

SK Newsletter 14.1. July 2012.

Dear friends,

Thank you all for your wonderful and varied comments to SKN 14. This Newsletter is numbered 14.1 because it is not about the people who shaped southern Namibian and northern Cape history but is about the ancestors of Michelle Obama, First Lady in the White House in the United States of America. I was struck by the many similarities. In both instances the questions of forbidden liaisons across the colour line, denial and secrecy play a central role. Both examples point to events that took place five and six generations ago and how those on either side of the big social divide had and still feel shame and hide specific family connections because they feel pain or embarrassment. It so happens that the Kleinschmidt–Uirab hidden story appeared the same month the New York Times covered the Obama story. In the USA and in Colonial Africa these stories repeat themselves countless times but remain as yet hidden. I have little doubt that we are in the early stages of an avalanche of more and more such revelations. If told they hold the prospect to acknowledgement, to acceptance, forgiveness and reconciliation. In the NYT article Professor Hochschild is quoted as saying, “This is a whole new social arena. We don’t have an etiquette for this. We don’t have social norms”. Yet!

The Michelle Obama story hinges on slave owners sexual relations with their, mostly female, slaves. Whether such liaisons were consensual or rape cannot be established, but neither can be ruled out. Mrs. George, in the NYT article says, “I am appalled at slavery. I don’t know how that could have even gone on in a Christian nation. I know that times were different then. But the idea that one of our ancestors raped a slave...” In my research, so far, we are dealing with unions formally sanctioned by the institutions of church or magistrate. The union between Hinrich and Zara Schmelen, as I will write about later, is a unique ‘third’ form of union. Extra-marital consensual relations or rapes may be revealed in time, always complicated by and further hidden, because of the social hierarchy of racial subjugation.

Thank you Jeremy Sugerman, my son-in-law in San Francisco, who brought the NYT articles to my attention.

Regards,

Horst.

352 Comments on FACEBOOK, TWITTER, GOOGLE+

Meet Your Cousin, the First Lady: A Family Story, Long Hidden



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Joan Tribble at the grave of her great-great-grandfather, Henry W. Shields, a Georgia slave owner who is also an ancestor of Michelle Obama. [More Photos »](#)

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

Published: June 16,

REX, Ga. — Joan Tribble held tightly to her cane as she ventured into the overgrown cemetery where her people were buried. There lay the pioneers who once populated north Georgia's rugged frontier, where striving white men planted corn and cotton, fought for the Confederacy and owned slaves.



[The First Lady's Family: Your Questions Answered](#)



The First Family, Redefined



Michelle Obama's Ancestors Richard Perry/The New York Times

The settlers interred here were mostly forgotten over the decades as their progeny scattered across the South, embracing unassuming lives. But one line of her family took another path, heading north on a tumultuous, winding journey that ultimately led to the White House.

The white men and women buried here are the forebears of Mrs. Tribble, a retired bookkeeper who delights in her two grandchildren and her Sunday church mornings. They are also ancestors of [Michelle Obama](#), the first lady.

The discovery of this unexpected family tie between the nation's most prominent black woman and a white, silver-haired grandmother from the Atlanta suburbs underscores the entangled histories and racial intermingling that continue to bind countless American families more than 140 years after the [Civil War](#).

The link was established through more than two years of research into Mrs. Obama's roots, which included DNA tests of white and black relatives. Like many African-Americans, Mrs. Obama was aware that she had white ancestry, but knew little more.

Now, for the first time, the white forebears who have remained

hidden in the first lady's family tree can be identified. And her blood ties are not only to the dead. She has an entire constellation of white distant cousins who live in Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Texas and beyond, who in turn are only now learning of their kinship to her.

Those relatives include professionals and blue-collar workers, a retired construction worker, an accountant, a dietitian and an insurance claims adjuster, among others, who never imagined they had black relatives. Most had no idea that their ancestors owned slaves.

Many of them, like Mrs. Tribble, 69, are still grappling with their wrenching connection to the White House. "You really don't like to face this kind of thing," said Mrs. Tribble, whose ancestors owned the first lady's great-great-great-grandmother.

Some of Mrs. Tribble's relatives have declined to discuss the matter beyond the closed doors of their homes, fearful that they might be vilified as racists or forced to publicly atone for their forebears.

Mrs. Tribble has decided to openly accept her history and her new extended family.

"I can't really change anything," said Mrs. Tribble, who would like to meet Mrs. Obama one day. "But I can be open-minded to people and accept them and hope they'll accept me."

Complicated Histories

The bloodlines of Mrs. Obama and Mrs. Tribble extend back to a 200-acre farm that was not far from here. One of their common ancestors was Henry Wells Shields, Mrs. Tribble's great-great-grandfather. He was a farmer and a family man who grew cotton, Indian corn and sweet potatoes. He owned Mrs. Obama's maternal great-great-great-grandmother, Melvinia Shields, who was about 8 years old when she arrived on his farm sometime

around 1852.

The DNA tests and research indicate that one of his sons, Charles Marion Shields, is the likely father of Melvinia's son Dolphus, who was born around 1860. Dolphus T. Shields was the first lady's maternal great-great-grandfather. His identity and that of his mother, Melvinia, were [first reported](#) in an article in The New York Times in 2009, which also indicated that he must have had a white father.

Melvinia was a teenager, perhaps around 15, when she gave birth to her biracial son. Charles was about 20.

Such forbidden liaisons across the racial divide inevitably bring to mind the story of Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings. Mrs. Obama's ancestors, however, lived in a world far removed from the elegance of Jefferson's Monticello, his 5,000-acre mountain estate with 200 slaves. They were much more typical of the ordinary people who became entangled in America's entrenched system of servitude.

No Easy Life

In Clayton County, Ga., where the Shields family lived, only about a third of the heads of household owned human property, and masters typically labored alongside their slaves. Charles was a man of modest means — he would ultimately become a teacher — whose parents were only a generation or so removed from illiteracy.

Melvinia was not a privileged house slave like Sally. She was illiterate and no stranger to laboring in the fields. She had more biracial children after the Civil War, giving some of the white Shieldses hope that her relationship with Charles was consensual.

“To me, it's an obvious love story that was hard for the South to accept back then,” said Aliene Shields, a descendant who lives in

South Carolina.

People who knew Melvinia said she never discussed what happened between them, whether she was raped or treated with affection, whether she was loved and loved in return. Somewhere along the way, she decided to keep the truth about her son's heritage to herself.

Related

[Sunday Book Review: 'American Tapestry' by Rachel L. Swarns \(June 17, 2012\)](#)

Ruth Wheeler Applin, who knew Melvinia and Dolphus, suspected that Melvinia had been raped by her master. But Mrs. Applin, who married Melvinia's grandson and lived with her for several years in the 1930s, never asked that sensitive question. Melvinia died in 1938.

"You know," Mrs. Applin said in an interview in 2010, "she might not have wanted nobody to know." Mrs. Applin died this year at 92.

For many members of that first generation to emerge from bondage, the experience of slavery was so shameful and painful that they rarely spoke of it. This willful forgetting pervaded several branches of the first lady's family tree, passed along like an inheritance from one generation to the next.

Mrs. Obama declined to comment on the findings about her roots, as did her mother and brother. But over and over, the black members of her extended family said their parents, grandparents and other relatives did not discuss slavery or the origins of the family's white ancestry.

Nor was the topic much discussed within Mrs. Obama's immediate family. She and her brother, Craig Robinson, watched the mini-series "Roots," about Alex Haley's family's experience in slavery. During summers, the family would visit relatives who lived in a South Carolina town dotted with old rice plantations.

But they never discussed how those plantations might be connected to their personal history.

Nomenee Robinson, Mrs. Obama's paternal uncle, said he found himself stymied whenever he tried to delve into the past. His line of the family also has white ancestry, relatives say.

"All of these elderly people in my family, they would say, 'Boy, I don't know anything about slavery time,' " he said. "And I kept thinking, 'You mean your mother or grandmother didn't tell you anything about it?' What I think is that they blocked it out."

Contemporary America emerged from that multiracial stew, a nation peopled by the heirs of that agonizing time who struggled and strived with precious little knowledge of their own origins. By 1890, census takers counted 1.1 million Americans of mixed ancestry.

All four of Mrs. Obama's grandparents had multiracial forebears. There were Irish immigrants who nurtured their dreams in a new land and free African-Americans who savored liberty long before the Civil War. Some were classified as mulatto by the census, while others claimed Cherokee ancestry.

There were even tantalizing hints of a link to a Jewish family with ties to the Charleston, S.C., synagogue that became the birthplace of the American Jewish Reform Movement in the 19th century.

Mrs. Obama's ancestors ultimately moved north, with some arriving in Illinois as early as the 1860s. Others settled in Maryland, Michigan and Ohio.

Dolphus's daughter, Pearl Lewis, moved to Cleveland. Pearl's granddaughter, Jewell Barclay, still remembers Dolphus, a stern, fair-skinned man with narrow lips and an aquiline nose. There were whispers in the family that he was half white.

“Slave time, you know how the white men used to fool with them black women, that’s what I heard,” Mrs. Barclay said.

Mrs. Barclay said she would like to meet white members of her family. Mrs. Tribble and Sherry George, a great-granddaughter of Charles Marion Shields, said they would also like to meet their black extended family.

Others remain reluctant. “I don’t think there’s going to be a Kumbaya moment here,” said one of Charles Shields’s great-grandchildren, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, fearful that the ancestral ties to slavery might besmirch the family name.

DNA Testing

The discovery comes as an increasing number of Americans, black and white, confront their own family histories, taking advantage of widespread access to DNA testing and online genealogical records. Jennifer L. Hochschild, a professor of African and African-American studies at Harvard who has studied the impact of DNA testing on racial identity, said this was uncharted territory.

“This is a whole new social arena,” Professor Hochschild said. “We don’t have an etiquette for this. We don’t have social norms.”

“More or less every white person knows that slave owners raped slaves,” she continued. “But my great-grandfather? People don’t know what they feel. They don’t know what they’re supposed to feel. I think it’s really hard.”

Mrs. George, a hospital respiratory therapy manager, struggled to describe her reaction to the revelations. Her grandfather McClellan Charles Shields and Dolphus Shields were half brothers. They both lived in Birmingham, where Mrs. George grew up.

“I’m appalled at slavery,” said Mrs. George, 61. “I don’t know how that could have even gone on in a Christian nation. I know that times were different then. But the idea that one of our ancestors raped a slave. ... ”

She trailed off for a moment, considering the awful possibility.

“I would like to know the answer, but I would not like to know that my great-grandfather was a rapist,” she said. “I would like to know in my brain that they were nice to her and her children. It would be easier to live with that.”

Mrs. Tribble, who began researching her roots before Mrs. Obama became the first lady, said she was shocked to learn that her ancestors owned slaves.

“My family, well, they were just your most basic people who never had a lot,” Mrs. Tribble said. “I never imagined that they owned slaves.”

Her mother, Lottie Bell Shields, was an orphan who picked cotton as a girl and was passed from relative to relative in a family that could ill afford an extra mouth to feed. She never got past the seventh grade.

Yet even before she took the DNA test, Mrs. Tribble had a strong feeling that her family and the first lady’s family were related. She still remembers the moment when she laid eyes on an old black-and-white photograph of Dolphus Shields. She was sitting at her kitchen table in her house in the Atlanta suburbs when she saw him staring out of the pages of *The New York Times*: this stern, bespectacled African-American man who happened to share her mother’s last name.

Mrs. Tribble never had any doubts about her family’s ethnic background. Yet when she stared at the photograph that day, she said she felt something entirely unexpected: a strong stirring of recognition.

“I just thought, ‘Well, he looks like somebody who could be in my family,’ ” she said.

This article is adapted from “American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama” by Rachel L. Swarns, to be published by Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

The New York Times Friday, June 22, 2012

The First Family: A New Glimpse of Michelle Obama’s White Ancestors



Henry Wells Shields is the man with the white beard. His wife, Christian Patterson Shields, sits to his right. Charles Marion Shields is the third man standing from the right. Courtesy of Jarrod Shields, in honor of Melvin Shields.

We knew that the [Sunday](#) article about Mrs. Obama’s white ancestors would stir considerable interest so we decided to invite readers to pose questions and make comments. We never imagined that one of those readers would provide us with the first glimpse of two key figures in the first lady’s family tree: The white man who

owned Mrs. Obama's great-great-great grandmother, Melvinia Shields, and his son, who most likely fathered Melvinia's child.

The photograph of those two men and their relatives, which is believed to have been taken in Georgia sometime around 1884, is being published here for the first time.

The slaveowner was Henry Wells Shields, who inherited Melvinia when his father-in-law died in 1852. DNA testing and research indicate that he and his wife, Christian Patterson Shields, are the first lady's great-great-great-great grandparents.

Their son, Charles Marion Shields, worked as a farmer and a teacher. DNA testing and research point to him as the father of Melvinia's son, Dolphus Shields. That would make Charles Mrs. Obama's great-great-great grandfather.

The photo came from Jarrod Shields, a science teacher at a community college in Alabama who also happens to be the great-great-great grandson of Henry Wells Shields. He was getting ready to mow the lawn when his wife, Tonya, got a call about the article and called him to come inside. Jarrod had grown up knowing that his family had once owned slaves and always wondered what happened to their descendants. His wife sent me an e-mail this week, outlining her husband's connection to the Shields family, along with the photograph.

When I spoke to Jarrod by phone, he told me that he hoped that he might be able to meet his extended black family, he said of the descendants of the slaves his ancestors had owned. "I always really wanted to say I was sorry. I also wanted to let them know that we're glad that you're part of our family, however it came about." —

Rachel L. Swarns

MRS. OBAMA'S PARTICIPATION

Did Mrs. Obama concede to this research?

Mrs. Obama has a policy of not participating in book projects so unfortunately I didn't get a chance to interview her. I did interview members of her family – an aunt, an uncle, a great-aunt, a great-uncle, some cousins and some more distant relatives. I also briefed the first lady's staff periodically on my research and gave Mrs. Obama

and her aides copies of the book prior to publication. Americans are fascinated by their first ladies and there have been books written about Laura Bush, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Eleanor Roosevelt, just to name a few. I suspect that there will be many more books to come about Mrs. Obama, given her historic role as the first African American first lady.

FAMILY TREE

It would be helpful if a family tree diagram were provided.



Yes, there is a detailed family tree in my book, “American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama.” The family tree in the enhanced ebook is interactive and includes photos and historical documents along with the names of the first lady’s ancestors.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

Who decided to pursue the DNA and connection between this lady in Georgia and Mrs. Obama?

I suspected that the white father of Dolphus Shields, Mrs. Obama’s great-great grandfather, was probably a member of the Georgia family who owned him. So I tracked down as many descendants of that family – the white Shields family -- as I could. In the end, three agreed to be tested. Many Americans are doing this now, using DNA testing to find out more about their origins and their families. It allows people to take their research a step further than your grandfather could.

OTHER COUSINS

I wonder if they're interested in meeting their not so famous black cousins?



Both Sherry George and Joan Tribble, who are the descendants of the man who owned Mrs. Obama's ancestors, would like to meet Mrs. Obama as well as their black relatives who are not famous.

THE MOTEN SIDE

Can you tell us more about the Moten side of the family?

The Motens are on Mrs. Obama's paternal line. Her great-grandmother was Phoebe Moten, who was born in Villa Ridge, Ill. in 1879. Her great-great-grandparents were Nelson and Mary Moten, who arrived in southern Illinois sometime during the 1860s. The spelling of their names changed at times in the census; sometimes they appeared as Morten; other times as Moulton. But Mrs. Obama's relatives say that they spelled it Moten.

DNA TESTING

If you don't have close male relatives, what can you find out from female DNA alone? How do you go about getting tested?



These days, you can find out a good deal about your family line without having close male relatives. Companies like [FamilyTreeDNA](#)

and [23andMe](#), among others, do such testing.

JEWISH CONNECTION

I'd be interested in reading about Michelle Obama's Jewish ancestors.

Mrs. Obama's paternal great-grandmother was Rosella Cohen of Georgetown, S.C., and her origins remain something of a mystery. We can't say with certitude who Rosella's parents were, but some historical documents suggest that they were Caesar and Tira Cohen, who were born into slavery in Georgetown. The surname Cohen suggests a possible link to the white Cohen family, a very prominent Jewish family in Georgetown in the early 1800s. Moises Cohen, who emigrated from London to South Carolina around 1750, was the first chief rabbi of Charleston's Congregation of Beth Elohim, the birthplace of Reform Judaism in the United States. His two sons, Abraham and Solomon, moved to Georgetown and became deeply involved in its civic and political life. Abraham, who fought in the Revolutionary War and served as the town's postmaster, met with George Washington when the American president visited Georgetown in 1791. Solomon was a director of the Bank of the State of South Carolina and his son, Solomon Jr., was elected to the South Carolina State Senate in 1831. Several Cohens were also slave owners. Most of the Cohens eventually left Georgetown for Charleston, but before they did, it is possible that a member of this prominent Jewish family owned Caesar or his parents.

AFRICAN ANCESTRY

Were any DNA tests conducted on the white Shields family to determine whether any of them have African ancestry?



None of the white Shields descendants who were tested had African origins. You're absolutely right that there's a long history of "passing" in this country.

EUROPEAN ANCESTORS

Out of curiosity, what percentage of Mrs. Obama's ancestors are European?

Growing numbers of Americans are coming to terms with these issues as they learn more about their origins through genealogy and DNA testing. It's not always easy for people to find out that their ancestors were slaveholders. These can be difficult things to confront. But it is our history. As for Mrs. Obama, I don't know what percentage of her ancestors are European. But I do know that all four of her grandparents had multiracial roots: In addition to African ancestry, some had Irish American ancestry; some claimed Cherokee ancestry and others were simply described as mixed-race or mulatto without any specific reference to their European roots.

ISSUE OF CONSENT

Why does this article give so much credence to the idea that a slave woman could have had a consensual relationship with her owner?

Slave masters, their sons and overseers often preyed on their female slaves. Georgia instituted the death penalty for any man of color who raped a white woman. But white men who raped black women were not considered criminals; such assaults were not deemed crimes under Georgia's criminal code. No one knows what happened to Melvinia, but given the frequency of sexual assaults against enslaved women at the time, it is quite likely that she was raped. However, the descendants of Melvinia's slave owners – and some of her own descendants – hope that there was some affection between Melvinia and the white man who fathered her child. Melvinia continued to have biracial children as a free woman, after slavery was over. She also continued to live close to the Shields family and to the man who fathered her son years after slavery ended. We will never know whether there was any affection between the two of them, or whether she stayed because she was brutalized and too terrified to leave or because she was dependent on his financial support.