jacket, tie, and pocket-watch with a looping chain across his chest.

There were brutal stories about slavery — first told to Abram by his parents — that he shared with the family on Saturday nights, and which Dan was considered too young to hear but snuck out of his bed to listen to anyway. He remembers those stories — of whippings, hangings, and other cruelty — bringing tears to his father's eyes.

Dan didn't recall his father as a strict disciplinarian, but wrote of one distinct memory: He was crying over something that in the present day he couldn't remember. His father took the young Dan by the shoulders and shook him hard, saying, "You have nothing to cry about. Remember you are the son of A.B. Smith. We survived the ships. You come from the strongest of the strong." In spite of what he'd been through, Dan's father always spoke highly of America and defended the country.

When Dan was six, Abram was struck and killed by an unknown vehicle on his walk home from work, leaving Dan's mother to raise six children alone. Dan recalled bleak years, and food stretched thin, in the years after.

### **'One of the most profound events'**

Smith's accomplishments as a young man and older were well documented by journalists before and after his death. He worked with a veterinarian in high school, served as a medic for the U.S. Army in the Korean War, rescued a man from Hurricane Diane's floodwaters in his hometown of Winsted, and was elected student council president at the largely white Springfield College, according to his Washington Post obituary.

Smith marched in both the 1963 March on Washington and one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Selma-to-Montgomery marches. He attended veterinary school at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama but left to direct a federal anti-poverty program in Lowndes County, Alabama. Smith moved to Washington to develop neighborhood health centers nationwide, and in 1972 started a \$60 million program for the National Institutes of Health to train primary care physicians to work in underserved areas.

He helped develop emergency medical services in Lebanon, Morocco and Saudi Arabia and attended Bishop Desmond Tutu's installation as the first Black archbishop of the South African Anglican Church.

After retirement, he helped launch the Korean War Memorial and served as head usher of the Washington National Cathedral, escorting Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama to their seats.

In his memoir, Smith remembered the March on Washington as "one of the most profound events in my life." In 1963, he was working as a social worker at Norwich State Hospital in Connecticut, according to a 2013 New York Times article.

He recalled in "Son of a Slave" that he and a white friend debated going to the March, expecting violence. Smith's experience proved to be quite the opposite: as he and his friend were driving into the city, a white motorcycle police officer pulled them over. They were alarmed, but the officer politely asked where they were going. When the two said they'd come from Connecticut for the march, the officer asked them if they had a place to stay and escorted Smith and his friend to a house of a white family, where they spent the night with some 20 other marchers from around the country.

On the day of the march, Smith joined a dense crowd of marchers headed to the reflecting pool and was amazed at the unity between marchers of every race, gender and religion, describing the atmosphere as determined but festive.

### **No 'colored soldiers'**

In his lifetime, Smith watched the nation come closer to the vision he heard from Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Monument, but was continually met with roadblocks and violence more reminiscent of his father's and grandparents' American experiences.

The New York Times reported when Smith was drafted into the newly desegregated Army and tried to sign up for the K-9 corps, he was told despite his veterinary experience that branch wasn't "taking any colored soldiers."

In a 2020 article about Smith, The Washington Post reported he rescued a truck driver from the flooded Mad River after Hurricane Diane in the summer of 1955. But in 1957, when he was working as a trip director for a YMCA camp in Connecticut, another act of heroism went sour.

Smith rushed over to help when he saw a woman being pulled from a reservoir. He checked her pulse but was stopped by a white police officer from performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Smith knew she was still alive, but the officer insisted she was already dead.

“He didn’t want me to put my lips on her, and she died,” Smith told the Washington Post in 2020.

The church office where Smith worked in Lowndes County was burned to the ground by arsonists, and soon after he was tailed down a dark road by white pursuers who shouted racial epithets at him.

The resilience his father instilled in him remained throughout his career, though.

According to the Washington Post obituary authored by his second wife, activist Loretta Neumann, Smith faced discrimination and possible demotion while working at the National Institutes of Health but fought back with pro bono legal help, keeping the position and earning a promotion.

In a November phone interview, Neumann said she and Smith met when she threw a party in the backyard of her Takoma, Washington, D.C. home. He lived two doors down from her. In his memoir, Smith fondly recalled their courtship and marriage in 2006 at the Washington National Cathedral. He noted both were first married in 1965 — Neumann, who is white, to a white man, and Smith to a Black woman. But the two couldn’t have legally married each other at that time in Neumann’s home state of Oklahoma.

### **‘Back There, Then’**

Linda Crichlow White is president of the James Dent Walker Chapter of the Afro American Historical and Genealogical Society in Washington, D.C. She met Smith through Neumann, the two moving through many of the same D.C. historical-advocacy circles. White said she’d met Dan on several occasions.

“He was such a fine gentleman. That’s the best way to describe him,” she said in a phone interview.

Smith and White had more in common than just Neumann though, as White also traced her ancestry back to Nelson County. Her mother’s memoirs, with White’s notes, are collected in the book “Back There, Then; A Historical Genealogical Memoir,” published in 2014.

In the book, White writes of Andrew Stevens, the great-grandfather of her mother, Marietta Stevens Crichlow. He lived in the Massies Mill section of Nelson County, with his occupation listed as “farming” in 1870. This means Smith and White might have ancestors who lived in the same Nelson County community.

White said she’s found an even earlier ancestor, Andrew’s mother-in-law Betty Brown, who’d be her third great-grandmother, born around 1795, although it’s impossible to be sure of her birth date.

White’s maternal grandfather, John James Stevens (grandson of Andrew Stevens) was born in Nelson County in about 1889. He married his Lynchburg-born wife in 1910 in Washington, D.C., and there Stevens worked as a porter at Union Station and in a messenger role at the Library of Congress — wearing a suit and tie to work every day, White said her mother remembered.

White said she's also recently discovered ancestors with the last name Johnson who are listed in the 1860 census living in Schuyler. It's a significant date, White explained, because 1870 was the first census year to count Black Americans. If the Johnsons were listed in 1860, they had to be free and not enslaved.

She said of Smith, "The story I love about him, and it's really the story of a lot of African Americans, is that, despite so called 'humble beginnings' or 'humble ancestry,' they continued to achieve despite the odds."

In the final lines of his book, Smith urged Americans not to halt the study of slavery and racism, to remember the civil rights figures who worked to further equality, and to fight hate with kindness.

He wrote, "Although my father was born into slavery, he never hated anyone. He always said, 'Do good things.' That is what has guided me throughout my life."

Smith was buried Dec. 3 at Congressional Cemetery in Washington D.C., according to an email from Neumann. More than 300 people attended his funeral on Oct. 29.