

*You're gonna need somebody on your bond...*  
~ Blind Willie Johnson

By Lauren Carroll Davis ([author website](#))

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When our local library asked Tom DeWolf to present the film, *Traces of the Trade* it changed the trajectory of my life. Tom's willingness to travel back in time to "meet" ancestors who were involved with the slave trade really inspired me. I had recently discovered my family's roots in antebellum North Carolina, but it hadn't occurred to me to travel — both physically and spiritually — to meet them. A few weeks later, I was driving across the country for the first time.

I took Sharon Morgan and Tom DeWolf's book, *Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade*, on the journey. Their stories were a comfort. I felt Sharon and Tom would understand why a West Coast white girl like me would need to make a Sankofa journey like this.

I had discovered that my fourth great grandmother was born a "Free Person of Color" in the Blue Ridge Mountains but died "White" in northern Missouri. She crossed the color line by moving north sometime between 1830 and 1840. My family never mentioned this forgotten — or hidden — aspect of our heritage. It fascinated me, but I was nervous about talking to strangers (as in *white* strangers) in the South about my mixed-race ancestors. Was I opening up back chapters some people wanted to keep closed?

In North Carolina I visited the genealogical library in the old Wilkes County courthouse. A young woman researcher, who was white, volunteered to help me. Cautiously, I started asking questions about the "whitest" side of the family. That went okay, so then I asked about the mixed-race side, focusing on their native ancestry first. The researcher said her family had

Cherokee blood “way back there” too. (Phew!) Then we found a record of my fifth great grandmother selling pigs, hams, a still, and bushels of corn to one of the volunteer’s ancestors! They had been neighbors on a creek just a few miles upstream from where we were sitting. We looked at each other in amazement. By the time we uncovered that this grandmother was not legally married to the father of her children, that didn’t seem to faze my new friend. She dismissed it with, “That happened a lot in the hills.”

I decided to chance it and showed her the document I’d already found that explained why. These great grandparents had been indicted in 1809 for “fornication and adultery”. Under North Carolina’s “Black Codes”, what the law considered a “White” man couldn’t marry a “Colored” woman. They were heavily fined for having six children and living together in an “unlawfull manner”. The intimate details of their life had been dragged into court by a jealous neighbor. Fortunately, it was not the same neighbor that my cohort was related to. We both breathed a sigh of relief.

A few months later, a distant cousin came across the original bond insuring that our fifth great grandmother would appear at the “Superior Court of Laws” to answer the fornication charges. Along with her signature was the witness mark of her “good” neighbor — the ancestor of the woman who helped me that day in the courthouse. This white man vouched for his colored neighbor when she needed it. She *had* somebody on her bond.

I’m still in awe how we descendants of these two people were brought together over two hundred years later ... and grateful that Sharon and Tom’s experiences motivated me to take this healing journey.