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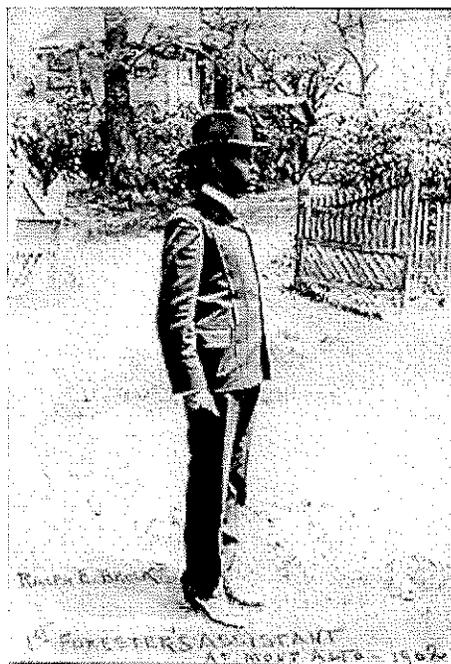


Country's first African-American forester was part of state class

Saturday, February 21, 2004

By Doug Oster, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Ralph Elwood Brock comes alive as Alex Day reads from the wrinkled, handwritten letter on his lap. Written in the early 1900s, the letter reveals a young black man trying to gently explain to his white professor why he can't start school in the spring, as requested.



Ralph Brock is shown in the forester academy's uniform in a photo from the early 1900s.

Click photo for larger image.

"While at home, I noted the important events held by members of my race at our church, institutions, conferences, etc., generally occurred between the middle and end of May."

But Brock, who would become this country's first African-American forester, also shows his initiative, detailing how he approached a family friend to discuss a forester's work.

"I did this without consulting you, but I thought it would meet your approval on account of the results it may bring," he wrote.

Day, the nursery operations manager for the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bureau of Forestry, has



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spent the past six years researching Brock's life in old metal filing bins from the Pennsylvania State Forest Academy in Mont Alto, Franklin County.

Brock was one of six graduates in 1906, the first class at the academy, now part of Penn State's Mont Alto campus. He wears the academy's uniform in an old photo found among the letters, yearbooks and other documents in the academy's files.

"When I discovered they were there, I just said, this is a story that tells what my predecessors did. I thought, 'What a story! This has just got to be told.' "

Before Day began his historical sleuthing, little was known about Brock, who became interested in plants while attending high school in West Chester. Luckily for him, the principal at his high school was friends with Dr. Joseph Rothrock, the man who would become Pennsylvania's father of forestry.

"I have a bright young fellow here that likes to work with things in botany," the principal told Rothrock.

Rothrock encouraged Brock to join him as he founded the Pennsylvania State Forest Academy, the first public school of its type in the country. There, Brock excelled in his studies and won himself a job after graduation. He was assigned to clear land across from the campus to make room for a tree nursery. He apparently did the job so well that he was made supervisor of the operation.

His time running the nursery was well spent. Records show that while he managed the nursery, he experimented with planting techniques and read everything he could get his hands on. He perfected the idea of using compost as an amendment to keep the soil healthy and viable.

Day has not been able to discover why Brock left his position at the nursery. But he has run across several notations suggesting that racism played a role. One is from "The Pennsylvania State Forest School, 1903-1929," a book by academy librarian Elizabeth Thomas.

"One quote from the book ... refers to a fist fight at the nursery," Day said. "Students of different opinions got into fisticuffs over the fact that they were working for an African-American and they didn't like it."

Day also found a note by a 1909 alumnus in a 1914 yearbook:

"Brock had a hard time of it, for none of the boys could quite content himself being ordered around by a darky, regardless of his ability," the man wrote.

Whatever the reason for his departure, Brock went on to have a

successful career in the private sector. He had his own landscaping business in West Chester and held various gardening positions in New York and Cleveland. He died in New Jersey in 1959 and was buried in West Chester.

Day says he is driven to keep discovering more of Brock's legacy.



Penn State Mont Alto Archives

Considered the country's first African-American forester, Ralph Brock was one of the six graduates of the first class of Pennsylvania State Forest Academy in Mont Alto, Franklin County, in 1906.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

"Every time I read an old letter, it makes another piece of the puzzle come to life. It's just an exciting time."

And each one of those old letters brings him closer to his colleagues of the past.

"I feel like I'm back here at the school, with the kids in 1910 or 1915. Since I'm a graduate of the campus myself, I can picture the things that they are saying. I know the places they are talking about."

Day was one of the people instrumental in getting a historical marker placed in front of what's now the Penn State Mont Alto campus. He's hoping to unearth more of Brock's history.

"We would just like to know if some of Ralph's current-day descendants are still alive," he said.

Day, who is white, says he and his fellow foresters deeply appreciate the foundation laid by Brock and others.

"The fact that we have a more open society now as far as racial minorities and women go, it's making this forestry business a lot more interesting. It's the salt and pepper, if you will."

If you have information about Ralph Brock, Alex Day can be reached at 1-814-364-5150.

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