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Out of the Attic

The remarkable visibility of Hannah Nokes

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Image: Hannah Nokes. Rural Electrification News/University of Michigan Collection/Robert Pfaff Reproduction..

In the early 1930s, a high-profile murder trial in Northern Virginia attracted national media attention as the defendant's attorney challenged Virginia's all-white juries. But the case of "Commonwealth v. George Crawford" is significant for another reason: It is among the earliest cases of an openly transgender person testifying in Virginia courts.

Prominent civil rights attorney Charles Houston defended George Crawford, an African American man who was indicted for murder after two white women in Middleburg were killed. Police had recovered one victim's car in Alexandria and inside they found a note with the name and Herndon address of Hammond Nokes, a transgender woman who was assigned male at birth and who also went by the name Hannah Nokes. Investigators determined that shortly before the murders, the suspect had boarded for a night at the Nokes home.

During the trial in Leesburg, Nokes appeared in court wearing a dress, wig and beaded necklace, and testified about the defendant's stay at her home. Nokes' nephew was also called to the witness stand, and when Houston questioned him about Hammond Nokes' relationship to him, the young man stated, under oath, that Nokes was his aunt.

One Crawford supporter dismissed Nokes as a "rather disreputable colored man who had been passing as a woman," and Houston and co-counsel James Guy Tyson were among Nokes' critics, referring to her as "this Hammond person" and describing her home as a "den for all the thieves, sissies, cutthroats and other depraved and degraded folk of that surrounding country." But the prosecution found Nokes credible enough to call her as a witness for the Commonwealth.

In contrast to the defense team's assessment, Nokes was a respected and trusted employee who maintained close family ties. Like many other black women in the Jim Crow South, Nokes took in boarders and worked as a domestic in white households to earn a living.

Just three years after the Afro-American newspaper described her as a "red wiggged girl-boy," a New Deal magazine promoting rural electrification wrote that Nokes was "regarded with affection and respect by her neighbors" and "noted throughout the countryside for her industry, honesty, and good nature."





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

The article in Rural Electrification News featured this photo of Nokes, wearing an apron and cap and washing laundry in a tub, and described her as “probably the happiest laundress in the Commonwealth of Virginia.” That language may be criticized today but there is nothing in the article that called her gender into question. It simply presented Nokes as a hard-working woman whose employers valued and trusted her.

Nokes’s visibility as a transgender woman, particularly as a black trans woman during Jim Crow, is remarkable for the time and deserves to be remembered today.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria. This week’s article is by guest author Amy Bertsch.