Sampson Bird Mackey was born on April 14, 1878 in Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky. His parents, having been slaves, died during Sampson’s early years. Following their death, he was taken by an elderly sister to live in Greenville, Pennsylvania. In Greenville he would finish public schooling. It’s likely that the reason he emigrated, on top of his parents’ passing, was the continued reign of white supremacy in the South even after slavery had been abolished. Being denied education many blacks moved to places that allowed them their proper freedoms. “In May 1879, black leaders from fourteen states gathered in Nashville, Tennessee, and proclaimed that “colored people should emigrate to those states and territories where they can enjoy all the rights which are guaranteed by the laws and Constitution of the United States” (Whitaker 369). This effort to enjoy all of their rights was very timely considering that “By the mid-1800s public schools, known as common schools, were just beginning to take hold in the Northeast;” (Anonymous 108). Realizing the tensions between the white and African American groups, I can easily view this movement by colored people through the conflict perspective. Given limited resources and opportunities, African Americans almost had no other choice.

Following his public school years in which he only completed the eighth grade, he went into the commercial department of Thiel College in the city of Greenville in Pennsylvania. During June of 1893, Sampson would begin working in the office of James T. Blair. Blair held the position of General Manager of the Pittsburgh, Shenango, and Lake Erie Railways. Sampson mainly worked for James Blair as a messenger. Other times he was required to serve as a cook and/or porter on the company’s official private cars. In 1897 Mr. James Blair took charge of the Colorado and Northwestern Railway Company which took Sampson out west to begin working in the general office in Boulder, Colorado. By September of 1901, he was given the position of Superintendent of Telegraph of Mr. Blair’s company. In addition he served as head of the
Advertising Department of the company and authored multiple souvenir publications of the Rocky Mountain region.

After living as a single man for a few years after being promoted to the Superintendent of Telegraph position, at the age of 28 in August of 1904, Sampson married Mattie Lewis Overton in Denver, Colorado. On the marriage record report, both Sampson and Mattie are listed with the race of white. It is unknown whether or not Mattie was truly white or not, but Sampson was African American but passing as white, which was not uncommon amongst African Americans during the time. There were two different types of passing. One was “situational passing” and the other “passing over.” “Passing over” was a permanent passing whereas “situational passing” was “a person of color presented a white identity only in certain situations—for example, to obtain employment in a white-only workplace or to gain entry into a white-only public facility such as theater or train car” (Brown 165).

I think Sampson used “situational passing” considering that he obtained initial employment as a messenger, porter, and cook for James Blair’s railway company. Almost being a necessary adjustment for Sampson, his “situational passing” can be seen through the functionalism perspective manifestly because neglecting to pass for white could have easily cost him his occupational career. The different forms of “passing” were sometimes vital for African Americans living in a time where one was blatantly discriminated against because of their skin color. I can also look at the act of “passing through the Symbolic Interactionist Theory in the sense that they changed their appearance in order to make good impressions on potential employers.

In the years after his marriage, Sampson would return back East in Girard, Pennsylvania where he would become a private secretary to C. B. Culbertson who had recently been manager of the Colorado and Northwestern road, giving up that position to return home to Girard to give attention to his private interests. Sampson’s occupations up to this point really did a number on his intragenerational social mobility, as he held positions as train dispatcher, Superintendent of Telegraph, as well as being the author of two books on the state of Colorado.

In 1920, after serving as secretary and bookkeeper for C. B. Culbertson for over ten years, Sampson is listed in the Girard, Erie County, Pennsylvania Census as a Janitor whom owns his own home mortgage free. By that time, his wife Mattie whom listed as a clerk, are also
listed as having a ten year old daughter named Hattie. Listed in the 1926 Census as living at 1110 Liberty, Sampson’s daughter is listed as a student at that residence. Two years later, Sampson is listed as the Steward at the Erie Yacht Club while Hattie is listed as an assistant to Dr. Clarence E. Cheeks who resides at the Erie Yacht Club. Although Sampson was not listed in the 1930 Census, Hattie was listed, still as assistant to Dr. Cheeks but also as renting at 317 Myrtle. This illustrates how Sampson’s various occupations had contributed to the family’s intergenerational social mobility. His daughter now in a socio-economic place where she can maintain her own residency. In 1940, Sampson and Mattie are listed as living in Washington D.C. both as lodgers. Sampson held a Government position as a statistician for the Deed and Land office. And in 1948 the Census lists the two as clerks at the district recorder of deeds, also renting a home at 1205 W NW. Viewing Sampson’s occupational career, it is clear that he accelerated the social mobility of not only him and his wife Mattie, but also their daughter Hattie. Without his hard work and commitment to his various occupations, his family may have not even been close to the positions that they did achieve.
References