A Black Tailor:

On Christmas of the year 1881 a boy by the name of Virgil McKnight Mackey was born into the prosperous Mackey family, who made most of their fortune in the barbering and tailoring business. Virgil was a lucky fellow, despite being a black gentleman he was able to acquire formal schooling from Richmond’s Colored School and graduate in 1896 at the age of fifteen. After Virgil’s graduation he moved Chicago Illinois to work as a tailor. Being the ambitious man that he was, he sought to own a business to practice the trade that he knew so thoroughly. Somewhere along the way he met young nurse from Athens, Georgia and on the 28th day of June in the year of 1905 Virgil Mackey was married to Louise Brydie. In only one short year after their matrimony Louise and Virgil had a daughter. Her parents decided to name their daughter Virgil, after the name of her respected father. Time passed and Virgil became more prosperous and he became more involved with the events of his community, particularly the Summer Street fair and carnival. Not too long after the anticipated 1912 Summer Street fair Mr. Mackey’s life took a downward turn. Virgil was bedridden in his home, on 3808 Prairie Avenue, after being struck by an automobile. Luckily his wife had extensive medical training from Provident Hospital and was able to nurse him back to good health. About six years later Virgil Mackey registered as a tailor in the Army in service to his nation in The Great War. After his short time in the service Virgil returned to Chicago where he eventually came to own his own tailor shop. Virgil’s long and interesting life came to an end on July the 20th 1954 in the place that he perhaps called his home, the city of Chicago, Illinois.

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1 Stephanie Blanchette, “Mackey-Blanchette Family Manuscript” (unpublished manuscript) Microsoft Word file, 30.
2 Blanchette, 30.
3 Blanchette, 31.
4 Blanchette, 31.
5 Blanchette, 30.
6 Blanchette, 29.
In the course of this research project an important question arose; what jobs were black people able to find in the late 1800s and early 20th century? At that time it was not exactly easy to find employment, much less become successful, as a black person. Any job to be had was far from the professional line of work, usually dealing in some type of low-rank manual labor. Records show that in 1885 there were about five hundred black barbers in Philadelphia. Several members of the Mackey family were barbers and about an equal number had skills in tailoring. With the proper education, it seems that someone could find employment in at least a few trades. But what about those without a trade? Could they find decent employment in the social climate of the day? It turns out that this is on a business by business basis. In some businesses, such as the Washington Railroad and Electric Company, African Americans were hired but were only allowed to work at certain jobs such as iron and steel working. However it was not impossible to find work, this particular company employed around four hundred black workers out of their workforce of 1,300.

From the records left behind and compiled into this genealogy it is fairly easy to observe that Mr. Mackey was a decently successful man in his trade of choice. It is also known that he graduated from Richmond’s Colored School around the age of fifteen, which is more than most African Americans can say at this point in time. Oddly enough, there are no records stating that he ever went to a trade school to learn the art of tailoring. Of course it is very unlikely that Mackey learned this trade just as a hobby, he most likely was taught by another member of his family. The majority of his family were either tailors or barbers which would have made it easy for him to gain the knowledge that he had. His own knowledge and education seemed to lead him quite far in life, as for his daughter not much can be said unfortunately, records are not only few but also quite brief.

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7 The author would like to inform the reader that all citations regarding encyclopedias will be mentioned in the footnotes but will remain absent from the bibliography. This is to keep in accordance with the Chicago manual of style.
9 Blanchette, 1-38.
11 Greene, 325.
12 Blanchette, 29.
13 Blanchette, 1-38.
It is a distinct possibility that Mackey moved to Chicago to escape some of the prejudices that most of the Southern population held about black people. This prejudice is of course due to slavery but also the idea of Western culture being superior or Eurocentrism. With Mackey’s success he was in many ways able to break the oversimplified generalization, or stereotype, that all black people were unambitious and unsuccessful. In many was Mackey was able to combat the, mistakenly perceived, social norms of his ethnic group.

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15 Parrillo, 91.
Bibliography:

