

READING

Family Names

Ralph Ellison wrote, “It is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own. . . . They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past.”¹ In the documentary *Family Name*, filmmaker Macky Alston, who is white, uncovers the history that unites three present-day families that share his last name—two black and one white. Alston introduces himself in the film with these words:

My grandfather’s name was Wallace McPherson Alston and he was a preacher. My father’s name is Wallace McPherson Alston, Jr., and he’s also a preacher. My name is Wallace McPherson Alston the third. I dropped out of seminary after two years. Okay, so I rebelled. . . . When I was five [my father] put me in a predominately black public school in Durham, North Carolina. It was where I first met black children with the same last name as me. I remember wondering how this could be, but I felt like this was something I couldn’t talk about. We moved north when I was eight and the issue never really came up again.

Recently I asked my dad about our family history and he gave me a book. That’s where I discovered that the Alstons were one of the largest slave-owning families in North Carolina.

Is something a secret if everybody knows it, but nobody talks about it? I want to know the whole story behind my family name.²

For many of us, our names can help us learn about our family histories and, ultimately, about ourselves.

Names not only represent our identities but also reflect our relationship to society. Throughout history, names have represented, in a variety of ways, one’s degree of power and freedom. In the book *Parting the Waters*, historian Taylor Branch writes, “Among the most joyous feelings most

¹ Ralph Ellison, in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (Modern Library, 2003), 192.

² *Family Name*, directed by Macky Alston (Opelika Pictures, 1997).

frequently mentioned by freed or escaped slaves was the freedom to choose a name. A name was no longer incidental."³

³ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 45.