

"I've always been interested in history"

Rebecca Gilmore Coleman was already married with two children when she first learned from her father of her connection to the Gilmore cabin. Her father died a short time later, and she regrets that she did not learn more from him about the family. In some ways, that vacuum motivated her to form the Orange County African-American Historical Society (OCAAHS).

In 1998 Montpelier's archaeologist, Scott Parker, who was doing research on Montpelier slaves, took her to see the cabin. Later, when she served on James Madison's 250th birthday celebration committee, she said, during a morning meeting with visiting National Trust dignitaries, "You know, I really wish someone would do something about the cabin."

"What cabin?" they asked. "It's my grandfather's cabin," she responded. Eyebrows arched in interest. After lunch that day, the dignitaries took one of those small tour buses Montpelier used to have across Route 20 to see for themselves. The seed had been planted, not just for them, but for Rebecca as well.

"Montpelier was continually asking about African-Americans and slave descendants. I just felt an urgent need to form this society," she says of the first organizational meeting of the OCAAHS at the train station in 2000. Crediting the many people who helped her organize it, the OCAAHS and Montpelier led the way to the first slave descendents gathering in 2001.

"The whole purpose of the gathering was to encourage people; get your folks to tell their story, document your history," she says passionately. That gathering has grown to the point that at the 2007 slave descendents reunion, Rebecca under-



Photo by Susie Audibert

The fully restored Gilmore cabin may be the only freedman's home open to the public in the country. Rebecca Gilmore Coleman's great grandfather George Gilmore built this cabin in 1873. Her father was born upstairs.



Photo by Phil Audibert

This past December, friends, admirers, and relatives gathered to honor Rebecca Gilmore Coleman at her retirement ceremony as president of the Orange County African-American Historical Society. Future plans for her include earning a degree in history from the University of Virginia or James Madison University.

went the "very scary" experience of going on live television on C-SPAN with Montpelier's Michael Quinn.

The OCAAHS has also, in conjunction with the Arts Center, produced numerous black history programs and exhibits. And it has led to the complete restoration of the Gilmore cabin, which, as far as

anybody can tell, is the only original freedman's residence open to the public in the country. This restoration has forged a vital link in Montpelier's unique and still unfolding story of the journey taken from slavery to emancipation to Jim Crow and beyond.

Rebecca's family history follows that trail step for step. In 1810, her great-grandfather George Gilmore was born into slavery at Montpelier. Emancipated at the end of the Civil War, George and Polly Gilmore built the cabin in 1873. He may have used stones from a nearby Confederate winter encampment to build his chimney. By the 1880 census, the Gilmores and five surviving children were actively farming this land. Elder sons may have worked as wage laborers and evidence shows that Polly was a skilled seamstress.

In 1901, George Gilmore bought the 16 acres on which the cabin was located for \$560 from Dr. Ambrose Madison, who died shortly afterwards. Four years after that, George Gilmore, former slave and now a free Orange County landowner, died at the age of 95. His son William and successive generations of Gilmores, including Rebecca's father, continued to occupy the cabin until the 1930s.

And so George Gilmore's direct descendent was honored at a Sunday afternoon retirement ceremony this past December. Archaeologist and close friend, Matt Reeves; her pastor, the Reverend Marion Wilkerson; Montpelier's Michael Quinn; Ruth Lewis Smith, representing the NAACP; and Rebecca's family all spoke on her behalf. But Orange County historian Frank Walker said it best when he referred to her as "a bridge all the way across this community. Rebecca, your bridge still stands," concluded Walker.

But it doesn't stand still. "I've always been interested in history," says Rebecca. She outlines plans to enroll at either JMU or UVA, once Isaiah gets through knee replacement surgery. "Before I die, I want to walk across that stage with my degree," she said. It's a safe bet her major will be history.

From BLACK and WHITE to glorious COLOR

Few Gilmore family photographs survive. This shot of Rebecca Gilmore with her mother, Blanche Gentry Gilmore, was only discovered 15 years ago. Blanche Gilmore died when Rebecca was 11.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Rebecca Gilmore Coleman founded the Orange County African-American Historical Society in 2000. That led to the first Montpelier slave descendents gathering a year later and to the complete restoration of the cabin her great-grandfather built after emancipation.

The date was August 28, 1963, and Rebecca Gilmore Coleman and husband Isaiah were sitting in this very house watching "a little old broken down black and white TV." Martin Luther King was on the Mall delivering his "I have a dream" speech. They can still hear those famous words today. "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last." Well, not quite yet. They had to wait until...

The date was January 22, 2009, and Rebecca Gilmore Coleman and husband Isaiah were sitting in this very house watching ...a nice color set hooked up to a satellite dish. Barack Obama was on the Mall delivering his inaugural address. And they can still hear those famous words today... "the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness."

From an era where not just television sets but society as a whole saw everything in black and white, we've become a nation of multiple hues and shades of glorious color. The Colemans, all of us for that matter, saw Martin Luther King's dream come true that day.

She briefly recalls the haunting black and white images of the past. "When you watch the dogs and the fire hoses and all this and then you see what happened today...What a comparison," she marvels. "We've come a long way, thanks to education and people who are willing to change." She points out that, in his inaugural address, Barack Obama hardly mentioned matters of race. "I don't think race for him or for me, as far as that goes, should play any part in it. It's about this country and who we are and what we represent."

She pauses and adds with a shrug of mild irritation, "Some will never change, both black and white; the hatreds are still there, not only with whites but blacks too. But you know," she straightens, "you have to move forward."

One thing you cannot say about Rebecca Gilmore Coleman is that she stands still. She is the original Energizer bunny. At a retirement ceremony this past December honoring her as founder and president of the Orange County African-American Historical Society,



Rebecca Gilmore Coleman in her mid 20s before she started work with AT&T in 1968.

her pastor, the Reverend Marion Wilkerson said, "Just leave her alone for 35 minutes and she'll find something to do." Her own son, Tony let on that as he commutes to his postal service job in the wee hours of the morning, she calls him... at 1:30 a.m....every...single...morning.

Rebecca confirms this. "We have about a half hour early in the morning, and that's our time together," she explains. "He's just a child who is very attentive to his parents." Isaiah rolls his eyes. He loves his son, *but*, there's no way he's getting up at 1:30 in the morning to talk to him on the phone. Besides, Tony will call them this afternoon...and this evening.

Rebecca smiles demurely; says something about quality time. "You have to get it where you can. Everybody's so busy these days." Then she lets drop that every time Tony comes to visit he brings her a dozen roses. Mothers everywhere turn

green with envy. "How fortunate can you be?" says Rebecca appreciatively.

We are seated at her dining room table in this elegant and tastefully understated house that she and Isaiah have lived in since 1959...this house that has undergone so many alterations and additions you can't even see the original four-rooms-and-a-bath cinderblock structure. The dining room table is strewn with clippings, photographs, report cards, old resumes...a sort of 'This is Your Life,' in rough draft, all assembled in preparation for this conversation.

Of people who have roots in Orange County, Rebecca's run particularly deep, although she didn't know it until the 1970s when Alex Haley's seminal book and film of the same name came out. "Roots" prompted her father, Harry Gilmore, to take her to a log cabin tucked into a clearing beside Route 20 near Montpelier. He pointed to a quarter circle window just under the vine-choked eaves in the attic and told her he was born in that room. His father before him was born into slavery in 1863, and his father before him, George Gilmore, toiled for free at Montpelier and upon emancipation, built that cabin. "We're not too far removed from slavery," says Rebecca somberly. Yet it took her almost 30 years to fully probe that legacy. There were too many other things to do.

First there was this matter of being born, the sixth child of seven "right up the path here," in what was known then as Goffneytown. "I don't think I could ever leave," she says of her surroundings. "It's so much a part of me. It's in me." She attended Monroe Wood School near where the Moose Lodge is today on Mountain Track Road. "We walked to school... rain, sleet, snow." After one year, she switched to the Orange Graded School, where Prospect Heights is today, and which was renamed just recently to the Taylor Education Administration Complex, after the legendary Orange County black educator, Gussie Taylor.

But Rebecca Gilmore couldn't attend school every day; her mother was dying of cancer. "We would stay home because she was so ill. We took turns out of school. When the aunts couldn't come, then we children had to stay home with her, because she was in bed. And I can remember giving her breakfast." Rebecca's mother died when she was 11.

She remembers going to the Pitts-Madison Theatre every Saturday afternoon and sitting upstairs in the segregated balcony. These were actually the best seats in the house, although she claims she did not pelt the white audience below with popcorn, as the others gleefully did. "I was too chicken," she laughs. She also remembers waiting in the "Colored" section at the train station while her father ferried a fare in his taxi. Still she says, "I cannot say that I have experienced any racial issues here...Our parents knew that you didn't sit in the



Isaiah and Rebecca Coleman have no marriage day photographs of their own. Instead this was snapped on the occasion of their son Tony's wedding.



Photo by Phil Audibert
Isaiah and Rebecca Coleman have known each other since childhood. They have been married 52 years, and have lived in this house since 1959. Note the painting of the Gilmore cabin on the mantel.



The Coleman family today- Back row from left to right: daughter, Cathy Coleman Tracy, granddaughter Jessica Tracy, son Tony, grandson Tony Tracy. Seated in front are Isaiah, great grandson Ayden and Rebecca. Not pictured are grandsons Darrin and Derrick.

drug store and eat your sandwich or your ice cream. If you wanted it, you bought it and you left." They protected her that way.

Besides, Harry Gilmore commanded respect. He was a skilled bulldozer operator for J.P. Walters and Sons, and he drove a cab on weekends. "We were fortunate in that we had good relationships with whites in this community," says Rebecca, adding that once you share bread with somebody, differences seem to melt away. "My mother would cook for them and they would come and sit and eat. We were surrounded by whites who wanted to be with us."

Rebecca was the first African-American woman to work at the Eagle Store on Main Street in Orange. "People were nice to me. There were a couple who would stare, but I never had a problem." She attended the segregated George Washington Carver High School (today's Piedmont Regional Adult Education Center on Rt. 15 between Orange and Culpeper), but did not finish, eventually earning her diploma in 1968 from a correspondence school in Chicago. Her lowest grade was an 89.

"I loved school, but he got in the way of school," she teases Isaiah gently. They met as children at the old Little Zion Baptist Church. He was born and raised "back in the woods" just two miles from where they live today. "We've always known each other," she says with a little shrug. "Isaiah came bearing gifts...for some reason or another he decided he wanted to marry me, so here we are, 52 years later. We've been very blessed."

Married in 1956 they built their home three years later in this very spot, carved out for them by her father and uncle, right in front of the house site where she was born. Isaiah had landed a job with Grymes Drug Store, where he worked as a sales clerk for an incredible 44 years. In 1968, at age 26, Rebecca was hired by AT&T, first as an operator, and later, after she earned her clearance, as an administrative assistant to "my dear, dear friend," Jack Fulton at the top-secret communications facility buried in Peters Mountain. "I can't tell you anymore; I'll definitely have to kill you," she jokes.

It was during this period that Rebecca earned her associate degree at Piedmont Community College. She remembers when she had a term paper due, "I was up all night with a coffee pot and I would call Jack and say 'Jack, you know I haven't been to sleep yet.'" He would suggest she take a vacation day. "He was really kind to me. Without

him I don't think I would have made it."

It was on Nov. 11, 1987, that Rebecca was driving to work on Rt. 231. An inch of snow covered the road. A man driving towards Gordonsville slid into her path, and "hit me head on." She suffered two black eyes, a fractured sternum, and a badly injured back. She was bed-ridden for three months.

By this time she had taken a job with AT&T at a facility near Winchester. Because of her back injury, she bought a house there to shorten the commute. She retired from the company in 2003. And since then, she's been lying around the house with her hair up in curlers eating bonbons, right? Wrong.

Rebecca Gilmore Coleman's energy is legendary. Throughout her life she has been active in a variety of causes and organizations, most notably the Little Zion Baptist Church, the March of Dimes, the Orange Downtown Alliance, the NAACP, to name just a few. She has organized and chaired events. She has been honored for her many accomplishments. She founded the Orange County African-American Historical Society. She brought her ancestor's home, the Gilmore cabin, to the attention of Montpelier and the National Trust, resulting in that cabin's restoration. And she dug a basement...by hand.

The Orange County African-American Historical Society will celebrate History Month with the unveiling of the Gussie Taylor portrait Feb. 22 at the Orange Train Station.
Artist Thomas Marsh will unveil the portrait and local residents are invited to recount memories of Mrs. Taylor's contributions to African-American schools.

For more information please contact Patrice Grimes 434.295.3199 or patricepgrimes@yahoo.com.

"That's remarkable," says Isaiah who has been sitting quietly listening to this conversation at the dining room table. He mentions that the four of them, Rebecca, Isaiah, and their two children, Cathy and Tony, excavated 137 pick-up truck loads of dirt from under this house, by hand. "It was the best thing for our children because they learned responsibility," chimes in Rebecca.

For structural reasons, they excavated by section, and once they completed each section, they celebrated, until the entire basement was dug. "It only took us three months," she offhands, adding the experience taught the children the value of setting goals and completing them. She remembers Tony saying, "Mom, that was the best thing you all could have done,' although he admits, "' It was hard and we fussed about it.'" But she smiles and adds "when he looks back now, teaching responsibility, he appreciates what we've done."

The new basement became a game room, complete with pool table. "The kids loved it; they got a color TV for doing the work...we only had a little old broken down black and white TV."

Maybe, it was the same TV they had when they saw Martin Luther King deliver his "I have a dream" speech. But the color set that they watched during Barak Obama's inauguration; now, that's a newer model.