The Court Archive:
Abraham Lincoln Lee: Supreme Court Janitor

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Nearly 110 years ago, the new Supreme Court Building opened for business. While there has been a significant amount of research on the justices who worked there, one missing piece of the history of the building is the individuals who maintained and cared for the Temple of Justice. In December 1907, the new staff had been named. The Building Superintendent was English immigrant William Marlowe. The third-floor supervisor, or matron, was Mrs. Thomas Armstrong. Aaron Blair and Charles Boswick were the elevator operators. William Eilenberger was the head janitor, while two assistant janitors worked for him: Jeremiah Sullivan and Abraham Lincoln Lee.

Abraham Lincoln Lee was an African American and son of a former slave from Kentucky. Henry Lee served in the Civil War and settled in Shelby County, Illinois around 1869. Abraham Lincoln Lee was born about 1870. The younger Lee became a barber in Shelbyville while his wife Bertha was a manicurist. The two raised a family in Shelbyville before Abraham found work in Springfield around 1902 as a messenger for the Attorney General. Lee apparently returned to Shelbyville, but found work again in Springfield as an assistant janitor in the Supreme Court Building.

In 1913, Lee read an article in the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* by Jane Addams entitled "Has the Emancipation Act Been Nullified by National Indifference?" Moved by the article, Lee wrote to Addams thanking her because "a person of your note, strength, and ability" raised awareness that the "Negro is passing through a desperate crisis these days, caused from racial prejudice." Lee astutely observed that the "door of opportunity is closed against us, and all that is left for us to subsist upon is to gather up a few crumbs that fall from the Anglo-Saxon's table. The Christian Church has turned its back upon us. The educational institutions say no admittance. Labor organizations prevent us from learning trades and working at them. So what is left for us but to moan and sigh? Conditions are now worse than before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed." Lee concluded by asking Addams to contact others to help "us [to a] square deal as Afro-American citizens of this United States."

Abraham Lincoln Lee and Bertha Lee divorced in 1919. By 1920, he was living in Washington, DC, working as barber. He remarried in 1924 to Mary Brady, and died on January 4, 1926. He

was buried in the Harmony Cemetery in Washington, DC. When the Metro was built, the cemetery was moved to make room for a Metro station, and Lee was reinterred at the National Harmony Memorial Park in Hyattsville, Maryland.

Lee's children were able to open that "door of opportunity." His daughter Vivian went to the nursing program at the Tuskegee Institute. His daughters Audrey and Mildred became teachers in South Carolina. His sons Floyd and Phillip both went to college and served in World War II.

(Special thanks to Stacy Lynn of the Jane Addams Papers, who alerted me to the existence of Lee's letter to Jane Addams, and provided some of the research on Lee and his family).