



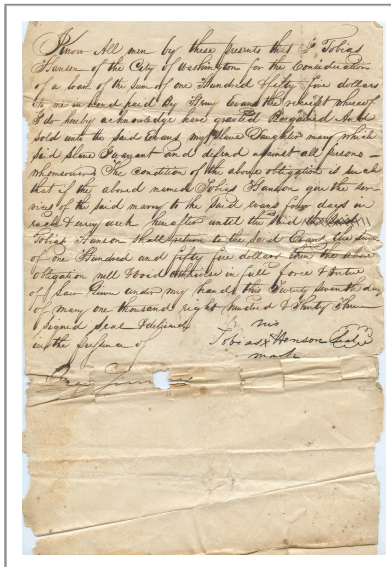
# Smithsonian

## *Anacostia Community Museum*

Henson family papers, 1818-1943, bulk 1830-1900

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2010



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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Anacostia Community Museum Archives
<b>Title:</b>	Henson Family Papers
<b>Date:</b>	1818-1943 (bulk 1830-1900)
<b>Identifier:</b>	ACMA.06-030
<b>Creator:</b>	Henson family
<b>Extent:</b>	0.18 Linear feet (1 box)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	The Henson Family papers, which date from 1818 to 1943 and measure 0.18 linear feet, document the activities of Tobias Henson and his descendants. The papers are comprised of booklets, correspondence, legal documents, and receipts.
<b>Digital Content:</b>	<a href="#">Image(s): Henson family papers</a>

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## Administrative Information

### Provenance

The Henson family papers were donated to the Anacostia Community Museum in 2004 by Dr. Myrtle Henson.

### Related Materials

Anacostia Historical Society Records.

### Preferred Citation

Henson family papers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Dr. Myrtle Henson.

### Restrictions

Use of the materials requires an appointment. Please contact the archivist to make an appointment: [ACMarchives@si.edu](mailto:ACMarchives@si.edu).

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## Biographical Note

The history of the Hensons begins with the family's patriarch, Tobias Henson. Mr. Henson was a slave in the Washington, DC area during the 18th and 19th centuries and, given his family's history, it is apparent that he was a man with an ambitious mission: to attain the American dream. He had two tasks to accomplish if he were to see his dream realized. First he had to gain freedom for himself and his family. Second he had to purchase property upon which he could build a home, and from which he could earn a living.

He took the first step in 1813 when he purchased himself from his slave master, thus gaining his freedom. Next he purchased his wife, Elizabeth. In April of 1832 Mr. Henson purchased his daughter Matlinda Smith and her three children. In May of the following year he purchased his second daughter Mary Anderson.

With these purchases, Tobias Henson became a slaveholder, with his wife and children his slaves. Ever resourceful, Mr. Henson used this to his advantage; he rented out his daughters for income and used them as collateral for loans. With the income he generated, he purchased the freedom of his other family members. In fact, he used his daughters, Matlinda and Mary, as collateral for a loan he acquired to purchase Mary's freedom.

In addition to purchasing his freedom in 1813, Tobias Henson entered into an agreement to buy land in the Anacostia section of Washington, DC. The land, named the Ridge, consisted of twenty-four acres located in the Congress Heights section of Anacostia. He made payments on the Ridge until 1826, at which time he made the final payment and became the legal owner. Initially Mr. Henson farmed the land, but as his family grew he subdivided the acreage so that the members of his family could experience their own American dream.

Over the subsequent decades members of the Henson family continued to purchase land in the area surrounding the Ridge; at one point they were one of the largest landowners in the Anacostia section of Washington, DC. The family maintained residence on various parts of the land from the time of its purchase until the middle of the 20th century. Title records filed with the District of Columbia show that, in 1931, the portion of the Ridge that Tobias Henson gave to his grandson, Richard Smith, was still in possession of his descendants. But that was the exception. Most of the Henson family's real estate was either sold or "taken" by the government under the auspices of eminent domain. Just a decade after this title was filed, the federal government made plans to take what remained of the Ridge.

The family did all they could to save the legacy of Tobias Henson. They contacted local and federal government officials in an attempt to stave off what would amount to the destruction of an important piece of black history dating from antebellum Washington, DC. When they had exhausted all of the possibilities, they made a last ditch appeal to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. In a 1943 letter they pleaded,

At the present there are some thirteen or fourteen families living on this land, which is still designated as the Ridge, and with only one or two exceptions, these families are the direct descendants of Tobian [sic] Henson...we do not feel that taking our homes will aid in the War Effort or in the Ideals of Democracy.

Unfortunately, their plea went unanswered; the land was taken by the government and the houses thereon were razed.

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## Scope and Contents

This collection documents the activities of Tobias Henson and his descendants between 1818 and 1943. It contains materials related to the Hensons' financial and legal activities. Included in the collection are booklets, correspondence, deeds and titles, legal documents, and receipts.

Arrangement The papers are organized into four series. The content of each series is arranged alphabetically. The series are arranged as follows:

Series I: Financial Records Series II: Legal Records Series III: Printed Materials Series IV: Miscellaneous

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## Arrangement

The collection is arranged by series: 1) Financial Records, 2) Legal Records, 3) Printed Materials, 4) Miscellaneous.

## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

### Subjects:

- African American families
- African American military personnel
- African American neighborhoods
- African Education Society
- American Colonization Society
- Eminent domain
- Free Black people
- Freedmen
- Public housing
- Slavery -- United States

### Types of Materials:

- Account books
- Correspondence
- Financial records
- Leaflets
- Legal documents
- Newsletters
- Receipts

### Names:

- Henson family
- Henson, Tobias

### Places:

- Anacostia (Washington, D.C.)
- Washington (D.C.)

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Financial Records, 1818-1899; undated

*0.08 Linear feet*

Scope and Contents: This series contains materials related to the Hensons' financial matters. Included are account ledgers and receipts for consumer goods, mortgage payments, and medical bills.

Box 1, Folder 1	<a href="#">Elizabeth Henson, 1818 - 1820</a>
Box 1, Folder 2	John Smith, 1842 - 1844
Box 1, Folder 3	Richard Smith, 1860-1889; undated

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## Series 2: Legal Records, 1833 - 1934

### 0.06 Linear feet

Scope and Contents: This series contains materials related to the Hensons' legal matters. Included are documents related to land acquisitions and court appearances. Of particular interest is a 1931 title for land purchased by Tobias Henson in 1826.

Box 1, Folder 4 William E. Douglass--Military, 1887; 1934

Box 1, Folder 5 [Tobias Henson--Loan agreement, 1833](#)

Box 1, Folder 6 The Ridge--Title certificate and survey, 1904; 1931

Box 1, Folder 7 Richard Smith--Summonses, 1865; 1885

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## Series 3: Printed Materials, 1830 - 1889

### 0.02 Linear feet

Scope and Contents: This series contains materials that address African-American issues. Included is an 1864 booklet that details procedures for educating slaves and Freedmen who would, once educated, establish a colony in Africa. This particular colonization program was established by The African Education Society.

Box 1, Folder 8

Booklets, 1830; 1836

Notes:

This series contains materials that address African-American issues. Included is an 1864 booklet that details procedures for educating slaves and Freedmen who would, once educated, establish a colony in Africa. This particular colonization program was established by The African Education Society.

Box 1, Folder 9

Newsletter, 1889

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## Series 4: Miscellaneous, 1862 - 1943

## 0.02 Linear feet

Box 1, Folder 10	Confederate money, 1862
Box 1, Folder 11	General documents, 1894; undated
Box 1, Folder 12	Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, 1943

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4 Pages (20cm)

Creator: Brown, Solomon G., 1829?-1906

Language: English.

Notes: The first African American employee of the Smithsonian Institution, Solomon G. Brown (1829?-1906) dedicated 54 years of service to the Smithsonian under three Secretaries: Joseph Henry, Spencer Baird, and Samuel P. Langley. The Social Habits of Insects, his first public lecture, was given before the Young People's Literary Society on January 10, 1855. Dedicated to his community, Brown was involved with a citizens' group that encouraged the Freedmen's Bureau to purchase land in the District of Columbia for homesteading by African Americans—some recently freed from slavery. He also served as a member of the House of Delegates under the Territorial Government of the District of Columbia in which he represented both blacks and whites residing in the Anacostia (Hillsdale) section of Washington, D. C. Solomon G. Brown retired from the Smithsonian on February 14, 1906, and died at his home in Anacostia, D.C., on June 24, 1906.

Henson Family papers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Dr. Myrtle Henry.

Information from "Kind Regards of S. G. Brown" selected Poems of Solomon G. Brown compiled by Lousie Daniel Hutchinson and Gail Sylvia Lowe, reads, "Brown wrote this 'memorial verse' in honor of his friend, Isaac Brown, who died April 26, 1894. Isaac Brown had been president of the Pioneer Sunday School Association, founded by S. G. Brown. This poem was read at the memorial service May 13, 1894. Privately printed."

Topic: African Americans  
Poetry

Place: Anacostia (Washington, D.C.)  
Washington (D.C.)

Genre/Form: Leaflets