

GENERATIONS AND CHANGE

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M E R C E R



ETHNICITY AND THE
SOUTHERN GENEALOGIST:
MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS,
RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Elizabeth Shown Mills

There is no aspect of American social history that has been so minutely scrutinized and yet remains so misunderstood as ethnicity and ethnic relations in the Southern United States. Social scientists, journalists, psychologists, and politicians have probed the myriad ramifications of this issue and offered their exegeses as solutions to almost every conceivable problem. Yet, in an ironic commentary on American social thought, this overwhelming focus on racial issues has seldom been directed toward the genealogist.

To a great extent this anything-but-coincidental omission is due to the intrinsically personal nature of family history and the extreme sensitivity that has existed toward racial issues. Generations of Americans have believed the old cliché that America is “the great melting pot,” yet somehow have convinced themselves that melting did not occur across color lines—at least not in their own families. To a significant degree, the prob-

lem stems from a cumbersome legacy of myths and misconceptions that has distorted America's historic self-image. Finally, but no less significantly, the lack of interest that genealogists traditionally show to certain ethnic groups is due to a lack of awareness of, or exposure to, the resources other peoples have to offer. The traditional genealogist, unconscious of this self-imposed isolation, approaches the source materials at his disposal with arbitrary ethnic lines already drawn in his own mind. He handicaps himself from the onset.

This analysis of historic race relations and their applicability to genealogy focuses upon the South, but much of what is said can be applied to all quarters of America. Inherent differences do exist in the records and philosophies of Louisiana's Catholics and Philadelphia's Quakers, Virginia's Tidewater diarists, and Iowa's census-takers. Yet all societies share certain basic human traits. The flaws of fallibility, gullibility, and ethnic bias must rank high among these, and they are the classic Medusas that have created the most problems for genealogists.

The magnolia-scented South, laden with its burden of slavery that Margaret Mitchell and Alex Haley painted in such stereotyped melodrama, certainly spawned its share of America's myths and misconceptions. This limited paper can address only a few of them. For the most part, the myths chosen are so widely accepted that neither white nor black, Northerner nor Southerner, thinks to question them. Each misconception opened for discussion also represents an arbitrary barrier that has existed between the genealogist and the success he seeks as he reconstructs his own heritage.

MYTH: *White Southerners are the personification of Anglo-Saxon America and its preoccupation with racial purity.*

To the contrary, the most recent historical scholarship argues that the South is not an Anglo-Saxon society at all. Extensive statistical analyses of immigration and migration, patronyms, life-styles, and economic patterns offer convincing evidence that whites who populated the early South were overwhelmingly Celtic in origin. The most recent statistics indicate that "upwards of 70 percent of those whose ethnic backgrounds can be ascertained were of Celtic extraction—mainly Welsh, Scots, Irish, and

Scotch Irish," while seventy to eighty percent of Northern householders in 1790 were predominantly English (that is, Anglo Saxon).¹

The distinction is crucial, not only because it suggests the national origins of immigrants from whom genealogists descend, but also because it explains many peculiarities of the Southern life-style as well as the conflicts that have existed between Northern and Southern whites who heretofore were presumed to be of similar origins. The identification of the South as a dominantly Celtic culture also helps to explain the *lack of racial purity* that actually existed. The Celts of the British Isles were people who shared a common *cultural* heritage but were "clearly of different genetic mixtures,"² and they transplanted to the New World their emphasis on cultural compatibility and their lesser concern for superficial genetic distinctions.

MYTH: *Indian-white marriages were common in the Latin regions of the Gulf but not in the Anglo-South.*

Again, this common misconception stems from the indiscriminate attribution of Anglo-Saxon characteristics to the whole of the white South. Such colonials as Alexander Spotswood, William Byrd, and Robert Beverly—members of the Anglo minority that controlled Virginia politics and letters—played the part of ostriches, buried their heads in the sands of the Tidewater, and ignored the life-style of backcountry Celts when they asserted that "they did not know of a single mixed marriage."³ Historians, unwittingly, have perpetuated their racially myopic views.

¹Preliminary glimpses of the newly emerging "Celtic thesis" of Southern history have appeared in Forrest McDonald and Ellen Shapiro McDonald, "The Ethnic Origins of the American People, 1790," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 37 (April 1980): 179-99; Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, "The South from Self-Sufficiency to Peonage: An Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 85 (December 1980): 1095-1108; Grady McWhiney, "Continuity in Celtic Warfare," *Continuity: A Journal of History* 2 (Spring 1981): 1-18; and Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (University AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1982). A seminal monograph, by McWhiney and McDonald, is scheduled for publication in 1985.

²McDonald and McWhiney, "The South from Self-Sufficiency to Peonage," 1108.

³J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *The Only Land They Knew: The Tragic Story of the American Indians of the Old South* (New York: The Free Press, 1981) 234.

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Certainly, Indian-white miscegenation existed widely in the Latin South. An analysis of the population settling northwest Louisiana between 1714 and 1803 indicates that by the close of the colonial era, *forty-nine percent of the native-born white population boasted Indian blood.*⁴ Further study, by the same writer, of families migrating later into the region from Southeastern states, reveals high levels of Indian ancestry in their ranks as well. J. Leitch Wright has reported extensive evidence of white-Indian marriages in the Southeast, particularly involving Scots and Scotch-Irish, and asserts that such racial mixing existed there “perhaps on a larger scale than in New France.”⁵ If Wright is correct, and if the French of northwest Louisiana prove typical of New France, then the Indian heritage of the white Southeasterner is indeed strong.

MYTH: *A single drop of Negro blood eternally doomed a Southern family to suffer racial prejudice, subservience, and even slavery.*

The “one drop rule” made famous by Edna Ferber’s *Showboat* and its literary ilk is possibly the most miasmatic myth to arise from the Old South. According to Carl Degler’s study of American race relations, in most Southern states the Negro “was defined in law and in custom as anyone with a *certain amount* of Negro ancestry—*usually one eighth.*”⁶ The legislatures of Virginia and other states lowered that definition to one quarter because the one-eighth ruling would include too many “upstanding” citizens. No antebellum Southern state labeled as Negro any citizen with less than one-eighth African blood.⁷

This blurred line between the Southern black and white is elucidated by the 1835 court decision of South Carolina Justice William Harper:

The condition [of being Negro] is not to be determined solely by visible mixture . . . but by reputation . . . and it may be . . . proper that a

⁴Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Social and Family Patterns on the Colonial Louisiana Frontier,” *Sociological Spectrum* 2 (Fall-Winter 1981): 238.

⁵Wright, *The Only Land They Knew*, 235.

⁶Carl Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1971) 101; italics added.

⁷James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970) 192.

[Negro] man of worth . . . should have the rank of a white man, while a vagabond of the same degree of blood should be confined to the inferior caste.⁸

Even more surprising to students of history is the fact that intermarriage between white and black was legal in almost every Southern state or colony at one time or another, and at least one antebellum state never outlawed such marriage. Gary B. Mills's study of miscegenation in Alabama provides startling statistics on legal intermarriages and community-tolerated miscegenous concubinages—even between white females and non-white males. Examples of racial mixing and crossing abound, and there is clear evidence of laxity and unconcern by white citizens when called upon to distinguish between "coloreds" and "clear bloods."⁹

Such situations are evident across the Southern frontier. The 1826 census of the Celtic-Anglo settlers of Atascosita, Texas, reveals a minimum ten percent of the population with known Negro ancestry, yet no discriminatory designations are applied to them on the census.¹⁰ Across the Sabine, in southwest Louisiana, fifteen of the "first families" of "white" Southeastern origins appear on pre-1860 censuses as "free nonwhite." Moreover, the ethnic origin of those families is discussed in published studies of the free Negro in every state along their migration path; yet their identity for the past century and a quarter has been white.

In short, "racial purity" was not a universal concern in the Old South; and the "white" genealogist would be naive to begin his work by *assuming* that he will find nothing but "white" ancestors. If he succeeds in tracing every ancestral line back to a European immigrant (as he may), he would still be foolish to assume that his ancestry was "pure white." Not only was Europe traveled by men of every conceivable hue, but African slavery existed there also, and blacks were assimilated into Europe's population before American colonization began.

⁸Marina Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow: The Free Black in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973) 14.

⁹Gary B. Mills, "Miscegenation and the Free Negro in Antebellum 'Anglo' Alabama: A Reexamination of Southern Race Relations," *Journal of American History* 68 (June 1981): 16-34.

¹⁰Mirian Partlow, *Liberty, Liberty County and the Atascosita District* (Austin: Jenkins Publishing Co., 1974) 329-36.

When nonwhite ancestry is encountered in America, the genealogist may expect considerable difficulty in attempting to label, ethnically, that nonwhite element. The enslavement of Indians by whites introduced countless Native Americans into Negro life, while the Indian enslavement of Afro-Americans interjected Negro blood into the Indian nations. Indeed, countless Southern families with no Indian ancestry at all and more than a few drops of Negro blood have seen many advantages to painting these drops red instead of black when sketching their family tree.¹¹

MYTH: *A genealogist who "knows" his family to be white need not expend time searching records already identified as "black" or "Indian."*

A successful reconstruction of any family—even an apparent “clear-blood” one—is almost never possible for the genealogist who thinks in terms of “white records,” “black records,” or “Indian records.” These phenomena do not exist. The needs and problems of various ethnic groups did cause certain records to be created; and for convenience’ sake, archivists, historians, and the general public have categorized these. However, in the recorded history of the South, no ethnic group has existed in isolation, and there is no body of records that deals with one race to the exclusion of others. Many of the problems genealogists experience—many that have stymied a family’s pursuit of an elusive ancestor for generations even—result from a simple case of ethnic tunnel vision.

¹¹The Montgomery County, Alabama, case of *Elmore v. Harris & Pickett* provides an excellent example of how public knowledge of nonwhite ancestry might follow a family through numerous generations and across several states; how a seeming majority of such a family’s neighbors might consider its ancestry unimportant; and yet how the issue might continue to be raised whenever opponents saw advantage in airing the family’s closetful of skeletons. In this particular case, when friends and neighbors were forced to testify, they consistently related the “public knowledge” (sometimes, personal knowledge) that the family in question descended from “a black Negro with a number of white wives.” Yet the family itself repeatedly identified its dark progenitor as a full-blooded Indian.

In 1977 this writer, together with Gary B. Mills, photocopied abstracts of the case from *Records of the Chancery Court, 1830-1839*, Montgomery County Records, 668-754, while the court files were stored in the basement of the county courthouse. In 1980-1981 a portion of these files were transferred, at intervals, to the Alabama Department of Archives and History; also in 1981 Professor Mills’s study of miscegenation was published, with a discussion of the *Elmore v. Harris & Pickett* case. Some months later this writer had occasion to search that same group of files in both its old and new location and found the cited volume missing. As of this writing, it has not been located.

The experience of the Charleville family of southeast Louisiana provides an excellent example. By the 1960s descendants had attempted for fifty-three years to identify the parents of their late-eighteenth-century Louisiana progenitor, Joseph Chauvin *dit* Charleville. Tradition identified his father as Captain Joseph Chauvin *dit* Charleville of the Kaskaskia, Illinois, post. He was, in fact, the only older Chauvin male in America known to have used that *dit*. Yet all "known" civil and church records dealing with the family, from Montreal to Mobile, had been searched; no younger Joseph was found in the family of the captain and his wife.

The problem was self-created. The needed proof existed, and always had, but researchers had erected superficial ethnic barriers they could not see beyond. Copious notes had been taken from the crucial parish registers at Kaskaskia, notes dealing with everyone identified in the marginal notations as a Chauvin or a known relative; but every researcher had skimmed past the numerous slave registrations interspersed amid white entries, presuming that the marriages and baptisms of blacks had no bearing on their own research. It was not until a researcher recognized the importance of the family's ownership of slaves, as a facet of their character, that proof was found of the existence of a Joseph, Jr. in the Illinois family. A 1756 marriage, annotated as "Louis and Geneviève, slaves," identified the couple as property of Captain Joseph Chauvin *dit* Charleville—and identified one of the official witnesses as "young Joseph, son of the master."¹²

Sacramental registers kept by Southern Catholic churches may or may not be segregated by race. Where separate registers do exist, the genealogist must recognize that even the church is not infallible in all things. On countless occasions, a new cleric who did not know the recipient of a sacrament racially misidentified the person in his records. The registers of the parish of St. François in the old Louisiana settlement of Natchitoches contain fifty such entries between 1826 and 1831, eleven more between 1831 and 1846, and forty-one between 1850 and 1871.¹³ Other pastors

¹²Parish of Notre-Dame de l'Immaculée Conception de Kaskaskias, Microfilm C-2899, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. The cited researcher is Mary Helen (Mrs. George) Wilson of St. Louis.

¹³Archives of Immaculate Conception Church, Natchitoches LA. See also Gary B. Mills, "Piety and Prejudice: A Colored Catholic Community in the Antebellum South," ed. Randall M. Miller and Jon L. Wakelyn (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1983) 180-81, 192.

recorded the administration of sacraments to individuals whom they clearly, and properly, identified as white; yet they inadvertently picked up a "black" or "slave" register in which to record the entries.¹⁴

Censuses and other civil records, by contrast, are traditionally treated with a curiously discriminatory brand of skepticism. The neophyte genealogist rapidly loses his naiveté over the reliability of census detail regarding ages, birthplaces, occupations, and property values; nevertheless, the racial designations that accompany this data are treated as though they were engraved in stone atop Mt. Sinai. The "white" researcher who encounters a "black" or "mulatto" family of his surname, even if the given names are appropriate, will automatically assume this to be a "different family." Similarly, descendants of light-skinned Negroes may react similarly if they encounter records that label their ancestors "black."

Yet racial misidentifications are rampant in census records and cross all class lines. The 1860 federal enumeration of Barbour County, Alabama, identifies as "black" a young boy named Bragg Comer—a lad destined for the governor's chair of Alabama. No trace of African ancestry has been found among the Comers, and in that census year they were not only well known in their county but were among the social and economic elite. Nonetheless, they are clearly designated "black." A sample study, made by the present writer, of the 1860 census of the civil parish of Natchitoches, Louisiana, reveals a significant margin of error in racial identification. Seventy-six of the 1,614 families that year were misidentified: four percent of the population! In twenty-three cases, a well-known family of color was identified as white by the newcomer who took the census, while fifty-three white families whose ancestry was European with no African admixture were labeled "mulatto." Clearly, the thorough genealogist cannot afford to ignore records on individuals whose names are "right" but whose racial designations are "wrong."

Local civil records present a host of opportunities for the genealogist to expand his lineage work by reprogramming responses to race-related data. The case of Thomas Brandon, an early official in Huntsville, Ala-

¹⁴See, for example, Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Natchitoches, 1800-1826: Translated Abstracts of Register Number Five of the Catholic Church Parish of Natchitoches in Louisiana*, Cane River Creole Series, 4 (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1980); idem, "Burials & Baptisms, 1807-1859, Parish of St. François des Natchitoches," *Natchitoches Genealogist* 5 (April 1981): 11-20.

bama, provides an excellent example. When family researchers reported that conventional research had failed to identify Brandon's origins, the federal censuses were reconsulted by the professional whom they employed—with the resulting “discovery” that in 1830 Brandon's household included a free man of color. The family had omitted him from their notes on the presumption that he was a “hired servant or something” whose presence was inconsequential. Research in the county records was then extended beyond the routine examination of entries indexed under the name Brandon. In other words, conveyance books for the period were combed for all “free papers” filed by Huntsville's free black population—and the family's problem soon was solved with the discovery of the following:

MARVILLE SMITH—CERTIFICATE OF FREEDOM

8 January 1830

Personally appeared before me, Wm. Barker, an acting Justice of the Peace of said County, Thomas Brandon, a citizen of said County and made oath in due form of law that Marville Smith . . . is a free man and that deponent was well acquainted with the father of the said boy before he was born. . . . Marville was born in the *State of North Carolina Burke County* where he [Brandon] lived.¹⁵

Similar records abound throughout the South with information on white associates of blacks. Mrs. Ann Bayless of Natchez, Mississippi, wife of Platt Bayless, testified in 1812 that the “yellow man” Uriah Jones, who first came to Natchez three years before, had been her acquaintance in Mason County, Kentucky, where he was bound to her fellow Quakers, the Samuel Canbys. In 1842 James W. Stewart and George S. Armistead, both whites of Lauderdale County, Alabama, swore they had first known the free black Jacob Lusk in Loudoun County, Virginia. In the Madison County, Alabama, free paper of Nancy Mayo, filed that same year, Abraham Bransford, a white, testified that Nancy was bound to him shortly after her 1811 birth in Cumberland County, Virginia, whence he brought her to “the said County of Madison . . . in the month of December 1817.”¹⁶

¹⁵*Deed Book M* (orig. vol.) 549, Madison County Records, Old Law Library, Huntsville AL.

¹⁶*Deed Record A*, 89-91, and *Deed Record W*, 102, Madison County Records. *Deed Record 10*, 428, Lauderdale County Records, Florence AL.

An awareness of the friendly, and often close, relations between free blacks and whites of the Old South is equally useful to the black genealogist in search of elusive roots. Free Southern blacks, like Southern whites, seldom migrated alone. When a free black ancestor is found in a state and county without apparent relations, and when those desirable but often nonexistent "free papers" cannot be found in local records, the black migrant's origins can often be traced by identifying and backtracking his white neighbors and associates.

The copious records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, and the more widely available WPA "Slave Testimonies" are other examples of record groups invaluable to both blacks and whites. Again, because of their racial labels, both are seriously underutilized. White genealogists searching for Southern ancestors are seemingly unaware that WPA interviewers instructed ex-slaves to "tell about your master, mistress, their children, the house they lived in, the overseer or driver, poor white neighbors, or when some of the master's family married or died." Indeed, a closer investigation of the Alabama collection labeled "Ex-Slave Tales & Life Histories/Stories" reveals that at least half are recollections given by elderly whites whom WPA workers also interviewed; yet the white genealogist who suffers from racial myopia reads the first two words on the collection's label and passes it by.¹⁷

Almost equally neglected by white patrons of Southern libraries are the microfilmed documents of the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs. Genealogists who have not yet found Indian ancestry assume these files have nothing for them, but the loss they suffer as a consequence is great. For example, a single roll of filmed letterbooks relating to Cherokee Indians along the Tennessee-Georgia-Alabama borders for the years 1801-1802 contains data on 118 frontier whites, while the 1808-1809 letterbooks discuss some 400 whites and only one-quarter that number of Indians. Included in these files are recommendations for agency jobs, giving relationships and places of origin for the frontier applicants. There are Indian complaints against specific whites who encroached upon their lands, stole their food stores, and destroyed their crops and homes, as well as white

¹⁷Works Progress Administration, Writers' Project of Alabama, Folklore Section, *Ex-Slave & Life Histories/Stories*, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery. See also George P. Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 31 vols. (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1972-1977).

accounts of Indians attacking homesteads, throwing children into blazing fireplaces, splitting open the heads of womenfolk, and other similar atrocities that white-family traditions often relate, but which genealogists seldom verify due to a supposed "lack of records."¹⁸ In such cases, the problem often is not so much a *lack* of records as it is a failure to utilize the material that does exist.

MYTH: *Black genealogists must depend more on oral history since their families can rarely be traced through the conventional means that white genealogists use.*

This misconception, commonly believed by blacks and whites alike, is yet another example of ethnic naiveté. The traditional, historical portrayal of Afro-American life as a promiscuous, matriarchal society with weak family ties resulting from frequent sales and sexual exploitation has been seriously questioned by recent scholarship; and the rich breadth of the latest studies in black history reflects at last the broad scope of available records.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the public is far more likely to have "learned history" from Frank Yerby's *Foxes of Harrow* or Kyle Onstott's *Mandingo* than from the scholarship of Herbert Gutman or John Blassingame. Even more damaging is the credence given this myth with the publication of Alex Haley's undocumented *Roots*, accompanied by his self-acclaimed status as "probably . . . the person most knowledgeable about black genealogy."²⁰ There was also his misleading but widely publicized advice that "records [do not] reflect things like children born from unions between white masters and black women so to expect these records to provide an accurate account is pure naiveté. When it comes to black genealogy, well-kept oral history is without question the best source."²¹

¹⁸Reels 1 and 4, Microcopy 208, U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives and Records Service, Washington D.C.

¹⁹Excellent rectifications of these points appear in Herbert C. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); and Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974).

²⁰Quoted in Peggy J. Murrell, "Black Genealogy," *The Genealogical Helper* 26 (September 1972): 417.

²¹"Roots: The Saga Continues," *Family Weekly*, 2 August 1981, 18.

To the contrary, legitimate historians and genealogists of recent years have proven that records do document even illicit miscegenation. Gary B. Mills's *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color*²² is an excellent example of how a mixed-family's traditional descent from a black female slave and her white master can be documented thoroughly, and how the family's social, economic, religious, and political experiences, both in slavery and freedom, can be traced to an African progenitor ten generations removed—with the support of literally thousands of the same type of documents that white genealogists use.

The traditions that black or Indian families (or those of any race) have preserved are invaluable clues in reconstructing a family's heritage; however, there is inherent danger in the current fad that elevates oral history to the status of a sacred relic. As was pointed out in an interdisciplinary study of *Roots*, there is no such thing as "The Gospel According to Aunt Lizzie."²³ All humanity, regardless of race, is fallible, gullible, and biased. Any traditional story passed through successive generations will be altered by fading memories, by misinterpretation of details, and by the very human desire to present one's self or one's family in the best possible light. Generations of white genealogists rooted family trees in a mountain of mistakes and earned for themselves the scorn of serious historians before they learned (and admitted) that Aunt Lizzie's gospel was not divinely inspired. Now, a growing popular belief that oral tradition is sanctified by its association with minorities threatens to catapult black genealogy into the academic dark ages from which white family history already has emerged.

The advantages and limitations of oral history know no racial bounds, and there is a striking universality of substance within the family traditions of all people—as shown by Donald R. Wright's work with Gambian

²²(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977). See also Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, "Slaves and Masters: The Louisiana Metoyers," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 70 (September 1982): 163-89; and Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Mézières, Grappe, Trichel: A Study of Tri-Caste Lineages in the Old South," *The Genealogist* (forthcoming, 1985).

²³Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Roots and the New 'Faction': A Legitimate Tool for Clio?" *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 89 (January 1981): 3-26.

griots and family elders.²⁴ Assertions that oral accounts are of more value to Afro-Americans because of their traditional lack of educational opportunities ignore the legion of white Americans who were equally deprived. The state of scholarship currently enjoyed by all ethnic groups in America mandates that the legends of each be subjected to academic standards. Whatever his heritage, the genealogist who is scholarly in his methodology and interpretation, who anticipates (and accepts) the deviances that will invariably be found between legend and fact, can utilize his family's traditions to reconstruct a meaningful and poignant heritage.

Mills's experience in tracing the "forgotten people" provides a model of good genealogical practice. One oral account of the family's life centers on a white dentist who resided on the family's isle during the Civil War. While "drilling" one of the family members, the dentist allegedly was shot by his patient for an inexplicable reason. The dentist died, and the patient fled the parish. Mills could find no supporting evidence for the story in any records known to deal with the family. By analyzing and investigating the components of the traditional account, he identified several white medical doctors living on the isle, but no dentists. As he began to reconstruct the demise of each doctor, the actual story surfaced, with all the supporting detail that a careful genealogist or historian could desire. As expected, the basic truth differed somewhat from the tradition because, at some point, a storyteller had misunderstood details he had been told. More important, while the original family tale was interesting, it lacked reason or purpose. By contrast, the actual story told much about the problems this family faced in those strained years of war.

Free and wealthy despite their African heritage, this family supported the war effort. Its members volunteered for military duty and were rejected by the Confederacy. White friends encouraged them to form militia units for homeguard duty and they did so; but the discriminatory laws of the Confederacy required them to appoint white officers. Eventually the white friends whom they chose to command their units were either drafted into regular service or died. They accepted as drillmaster another who volunteered, Dr. Jean Napoleon Burdin (a medical doctor, not a dentist as

²⁴Donald R. Wright, *Oral Traditions from the Gambia*, Papers in International Studies, Africa Series, no. 38, 2 vols. (Athens OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1980); and Wright, "Uprooting Kunta Kinte: On the Perils of Relying on Encyclopedic Informants," *History of Africa* 8 (1981): 205-17.

had been erroneously assumed from his association with the word "drill"). Burdin's prejudices proved intolerable, and the militia disbanded. Ultimately, Union troops invaded the isle and confiscated all weapons they could find; the doctor attempted to force his former militiamen to attack this army of forty thousand, even though his men were armed only with "pitchforks and sticks." The men refused; an argument ensued. The doctor fired on one recalcitrant, and another whose weapon also had escaped confiscation returned the fire. The doctor died that night, and the man responsible for his death quietly left the parish to avoid arrest in the event that public sentiment might be aroused over the incident. When no negative reactions materialized, he returned.²⁵

Clearly, oral traditions can be invaluable *as clues to find the documentary evidence that should exist, that must exist before any tradition can be accepted as fact*. The black genealogist who refuses to reconcile tradition with evidence, who lets himself be daunted by obstacles all genealogists face, and then falls back on the platitude that "oral tradition is the best source" for oppressed races, does so at the expense of genealogical scholarship and compromises the academic integrity of the black American experience.

MYTH: *Much of the difficulty in tracing black roots stems from the fact that slaves used the surnames of their masters—and this changed every time a slave was sold.*

Black historiography currently offers no consensus on this point. John W. Blassingame, a more cautious authority, reports that forced name-changes were not uncommon, but concludes that "the slave used his *actual* name in conversation in the quarters and adopted it officially when he was freed." Unfortunately, he hedges the question of how a slave acquired or determined an *actual* surname. Ira Berlin has been quoted as more emphatically stating, "Slaves *rarely* took their master's name."²⁶ A sample study made by the present writer, from 696 ex-slave testimonies given before the three Civil War reparations commissions, indicates that in seventy-one percent of the cases, the ex-slave used the surname of the man

²⁵Gary B. Mills, "Patriotism Frustrated: The Native Guards of Confederate Natchitoches," *Louisiana History* 18 (Fall 1977): 437-51.

²⁶Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 181-83. Berlin is quoted in a United Press International news release, "Freedmen's Files Studied," *Shreveport Times*, 18 February 1976; italics added.

whom he identified as his last master; two percent reverted to using the name of an earlier master; and twenty-five percent did not use the name of any identifiable owner. In a small number of cases (two percent), no names of former masters could be determined and the origins of those slaves' names were unquantifiable.²⁷

The question of slave-naming practices is an important one to both black and white genealogists. Obviously, whether a freed slave took the name of a former master is crucial to any descendant who might search for premanumission records. Less obviously, an awareness of slave-naming customs can open new vistas for the descendants of slaveowners who place no racial bounds on their research. Included in the papers of the Southern Claims Commission, for example, are a number of files created by ex-slaves who sometimes used and sometimes did not use the surname of a former master. The efficient white genealogist who goes beyond a search for claims filed by his own ancestors and studies the claims of area blacks with the same name may well find data that augments his own work.

Examples are numerous: ex-slave Frederick Calhoun of Madison County, Alabama, testified that he was the former property of Meredith Calhoun, whose son "was afflicted [so] I stayed with him nearly all the time. *He broke his back when he was a boy.*" In the claim of David Vincent, ex-slave of Stephen Willis Harris of that same county, the claimant's friend, Anderson Watson, testified: "My master was Bob Watkins. His plantation was about fifty miles from the Harris place. *My master was a brother to Mrs. Harris.*" In the suit of ex-slave Quinn Grey of Lawrence County, Alabama, George W. Grey, a white, testified he had been born in 1828 and was *the son of Quinn's old master, Jonathan Grey.* In the Limestone County, Alabama, case of John Richardson, ex-slave of William Richardson, a fellow slave testified that she well knew one Colonel Phillips of the 9th Illinois, U.S. Army, since "*he married Miss Jennie Davis, sister to my master's wife.*"²⁸ Similar testimony regarding white owners, to be found

²⁷The three claims commissions from which these statistics are drawn are the Southern Claims Commission, RG 56, 217 and 233; Mixed Commission of British and American Claims, RG 76; and French and American Claims Commission, RG 76, National Archives.

²⁸Files 18667 (Cong. No. 10146), Frederick Calhoun; 18686 (Cong. No. 9448), David Vincent; 19679, John Richardson; 4197, Estate of Quinn Grey—Southern Claims Commission.

in these claims of blacks, reports earlier places of residence, death dates, and a host of events in their masters' lives—all of which the white genealogist may not find through traditional genealogical sources.

MYTH: *Family research is more disheartening for blacks since they have inherited a legacy of oppression and tribulation, with few of the positive experiences that make ancestral research exhilarating for white (that is, free) American families.*

Carl Degler sums up this problem in pointing out that traditional American history treats the black "primarily as a problem, not as a contributor to the making of society."²⁹ The publishers of *Roots* capitalized upon this myth by proclaiming on its cover that the trials of this fictionalized family of slaves was "the story of 25,000,000 Americans of African descent." On the contrary, the rich legacy left by America's antebellum blacks is far more complex, far more dramatic, far more troubling, and far more rewarding for their descendants who pursue the truth.

Among the many facets of Southern antebellum race relations that popular history has obscured, the black genealogist will quite likely find a very positive heritage of achievement. On the eve of the Civil War, almost half a million black Americans—approximately one out of every eight—were *free*. (If the legions of other Americans of African descent who had crossed the color line already were included in this tabulation, the numbers would be even greater.) A middle-aged American black of the 1980s, who begins to trace his ancestry, may statistically expect to find some twenty-four direct ancestors living on the eve of the Civil War, and he may also expect that three of these ancestors were not slaves at all.

Public awareness of free blacks does exist. Movies and novels have sensationalized the "underground railroad" that took Southern slaves to freedom after slavery gradually was abolished in the North. Yet, few contemporary Americans are aware of the actual numbers of blacks who did gain freedom, nor do they realize that *half this number, almost a quarter of a million in 1860, were living in the South* where they very often were contributors to and builders of Southern life. By comparison, the number of

²⁹Degler, *Neither Black nor White*, 7.

passengers on the fabled "underground railroad" has been estimated at only 50,000.³⁰

The black genealogist may also find that his Afro-American ancestors were not only the victims of slavery, but perpetrators of the system as well. Pioneer black historian Carter G. Woodson catalogued 3,765 blacks in 1830 who were actually slaveowners,³¹ but in the half-century since Woodson's study was published, popular history has tread lightly on the subject. Like Spotswood, Byrd, and Beverly of eighteenth-century Virginia, who did not want to admit the existence of miscegenation in their ranks, a twentieth-century black America that idealizes the historically nonexistent concept of "black brotherhood" overlooks the reality that black Americans enslaved other black Americans. This particular strain of historic myopia has been encouraged as well by white supremacists who are more comfortable with the image of blacks as nonachievers and are disturbed by those who dare to admit antebellum blacks to the master class.

Afro-Americans who stepped into the slave market to buy or sell, and not to be auctioned, were motivated by a variety of reasons. Every Southern state had nonwhite capitalists who enjoyed varying degrees of success. Mistress L. Horry of Colleton District, South Carolina, was enumerated in 1830 with eighty-four slaves. Martin Donato, a *creole de couleur* of Opelousas, Louisiana, was the owner that year of seventy-five blacks. The Metoyer family, planters and merchants *de couleur* of Isle Brevelle, Louisiana, owned 287 bondsmen in 1830—a stupendous number that continued to swell until, in 1850, the family collectively owned 436 other Afro-Americans.³²

At the other extreme, there existed a still-unquantifiable number whose slave property consisted of relatives or friends. In such cases the owner may have manumitted the relative, if law permitted. Sometimes the law was more generous than the owner, and the black kinsman remained

³⁰Johni Cerny, "Black Ancestral Research," in *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*, ed. Arlene Eakle and Johni Cerny (Salt Lake City: Ancestry Publishing Company, 1984) 592.

³¹Carter G. Woodson, "Documents: Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830," *Journal of Negro History* 9 (January 1924): 41-85.

³²*Ibid.*; Mills, *The Forgotten People*, 108-11. The estate grounds of one of the Metoyer plantations have survived and in 1975 the site (Melrose) was declared a National Historic Landmark.

in bondage. At least one black who held title to his own children is known to have offered them at public auction to pay off debts he had accumulated.³³

MYTH: *Tracing Southern ancestry is particularly gratifying to whites in search of illustrious ancestry since the plantation regime of the Old South produced so much wealth and so many already-documented, noble pedigrees.*

Historians have long since debunked the magnolia-scented and mint-julip-soused image of the white Southerner as a slaveowning planter lolling on the veranda of his mansion. Still, the myth persists. Among Southern householders enumerated in 1860, only one of every twenty-seven met the Census Bureau's criteria for the elite status of "planter." Three-fourths of all white Southerners owned no slaves at all, and half of those who did had less than five. In reality, the "typical" slave quarters contained no more than a man or woman, possibly both, and perhaps a child or two. The "typical" owner, that one man in four prosperous enough to own a slave, was a yeoman farmer who worked in the fields beside his bondsman. More than three-quarters of a century have passed since the Vanderbilt professor Gustavus W. Dyer first began to incorporate these census figures into his lectures, and generations of historians have repeated them. Still, the moonlight-and-magnolia aura remains draped, like charming but parasitic moss, on too many Southern family trees.

The white genealogist tracing Southern roots possibly has more surprises in store. Few expect, but some do find, the chains of slavery on their own non-African ancestors. The American colonists who first brought Negroes to the New World as indentured servants, and then saw the economic advantages of enslaving them, developed other innovations. When colonial leaders attempted to discourage miscegenation by legislating the enslavement of white females who bore part-Negro children, unconscionable masters forced unwary white bonded girls to marry blacks and thereby gained for life the services of the female and all her offspring. The abused law was repealed ultimately, but throughout the antebellum era cases appeared before the courts in which whites were found to be holding other

³³Interview with Angie Garrett, Gainesville, *Ex-Slave Tales & Life Histories/Stories*. The free black who auctioned his sons in front of the local post office was George Wright, a mill owner of Choctaw County, Alabama.

whites in slavery on the pretense that the oppressed one was a light-skinned, slave-born mulatto.³⁴

To a greater degree, white American roots are manacled to slavery through the Indian roots that many families, until recently, tried to forget. A study conducted in northwest Louisiana, focusing on the white families who settled the area prior to 1803, revealed that at the close of the era a startling 23.8 percent of the white population had slave ancestry through one or more Indian lines.³⁵ In all cases, the situation resulted from the enslavement of, impregnation of, and eventually the manumission of Indian females by European settlers under the same circumstances that existed in Afro-American slavery. This is but one of the many facets of the American heritage that social historians and demographers have not yet explored. It reveals one of the many ways in which the genealogist who is scholarly in his methodology and candid with his results can help achieve a better understanding of America's ethnic history.

Popular opinion notwithstanding, the Old South the genealogist encounters was an extremely homogeneous and highly integrated society. Segregation was as unworkable in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries as in the twentieth. The attempts at segregation so commonly known today stem not as much from customs of the slave South as from reactionary experiments of a frightened, perplexed, postwar society in which Jim Crow measures were used to counter the social and political upheaval wrought by the Civil War and Reconstruction. This distinction between attitudes of the antebellum South and those of the postwar South is an important one for genealogists to remember since it affected the attitudes, activities, and associates of their ancestors.

Integrated housing, integrated churches and, occasionally, integrated schools were a fact of life in the Old South, one that produced equally integrated records for the benefit of the modern genealogist. Laws against intermarriage often did not exist. The legendary "one drop rule" is nothing but a myth. The peculiar institution of slavery did not force all blacks onto one side of a social, economic, and political line and array all whites on the other, while the Native American stood unconcerned and

³⁴Carter G. Woodson, "The Beginnings of Miscegenation of the Whites and Blacks," *Journal of Negro History* 3 (October 1918): 340.

³⁵Mills, "Social and Family Patterns," 238.

uninvolved at a remote distance. The Old South was, literally, the proverbial melting pot, a *soupe de jour* in which all social elements on hand from the Old World were mixed with the leftovers from the new. On this basis, the genealogist may well expect difficulty in separating the cream of Europe from the blood of the Native American or the hearty broth of the transplanted black.

"Ethnic awareness" and "respect for ethnic identity" are emotional catchwords, even political battle flags, in twentieth-century America. Their accompanying emphasis on the contributions of minority groups is a positive good, especially for the genealogist. It has paved the way for open admission, and frank study, of any and all ancestral elements that a genealogist may find. It has expanded the availability of records heretofore believed to be of limited interest to members of certain groups only. The genealogist now has at his disposal unprecedented resources and revolutionary computer technology to expedite his utilization of these masses of data. It is time, as well, that outmoded ethnic misconceptions be set aside and the genealogist approach these resources with the open inquisitiveness and judicious discretion that produces success in scholarship.

