Review: 'The Original Black Elite,' by Elizabeth Dowling Taylor

NONFICTION: This biography sheds light on the black elite, a group that emerged after the Civil War but was soon blocked by the Jim Crow laws of the 1890s.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune | JANUARY 30, 2017 — 2:59PM

Soon after Daniel Murray became chief of the periodical division of the Library of Congress, the Washington Times included a biographical sketch of him, along with a pen-and-ink likeness, in an article titled “Successful Colored Men.” The position, the article proclaimed, gave Murray “great prominence, and it is safe to say that he is known to almost every colored man of note in the country, and to most of the statesmen.”

These days, it is safe to say, very few Americans, white or black, know anything about Murray — and, except for professional historians, few of us know that in the decades after the end of the Civil War, a cohort of well-educated and wealthy blacks emerged. In “The Original Black Elite,” Elizabeth Dowling Taylor, the author of “A Slave in the White House,” uses a detailed (and, at times, moving) biography of Murray to illuminate this little-known chapter in our history.

A “colored aristocracy,” existing midway between the black and white worlds, she reminds us, was active in social, civic and political affairs — until their efforts to become “full citizens” were blocked with the imposition of Jim Crow laws in the 1890s and early 20th century.

Taylor indicates that even during Reconstruction, only a few blacks could join the “colored aristocracy.” The availability of government jobs (until Woodrow Wilson resegregated the federal bureaucracy), she notes, helped make Washington a “comparative paradise” for blacks.

That said, Murray’s life underscores the fragility of the black elite. Despite his exemplary service, he was demoted as assistant librarian; his salary was reduced (and frozen for 25 years). Requiring white employees to report to a black supervisor, he was told, might produce “friction incident to caste.”

In 1893, the officials of Graceland Cemetery, where two of Murray’s children were buried, decreed that the bodies of blacks interred there would be removed. Most important, blacks failed to persuade Congress to pass laws to combat voting restrictions, lynching and segregated railroad cars.

By the early 20th century, Taylor writes, the nation’s capital was “a scene of sorrows,” with racists delighting in humiliating cultured and ambitious blacks. Murray and his wife, Anna (a pioneer in kindergarten education), cut back their civic and political activities. Murray devoted virtually all of his time to his “Encyclopedia of the Colored Race,” a six-volume work that was never published.

Blacks were “outraged, heartbroken, bruised and bleeding,” declared George Henry White, the last black member of Congress of the era, in 1901. But they were also “rising people, full of potential force.” He was right, Taylor notes, before adding a timely lesson of her own: “Rights won must be rights guarded, and, if necessary, rewon.”

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The Original Black Elite
By: Elizabeth Dowling Taylor.
Publisher: Amistad, 498 pages, $27.99.