

Raising the Dead: Coming to the Table

By Sharon Leslie Morgan

In the last issue of NGS Magazine, Lucia King described the transformative impact of discovering that her ancestors enslaved people in "Genealogy as a Tool for Healing." Sharon Leslie Morgan is on the other side of that equation: her ancestors were enslaved.

I did not realize until I was an adult that my ancestors were enslaved. I was born in Chicago in a time greatly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement that was sparked by the lynching of Emmett Till in 1954 and the refusal of Rosa Parks in 1955 to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, where my father was born. My family never talked about slavery, and although we read about the Civil War and Emancipation in school books, I never connected the concept to me personally.

The discovery of my ancestors' plight led me to devote a lifetime uncovering a family saga that features countless sorrowful stories involving more than two dozen people who were enslaved, subjected to numerous instances of rape and miscegenation, and suffered at least one lynching. This culmination of fact incited soul-searing anger that I have yet to fully resolve. Like Rosa Parks, I am unwilling to give up my seat on the bus of history, and like Lucia King, I am committed to confronting this history with openness and honesty and finding a way to heal.

My Ancestors

My genealogical research for the past forty years has concentrated on three principal lines: Gavin, Nicholson, and Leslie. On my maternal side, I have had great success in researching Gavin. I can trace these immigrants from Ross Cromarty, Scotland, to their arrival in Virginia, circa 1695. Charles Gavin I (1670-1721) was likely an indentured servant en route from Barbados who married his sponsor's daughter and put down roots in the Carolinas. One branch of his descendants pressed onward to Noxubee County, Mississippi, in the early 1800s. This is where my grandfather, Louis Nicholson (1894-1974), was born. His mother, Ella Gavin (1870-1939), was one of seventeen children born to an enslaved woman named Bettie Warfe (1840-1917) and a white man named Robert Gavin (1838-1896). Robert was the nephew of Bettie's owner. She was transported from Virginia to Mississippi as a nine-year-old child by a man named John Warf.

For Nicholson, I can also go back into the far reaches of history. Like Charles Gavin, George Nicholson (1708-1780) migrated from Scotland and was first found in Virginia. He was the father of Josiah Nicholson (1750-1833), who died in Clarke County, Alabama. Josiah's son, Isaac Nicholson (1793-1861) ended up in Noxubee County, Mississippi. Based on the wills of Josiah and Isaac, I believe they owned at least one (and

maybe more) of my ancestors: Samuel Nicholson (1812-after 1870). Samuel's sons -- Count, Wash, Alfred, and Virgil -- were sold to Captain Joel Barnett. Upon Barnett's death in 1851, they were put on the auction block and sold to "the widow Johnson." Wash was the grandfather of my grandfather, Louis Nicholson.

Research on my paternal Leslie line from Lowndes County, Alabama, has been less rewarding. I began with an 1880 census schedule and worked from there. My great-grandfather, Tom Leslie (1845-1939) was enumerated with his wife Rhody, three small children, and his sixty-year-old mother-in-law, Easter Reeves. Tom's 1939 death certificate named his mother as Harriet Morass. Further research suggested that Harriet likely came from the plantation of Dr. John Marrast, one of the largest slaveholders in Lowndes County. Tom, Rhody, and Easter likely emerged from the neighboring plantation of Green Rives.

The origins of the white people associated with my family tree are comparatively easy to research. They had surnames and left a wealth of public records that include census schedules, slave schedules; tax, land, and marriage records; wills and deeds.

Searching my African American ancestors is not so easy. Before 1870, they had no surnames or other public documents of their own. They are found only after arduous research in records of those who owned them. When I was lucky, I hit gold mines of data that helped in reconstructing their genesis and the trail of tears that illustrated their lives.

The first time I saw a slave schedule was circa 1979. I was looking for Tom Leslie's father. I knew he must be a white man because of Tom's physical appearance and his oft-repeated claim that he was "Portuguese and Indian." There were only two Leslies' in the 1866 Alabama State Census schedules: one was black, named Tom and the other was white, named James. Bingo! James E. Leslie's blacksmith shop was located in the town square of Hayneville, the county seat of Lowndes. He was in the right place at the right time with the right name and the right

occupation to be related. I can easily envision how James traveled around local plantations, making horseshoes and spending nights enjoying the ministrations of women in slave cabins on Dr. Marrast's plantation.

As I was engrossed in the records displayed on the microfilm reader at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the white woman sitting next to me exclaimed with joy. She had found her family! I cringed. Before my eyes was an 1850 slave schedule that showed James E. Leslie as the owner of one female slave,



Tom and Rhoda Leslie.

black, age thirty, and no name. Was this my great-grandfather's mother Harriet? If so, where was her five-year-old son who was born in 1845?

When I shared the slave schedule with my father, he admitted with great reticence that his grandparents — the people who raised him after his mother died when he was six years old — came out of slavery together. I was in shock to realize that the woman I met as a baby girl in Chicago (Rhody Leslie) had suffered a relentless stream of indignities. I was three, she was 101. My father went on to tell me the story of how the wife of Rhody's father (a white man) had thrown baby Rhody against a wall in an attempt to kill her. She lived. The husband was forced to sell her and her mother Easter.

My Story

As painful as these stories may be, they helped fill in the blanks for a person who, like everyone else interested in genealogy, longs to know: Who am I? Where did I come from? What were my ancestors like? What have I inherited from my

predecessors? What does that mean in our world today?

African people suffered an incredible breach of humanity. For the half million kidnapped and brought to America, every normal human connection was sundered. Slave ships plying the waves of the Atlantic Ocean transported them to a land in which they were more than strangers — their connections to family, culture, and almost everything they knew were obliterated. During slavery marriage was not allowed. Children were snatched from their parents. Mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters were sold to disparate locations. When they were able to have surnames after Emancipation, they chose names that are hard to track. The names generally lead back to the people who owned them rather than to the families to which they rightfully belonged. In essence, they were reduced to fodder in an economic system that abused their bodies to build the wealth of the country we now hold dear. Therein lies the



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multitude of challenges that confront today's African American genealogists.

The historical precedence that undergirded the system of slavery in America produced an ongoing race problem. Conceived within a sequence of events that established white supremacy as the worldwide standard for human relations, it gained irrevocable root in America in 1640 when African John Punch was sentenced by the Virginia Governor's Council to a lifetime of enslavement. Ever after, African Americans have been dehumanized and treated with disdain.

White people commonly want to lay the past to rest by dismissing slavery as something that happened in the distant past and has no relevance to our lives today. They ask "Why can't you just get over it?" That is easy to say, but almost impossible to do. The specter of slavery haunts America today in the form of disparities in health, wealth, and life expectancy, rates of which are all significantly lower for blacks than whites. Black children are murdering each other in cities across the land. Rogue policemen, who instinctively view black people as a threat, shoot to kill without pause. I am reminded of these things everyday as I continue my genealogical research.

In 2007, I founded Our Black Ancestry as a way to share what I know about genealogy with others (<http://www.OurBlackAncestry.com/>). Today, we are a group with more than ten thousand visitors per month to our website and more than 26,000 people in our Facebook community. Along with sharing information about how to do family research, I promote the idea that "honoring our ancestors empowers our future."

Like Lucia King, I have found a salvation of sorts in my involvement with Coming to the Table (<http://www.comingtothetable.org/>) along with training in Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) (<http://www.emu.edu.cjp.star/>), both of which are promulgated by Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. What I have learned is that there is a "cycle of violence" that repeats itself as long as we let it. That, combined with

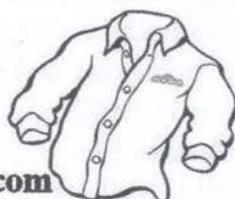
the DNA science of epigenetics, which proves that trauma from the past affects the genes of living descendants, justifies my convictions about contemporary social conditions.

Coming to the Table challenges us to acknowledge history, make connections across racial lines, and take action to heal the wounds. Inspired by that call, I partnered with Tom DeWolf, a descendant of the largest slave trading dynasty in American history, to co-author a book based on our respective genealogies that shows a way forward from our debilitating inheritance.

As genealogists, we must raise the dead in order to save the living. I am putting out a call for family historians — black and white — to share the information they uncover in their family research. African Americans need wills, deeds, and other documents that name their ancestors. We need to stand up and claim the past so we can move forward and bequeath a better world to our descendants. 🌳

Sharon Leslie Morgan is the founder of Our Black Ancestry, a website devoted to African American genealogy. She is a multicultural marketing expert who worked for many years as a consultant to Fortune 100 companies. A Chicago native, she has lived abroad in the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. She is the co-author with Thomas Norman DeWolf of Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade (Beacon Press, 2012).

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