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The case of Abbie Williams

THREATENED TO KILL THE CORONER
A young colored woman living on Wolfe street, between Patrick and A
ed, yesterday gave birth to an illeg
ate child, and was attended by
colored midwife named Abbie William
he head of the child was not proper
rmed, and from this and other caus
was said it expired as soon as bo
r. W. R. Purvis, the coroner, was no
ed, and in making an examination
discovered that the umbilical cord h
een so arranged that in time it wou
ave proved fatal to the child, whi
he operation had been proper
ough performed to insure safety
he mother. The doctor having b
is suspicions aroused on several oth
casions by the apparent death of co
red infants from neglect, conclude
at this was a case which demand
vestigation, and he interrogated th
granny" closely. The latter undoub
ly understood the *modus operandi*
orted to on such occasions, and bei
osely pressed by questions from th
roner finally said she couldn't s
ery well and supposed she had pe
rmed her duty satisfactorily. Th
ctor finally had the woman arrest
r criminal neglect. Later Willia
Williams, son of the accused, learned
e interview between his mother an
r. Purvis, and becoming exasperate
id he would knock the Coroner in th
ead with a cobble stone on sight. C
er Howson later found the bellico
dividual and carried him to the st
on house and locked him up. Th
orning Mayor Strauss held him in t
m of \$100 to keep the peace f
elve months. There is every reason
believe that the crime with whic
e midwife in this case is charged
mitted with impunity in this city
d that the infants whose worldly c
er is thus rendered ephemeral a
ried at the city's cost, while their i
vident and depraved parents pro
e city night and day leading lives
amoral, laziness and dishonest
n inquest was held this morning ov
e remains of the infant referred
bove. Dr. W. M. Smith made the a
psy. A verdict was rendered to th
llowing effect: "The jury render
dict that the child was born de
d that there was no foul play, e
pt neglect on the part of the mi
ife, and recommend that all mi
wifes be required to be registered

PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
A story about Abbie Williams
from the Dec. 19, 1893,
Alexandria Gazette.

The Dec. 19, 1893, edition of the Alexandria Gazette highlighted the case of Abbie Williams. The case involved a Black woman giving birth to a child who died at birth. The coroner, Dr. Purvis, accused the midwife, Williams, who was also Black, with criminal neglect.

A jury acquitted Williams on charges of foul play, but despite the acquittal, the article insisted she had been negligent in her care of the mother and child. The case of Williams shows the intersection of inequalities in segregated Alexandria, where medical practices and care were viewed through a lens prejudiced against women of color, whether as midwives or as patients giving birth.

The Alexandria Gazette noted Dr. Purvis "had his suspicions aroused on several other occasions by the apparent death of colored infants from neglect." At the same time, the coroner noted that "the operation had been properly enough performed to insure safety to the mother."

The article claimed that Dr. Purvis questioned Ms. Williams, or "granny," closely, and when pressed, Abbie Williams "said she couldn't see very well and supposed she had performed her duty satisfactorily." The interroga-

tion angered Ms. Williams' son, William, to the point that he threatened Dr. Purvis, got arrested and had to post \$100 bail.

The Gazette speculated that medical negligence "is committed with impunity in this city." The newspaper's prime complaint was that stillborn African American children:

"are buried at the city's cost, while their improvident and depraved parents prowl the city night and day leading lives of immorality, laziness and dishonesty."

The author gave no other examples of medical negligence by African American practitioners. Nor did it explain what a more qualified medical professional would have done for the unfortunate child in this case, whose skull never fully formed.

The jury's recommendation that "all midwives be required to be registered at the auditor's office" became a reality almost 20 years later, in 1912. Alexandria created a Board of Health and hired a health officer to inspect businesses accused of being unhealthy or unhygienic.

The new office was meant to protect the public in terms of hygiene, sanitation and preventing mass outbreaks of contagious diseases. The

Board also regulated the practice of midwifery, requiring all births to be registered, all midwives to pass an examination, and to pay one dollar – equal to \$30.67 in 2024 – to the Commissioner of Revenue.

While well-intentioned, the fees and exam requirements disproportionately burdened women with barriers to wealth and whose knowledge was built on experience rather than schooling. Modern-day readers might ask what the medical options for Williams' former patients were if she wasn't able to practice anymore. On Jan. 5, 1914, the Alexandria Gazette printed a list of registered midwives separated by race. Sixteen white women and eight African American women are listed.

Williams' case was re-discovered by Shay Merker and Julia Walsh as they researched a tour on midwifery in Alexandria.

Historic Alexandria celebrates Women's History Month throughout March. For a listing of virtual events and celebrations, please visit alexandriava.gov/WomensHistoryMonth.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.