

They Had Names

African Americans in Early Records of Liberty and Bryan Counties, Georgia

Titus Alvin and Eliza LeConte Liberty County, Georgia

Research by Stacy Ashmore Cole

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They Had Names (theyhadnames.net) is a digital humanities project dedicated to uncovering, preserving, and sharing the lives of enslaved and formerly enslaved people in coastal Georgia. By using digital tools to recover individual names and stories, They Had Names bridges archival research and public history, ensuring that voices often omitted from the historical record are visible to descendants, researchers, and the wider community. It was created by Stacy Ashmore Cole to memorialize those held in slavery in Liberty County, Georgia, where her family were slaveholders. Contact her at jnscole@yahoo.com.

Disclaimer: This research was done with the records available at the time and may contain mistakes. It is intended to aid your own research. Please double-check all facts and conclusions.

Research on Titus Alvin and Eliza LeConte

In 1877, Titus Alvin, a formerly enslaved African American man from Liberty County, Georgia, filed a claim with the U.S. Southern Claims Commission on behalf of a deceased African American woman named Eliza LeConte. Alvin claimed \$101 for cattle, hogs, poultry, lard, potatoes, rice, and clothing/bedding that he said had been taken from LeConte by U.S. soldiers when they raided Liberty County in December 1864.

See a full transcription of the Southern Claims Commission petition here:

<https://theyhadnames.net/2020/08/03/titus-alvin-eliza-leconte-southern-claims-commission/>

Alvin said that Eliza LeConte's slaveowner was John L. Harden, and that she had gotten the property from her (unnamed) father, and that the U.S. soldiers had taken it to their camp at Midway Church from her home on John Harden's Halifax Plantation. Two other formerly enslaved men, Paul LeConte and Charles Holmes, also testified that Eliza LeConte's property had been taken, and Judge John L. Harden, a white man, testified that, although he was in the Confederate Army during the actual raid so did not see the property taken, Eliza LeConte did own the property Alvin said she owned.

Special Commissioner Henry Way, who took the testimony and charged an illegal fee of \$3 for it, did a spectacularly poor job of presenting the testimony. The Claims Commissioners expressed confusion over why Titus Alvin was filing as Eliza LeConte's agent, as no relationship between them was listed in the report. They noted that two children had been mentioned but nothing said about who they were, adding, "Who the parties interested in this claim are is not informed. We can not even conjecture. Titus Alvin in his own right as stated in the petition has no claim. The claim is disallowed."

Commissioner Way's method of presenting testimony was often confusing, as the claims questions were long and contained multiple questions in one, and he tended to summarize the answers without punctuation. In this report, the Claims Commissions assumed that Alvin had said that John L. Harden was Eliza LeConte's father because of the way this question was answered in the report:

70. Were you a slave or free at the beginning of the war? If ever a slave, when did you become free? What business did you follow after obtaining your freedom? Did you own this property before or after you became free? When did you get it? How did you become owner, and from whom did you obtain it? Where did you get the means to pay

for it? What was the name and residence of your master, and is he still living? Is he a witness for you, and if not, why not? Are you in his employ now, or do you live on his land or on land bought from him? Are you in his debt? What other person besides yourself has any interest in this claim?

(Answer): She was slave became free after war owned property before became free got it before the war from her father. John L. Harden dec'd he is not witness because dead deceased two children.

It is likely that Alvin was answering the question about who her slaveowner was when he answered "John L. Harden," rather than saying "her father John L. Harden," as the Commissioners evidently thought.

However, John L. Harden was not dead, as Alvin had said, because he did testify. In fact, he was only 38 at the time of the testimony. John LeConte Harden did not actually own Halifax Plantation; instead, it was owned by his mother, Jane LeConte Harden, daughter of Louis LeConte and widow of John M.B. Harden, John L. Harden's father, who had died in 1848. Jane L. Harden lived until 1873. [For more on this, see <https://theyhadnames.net/2020/05/20/paul-leconte-southern-claims-commission/>]

There was an Eliza in John M.B. Harden's 1848 estate inventory following his death, and in 1862, when Harden's estate was divided among his heirs, Eliza was in the group inherited by Jane L. Harden, so it does seem likely that this was Eliza LeConte.

There is no Titus in either the 1848 or 1862 Harden estate inventories. Titus Alvin appears to have been born around 1837, and a Titus of about the right age does appear in Louis LeConte's estate inventories from 1838 through 1842, and was inherited by John LeConte, John L. Harden's uncle. That Titus appears to have been the son of Scipio and Tenah, who took the name LeConte and then Polite after the Civil War, and the brother of Boston Polite, who also submitted a Southern Claims Commission petition. However, we don't know if that Titus is Titus Alvin. [For more on this, see <https://theyhadnames.net/2020/07/12/boston-polite-southern-claims-commission/>]

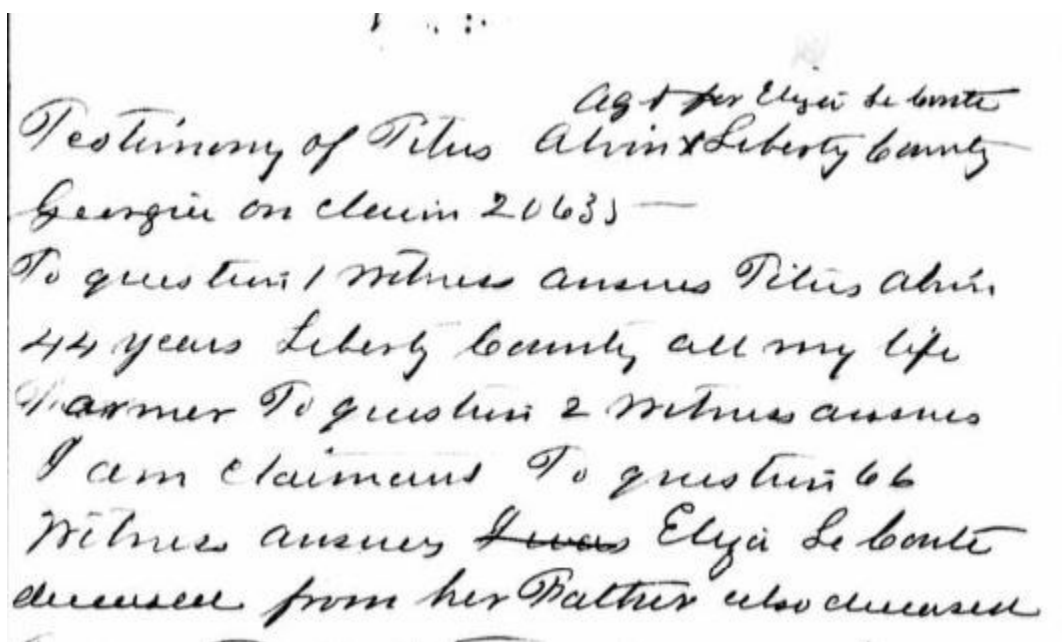
Why did Titus Alvin submit Eliza LeConte's claim? She evidently died before his 1877 claim on her behalf, but the 1870 and 1880 censuses reveal the connection. In 1870, Titus Alvin was living with his wife Rachel, and their children Joseph (14), Scipio (5), and Benjamin (7 months). Also in the household was Julia Howard (35) and James Harden (5), listed in order, which would appear to make them mother and son, since relationships were not listed in the 1870 census.

However, in the 1880 census, which did list relationships, we see Titus and Rachel with their children listed as Scipio (15), Annie (13), Ben (8), Samuel (7), and Aberdean (Dean) (6). Julia Howard and James Harden are still in the household, but now Julia is

listed as Titus' sister-in-law (so presumably Rachel's sister), and James Harden is listed as adopted.

So it appears that James Harden is probably one of the two children of Eliza LeConte mentioned in Titus Alvin's claim for her, and Alvin had adopted him. What else can we learn about him?

Remember that the Claims Commissioner had misinterpreted Special Commissioner Way's report to say that John L. Harden was Eliza's father? It appears possible there may actually have been a different connection. James Harden was listed as mulatto in the 1870 census, the only member of the household so listed, and when he died of malaria in 1928 his death certificate listed his mother as Eliza LeConte and his father as Johnnie Harden. John L. Harden would have been about 26 when James Harden was born in 1865, and did not marry until 1869. Perhaps Commissioner Way's report was deliberately vague about relationships because it was an awkward subject. However, James Harden was not listed as mulatto in the 1880 census, and John L. Harden was in the C.S.A. Chatham Artillery from 1861 until April 26, 1865, when he surrendered with his unit in Greensboro, North Carolina. On the other hand, C.S.A. soldiers did get leave during the war. Only DNA testing of descendants could say for sure whether John L. Harden was James Harden's father.



Ag't for Eliza LeConte
Testimony of Titus Alvin Liberty County
Georgia on claim 20635 —
To question 1 witness answers Titus Alvin
44 years Liberty County all my life
farmer To question 2 witness answers
I am claimant To question 66
witness answers I was Eliza LeConte
deceased from her father also deceased

Titus Alvin's SCC testimony

Liberty County Superior Court records revealed a surprising amount about Titus Alvin's life. Testimony in an 1882 court case in which neighbor Ben Howard was accused of setting fire to white landowner James Townsend's rice house and commissary revealed that Titus Alvin's wife Rachel was Ben Howard's sister. Ben Howard's attorney in that case was Judge John L. Harden. The charges were dropped and another man, John Lambert, was later convicted.

In 1885, however, Ben Howard, Titus Alvin, and Titus' son Scipio Alvin were convicted of theft for stealing three hogs worth \$9 and sentenced to two years at hard labor. John L. Harden was again the defense attorney.

In 1892, James Townsend, whose rice house had been burned in the 1882 case, was shot by an unknown party, and Ben Howard was blamed and arrested. While the deputies were transporting him to Hinesville, Ben Howard was lynched. The case made the national news, and two white men were arrested, but no records have yet been found of the outcome of their trial, which was postponed in 1893 because the state was "not ready" to prosecute its case.

Titus Alvin had begun share-cropping after the Civil War, and was living on the Foster Plantation at the time of his 1877-1878 Southern Claims Commission claim. In 1880 and presumably other years, he was subject to a common, predatory, transaction with the R. Jordan Company. The Company gave him \$40 worth of provisions and plantation supplies and in return, he was to hand over his entire crop for the year to be sold by the Company, which would deduct the amount of the loan and give him the balance, "if any." In addition, all of his property, both real and personal, was mortgaged to the Company.

Despite all these difficulties, Titus Alvin had managed to amass 120 acres of land by at least 1899, when he and his sons Scipio and Ben leased the timber rights to the Hilton & Dodge Lumber Company. The 10-year lease cost the company \$50. The lease specified that Alvin had lived on the land for 27 years and had clear title to it, also that it was known as the "Polly Bacon" tract and was bounded on the north by Col. E.P. [Edward Payson] Miller, east and south by Pompey Stewart, and west by Louis Harden.

By 1900, Titus Alvin was a widower and was living with his grandchildren Bussie (20), Lewis (13), and Phillis [Phillis] Alvin, Julia Howard (now 50), and his nieces and nephews Charlotte Hargrave (25), Robert Hargrave (8), William Hargrave (23), and Betsey Hargrave (6), as well as grandnephew Henry Keller (20). Living nearby — probably on the same land — were sons Ben, Scipio, and Aberdine Alvin with their families. [NOTE: The name Alvin was also spelled Albin in some records.] By 1910, Titus, now about 73, had moved in with son Scipio.

No record was found of Titus Alvin after 1911, when he gifted the 110 acres where his son Ben Alvin was then living to his sons Ben, Dean [Aberdine], Sypio [Scipio], and Joe. By then, the land was bounded by the Brewster Lumber Company on the south and north, west by Paul LeConte (who had also submitted a Southern Claims Commission petition), and east by Miller and Harden.

Citations

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1880 U.S. Census, Liberty County, Georgia, population schedule, District 15, enumeration district 67, p. 47, dwelling #533, family #534, Titus Alvin and household; digital image, Ancestry.com (<https://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 8/3/2020).

1900 U.S. Census, Liberty County, Georgia, population schedule, Militia District 15, enumeration district 81, sheet #12, line number 61-70, Titus Alvin and household; digital image, Ancestry.com (<https://www.ancestry.com>: accessed 8/3/2020).

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1928 James Harden Death Certificate

Certificate of Death for James Harden, Georgia State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Liberty County, Militia District 15, Riceboro, June 28, 1928, Certificate #16349; accessed online, Ancestry.com, "Georgia, Deaths Index, 1914-1940" for Eliza LeConte, 004335062, Image #220 of 1013 (link: https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/2562/images/004335062_00220)

John M.B. Harden Estate Inventories

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"Georgia Probate Records, 1742-1990," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QSQ-G93L-GHFW>: 20 May 2014), Liberty > Wills, appraisements and bonds 1790-1850 vol B > image 664 of 689.

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1862:

Family Search.org. Liberty County Superior Court "Deeds and mortgages, 1777-1920; general index to deeds and mortgages, 1777-1958," Film: Deeds & Mortgages, v. O-P 1854-1870," Record Book P, p. 207-210 (image #475-7). (Link: <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-C3QP-RSTR-Sv>)

<https://theyhadnames.net/2019/02/21/liberty-county-estate-inventory-division-j-m-b-harden/v>

John L. Harden military service:

Confederate Widow's Pension Application by Mrs. Annie Olivia Harden of Ben Hill County, Georgia, in 1910. Archive Collection #GCP-019; accessed online, Ancestry.com, "Georgia, Confederate Pension Applications, 1879-1960," image 1 of 64 (link:

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