

Truth Hurts, Then Heals: Coming to the Table

By Lucia King

Be prepared to face the truth if you undertake genealogical research," said Peter Wingate, one of two instructors for a genealogy workshop I attended called "Tracing Your Family Tree to the Slave Era."

Peter was correct. Until 2013, I was unaware that either side of my family owned slaves. I remember the first time I read down the list of census schedules online looking for the 1850 and 1860 slave schedules. I wasn't prepared for what I was about to discover.

My parents and grandparents never discussed this aspect of our family history. I knew some of my ancestors' accomplishments. Of the four siblings, I was the most interested in our history. I compiled information on family—birth and death dates and places—for several generations of paternal and maternal lines. However, I never heard about our history pertaining to "the shadow side," the painful aspects. As I sat looking at the 1860 slave schedule, I came face to face with the truth. My ancestors were enslavers. That knowledge set me on a new course of family research and personal healing. That is when I joined Coming to the Table (CTTT), an organization founded by descendants of both

enslavers and the enslaved. Its members are devoted to racial reconciliation by providing a supportive, safe environment for people like me, who want to face history openly and honestly. Coming to the Table is dedicated to helping all who wish to acknowledge and heal wounds from racism rooted in the United States history of slavery.

In joining CTTT I found I was not alone. I learned from others engaged in this search how crucial facing history is to all of us. As CTTT executive director Tom DeWolf states, "The organization is deeply founded in genealogy and how it can be used to heal the wounds from history." Tom knows. He's descended from the largest slave trading family in U.S. history—the DeWolfs of Bristol, Rhode Island. He wrote a book, *Inheriting the Trade*, describing how he and other DeWolf descendants came to terms with their ancestry.¹ As I learned from Tom and from participating in CTTT, reconciling the difficult emotions we face about race is a

1. Thomas Norman De Wolf, *Inheriting the Trade, a Northern Family Confronts its Legacy as the Largest Slave-trading Dynasty in U.S. History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

process that requires acknowledging history, making connections across racial lines, healing wounds, and taking action to make systemic and institutional change to end racial inequality.

Miss Julia & Juanita

I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1948 during the Jim Crow era. Ours was a segregated culture and, like most white southerners in the 1950s and 1960s, I saw and learned segregationist attitudes and behaviors. Miss Julia, my mother's maid who died in 1983, was a foundation in my childhood. As a toddler, I couldn't pronounce Julia: Ju-ju came out instead. The name denoted my affection and love for her and I use the term Miss Julia now to show respect. I began writing about Miss Julia for the first time in 2012 in a poetry class. As I read my poems to classmates, I cringed with shame over the Jim Crow culture I had been raised in and had been afraid to speak about openly.

While writing about Miss Julia, the story of my family's connection with a woman named

Juanita began unfolding. It started with my 87-year-old mother who lives in a retirement community in Memphis. After she had a series of falls, my two sisters, who also live in Memphis, insisted that she hire an aide. My mother hired Juanita. By coincidence my mother discovered that she and Juanita's mother shared the same maiden name and that our ancestors shared the same place of birth—Senatobia, Mississippi. When my mother asked Juanita about her mother's ancestry, Juanita talked with her uncle and told my mother that her mother's family was named after the people who owned them as slaves.

A few months later during a long distance phone call, I asked my mother the outcome of her inquiry. My mother told Juanita that our family hadn't owned slaves. I wondered if my mother was ashamed of our history too and if what she said to Juanita was true. Since I was already subscribing to *Ancestry.com*, I began digging into this possible aspect of our history. My older sister and her husband felt I should



Sharon Morgan leading a genealogy breakout session from her workshop at the CTTT May 2014 National Gathering (Tony Scott, photographer).

not explore further and they thought I may find something that could be hurtful to Juanita. But I didn't stop. Curious about the possibility that we might be connected, I was also aware of how important Miss Julia's love had been in my life. I felt that finding out about my history seemed to be the place to start to somehow honor Miss Julia, to respect Juanita's history, and to come to terms with my emotions about my past.

I began by searching the 1860 slave schedule for De Soto County, Mississippi, where my second great-grandfather, S.D. Wooten, had lived. From my tentative, non-methodical first search, I found two Wootens in the county who were slave owners—S.B. and Joseph Wooten. S.B. was close enough to S.D.—handwritten documents were often misspelled, I thought. I flew to Memphis to share what I found with my mother, my sisters, and Juanita. As it turned out I later found a third listing for a S.D. Wooten who owned six slaves.

Little did I know how those first tentative steps would open a window into my past that

démanded an astonishing level of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual energy. My visceral first reaction: I didn't want to be associated with a racist past that had now become personal. That was juxtaposed to being perturbed at my family's hesitancy to even look at this part of our history. I wanted them to be interested like I was, but that was my agenda. I learned from Shelley Murphy, D.M., the African American genealogist who co-led our Shenandoah Valley CTTT Chapter's genealogy workshop: "When you do this genealogy work, even if it's your family members, white or black, you plant a seed and move on if they don't want to work with you. People are in different places when dealing with this research, and you need to recognize that."

I wish Shelley and Peter had been there when I began doing my research. Only later did I realize the duality of "we versus they." I heralded the non-racist me versus my racist ancestors. My accusatory attitude didn't help me or my family deal with difficult emotions. My real problem: I did not want to examine my attitudes about



CTTT May 2014 National Gathering attendees, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va. (Shelly Barker, photographer).

the past. Blaming and being angry at others let me avoid examining my feelings. But, I needed to honor my love for Miss Julia, and I was tired of the persistent separation I feel when talking with African Americans. In my angst I turned to writing, meditation, and *Coming to the Table*.

I gradually discovered I needed to read history and deal with my attitudes about race, realizing it is not a “we-they” situation, but an “us” situation. By distancing myself from my family, I was hiding from my negative emotions, from ingrained racial attitudes and from current cultural conditioning. I revisited a reality: I live in a culture of dualities—black/white, rich/poor, Christian/non-Christian, good/bad, Republican/Democrat, and so on. The path to genuinely embracing our wholeness and interconnectedness is not easy. I discovered compassion for myself, my family, my ancestors, for all of us, black and white.

Healing

In 2014, I attended the National Gathering of CTTT, heard others’ stories and participated in breakout sessions. One entitled “Just Like Family” gathered those with a parent who was a domestic worker during Jim Crow with those of us who were raised by an African American domestic and we discussed our experiences. Another entitled “Calling Our Ancestors to the Table,” led by Sharon Morgan, founder of the website <http://www.ourblackancestry.com>, focused on the challenges of researching African American ancestors.

As Sharon said to me, “Too many people, black and white, have pushed this history under the rug. My parents and grandparents didn’t talk about our enslaved ancestors. They protected me. But, we have to look, to uncover that layer of hurt, and understand why we are where we are today. Hopefully when we do that, we will arrive at a place of compassion for our ancestors, black and white. We will see that they were trapped in a system, but we don’t have to continue to be trapped today in emotions of shame, anger, or guilt. We learn more about who we are by discovering who came before us, what

they endured, and what they accomplished. It gives a framework for understanding our lives and opens the possibility of moving forward and becoming agents of change for ourselves, and hopefully others.”

Sharon knows: She gets over 10,000 visits to her website every month. Her Facebook group has over 25,000 members. Sharon estimates that 95 percent of the people subscribing to the *OurBlackAncestry* website are African American. She encourages whites to join, too. She wants collaborators who can contribute slave names to the database, information they find in family wills and other records. I did. My husband shared a copy of a will dated 1856 that included names of 37 slaves his great-great-grandfather bequeathed to his wife and children in South Carolina. Sharon then shared that information with her network.

Juanita and I shared information, too. She gave me her grandfather’s name, birth date, and birth place. Using census data, I found her second great-grandfather, Pinkney Wooten, who was born in 1874. In family files, I discovered a 1963 account of a trip my mother’s cousin took looking for the old Wooten homestead. While searching, he stopped to ask directions from a very old black man sitting on his porch who told him it was a mile down the road. This man was 90 years old. His name was P.K. Wooten. He was Juanita’s second great-grandfather!

I started this genealogy search ashamed of my Jim Crow past, then shocked and dismayed by my naiveté about my slaveholding ancestors. Writing and talking about Miss Julia, first looking for her history in the census, helped me honor her and mourn her loss in a constructive way. Her love guided my steps and she is the reason I began to pursue the truth about this history. When I told my sisters what I discovered about our linkage to Juanita, they apologized to her for what our ancestors did to her ancestors. Juanita received our apologies with grace and compassion. I was glad my sisters took that step and grateful to Juanita for her compassion.

Why did I not realize that my ancestors had been enslavers? I let my shame keep me ignorant

and complacent. I have begun reading U.S. and Southern history, to me a vital part of genealogy research, to confront our past. Make no mistake, our past and my personal ancestral history saddens me. In doing this research and working with others in CTTT who are doing the same, I reach beyond my ethnicity in a deeper way to make new friends within and across racial lines. I examine and *unlearn* how my cultural upbringing trained me to separate black and white rather than to see our common humanity. I look now for the “content of our character.” I read history and stories from both black and white perspectives. This research is not just about *my* history—it belongs to all of us. I look forward to the next CTTT National Gathering where there is an environment of honesty, reconciliation, and healing.

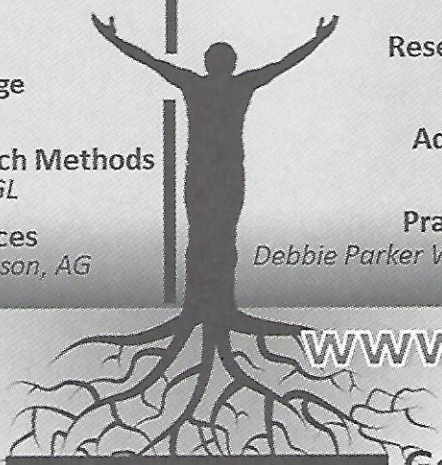
Coming to the Table will host the next national gathering on 9–12 June 2016 at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. For more information, go to <http://www.comingtothetable.org>. I look forward to

being with others again, to uncovering fresh dimensions of awareness. With all its challenges, facing the truth has opened a whole new world.



Lucia King currently serves as co-chair of the Shenandoah Valley Chapter of Coming to the Table. Ms. King was employed for most of her career as a science and technology policy analyst for the U.S. Congress and several executive branch agencies and she now resides with her husband in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

<p>26 June-1 July 2016 Courses Registration opens February 10, 2016</p> <p>Pennsylvania: Research in the Keystone State <i>Sharon MacInnes, Ph.D., Michael Lacopo, D.V.M</i></p> <p>Master the Art of Genealogical Documentation <i>Thomas W. Jones, Ph.D., CG, CGL, FASG</i></p> <p>Fundamentals of Forensic Genealogy <i>Cathi Desmarais, CG, Kelvin Meyers, Michael Ramage, J.D., CG</i></p> <p>Family Archiving: Heirlooms in the Digital Age <i>Denise May Levenick</i></p> <p>Women and Children First: Research Methods <i>Judy G. Russell, J.D., CG, CGL</i></p> <p>German Research Resources <i>Warren Bittner, CG, Baerbel Johnson, AG</i></p>	<p>17-22 July 2016 for below; Registration opens March 2</p> <p>Diving Deeper into New England: Advanced Strategies for Success <i>D. Joshua Taylor, MA, MLS</i></p> <p>Intermediate Genealogy: Tools for Digging Deeper <i>Paula Stuart-Warren, CG, FUGA</i></p> <p>From Confusion to Conclusion: How to Write Proof Arguments <i>Harold Henderson, CG, Kimberly Powell</i></p> <p>Researching in Italian Records <i>Melanie D. Holtz, CG</i></p> <p>Advanced Genetic Genealogy <i>CeCe Moore</i></p> <p>Practical Genetic Genealogy <i>Debbie Parker Wayne, CG, CGL, Blaine Bettinger, Ph.D., J.D.</i></p>
--	---



www.GRIPitt.org



Genealogical Research Institute of Pittsburgh
P.O. Box 44, Wexford, PA 15090
Email: info@GRIPitt.org

Twelve One-week Courses Offered Two Separate Weeks!

Get a **GRIP** on your Roots in Pittsburgh!