

Ida Virginia Thornton (1875-1969)

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The early yearbooks and newspapers of Mary Washington College (MWC) offer a glimpse into everyday life at a southern, all-female school during the first part of the 20th century. Collectively, these publications present a detailed view of students and faculty who studied and worked at the college. This view is not a complete one, however. Dozens of women and men, primarily African American, have gone without mention in this school publications. Ida Thornton, a long-standing employee of the college, is a rare exception. After 24 years of keeping the dorms of Mary Washington College clean, Ida Thornton was finally recognized in the college's student newspaper, *The Bullet*, in 1946. "Mrs. Ida Thornton Works for Education of Granddaughter," an article heading states, and the report gives a brief description of Ida and her work.¹

Ida was in charge of cleaning Virginia Hall, a sophomore residence at that time. She worked closely with Nina Bushnell, the formidable Dean of Women whose office was in Virginia Hall.² The MWC employee roster also included Ida's brother, William Alsop, who drove the school's truck and later managed the maintenance of the campus buildings for 34 years.³ *The Bullet* article describes Ida as "a quiet, polite colored woman," who "enjoys her work very much and doesn't find time to do much else." Census data confirms Ida's full work schedule; in 1940 she worked 48-hour weeks and earned \$250 per year.⁴

Ida's life was, of course, more than just work. Born on June 16, 1875 in Spotsylvania County, Ida grew up with six siblings. All of them attended a school in Fredericksburg, where Ida was recognized as an honor-roll student for four consecutive years.⁵ Despite her drive, Ida did not continue school past the 5th grade.⁶ At the age of 23, she married William Thornton. By 1910, they were living with their two children, Louise and William Sanford, and Ida's father, Waverly, at 521 Hanover St.⁷ When the next census was taken in 1920, Ida, William, and their children Louise, William, and Margret were living in Washington, DC. There, Ida worked as a laundress from their home on 11th Street, and William as a watchman for a stable.⁸ By 1922, however, the Thorntons had moved back to Fredericksburg and Ida began her career at what was then called the Fredericksburg Teachers College.

¹ Joan Rekemeyer, "Mrs. Ida Thornton Works For Education Of Granddaughter," *The Bullet*, December 17, 1946, accessed February 2, 2020, https://archive.org/stream/Bullet-Fredericksburg_VA_vol-19_1946-12-17.

² Edward Alvey Jr., *History of Mary Washington College, 1908-1972* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974), 110.

³ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

⁴ 1940 U.S. Census (Population Schedule), Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED) 107-6, sheet no. 64-B, Ida V. Thornton, line 79, digital image, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.

⁵ *The Fredericksburg Star*, October 21, 1885; *The Fredericksburg Star*, February 6, 1886; *The Fredericksburg Star*, October 13, 1886; *The Fredericksburg Star*, February 5, 1887; *The Fredericksburg Star*, January 7, 1888.

⁶ 1940 U.S. Census (Population Schedule), Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED) 107-6, sheet no. 64-B, Ida V. Thornton, line 79, digital image, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.

⁷ 1910 U.S. Census (Population Schedule), Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED) 41, sheet no. 18-B, Ida Thornton, line 97, digital image, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.

⁸ 1920 U.S. Census (Population Schedule), Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED) 40, sheet no. 1-B, William and Ida Thornton, lines 54-55, digital image, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.

By 1940, Ida's family structure had changed rather tragically. Her husband, William, and children Louise and William all died in the 1920s while both her father and her daughter Margret died in the 1930s.⁹ The 1930 and 1940 censuses listed Ida as the head of the household, living at 519 Hanover Street in Fredericksburg with her son-in-law, Andrew Burruss, and his daughter Norma.¹⁰ The house on Hanover Street was constructed for Ida and William around the turn of the century by local African American developer and entrepreneur Henry Deane.¹¹

With little remaining family, it is no wonder that *The Bullet* noted Ida's dedication to spending time with her granddaughter Norma and saving money for her education.¹² Sadly, Ida likely did not entertain the idea of her granddaughter attending MWC because the school was not officially desegregated until 1964.¹³ Norma instead attended the historically black Virginia Union University in Richmond and taught in Fredericksburg and later in Liberia. Ida continued to work at the college until 1953. While formerly listed as a maid for MWC in several Fredericksburg city directories, the ones after 1953 referred to her as William Thornton's widow. Sometime after 1959, Ida, Andrew, and Norma moved from their home on Hanover Street to a small, recently constructed residence at 613 Weedon Street. Both addresses were in or near Fredericksburg's Liberty Town, a historically African American neighborhood. Ida died in 1969 at the age of 94.¹⁴

At that time, her hometown and former workplace were taking part in a nationwide transformation that began to recognize women and people of color. Today, as we retrieve stories like Ida's from our archives, we thank Ida and her African American co-workers for their service to our school.

⁹ *Virginia, Deaths Index, 1912-2014*, "William Thornton," accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>; *U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current*, "Louise Annetta Thornton," accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>; *Virginia, Deaths Index, 1912-2014*, "William Sanford Thornton," accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.

¹⁰ 1940 U.S. Census (Population Schedule), Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED) 107-6, sheet no. 64-B, Ida V. Thornton, line 79, digital image, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.

¹¹ Ruth Coder Fitzgerald, *A Different Story: A Black History of Fredericksburg, Stafford, and Spotsylvania, Virginia* (Fredericksburg, Unicorn Press, 1979), 159, 174.

Matt Scott and Gary Stanton, "The Domestic Architecture of African-Americans During the Era of Jim Crow," *HISP325* (blog), accessed April 21, 2020, <http://hisp325.umwblogs.org/files/2014/03/Domestic-Architecture-of-African-AmericansHFFI.pdf>.

¹² Joan Rekemeyer, "Mrs. Ida Thornton Works For Education Of Granddaughter," *The Bullet*, December 17, 1946, accessed February 2, 2020, https://archive.org/stream/Bullet-Fredericksburg_VA_vol-19_1946-12-17.

¹³ Edward Alvey Jr., *History of Mary Washington College, 1908-1972* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974), 506.

¹⁴ *Virginia, Deaths Index, 1912-2014*, "Ida Thornton," accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/>.



Ida Alsop Thornton. Photo in *The Bullet* (December 1946)



The former Thornton Residence at 519 Hanover Street in 1985.
Photo by Mary Beth Gatzka (Class of 1987).