



From Whence Cometh My Help: The African American Community at Hollins College

Ethel Morgan Smith

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In 1842 Charles Lewis Cocke arrived in Roanoke, Virginia, with sixteen slaves; there, he founded Hollins College, an elite woman's school. Many of the early students also brought their slaves to the college with them. Upon Emancipation some of the African Americans of the community "mostly women" stayed on as servants, forming what is now called the Hollins Community. Although the servants played an integral part in the college's success, students were strongly discouraged from acknowledging them as people. Rules forbidding any "familiarity" with the servants perpetuated a prejudicial attitude toward the African American community that would persist well into the 1940s.

Determined to give voice to the African American community that served as the silent workforce for Hollins College, Ethel Morgan Smith succeeded in finding individuals to step forward and tell their stories. *From Whence Cometh My Help* examines the dynamics of an institution built on the foundations of slavery and so steeped in tradition that it managed to perpetuate servitude for generations. Interviewing senior community members, Smith gives recognition to the invisible population that provided and continues to provide the labor support for Hollins College for more than 150 years.

Although African American students have been admitted to the college for roughly thirty years, to date only one person from the Hollins Community has graduated from the college. *From Whence Cometh My Help* explores the subtle and complex relationship between the affluent white world of Hollins College and the proud African American community that has served it since its inception. Interweaving personal observations, historical documents, and poetry throughout a revealing oral history, Smith shares her fascinating discoveries and the challenges involved in telling a story silenced for so long.

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