

## Behind the Line: The Cooks of Mary Washington College

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African American staff members of Mary Washington College are rarely present in documentary materials pertaining to the school's history. Scant photographs show them as anonymous figures blended in the background (Fig. 1) or identify them only by their first names (Fig.2).



Fig. 1 Seacobeck Kitchen (ca.1955).  
Special Collections and University Archives,  
Simpson Library, University of Mary Washington



Fig. 2 “John, Willie, Lee”  
*The Battlefield* (1936)

A rare view into the work of dining-staff members comes from a student-written article titled “The Men Who Cook Our Meals” and published in the campus newspaper *The Bullet* from 1947. The author identifies Leroy Hamm, Eugene Johnson, and Robert Wormley as three of the twenty-eight workers whose task was to feed the 1,600 students on campus.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of the full names of these three African American employees led to additional documentary materials that provide a glimpse into their lives.

### Leroy Hamm

Leroy James Hamm's time as the college's head chef was just a brief part of his varied cooking career in Fredericksburg. Born in South Carolina in 1904, Leroy moved to Richmond, got married, and was working as a gardener by 1940.<sup>2</sup> Hamm joined the kitchen staff of Mary Washington College later that year.<sup>3</sup> While working at the college, Hamm divorced his first wife Ada and

<sup>1</sup> Zimmerman, Dorothy, “The Men Who Cook Our Meals,” *The Bullet*, November 11, 1947, [https://archive.org/stream/Bullet-Fredericksburg\\_VA\\_vol-20\\_1947-11-11#page/n3/](https://archive.org/stream/Bullet-Fredericksburg_VA_vol-20_1947-11-11#page/n3/).

<sup>2</sup> Virginia, Commonwealth of. 1972 (Filed February 14). “Certificate of Death: LeRoy James Hamm.” Dept. of Health, Bureau of Vital Health Records and Health Statistics. Reg. area 209, File No. 72-008330. Accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

1940 U.S. Census (Population Schedule), Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED) 118-45, Sheet Number 14-B, Leroy Hamm, Line 44, digital image, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>3</sup> “Leroy James Hamm,” The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; St. Louis, Missouri; *WWII Draft Registration Cards for Virginia, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: 312, Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

married Josephine Washington.<sup>4</sup> Their son Leroy Jr. was born in 1944.<sup>5</sup> Leroy was known for his Southern fried chicken and he probably transferred this specialty to the succession of culinary positions he held over the following decade.<sup>6</sup> In 1953 Leroy became a chef at the Mary Washington Hospital.<sup>7</sup> Three years later, he transferred to be a chef at the George Washington Inn, and by 1958 he cooked at the General Wayne Hotel in Waynesboro, Virginia.<sup>8</sup> Leroy's work record is lost after 1959, but it is possible that he continued to cook for the rest of his career. When Leroy died of cardiac arrest in 1972, he was listed as a retired cook.<sup>9</sup> By then, he and his family had owned a house on 512 Sophia Street for at least 23 years.<sup>10</sup> Leroy is buried at Glen Haven Memory Gardens in Falmouth, Virginia.<sup>11</sup>

**2 The Free Lance-Star, Fredericksburg, Virginia**  
Saturday, February 12, 1972

## Obituaries

**Leroy J. Hamm Sr.**  
Leroy J. Hamm Sr. of 512 Sophia St. died Friday at Mary Washington Hospital. He was 68. He is survived by his wife, Mrs. Josephine Hamm; four sons, Mack Hamm of Brooklyn, N.Y., and Leroy J. Hamm Jr., Van Hamm and Richard Hamm, all of Fredericksburg; a daughter, Miss Deborah Hamm of Fredericksburg; a sister, Mrs. Letha Scott of Brooklyn, N.Y.; and a brother, Lloyd Hamm of Ocean City, Md.  
The Rev. A. Russell Awkard will conduct a funeral service Tuesday at 2:30 p.m. at Shiloh (New Site) Baptist Church and interment will follow in Glen Haven Memory Gardens, Stafford.  
The family will receive friends Monday from 8 to 9 p.m. at Brown's Funeral Home.

Park, Pa., Miss Isabel Moter of Reading, Pa., and Mrs. Anna Hewitson of New York City; two brothers, Carl Moter of Bowling Green and Hans Moter of Reading, Pa.; and three grandchildren.  
A funeral service will be held Monday at 3 p.m. at Manns Funeral Home, Bowling Green, and interment will follow in Lakewood Cemetery.  
The family requests that expressions of sympathy take the form of contributions to the Bowling Green Rescue Squad.

**Mrs. Mamie Embrey**  
REMINGTON — Mrs. Mamie Rosie Embrey of Remington died Friday at Fauquier Hospital at the age of 72.  
She is survived by two sons, Robert L. Embrey of Remington and Jackson B. Embrey of Wil-

Fig. 3 Leroy J. Hamm's Obituary (*The Free Lance-Star*, February 12, 1972)

<sup>4</sup> Abstract of Divorce Decree: "Ada Hamm" Virginia Department of Health; Richmond, Virginia; *Virginia Divorce Records, 1918-2014* Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Certificate of Marriage "Leroy J. Hamm, Jr." Virginia Department of Health; Richmond, Virginia; *Virginia, Marriages, 1936-2014*; Roll: 101144701. Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Zimmerman, "The Men Who Cook Our Meals," 1947.

<sup>7</sup> "Leroy Hamm," Fredericksburg, Virginia City Directory 1953, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>8</sup> "Leroy Hamm," Fredericksburg, Virginia City Directory 1956, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

"Leroy Hamm," Fredericksburg, Virginia City Directory 1958, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>9</sup> Virginia, Commonwealth of. 1972 (Filed February 14). "Certificate of Death: LeRoy James Hamm." Accessed March 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>10</sup> "Leroy Hamm," Fredericksburg, Virginia City Directory 1949, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>11</sup> "Leroy James Hamm, Sr." Memorial ID 163419204. *Find a Grave Index*, accessed May 7, 2020. Findagrave.com.

## Eugene Johnson

Known as the “most widely traveled” of the kitchen staff, Eugene Johnson had already seen much of the world by the time he started working at Mary Washington College in 1946.<sup>12</sup> His baking career began as a teenager in New Orleans, working at a sugar refinery.<sup>13</sup> In 1943, 22 year-old Eugene enlisted as a private in the US Army.<sup>14</sup> He served in Germany and England for the rest of World War II as a baker. The article in *The Bullet* mentions that Eugene used some recipes he learned during the war when he baked for Mary Washington College.<sup>15</sup> Eugene also transferred his skill of feeding an army of soldiers to feeding a campus of students. “The baker makes enough dough for 2,240 rolls or biscuits,” a student article in *The Bullet* recorded.<sup>16</sup> According to another article, “Eugene can carry on a conversation and cut out 280 biscuits in 3 minutes.”<sup>17</sup> In 1953 Eugene took on a job as a porter, but by 1955 he was once again listed as a cook in the Fredericksburg city directory.<sup>18</sup> He continued working at the college until at least 1958, and lived with his wife Julia at 903 Barton Street.<sup>19</sup>

## Robert Wormley

“Practically a permanent fixture” at Mary Washington College, Robert, or “Bob” Wormley was a lifelong resident of Fredericksburg.<sup>20</sup> In 1900, thirteen-year-old Robert attended 9th grade and was the only son of Lucinda and James Wormley, living on 511 Amelia Street.<sup>21</sup> Twenty years later, he was the head of his own household. Robert was a waiter at a hotel, supporting his wife Rosa and children Elsie and James.<sup>22</sup> His brother-in-law Leroy Golden also stayed with the family. The Wormleys lived at 1113 Winchester Street in a duplex structure. Within the next ten years, they moved to 1109 Winchester, renting the opposite side of the house.<sup>23</sup> In 1930, Bob was a janitor at the college. The student article on the college’s kitchen staff reports that Bob had been working at the dining hall since 1922, so perhaps this janitorial role included cleaning the kitchen and dining

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<sup>12</sup> Zimmerman, “The Men Who Cook Our Meals,” 1947.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Eugene S. Johnson,” *U.S., World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA. Accessed March 3, 2020. <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>15</sup> Zimmerman, “The Men Who Cook Our Meals,” 1947.

<sup>16</sup> Pinchbeck, Virginia. “Add a Pinch of Salt,” *The Bullet*, October 8, 1946, accessed May 1, [https://archive.org/stream/Bullet-Fredericksburg\\_VA\\_vol-19\\_1946-10-08#page/n1/mode/2up/search/cook](https://archive.org/stream/Bullet-Fredericksburg_VA_vol-19_1946-10-08#page/n1/mode/2up/search/cook).

<sup>17</sup> Zimmerman, “The Men Who Cook Our Meals,” 1947.

<sup>18</sup> “Eug Johnson.”” Fredericksburg, Virginia City Directory 1953, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

“Eug Johnson.”” Fredericksburg, Virginia City Directory 1955, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>19</sup> “Eug S Johnson.” Fredericksburg, Virginia City Directory 1958, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>20</sup> Zimmerman, “The Men Who Cook Our Meals,” 1947.

<sup>21</sup> 1900 Census (Population Schedule) Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED) 90, Sheet number 15, Robt. Wormley, line 35, digital image, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>22</sup> 1920 Census (Population Schedule) Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED) 48, Sheet number 7B, Robert L. Wormley, line 89, digital image, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>23</sup> 1930 Census (Population Schedule) Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED)107-2, Sheet number 18B, Robert L. Wormley, Line 65, digital image, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

room.<sup>24</sup> In 1940 Robert earned 780 dollars per year as a “kitchen helper” at the state college.<sup>25</sup> Although he registered for the draft in World War II, Robert remained at the college, working there until at least 1958.<sup>26</sup> His work was described variously as a laborer, employee, helper, dishwasher, and cook.<sup>27</sup> Robert and Rosa moved to 1208 Cardwell Street in Fredericksburg after 1958 and stayed there until their deaths in 1972.<sup>28</sup> They are both buried at Shiloh Baptist Cemetery in Fredericksburg.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Zimmerman, “The Men Who Cook Our Meals,” 1947.

<sup>25</sup> 1940 Census (Population Schedule) Fredericksburg, Virginia, Enumeration District (ED)107-4, Sheet number 8A, Robert Wormley, Line 4, digital image, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Lee Wormley. Draft Registration Card, 1942. The National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; Record Group Title: *Records of the Selective Service System*; Record Group Number: 147. Digital Image, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>27</sup> “Robert L Wormley” Fredericksburg, Virginia City Directory 1944, 1947, 1949, 1951, 1953, 1955, 1956, 1958, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>28</sup> Virginia, Commonwealth of. 1972 (Filed August 15, 1972). “Certificate of Death: Robert Lee Wormley.” Accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com>.

<sup>29</sup> “Robert L. Wormley, Rosa G. Wormley.” Memorial ID 94059099, *Find a Grave Index*, accessed May 7, 2020. Findagrave.com.