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Alonzo and Norris Herndon: The Herndon Men Defining Masculinity by Challenging Societal Norms

Alonzo and Norris Herndon - a father and son duo - although having contrasting views of masculinity, were two similarly influential African American businessmen in the course of the twentieth century. These two gentlemen individually took an active role in redefining masculinity during the shift from Victorian America to a more modern ethos that roughly occurred between the 1890s and the 1920s.[1] They are a significant part of black Atlanta's local history, due to their ability to build a successful enterprise during a time when black masculinity was threatened by white dominant culture. Historically, academic research has primarily examined the monetary success of Alonzo Herndon, Atlanta's first black millionaire,[2] rather than the toil that went into making him a successful businessman. Even more scholarship has been dedicated to the financial accomplishments of the multi-billion dollar corporation that dubbed him as such - the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, of which he was the founder and first president. Still, there has been little research that critically examines how the complex relationship between, Alonzo and Norris, aided to promote a new definition of black masculinity in the early nineteen-hundreds. Likewise, Norris's sexuality that was considered an open secret among his friends and colleagues,[3] and the father's personal strife over his son's homosexuality has yet to be examined by historians. Alonzo's unique perspective on masculinity played a critical role in his and his son's paths to success. Through his commitment to self-educate, Alonzo was a boy born into slavery that was able to grow up to achieve prestige during the notorious Jim Crow era. He succeeded during a time in American history when, according to

[1]Martin Anthony Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 155.
[2] Historical Sidewalk Marker located at 66 Peachtree Street, Atlanta, Georgia.
[3] Wesley Chanault and Stacy Braukman, *Images of America: Gay and Lesbian Atlanta* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 20.

cultural historian Michael Kimmel, "*all* men were in a crisis to define manhood in America."[4] As a result, there exists supportive evidence to conclude that Alonzo and Norris Herndon challenged societal norms in their distinct attempts to define masculinity. In a study with a focus on the defining of masculinity by two men in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it is important to note what the standard definition of masculinity was at the time.

Historian Martin Summers nicely states how masculinity was broadly defined during Alonzo's and Norris' time in history. Summers suggests,

> "Turn-of-the-century notions of success and failure were rooted in the gendered mythology of the 'self-made man.' In America, at the turn of the twentieth century, manhood seemed to be a national preoccupation. From individual concerns about one's own masculine character to larger collective anxieties over the nation's main-lines, definitions of manhood - ones that were fundamentally racialized and class bound - pervaded everyday discourse."[5]

Therefore, in the context of Victorian America of which Alonzo was a product, character included honesty, piety, and self-control. Very much like Kimmel's definition of manhood that exemplifies self-control, exclusion and escape, Alonzo Herndon embodied the typical Victorian agreed upon self-made man characteristics. In contrast to his father, Norris personified the new ideals of manhood for his time. The new generation were more comfortable challenging traditional Victorian notions of sexuality in their refusal to accept the conventionality and inevitability of marriage and their open acceptance of (and for some, participation in) a growing gay subculture.[6] And so, the ideal of the self-made man articulated a formula for success that was dependent upon the cultivation of one's character. The qualities that constituted character also constituted manhood by white dominate cultural standards.[7] Indeed, the self-made man as the personification of success depended upon, and reinforced, the coupling of masculinity and

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[4] Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22.
[5] Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 156.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid, 1.

character. An investigation and interpretation of both Herndon's paths to defining masculinity as they individually challenged societal norms is the focus of this study. Additionally, examinations of the son's definition of masculinity will be incorporated in order to decipher the effect this had on their financial enterprise that still thrives today. Together, the Herndon men accumulated remarkable, unprecedented wealth during a racially charged hostile socially political time.

We begin with the life stories of Alonzo and Norris Herndon, which will make up the body of this paper. The following research discusses some overlap in usage amongst the terms masculinity, manhood, and manliness. In as much as this is a study on masculinity, other social institutions will be incorporated as well. Historical intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and the socio-historical construction of black manhood are woven together to underscore masculinity as defined by the Herndon men. Unpublished sources are the predominate source of material for this research topic. Also, the paper is dotted with words such as perhaps, maybe, sometimes, likely, and probably. Still, there is informed speculation. The investigation unearths evidence to support the assertion that Alonzo and Norris used various manhood outlining characteristics to define masculinity. Historical record claims that individuals cultivated their character through a number of different mediums: the family, the church, the school, the fraternal organizations, and the military.[8] In this case, an essential element is racial influence due to its importance to determining the manner by which these men overcame the sufferings of the Jim Crow south. African American activism and fraternal organization affiliations are essential concepts to defining black manhood during this time since activism was a way to defeat racial issues. As well, ideas of homosexuality around this period help to explain masculinity as defined by the

[8] Martin Anthony Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1.

Herndon men which will be useful in the discussion of the gay son. The first of three parts of the study begins with a comparable analysis of the personal backgrounds of each man.

In an autobiographical statement written by Alonzo he said,

> "In 1858 I was born a slave on a farm…mother was emancipated and was sent adrift in the world with her two children…she received as pay potatoes, molasses and peas enough to keep us from starving. Our former master finally allowed us to take shelter in a one room log cabin with four other families."[9]

Alonzo Franklin Herndon was biracial, born to a slave woman and a slave master father. By the time Alonzo reached his mid-twenties he had traveled throughout Georgia such as Newnan and Rome and even ventured further north to Tennessee. His direction of travel was to follow telegram poles to each destination as he walked to each location.[10] While at these new places he acquired a trade, barbering, and challenged race issues by learning to self-accept his biracial background. Eventually, he maneuvered his way to a self-made man in a white man's world and over powered the standards of white dominate culture. "Alonzo Herndon is a colored barber well known in the city. He was originally a slave…has been successful and has accumulated a snug little fortune."[11] Alonzo opened several barbershops during his barbering career, but in 1902 *Herndon's Baths* the most elegant of all his barbershops would open for business to white customers only. Located on segregated Peachtree Street, *Herndon's Baths* catered strictly to a white cliental as a result of Jim Crow laws. In 1897, Alonzo's first wife Adrienne gave birth to their son, Norris Bumstead Herndon. By Norris' mid-twenties, he had traveled north of Georgia to New York and even across the Atlantic Ocean to Rome in Europe. At his father's expense, he reached his destinations in fashionable automobiles, trains, and steamboats. For Norris, cultural exchange and cultural influence was his major acquisitions from the European expeditions.

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[9] Herndon Family Papers, Herndon Home Museum and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
[10] Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 4.
[11] Did the Vows Bind: Marriage of Slaves in Ante-Bellum Days Discussed in Court, *Atlanta Constitution,* 19 March 1896, no page number.

After all, his father had methodically planned trips overseas to become personally acquainted and inspired by European ideals not just for business improvements, but his personal life, as well. In *Manliness and Discontents* Martin Summers proposes that black male subjectivity was produced, and reproduced to be grounded in production and respectability. The objective and subjective determinants of class, then trumped the national identity in the gender identity formation by the black man.[12] In other words, Summers' surmises that class formation eroded what might have otherwise been a consensus amongst black men about defining black manhood. He gives reason by articulating that a collective gender and class identity that was different from a normative white bourgeois manliness on in degree, not in kind, African American men were unable to transcend dominant Anglo-American configurations of gender, class, and power. Here Summers infers that class formation eroded what might have otherwise been a consensus amongst black men about defining black manhood. As seen in the Herndon family passports from their choice of travel locations[13] the universal egalitarianism of white males encouraged black males to think about gender identity in the same terms as their white, middle-class counterparts. Notably, Summers points towards African American activism and fraternal order affiliations as necessary components for combating racial pressures while identifying black masculinity.

Hence accordingly, Alonzo would take his son, alongside educators such as W.E.B. DuBois to the founding meeting of the Niagara Movement, the precursor organization to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. DuBois, like other literary figures of the time, would craft legendary prescriptive literature to tell the world that "the question of economic survival was the most pressing of all questions for nineteenth-century American

[12] Martin Anthony Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 63.
[13] Herndon Family Papers, Herndon Home Museum and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

blacks." [14] Still, telling of how the various definitions of masculinity were amongst black men of the time. For example, "how extraordinary, and what a tribute to ignorance and religious hypocrisy, is the fact that in the minds of most people, even those liberals, only murder makes men." [15] W.E.B. DuBois later wrote, "The slave pleaded, he was humble; he protected the women of the South, and the world ignored him. The slave killed white men; and behold, he was a man."[16] For reasons unknown, this notion was a highly accepted view about and by African American men at the time. In opposition to commonly accepted views, other prominent African American activist had remedies to counter such opinions of black manhood.

Fittingly, Alonzo was also closely linked to other African American liberation icons of the time, such as, Tuskegee's Booker T. Washington. He took up and elaborated on many of Washington's theories of unity across race boundaries that derived from Washington's monumental *Atlanta Compromise* speech - "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."[17] In this same speech Washington delivered, "I but convey to you, Mr. President and Directors, the sentiment of the masses of my race, when I say that in no way have the value and manhood of the American Negro been more fittingly and generously recognized."[18] Washington's statement was spoken from that of a view point of a black man who had transcended race boundaries, enough so to be a keynote speaker at a racially segregated event. Even so, equally for Alonzo there exists proof of him too transcending across race boundaries from newspaper advertisements. The white owned J.E. Hunnicutt & Co. highlighted Herndon's barbershop as a reference site to view their work.[19] Further evidence lies in a 1914 spread in the *Atlanta*

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[14] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia, 1899), 97.
[15] Ibid.
[16] W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York, 1935), 110.
[17] Samuel R. Spence, Jr. *Booker T. Washington and the Negro's Place in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1955), 102.
[18] B.T. Washington, *Atlanta Exposition Speech* (Sept. 18. 1895). Retrieved October 5, 2010 from the Library of Congress' *African American Odyssey* database on the World Wide Web: <http://memory.loc.gov./ammen/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart6.html#0605>.
[19] J.E. Hunnicutt & Co. Classified Ad, *Atlanta Constitution*, 11 January 1903, no page number.

Constitution where the eye-catching phrase of Alonzo's bathhouse announced "The Largest and Finest Barbershop in the World."[20] Herndon obviously marketed and profited greatly from the renovations that included marble fixtures and extravagant chandeliers which were directly inspired by the Herndon trips abroad described above.[21] Furthermore, both Herndon men were loyal members to the Atlanta Chapter of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. In addition they would become Alpha Phi Alpha affiliated, which was the first Greek letter fraternal organization for African American men.[22]

As indicated before, Alonzo along with his first wife incorporated European influences into their personal lives. For instance, the architectural design of their elegant home that Norris grew-up in, combined an eclectic interior, a mix of styles from many traditions: Italian Renaissance, French Rococo, and others.[23] The mansion was built by black artisans and Alonzo, who personally assisted by mixing mortar and laying iron sprinkled bricks at his estate. "'I designed it and built it myself,' Herndon says when asked about his residence" in an *Atlanta Constitution* interview.[24] A photograph of Alonzo at the construction site of his home was also featured in an Atlanta University Conference publication and identified as, "Residence of a Negro business man, insurance manager and proprietor of barber shops. Now building and said to be the finest Negro residence in the South."[25] As a testament to DuBois' claim, in the year two-thousand, the Herndon Home was inducted as a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior.[26] Not to go without mention, Adrienne single-handedly crafted the blueprints for the home she dreamed of for her well to do family.

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[20] The Largest and Finest Barber Shop in the World, *Atlanta Constitution,* 12 May 1914, 1B.
[21] Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 116.
[22] http://www.alpha-phi-alpha.com
[23] Merritt, 126.
[24] A.F. Herndon Fortune Made to Tour Europe with Bride, *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 May 1912, no page number.
[25] *Bulletin of Atlanta University (fall 1908)*: 2. Atlanta University Clark Atlanta Archives and Special Collections.
[26] "Atlanta University Center District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1976. Atlanta University Clark Atlanta Archives and Special Collections.

Unfortunately, she would only reside in it for four months. The family moved in January 1910 and she died in the home April that same year.[27]

For young Norris Herndon, his mother's death was devastating. The days thereafter became very challenging not just for Norris, but also for his father. Alonzo began to struggle heavily with the "let nature or I'll nurture" approach to rearing his only son, who was struggling with his homosexuality as he was coming of age. With a father who sternly insisted upon a *straight* and narrow course as seen in letters written to his son, Norris would have to deny himself.[28] Along with an early-twentieth-century society that had no tolerance for what it considered deviant or gender nonconformity, he lived a secret life, although, Norris would be profiled as one of the most eligible African American bachelors in the country.[29] African American periodical *Ebony* emphasized Norris's secrecy and elusiveness, call him "the millionaire nobody knows," a man "available to a select group of intimates and executives, who guard his whereabouts with the passion of secret service men protecting the president."[30] His silence is not surprising given the climate of the McCarthy era and his position as the sole heir to an African American fortune in a racially divided city.[31] In *Atlanta Life Insurance Company*, Alexa Benson Henderson argues that "a distinctive humanitarian and philanthropist influence emanated from Norris," and "he chose to make his participation quiet and unobtrusive."[32] This agrees nicely with the assertion put forward by historian John Howard. Howard's idea suggests that there was secrecy amongst queers and remarkable silence with regard to homosexuality in American society as whole during the early twentieth century.[33] Hence, Norris would assume a

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[27] Merritt, 126.
[28] Herndon Family Papers, Herndon Home Museum and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
[29] "Stern Father Reared Norris to Take Over Insurance Firm," *Ebony* 10, no. 12 (October 1955): 46.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Wesley Chenault, *Gay and lesbian Atlanta,* Images of America (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 21.
[32] Alexa B. Henderson, *Atlanta Life Insurance Company: Guardian of Black Economic Dignity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 73.
[33] John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 31.

comprised selfhood, his sexuality arrested, denied, or expressed in secret.[34] There lies conclusive evidence that would satisfy any historian that examines John Howard's oral history based project *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History.* For unknown reasons, almost all of the interviewees in Howard's study described a covert approach to coping with homosexuality as young men came of age in the first half of the century.[35]

However, given the gaps in the so-called historical record and given the silences then sustained in historical literature, Norris' homosexual life cannot yet be completely identified and is still subject to more refinement. John Howard further discusses a possible scenario in his argument that the homosexual silent approach was an option most likely chosen when coping with one's sexual identity. Moreover, he claims that sanctioned sexual and gender experimentation of boys and young men, as well as the clandestine but commonplace queer acts, provided a tradition with which men like that could craft viable alternatives (or complements) to the marriage paradigm.[36] Relevantly, Norris fought his father's definition of masculinity for some time. Like many young people of the period, he opposed the association of manhood with the marketplace. Some young men tentatively tested the boundaries of what it meant to be a middle-class man in the early twentieth century. These young men rebelled against the dictates of manliness through career choices. Their participation in the youth culture of the 1920s, and their approaches to love and sex was vastly different from what their parents tried to instill in them.[37] "I had been warning you about getting too many shows and other frivolities in your head. Now quit everything but something that pertains to your lessons and try and get yourself together" Alonzo wrote to his son.[38] Middle-class African American men who came of age

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[34] Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 188.
[35] Howard, *32.*
[36] Ibid, 21.
[37] Martin Anthony Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 157.
[38] Herndon Family Papers, Herndon Home Museum and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

during World War I and postwar period actively reshaped the meanings of manhood in the 1920s. Born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, these men rejected manliness as the organizing principle of their gender identity.[39] The self-made entrepreneur of the Victorian era gave way to the new generation that Norris was well entrenched, the rising salaried professional. Hereafter, achieving manhood became less dependent on thrift, self-control, and character; rather, individuals constructed a masculine character of self that was tied to the consumer goods they owned, the leisure they engaged in, and their physical and sexual virility. As far as Norris' generation was concerned, if manhood was defined by "self-sacrifice" until the first decade or so of the twentieth century, it had clearly become bound up in the pursuit of "self-fulfillment, self-expression, and self-gratification" by the 1920s.[40]

Alonzo and Norris witnessed the transition from Victorian culture to a new modern attitude. This change, largely experienced by the middle-class, but present in society as a whole, influenced all facets of life, from attitude toward work and leisure to social conventions concerning sexuality.[41] Norris began to reject the ideals and values that structured his father's claims to respectable, middle-class status. Consequently, he resisted the ideas to pursue a traditional, middle-class career. Case in point, the hierarchical pass down of the Atlanta Life firm by Alonzo to his son was initially refused by Norris to pursue a career in theater. In a message to his son Alonzo said "You spoke of the shows, but that is not very interesting to me compared with your studies."[42] Norris Herndon had the same passion for the arts of expression that his mother had had. He loved the theater almost as much as she did and attended every show his father would allow. But, the son eventually went from being the college student scuffling with his subjects and starting out in the lower ranks of his father's company during

[39] Summers, 157.
[40] Ibid, 156.
[41] Ibid, 155.
[42] Herndon Family Papers.

summer breaks in Savannah to ultimately pulling up his grades, graduating, and then focusing on his father's already successful businesses.[43] In a later letter to Norris, Alonzo said "I could not help tears coming in to my eyes when I read your letter, and thought of the promise to take the burden from my shoulders. How glad I am that you begin to see things as a man and not as a child."[44] The proceeding part is dedicated to the business spheres of the father and son duet that evolved after this climatic moment.

Despite all of his personal grief, Alonzo Herndon nurtured the Atlanta Life Insurance Company from a faltering enterprise he bought for $140 into one of the largest black financial institutions in America.[45] Alonzo built the world's largest barber shop and then parlayed his earnings into a multi-million dollar insurance and real estate fortune. It would be noted, "Winter home of Herndon is a two-story frame house in Florida orange grove. Herndon spends part of each year in Florida. Winter home, which has been in the Herndon family for many years, was used for regional conferences in early days of Atlanta Life."[46] A symbol of African American entrepreneurship and Atlanta's African American elite, Atlanta Life located its headquarters on Auburn Avenue. The company's new lofty Auburn Avenue address was in the most prestigious black area of Atlanta. Simultaneously, the polishing up of *Herndon's Baths* took place and was renamed *The Crystal Palace*.[47] The Herndon European expeditions previously cited that were used to conduct research for a distinguished taste of ideas for his world class establishment paid off indubitably. Aptly, Alonzo catered to wealthy white men on segregated Peachtree Street. Features in the *Atlanta Constitution* would communicate –

> "Herndon operates a barber shop on one of Atlanta's most fashionable streets. He has visited the most prominent cities of America and several of Europe to get advanced ideas of modern shop service with everything necessary for a

[43] Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 190.
[44] Herndon Family Papers, Herndon Home Museum and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
[45] Merritt, front inner cover.
[46] "Stern Father Reared Norris to Take Over Insurance Firm," *Ebony*, October 1955, Volume 10, Issue 12, 46.
[47] Herndon Family Papers.

> particular public. His biggest barbershop is worth $30,000. He has two others, worth $15,000 each."[48]

Alonzo Herndon challenged societal norms by magnificently defeating the race issues that had been his problem in characterizing masculinity. Neither would his anguish about his son's homosexuality impede upon his overarching goal of success. However, for Norris, race was not a forefront worry. He enjoyed the privileges that come from wealth and originally took his father's success for granted.[49] His forefront worries would lead him to challenge societal norms through unconventional sexual explorations on his path to defining masculinity. Such explorations would seem very unlikely compared to stories that read, "Norris appears at no national conventions, makes no public speeches. His picture appears on no society pages his name is in few press releases."[50] Martin Summers' account of what was taking place amongst African American youth which were born around and raised during Norris' life time serves as a clue. This interpretation from an unpublished source from 1935 helps to pinpoint what might have been occurring in Norris Herndon's personal approach to defining masculinity.

> Sometime around World War I, the writer Jean Toomer recalled American culture changed. The shift in attitudes and mores, chiefly among middle-class African American youth, did not occur rapidly; rather, it had occurred over the space of at least a decade. Toomer remembered, "There occurred something similar to what swept the youth of the entire country after the World War-a breaking away from old codes and conduct, the release of a 'free wild spirit,' flaming youth, not a little drinking and sexing." This gradual loosening of the moorings of respectability among young middle-class black youth was accelerated and in some ways, legitimized by the nation's war experience. As opposed to the earlier "flaming youth," who, Toomer implicitly suggested, had to live their scandalous lives *covertly*, "the post-war youth lived his or her post-war way openly, as he had support of a national trend, a rebellion which soon became a popular fashion."[51]

Here, Summers suggests according to Jean Toomer's indication, how in many ways black men who came of age in the years surrounding World War I began to have an attitude that included a

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[48] Born in Slavery Alonzo Herndon Has Made Fortune, *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 November 1920, 12A.
[49] Merritt, 188.
[50] "Stern Father Reared Norris to Take Over Insurance Firm," *Ebony* 10, no. 12 (October 1955): 46.
[51] Jean Toomer, "Book X," second typescript draft of unpublished autobiography, February 1935, Box II, Fol. 362, JTP. Quotes on pp. 68 – 69 found in Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents,* 155.

denial of bourgeois ideals of manliness. An African American male point of view in contrast to the traditional white cultural perspective is delivered. Similarly, to Toomer's testimony, Queer Theory historian John Howard's ideas agree that covertness as a mechanism personified by boys and men that explored in queer behavior.[52] In summary, homosexuality was defeated by methods of silence. Other socio-graphics that hindered black men were challenged by the Herndon men via African American activism and education. Thus, leading towards part two that examines such spheres.

Although, the ranges of black masculinities at the turn of the twentieth century vary, one singular item of importance in this regard is the evolving male roles as African American males themselves perceived it, in contrast to the perception of the larger white society. Some historical views propose that while many elements within the values, attitudes, and behaviors of white and black males are shared, their total configuration differs in terms of quantity, quality, and their relationship to each other.[53] During the antebellum and Jim Crow periods in particular, violence threatened black men bent on obtaining financial, social, or political power. Alonzo Herndon would become the exception. He once said, "I have never had a cross word with anybody. The reactions have always been very pleasant."[54] Despite one man's achievements, these barriers to advancement were well-known within African American communities. Consequently, the emergence of standards by which to evaluate black masculinity was altered accordingly. These standards of acceptable masculine behavior and achievement were adapted, to a considerable extent, to the reality of the unjust conditions that these males confronted.[55]

Like Christopher B. Booker gathers in *I Will Wear No Chain!* black masculinity in

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[52] John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 31.
[53] Christopher B. Booker, *"I Will Wear No Chain!" A Social History of African-American Males* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 155.
[54] Born in Slavery, Alonzo Herndon Has Made Fortune**,** *Atlanta Constitution,* 21 November 1920, 12A.
[55] Booker, *ix.*

America has always been influenced by the prevalent forms of masculinity of white America.[56] Since the mid-nineteenth century since the "self-made man" that included Christian qualities and honesty displaced the earlier archetypes such as Michael Kimmel's "genteel patriarch" and "heroic artisan," black males have felt the impact of these mainstream values, standards, and behaviors.[57] The "self-made man," transcended across class and race boundaries and became the dominant male figure in America.[58] "When asked what attributed to his success, Alonzo replied, 'I attribute my success in life to honest and fair dealings to the entire public and ever remembering that I am simply a custodian of that which God has given me" and summing up his career "I believe with all my heart that it is not the color of a man's skin, but the man."[59] Nonetheless, Alonzo would assume education as the driving tool to assure his son a successful career. As inscribed in mail to him from his father when he was attending Harvard University School of Business, "Your mind is bright enough," Alonzo told him. "It is application you need and a plenty of out-door exercise so you can have a strong body and your vision will be much clearer. God's plan is for man to work with his hands as well as with his mind," the father instructed, "and you must work or exercise. You can't defeat God's plan."[60] Norris graduated from Atlanta University in 1919 and went on to take a master's degree in business administration from Harvard University in 1921.[61] He grew up as a polar opposite to the way his father was reared. Norris did not do many outdoor activities.[62] It was as if his father had to make special request to get his son to be physically active. Alonzo regretted that his son was not a sportsman and insisted that physical activity would improve his academic performance. As pointed out prior, Norris attended a prestigious Ivy League school to heighten his Atlanta University

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[56] Ibid, 35.
[57] Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22.
[58] Ibid, 23.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Herndon Family Papers, Herndon Home Museum and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 7.

undergraduate degree. While in comparison, Alonzo only had one-year equivalent primary education.[63] Regardless, he took his barbershop and later his bathhouse businesses and mentally converted them into institutions of higher learning. It was in these type settings that Alonzo Herndon became privy to the conversations of Atlanta's most elite white male population, not to mention wealthiest white men. The customers were paying for grooming services, while the owner of the establishment not only cashed in on the higher echelon paying for a shave and a haircut, but cashed in on 'stock tips' he overheard. Granted Alonzo had succeeded in business without formal schooling, but clearly the father understood that education was important and, not just for his son. Education became a civic responsibility. As evident from a 1910 article of the *Atlanta Constitution*, "Born in Slavery, Alonzo Herndon Has Made Fortune - Career of Wealthy Atlanta Negro Brought to Public Attention by $10,000 Gift for Day Nursery and Kindergarten and helps out the unfortunate of his race in many other ways."[64]

Like Alonzo, there were many other African Americans that did great work to help the black race, but they do not even rate an apostrophe or a period in history. But, there was. Alonzo Herndon had cohorts and clients on "Black Wall Street" in Tulsa, Oklahoma that provided assistance for black people.[65] As proof to the racially charged hostile social political time before mentioned, in a hysteria fueled by a crumbling archaic racial order, numerous lives were destroyed. The inclusion of homogeneous African American achievements of Tulsa in comparison to a man and his son provides necessary elements for an analysis of how African American men established an identity at the turn of the twentieth century. Black people who were determined on attaining white ideals were exposed to viciousness. "To exercise manhood, as white men displayed it, was to invite disaster" was the black man's standpoint during this

[63] Merritt, 191.
[64] Born in Slavery Alonzo Herndon Has Made Fortune**,** *Atlanta Constitution,* 21 November 1920, 12A.
[65] Herndon Family Papers, Herndon Home Museum and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia and Atlanta Life Insurance Company Archives, Auburn Avenue Research Library for African American History and Culture, Atlanta, Georgia.

era.[66] As seen from the "Black Wall Street" 1921 atrocity when 3,000 African American died and 600 successful African American businesses were lost, by bombs from the air and burned to the ground by mobs of envious whites.[67] These standards of acceptable masculine behavior and achievement were adapted by African Americans, to a considerable extent, to the reality of the unjust conditions that were confronted.[68] According to historian Steve Estes what defined (white) manhood and independence during those times in history was the legal status of dependence (the subordination of women, children, and blacks).[69]

Even though Alonzo was not identified as a white man, he unmistakably incorporated the Estes commonly accepted theory of defining manhood in his approach to define manhood. "His property holdings are rated at more than $500,000."[70] In addition to land holdings and large number of dependents described previous, Alonzo Herndon had a lengthy payroll that spread out amongst five states which concludes at least from an Estesian definition that many people depended on Alonzo's manliness.[71] Plus, according to newspaper writings, "Herndon pays the rent for a number of old people."[72] Therefore, Alonzo well qualified to upholding the Estes' definition of the legal status for masculinity. As further evidence determines, Alonzo also had what some might consider live-in black servants. Her name was Florence Berry, Alonzo's cousin, who cooked for the Herndon's and Will who was also family took care of the Herndon's mansion property located on Diamond Hill near Morris Brown College.[73] Both Will and Miss Berry, as Herndon called her, were very dark skinned relatives from his mother's side of the family. Yet, in the scope of the subordination of women, Alonzo does not properly qualify. He

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[66] Steve Estes, *I AM A MAN!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 6.
[67] www.blackwallstreet.org
[68] Booker, *"I Will Wear No Chain!"*, ix.
[69] Estes, 4.
[70] Career of Wealthy Atlanta Negro Brought to Public Attention by $10,000 Gift for Day Nursery and Kindergarten, *Atlanta Constitution,* 21 November 1920, 12A.
[71] Atlanta Life Insurance Company Archives, Auburn Avenue Research Library for African American History and Culture, Atlanta, Georgia.
[72] Born in Slavery Alonzo Herndon Has Made Fortune**,** *Atlanta Constitution,* 21 November 1920, 12A.
[73] Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 173.

always displayed the best practices for uplifting rather than subordinating his female peers and especially his wife. By calling Florence, Miss Berry, he offered a sense of womanly pride to his female cousin, rather than a subservient address such as simply Florence or Flo which was common practice during those times. Two out of three factors for defining manhood where well over exceeded by the sheer number of dependents. Alonzo Herndon worked all of his life to uphold a proper definition of defining what it meant to be a man. Therefore, as a self-made man, Alonzo had great difficulty empathizing with those who struggled under better circumstances than he had suffered.[74]

In conclusion, Norris witnessed his father climb the success ladder and watched him express supreme commitment. "I am willing to sink everything I have in order to save it and make it the kind of institution I want it to be" of Atlanta Mutual when crisis threatened the company.[75] Alonzo weathered the storm of the 1918 - 1919 severe influenza epidemics that heavily burdened the company with sick and death claims, followed by the 1921 claims from Oklahoma.[76] With the establishment of Atlanta Life as a legal reserve company in 1922, Alonzo reached his greatest milestone in business.[77] The pinnacle had been reached by the father and the son was there to observe and took part every step of the way. When he died in 1927, he left one-half of his fortune to his son and one-half to his widow, with the proviso that her share would go to his son at her death. Norris had served a rigorous apprenticeship under his stern-faced, reserved father. Norris Herndon succeeded his father as president of the company and was hailed as a business genius by his associates. His whole life had been shaped toward that end.[78]

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[74] Merritt, 179.
[75] Herndon Family Papers, Herndon Home Museum and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.
[76] http://www.atlantalife.com/main.asp?urh=chronology
[77] Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 199.
[78] "Stern Father Reared Norris to Take Over Insurance Firm," *Ebony*, October 1955, Volume 10, Issue 12, 46.

The colored section of funeral notices in the *Atlanta Constitution* upon Alonzo's death said of him, "He was widely known as a capitalist, a churchman, and philanthropist."[79] Norris Herndon became the heir to the presidency upon his father's death and inherited the helm of Atlanta Life Insurance. The financial statements confirm the firm's assets totaled over one million dollars when he assumed the reins.[80] He led the firm for more than four and a half decades and his tenure was characterized by cautious growth, prudent investments, sensible management, and careful economies that permitted few frills.[81] Norris progressively moved the company to the next level. Gossip columnists linked him with no women and he never married, although he was called, by some, the world's most eligible bachelor. Many stories contribute to the mystery of the man. Unruffled by it all, the aloof millionaire lives on alone in the family mansion.[82] Upon his death in 1977 the firm's assets held over 100 million dollars and a collection of historic and contemporary architectural monuments that lined Auburn Avenue as testament to the company's prudent growth.[83] As a tribute to the extraordinary accomplishments that these men achieved in their paths to defining masculinity, The Alonzo F. and Norris B. Herndon Foundation enacted by a special act of Congress. The act allows the foundation to control the firm's assets and prevent Atlanta Life from passing out of black ownership.[84] In 2007, the company's assets exceeded $42 billion in revenue.[85] These things together allow me to argue that there is most certainly supportive evidence to conclude that the Herndon men, Alonzo and Norris Herndon, both challenged societal norms. One by overcoming race issues to become a successful businessman. The other by challenging societal norms about homosexuality while still being able to become a successful businessman, despite the odds he faced about his sexual

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[79] Funeral Notices, *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 July 1927, 18.
[80] Atlanta Life Insurance Company Archives, Auburn Avenue Research Library for African American History and Culture, Atlanta, Georgia.
[81] http://www.atlantaga.gov/government/urbandesign_herndonhomes.aspx
[82] "Stern Father Reared Norris to Take Over Insurance Firm," *Ebony*, October 1955, Volume 10, Issue 12, 46.
[83] Atlanta Life Insurance Archives.
[84] Carole Merritt, Historic Black Resources: A Handbook for the Identification, Documentation, and Evaluation of Historic African-American Properties in Georgia, (Atlanta: Historic Preservation Section Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 1984), 1.
[85] Aisha I. Jefferson, "Firms Create $42 Billion Company," *Black Enterprise* 37, no. 10 (May 2007): 30.

identity. Nonetheless, the Herndon men conclusively redefined masculinity in the early twentieth century, although from different views of manhood.

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