



1906 Legacy Descendant Bio – Patricia Walker Bearden and Yolanda Walker Simmons

Patricia Walker Bearden and Yolanda Walker Simmons are the granddaughters of Alex Walker, one of the few people convicted of an offense connected with the 1906 Atlanta Race Massacre.

Both retired educators, the sisters live in Chicago and were unaware of the family's link to the traumas of 1906 until their father told them during an oral history session on his 85th birthday more than 30 years ago.

In 1906, Alex Walker and his wife, Julia, were living in Brownsville, a middle-class African-American neighborhood in south Atlanta. They had two children, with a third on the way. Walker worked as a bellhop at Atlanta's finest hotel, the Kimball House. He was on the job when the massacre erupted downtown on the night of Sept. 22. The violence spread to other areas in the coming days.

On the evening of Sept. 24, a police posse marched on Brownsville intending to disarm residents, who were rumored to be stockpiling weapons for self-defense. A gun battle broke out. Ray Stannard Baker, a leading journalist of the day, investigated the incident for a magazine article and concluded that police fired the first shots. However it happened, Fulton County officer James Heard was shot in the head and died.

Almost all of the at least 25 fatalities in the 1906 massacre were African Americans, including five who died in Brownsville. Authorities arrested 257 people there, but only Walker was convicted of murder. He denied pulling the trigger during his trial but told a different story years later to his family.

“He admitted shooting him,” Patricia Bearden says. “It was self-defense. The way our father put it was, ‘Papa didn’t take no mess.’”

Sentenced to life, Walker apparently served only a few years of his term because his granddaughters have found him listed in the 1910 census living in Birmingham, Ala. He worked for a steel mill there and moved north to Chicago a decade later.

Patricia Bearden remembers him from her early childhood as a thin man in overalls with close-cropped hair who vaguely resembled Mahatma Gandhi as he sold vegetables from a wagon. He died in 1949.

His granddaughters went on to distinguished, award-winning careers as educators. Bearden taught for years in Chicago elementary schools while her younger sister, Simmons, taught in high schools and was later an administrator. They were both on the faculty at the National Louis University's Center for City Schools. Each is married with two children.

Bearden and Simmons have long been interested in genealogical research. They were among the authors of a 1999 book, *History Comes Home: Family Stories Across the Curriculum*. They also founded two organizations to help African Americans explore their histories: the American Family Historical Institute and the International Society of Sons & Daughters of Slave Ancestry.

The sisters have traced their family tree on their father's side to Alabama in the 1850s and on their mother's side to Virginia in the 1730s. But there's one piece of the past they're still looking for.

"We don't have a picture of our grandfather," Yolanda Simmons says.

"We'd really like to find a photo of Grandpa Alex," Patricia Bearden adds.

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