



Pushing Forward in Uncertain Times

by Carol Lasser, Executive Director

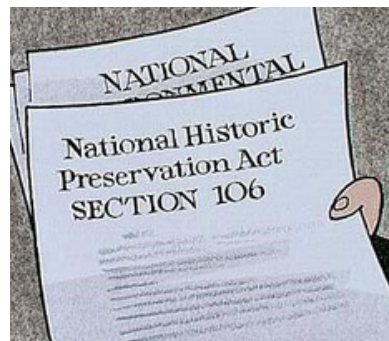
The good news from the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society at this moment of uncertainty: As of this writing, Evans HHS is still eligible for reimbursements for work done in conjunction with a \$283,250 National Park Service (NPS) “Save America’s Treasures” grant awarded in Fall 2022 and a \$738,400 NPS “African American Civil Rights” grant awarded in Spring 2024.

The bad news: As of this moment, we have still not received approval to draw down these funds since our comprehensive rehabilitation plan remains under review by the NPS and the Ohio State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO). That is, before we can go forward with construction, administrators at these agencies must certify that our plans meet the Secretary of the Interior’s requirements as specified in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which requires federal agencies, and those who receive funds from them, to consider the impact of their undertakings on historic properties. We continue to work hard to meet the administrators’ demanding conditions, all the more rigorous for sites that are, like the Evans House, officially designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL).

It is an honor and a privilege to be at work on an NHL. There are only about 2,600 NHLs in the country, and fewer than 3%—or just about 100—are, like the Evans House, primarily associated with the African American experience in America. Even fewer of those have been rehabilitated or have plans to open to the public. Not surprisingly, then, our challenges have been great; we need to choose rehabilitation methods and materials that will preserve as much of the original Evans House as possible for future generations, and we need to tread



Sign recognizing NPS grants in front of the Evans House.
Photo courtesy of Gary Kornblith



Cartoon illustration of the National Historic Preservation Act.
Image courtesy of the NPS Historic Preservation Fund

carefully on the grounds around it, where archeologists suspect that past generations may have left significant artifacts.

In developing plans for rehabilitation of the house, we are working with NPS and SHPO to make sure our walkways and our projected parking lot do not compromise areas that might contain deposits of interest in future archeological investigations. Recent investigations have looked at the remains of a dressmaker’s shop that seems to have stood

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west of the Evans House, at the edge of our prospective campus, between 1893 and 1911, to determine whether they are significant enough to require protection.

On concluding this phase of review, we look forward to signing with SHPO and NPS a Memo of Agreement that will state how we will responsibly handle the archeological finds, both to share them with our community and to protect them for future generations. An Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) determination of the “environmental and related social and economic effects” of our proposed actions will follow. Once we have NEPA permission, we will be able request NPS approval of our Requests for Proposals, which will then go out to bid. And upon receiving NPS authorization of our recommendation for a contractor, we will be able to sign papers that will at last allow us to launch our comprehensive rehabilitation project.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that 33 East Vine Street will be a construction site by the time of the 5th Annual Evans HHS Meeting, set for September 13, 2025. But we hope that we will be able to report significant progress at that point.

When we gather, we will be able to give a shout out to everyone who has patiently helped us get this far, including – but not limited to – devoted Evans descendants, committed local historians, hardworking board members, our dedicated owner’s rep, visionary architects and engineers, a creative landscape designer, determined archeologists, essential historic preservation consultants, archivists and librarians, our intrepid city director of development, our unshakeable grant consultant, our fearless master planners, private donors, local foundations, and other funders and all of you who have supported this project so that we can make the Evans House a place to tell the multigenerational story of the Evans family, their descendants, and the long campaign for racial justice in our town and more broadly across the nation—and to tell that story NOW, at a key moment in that enduring struggle. So let us look forward, and remember, in the words of Ella Baker, “we who believe in freedom cannot rest.”

The Evans HHS Newsletter is published twice a year, in the spring and the fall. It is edited by Gary Kornblith, who can be reached at gary.kornblith@evanshhs.org.



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Observations in a Cabinetmaker's Home



Jerome Bias and Bill Chapman standing with a cardboard standup of Wilson Bruce Evans in the front parlor of the Evans House.
Photo courtesy of Carol Lasser



The Evans House with rehabilitated front porch.
Photo courtesy of Gary Kornblith

by Bill Chapman

Wilson Bruce Evans' handsome brick Italianate home at 33 East Vine Street has long been recognized for its striking interior woodwork. Evans family history indicates it to be the work of Wilson himself along with his older brother Henry Evans, both cabinetmakers by trade. For two snowy days in December 2024, Jerome Bias and I undertook a detailed exploration of the home through our perspectives as woodworkers, old house restorers and sleuths, and (in Jerome's case) a scholar of 19th century free Black cabinetmakers to determine what could be learned by comparing our observations in the home with both existing and new research about their work as cabinetmakers.

On February 12, 2025, we presented our research and observations in a webinar which is now available at <https://evanshhs.org/2025/03/03/recording-looking-for-mr-evans/>. Here I offer a summary of our findings.

When we think about building and furnishing a home, it's important to understand who did what in the 19th century. In the period terminology of the woodworking trades, "carpenters" erected the frame of a building; "joiners" crafted and installed the interior and exterior woodwork, including doors, windows, trim, staircases, and any built-ins; and "cabinetmakers" made the

furniture, essentially any pieces not attached to the building, such as bedsteads, bureaus, tables, wardrobes, and chairs. All records indicate that Henry and Wilson Bruce Evans made their livings as *cabinetmakers*.

In 1847, while still in Hillsborough, North Carolina, Henry was invited to bid on a large job to provide both architectural woodwork and furniture for two newly enlarged dormitories at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The job, however, was ultimately awarded to Thomas Day, another free Black cabinetmaker from North Carolina of great note who not only had more experience than Evans (he was 23 years older), but who often crossed the line between joiner and cabinetmaker, designing both a building's furniture and woodwork to be complementary.

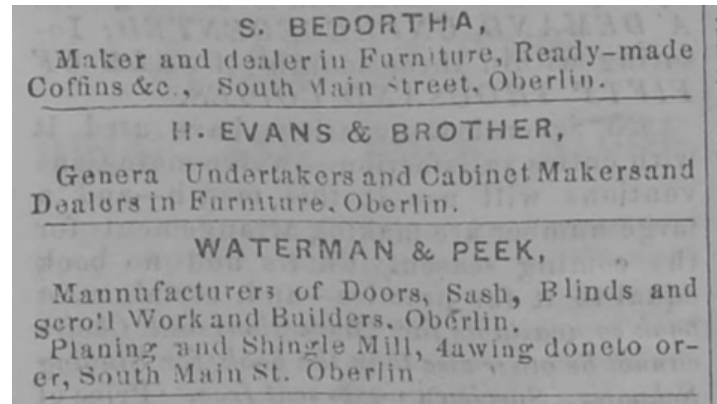
Twenty-six years later in Oberlin, the Evans brothers were awarded a dormitory contract, this time for the new Ladies' Hall at Oberlin College but exclusively for "a large bill of furniture" to furnish the building. (Presumably all of that furniture was lost when the building burned in 1889.) In announcing the Evans contract on January 7, 1863, the *Lorain County News* also noted that architectural woodwork for the building (all doors

and window sash) had been awarded to the large planing mill and millwork operation located on the northwest corner of Main and Mill Streets (the current Midas location). There are no known examples of the Evans brothers crossing the line into the joiner's world and creating millwork for a home.

With the knowledge that the brothers were always first and foremost furniture makers (and also undertakers, a common sideline for cabinetmakers of the period), how then should the impressive interior woodwork in the home of Wilson Bruce Evans be understood and interpreted as the work of the Evans brothers, who were not professional joiners? We were able to piece together a more comprehensive understanding of their business in Oberlin than has previously been gathered in one place through extensive research in newspaper archives, as well as city directories, maps, and existing work done by the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society.

The two brothers arrived in Oberlin from North Carolina with their families in 1854. Within days, Wilson purchased the property on Mill Street (currently 33 East Vine Street) where he, his wife Sarah, and their young son would reside in a simple frame home and where he would later build his Italianate home. It is possible that Henry and his family also resided with them, at least for some time. Two years later, Henry purchased from Oberlin College the two-story Walton Hall men's dormitory located to the west of Main Street and moved it a few yards "down to the street" to align its facade with the adjacent commercial buildings on its north side, making it suitable as not only a furniture-making shop but also a retail "ware-room." Census records indicate that Henry and his family lived above the shop, just as his neighbor, cabinetmaker Sidney Bedortha, lived above his own shop right next door.

Business was up and down for H. Evans & Brother, as the firm was called. In 1858, just two years after setting up shop on Main Street, Henry (then 41 years old) and Wilson (34) participated in the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue and were subsequently jailed for three months in 1859. According to a letter published in the *Lorain County News* by Oberlin professor Henry E. Peck, the indictment and imprisonment disrupted Henry's business and left him struggling to support his large



From 1863 until the fire in 1864, H. Evans & Brother ran a business listing in the *Lorain County News* along with neighbor Sidney Bedortha and the town's growing planing mill. Image courtesy of Bill Chapman

family for two years thereafter. Then, in 1861, a grizzly injury suffered while working at his steam-powered planer left Henry with months of recovery ahead and physical impairments that he would endure for the rest of his life. In 1863, things looked to be on the upswing for the brothers when their firm was awarded the furniture contract for the new Ladies' Hall mentioned above, but 13 months later, in February 1864, wood shavings ignited and fire destroyed the old Walton Hall building and with it, the H. Evans & Brother furniture business. Six months later, on August 30, 1864, Wilson Bruce Evans answered the call to enlist in the Union Army (178th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, Co. D) and served the next ten months in Tennessee and his native North Carolina.

Over the years, the planing mill operation mentioned above (trading as Waterman & Peek and later Peek & Colburn, and L.S. Colburn) had grown extensively, not only operating as a planing mill producing dimensional lumber, flooring, siding, and shingles, but continually adding capabilities to produce a growing array of refined architectural millwork for Oberlin's homes and many academic buildings, including window sash, doors, blinds, and moulding. Located so nearby, the Evans and Bedortha furniture shops would both have had close working relationships with this mill as their primary source for the rough-sawn lumber they used in their furniture making.

After the 1864 fire destroyed their shop—as well as Bedortha's next door—the Evans brothers joined

with chairmaker L.W. Butler from Bedortha's shop in putting an addition on the north end of the planing mill where they worked together until Butler "went west" in 1865 or 1866. After Butler's departure, the brothers seem to have been absorbed into the mill's expanding operations. An 1868 mill advertisement for oak flooring directs patrons to "Enquire of Mr. Evans." And in 1870, the mill began advertising an array of turned products (newels, balusters, and handrails) while in the U.S. Census of that same year, Wilson Bruce Evans' occupation was listed for the first time as "wood turner," indicating that he had transitioned from being a cabinetmaker to being a specialized lathe operator.

It was about this time (1870-1873 is the best estimation based on property tax records) that construction began on the new, brick front section of Wilson's home within eyesight of the mill. Working at the mill, Wilson would have had access to a bountiful variety of stylish architectural finishes for this addition, perhaps even at a discounted price in exchange for his work. And with the sensibilities of a seasoned furniture maker, he would have pored over the latest millwork catalogs filled with possibilities that the mill could create and that, combined with his creativity and skill, could make his expanded home a showplace.

Upon entering the home today, a guest first encounters the stunning dark walnut staircase. As a (or perhaps "the") wood turner at the mill, it seems very likely that Wilson crafted the components of this staircase with his own hands, expertly turning the massive, spooled newel and intricate balusters. Supporting this theory are four turned newels that were discovered stored in the loft above the rear wood frame section of the house.

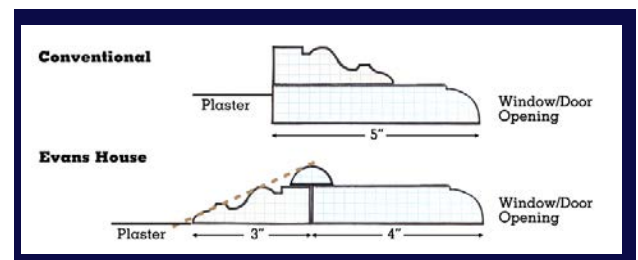


The newel and balusters, turned from solid walnut, are very likely the work of Wilson Bruce Evans.
Photo courtesy of Bill Chapman



Arched double doors were a popular element in grand Oberlin homes of the period, but the casings in the Wilson Bruce Evans home are unusually dramatic due to the creative use of typical moulding elements.
Photo courtesy of Bill Chapman

Moving farther into the home, one is struck by dramatically wide window and door casings that seem to grow at a rising angle from the surface of the wall. Upon inspection it can be seen that Wilson installed typical case moulding elements in an atypical way—including reversed—to create impressively wide trim while actually using less wood than a traditional installation.



A drawing from the webinar presentation demonstrates Wilson Bruce Evans' use of conventional trim elements in an unconventional manner to dramatically increase the width of window and door casings by two inches, while using 20% less wood.
Image courtesy of Bill Chapman

This economy-without-the-appearance-of-being-economical can be found in other aspects of the home's woodwork. For instance, multiple species of wood were used (we spotted walnut, oak, pine, and butternut) and then all expertly stained to create a consistent impression of rich walnut throughout the first floor. Tellingly, in an 1841 advertisement for his cabinetmaking business in Hillsborough, North Carolina, Henry Evans, then 24, touted his ability to stain cheaper wood species "in imitation of" walnut or mahogany. Some thirty years later, that skill was certainly put to use in the Wilson Bruce Evans home.



Jerome Bias studies window trim in the front parlor.
Photo courtesy of Bill Chapman

Economy of material is also apparent with close examination of the casings surrounding the home's impressive arched double doors. Because the components of the casings were milled on a radius—not a simple operation—a single narrow, curved piece of moulding had to be cut from a much larger piece of wood and a great deal of waste was created in the process. In several places, small pieces were used to close gaps when the curved moulding was too short. The alternative of recreating the trim pieces at the needed length would have been an expensive and wasteful prospect.

The home's arched doors are unlikely to have been built by Wilson or Henry, but were probably designs selected from a millwork catalog and then produced in the door department at the mill. Nearly identical doors are found in other Oberlin homes of the period, including the home of mill owner Lyman Colburn.

Other than family stories, there is no way to know exactly how hands-on Wilson or Henry were with the actual construction of the 1870s addition. Their nephew Fred Copeland was an experienced carpenter and in 1880 was living next door to Wilson's new

home, so it seems quite plausible that he could have been involved with its framing. From 1866 to 1868, Henry Evans built (or *had* built) two frame dwellings on the site of the burned Walton Hall, one presumably for his family and the other to sell. Although not carpenters or joiners by trade, it's hard to imagine that the Evans brothers were not actively involved in the construction of their own homes in any way they could be, and the most logical place for a furniture maker to leave his mark on his home is by installing the woodwork.

In our observations, it became clear to us that more than one person was involved in installing the woodwork in the Wilson Bruce Evans home. Different levels of skill and technique can be detected as one moves from room to room and closely examines the trim, especially the arched door casings. What can be made of this diversity of skill and techniques?

We can't know for sure, but given the woodworkers in the family, one can imagine, perhaps, a family affair with Wilson, brother Henry, Henry's son Matthew (who also worked at the planing mill for some time in his early twenties), and maybe Fred Copeland all pitching in to create this beautiful family home that still makes quite an impression. At the time of its completion, the house proclaimed the respectability, pride, and achievement of Wilson Bruce Evans, Sarah Jane Leary Evans, and their three surviving children. It reflected the family's high standing in the Oberlin community and boldly asserted the African American claim to full equality in post-Civil War America.

Today the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society is working to rehabilitate the house and convert it into a museum and educational center that will tell the Evans family story in the context of the enduring struggle for social justice in the United States.

Bill Chapman has spent 26 years restoring a home in Virginia that was in his family from 1762 to 1940 and then brought back into the family by Bill and his wife in 1999. Jerome Bias is a skilled woodworker, cultural heritage practitioner, and scholar of free Black cabinetmakers, while also restoring his 19th century home in North Carolina.

For greater detail, more images, and sources, please see the webinar at evanshhs.org/2025/03/03/recording-looking-for-mr-evans.

Updating the Evans Family Tree

by Gary Kornblith

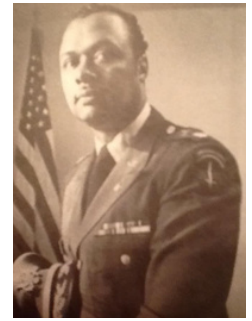
A half-century ago, Dorothy Inborden Miller, the last surviving grandchild of Wilson Bruce Evans and Sarah Jane Leary Evans, enlisted Robert Ewell Greene, the author of *Black Defenders of America*, to write a brief history of her ancestors. Titled *The Leary-Evans, Ohio's Free People of Color*, the book first appeared in 1979 and was re-issued in 1989. It offered a narrative based on stories passed down orally as well as a wealth of documentary evidence. It also included a set of genealogical charts. The most complete chart traced the descendants of Wilson Bruce Evans and Sarah Jane Leary Evans. When the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society was founded in 2021, that chart was the main genealogical resource available to the family members who joined the Society's board and to historical researchers.

Yet methods of doing genealogical research have advanced dramatically in the decades since Greene published his work, and as the team working on rehabilitating the Evans House soon discovered, some of the oral history passed down over the years was inaccurate. For example, we learned from maps, tax records, and expert analysis that the two-story brick front of the Evans house was not part of the original 1850s structure but instead an addition erected in the 1870s. Likewise, we learned from cemetery and death records that Wilson Bruce Evans and Sarah Jane Leary Evans had at least eight children, not only the five listed on the family tree in Greene's book.

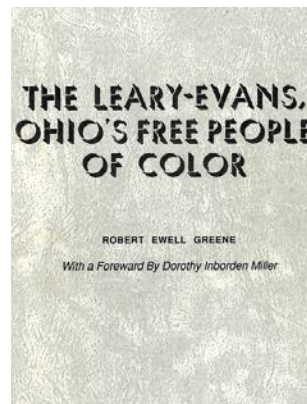
In this issue of the *Newsletter*--beginning on the following page--we are pleased to present a more comprehensive family tree of the descendants of Wilson Bruce Evans and Sarah Jane Leary Evans that incorporates new findings.



Dorothy Inborden Miller
Photo courtesy of Evans HHS



Robert Ewell Greene
Photo courtesy of Linda Seay on Find a Grave



The main source of genealogical information on the Evans family until now.

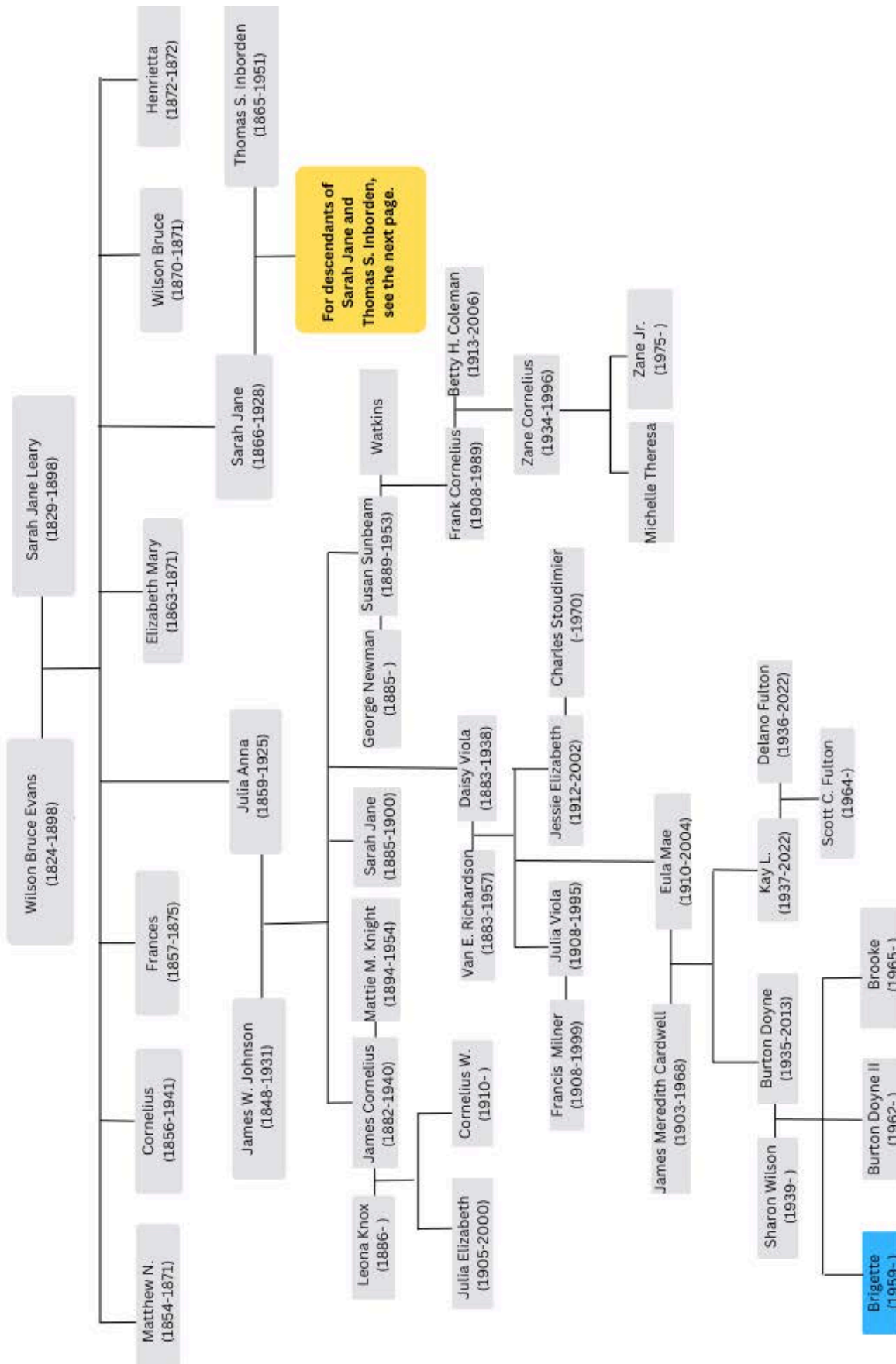
Image courtesy of Gary Kornblith

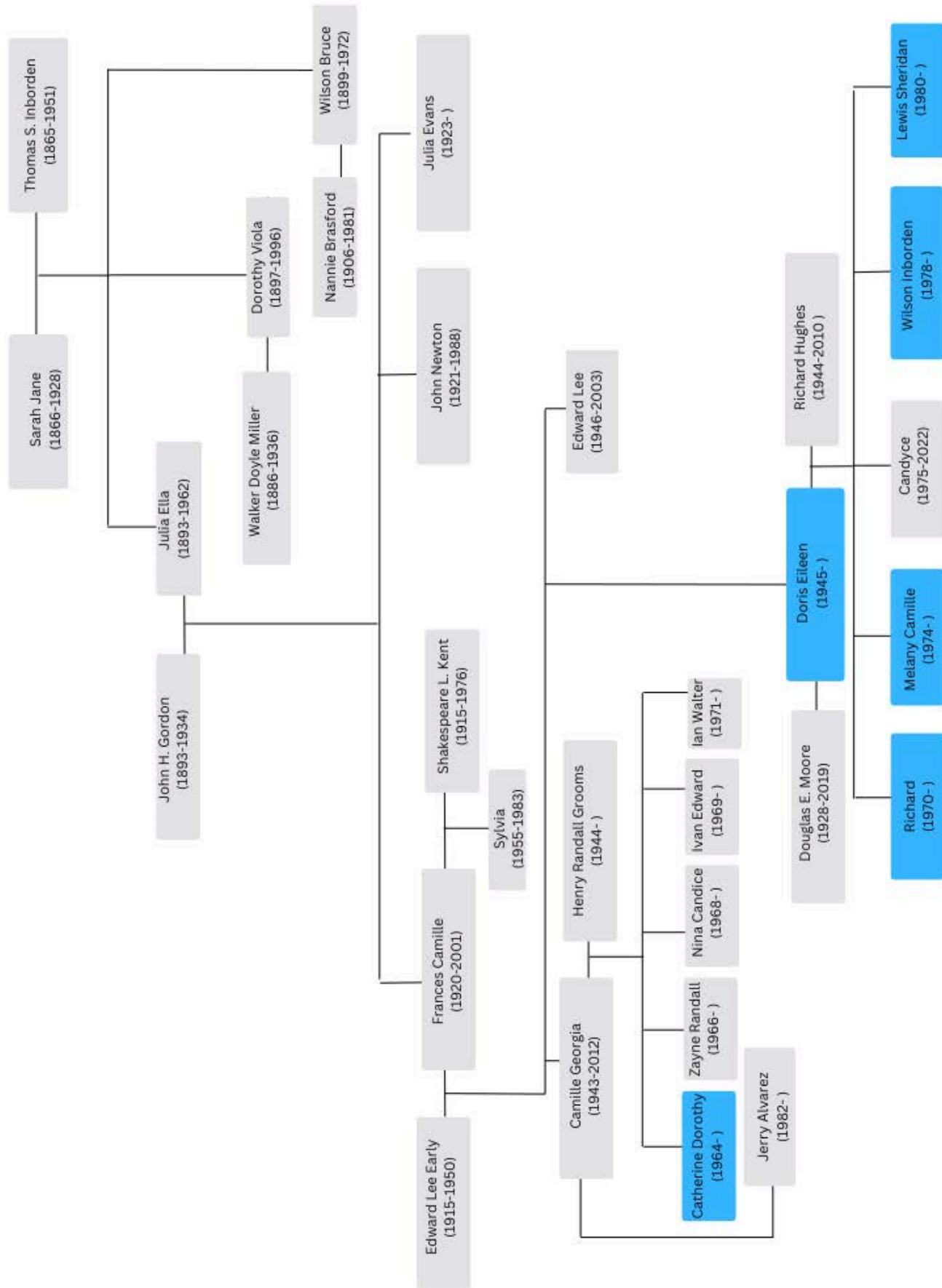
The new version carries the generational story down to today's adult descendants, though for reasons of space and safety, it omits their spouses and young children. Current board members are identified by **blue-shaded** boxes.

Careful readers will notice that certain given names are often repeated over time. As Dr. Doris Hughes-Moore, the president of Evans HHS, has explained, this pattern reflects "the family's faithful tradition of giving homage and respect to previous generations over and over, hopefully perpetuating the legacy of good and faithful service and promotion of education for all."

We welcome further updates from other descendants and genealogists interested in the Evans family's history.

DESCENDANTS OF WILSON BRUCE EVANS AND SARAH JANE LEARY EVANS





Evans HHS Bulletin Board

Save the Date

The 5th Annual Meeting of the Wilson Bruce Evans Home Historical Society will be held on Saturday, September 13, 2025.

Upcoming Presentation



"Camp Delaware and the 5th U.S. Colored Troops"
Saturday, May 10, at 3 pm
Oberlin Public Library



Photo courtesy of the Oberlin Heritage Center

Liz Schultz, Executive Director of the Oberlin Heritage Center and a Board member of Evans HHS, was honored as the 2024 Ohio Museum Association Professional of the Year at the Association's annual conference in March.

Recordings of Recent Evans HHS Presentations Available Online (click on links below)

David Klinge, "[A Peek Beneath: What We Learned from Historical Archeology at the Wilson Bruce Evans House](#)"

Bill Chapman and Jerome Bias, "[Looking for Mr. Evans: Exploring the Home and Furniture of Abolitionist and Cabinetmaker Wilson Bruce Evans](#)"



Photo courtesy of Melany Hughes



Lewis Sheridan Hughes and Dr. Doris Hughes-Moore (pictured above), along with other Evans HHS Board members, attended the "Founders' Legacy & Landmarks Celebration" at Fayetteville State University on April 25. Fayetteville State renamed a residential hall for Matthew N. Leary, Jr., a brother of Sarah Jane Leary Evans.



Oberlin Social Equity Plan 2025 includes "A Brief History of Race and Equity in Oberlin, Ohio" by Carol Lasser, Executive Director of Evans HHS and Emerita Professor of History, Oberlin College.

Congratulations to Kathleen Rose King, a former intern at Evans HHS, on the completion of her doctoral dissertation at the University of Colorado!