

Colonial Williamsburg

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COVER: Colonial Williamsburg theatrical interpreter Valarie Gray-Holmes is among the costumed staff pictured by Tom Green in this issue's photo essay, "About Faces," which begins on page 32.



Of Surnames, Escutcheons, and DNA

The Fine Art of Drawing the Family Tree

by Mary Miley Theobald

GENEALOGY WAS NO HOBBY for colonial Virginians. It was serious business. Everything—social position, political influence, economic opportunities—depended upon kin. No one filled in family tree charts or published family pedigrees, but everyone knew who was related to whom, and how. In large measure, family ties determined one's future. Pride in one's heritage was reflected in the use of surnames as masculine first names, hence Randolph Jefferson, Mann Page, and Beverley Randolph.

Ben Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson all had a keen interest in family history. While in England before the Revolutionary War, Franklin and his son William took rides in the country to visit distant relatives and see the old family lands at Ecton, which they considered buying. They took pains to clean off ancestors' headstones at St. Mary Magdalene Church, and paid the rector to gather more genealogy information for them.

Jefferson kept careful records of births, deaths, and marriages in the family Bible. In his autobiography he repeated the oral tradition that his paternal ancestors were Welsh, and mentioned coming across his surname in early records of the Virginia colony—for instance, a Jefferson sat in the first House of Burgesses in 1619. At age twenty-eight, curiosity about an alleged family coat of arms drove him to dig for the truth. In a letter to his agent in England, he wrote:

One farther favor and I am done, to search the herald's office for the arms of my family. I have what I have been told were the family arms, but on what authority I know not. It is possible there may be none. If so, I would with your assistance become a purchaser, having Stern's word for it that a coat of arms may be purchased as cheap as any other coat.

Historians have concluded that the search yielded nothing. Jefferson never displayed a coat of arms, choosing instead to design a seal with his initials and an inscription.

To men like Jefferson and Franklin, genealogy was as interesting as it was unimportant. Long a proponent of meritocracy, Jefferson had little patience with those who would claim superiority based on lineage. "An industrious farmer occupies a more dignified place . . . than a lazy loungeur, valuing himself on his family, too proud to work," he wrote. His mother, Jane Randolph, on the other hand, took great pride in her family line. "They trace their pedigree far back in England and Scotland," Jefferson wrote, "to which let every one ascribe the faith and merit he chooses."

During the early decades of the republic, Jefferson's point of view prevailed. Genealogical pretension seemed un-American. Mark Twain, whose roots were in Virginia, said as much in his autobiography. He, too, had a mother who was proud of her supposed aristocratic origins, yet Jane Lampton Clemens would never "refer in any way to her gilded ancestry when

any person not a member of the family was present, for she had good American sense." Twain's mother believed that the English Lambtons—the spelling had changed—were the feudal lords of Lambton Castle, later the earls of Durham, who had lived on the family estates ever since the Norman Conquest. Twain pokes gentle fun at one of his pompous Lampton cousins, "the colonel," whose first words to a stranger were always

some reference to the 'head of our line,' flung off with a painful casualness that . . . compelled inquiry, of course; it was intended to compel it. Then followed the whole disastrous history of how the Lambton heir came to this country a hundred and fifty years or so ago . . . while at home in England he was given up as dead and his titles and estates turned over to his younger brother. . . . And the colonel always spoke with studied and courtly deference of the claimant of his day—a second cousin of his—and referred to him with entire seriousness as 'the earl.'

GENEALOGY AS WE KNOW IT did not begin until after the Civil War, when certain long-established American families began compiling and publishing their histories. The earliest known Virginia example, the fifty-page Thomas Watkins of Chickahominy booklet, dates to 1852, and a few from New England appeared in the 1840s, but these are merely the vanguard for legions of postwar genealogies that followed.

"Southerners began to realize during the last quarter of the 1800s that they had lost a huge amount of history during the Civil War, due to fires and wartime destruction," Robert Clay said. A retired archivist from the Library of Virginia, he worked with professional and amateur genealogists throughout his career. "That's when people started trying to reconstitute the history of the area and the history of families. That's when enthusiasm for local history took off, when the *William and Mary Quarterly* started, and when Virginia's state government started preserving early records."

The timing also coincided with the 1876 Centennial, a national birthday party focused on Philadelphia but celebrated across the country. The patriotic surge, strengthened by widespread hostility toward immigrants, fed the belief that the only "real Americans" were those whose ancestors had arrived during colonial times.

Lineage societies proliferated: the Sons of the Revolution in 1883, the Sons of the American Revolution in 1889, and the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1890, when the Sons rejected female members. Then came the National Society of Colonial Dames, the Colonial Dames of America, the General Society of Colonial Wars, the Children of the American Revolution, the Society of Mayflower Descendants, the Sons and Daughters of the Signers of the Declaration, and dozens more, most now defunct. The membership require-

ment common to them all was the ability to prove direct descent from an individual in the honored group. Would-be members sharpened their pencils and set to work on the family tree.

Genealogy became a popular ladies pastime. "Some few," Clay said, "did very scholarly research; most dabbled." For many, the work had but one purpose—an invitation to one of the prestigious lineage societies—but some women pursued ancestors for the thrill of the hunt, the love of history, or simple curiosity about their husbands' or their own origins.

Joining the growing ranks of the genealogy movement were the northern nouveaux riches, self-made industrialists and politicians eager to be accepted by the established elite. To prove their credentials, some hired a new kind of historical researcher called a genealogist to unlock the secrets of their family's past and bind the results in gold-embossed leather. Most of these hired guns were conscientious; some were charlatans. Gustav Anjou was the most notorious.

For a fee of \$9,000 and up—an amount equivalent to ten or twenty times that much today—Anjou provided a pedigree guaranteed to please the aspir-

ing socialite. By the time his research was complete, the client's family tree sprouted a thicket of noble branches. An accomplished fraud—he had served time in a Swedish prison for forgery—Anjou padded his genealogies with documents from European parishes that he invented, church records that didn't exist, counterfeit documents he created himself, and mixed in some genuine material. Between 1900 and 1941, he made a fortune churning out some 200 fraudulent family histories, among them the Grant and Dent families for the descendants of President and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant. Three of his fakes were published at the time. Reproduced by photocopyers today, all 200 plague genealogists.

UNTIL THE Bicentennial, genealogy was primarily for the elite. Like the 1876 Centennial, the 1976 birthday bash rekindled Americans' interest in their country's history and in their own family histories. But the Bicentennial had something the Centennial did not—Alex Haley's *Roots*. Published in 1976, the book was a best-seller, but it was the television miniseries the next year that reached millions. Suddenly Americans everywhere wanted to search for their roots, too.

Nothing illustrates this break with elitism better than the formation in 1976 of the Black Sheep Society of Genealogists. With the motto "A baaad ancestor is good to find," the Black Sheep affirmed the relevance of *all* one's ancestors, including the horse thieves, traitors, felons, and bigamists.

The *Roots* phenomenon brought thousands of black Americans into the genealogy fold. Haley demonstrated that having enslaved ancestors was not automatically a bar to discovering one's family history. Historical records once thought insignificant were rediscovered and made more accessible, and ways to use traditional "white" documents for "black" research proliferated. Mary Beth McKimmy of Williamsburg, who teaches how-to courses in genealogy, notes, for example, that records from the Freedman's Bank, which had branches all over the South during Reconstruction, often lead African American genealogists to information about an ancestor's immediate family and former master, which in turn points to relevant white records like inventories, wills, deeds of sale, and other mines of information.

White Americans, too, fell under the Haley spell,

as did large numbers of descendants of relatively recent immigrants. McKimmy calls it the third-generation syndrome: "The original immigrants live in America, but culturally they are still from the old country. Their children try hard to be Americans; they speak only English and reject old-country traditions. But the third generation is comfortably American, and these are the people who are beginning to search out their family history."

In 1990, Ken Burns's Civil War epic on the Public Broadcasting System sent millions of black and white Americans scurrying from television set to library to learn about family members who fought for the Blue or the

Grey. During that decade, the Internet revolutionized research and communication, making genealogy the second-most-popular Web subject after pornography. The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints started bringing its huge repository of genealogical information to the Internet in 1999. As Jamestown's four hundredth anniversary approaches, professional genealogists predict another surge as Americans become inspired to learn about ancestors who lived and died during Virginia's formative years.

The most exciting new tool since the Internet is the deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA, test. It shows an individual's genetic blueprint, which can be examined for similarities and differences with others. First available to the public in 2000, DNA testing augments traditional genealogy research. Megan Smolenyak, a professional genealogist in Williamsburg who uses DNA analysis as well as traditional research, said, "It can save years of research by steering your future paper trail efforts and

preventing you from wasting time chasing false leads.”

At present there are two primary genetic methods of learning about connections to others, living or deceased. The Y chromosome test that follows the paternal line—the father’s family—is the most common. Using cells swabbed from the inside cheek, the test looks at the DNA of males, examining up to twenty-five chromosomal markers to determine a range in which the Most Recent Common Ancestor, or MRCA, lived. A match of all twenty-five markers means there is a 90 percent chance that the two men being tested have an MRCA who lived within the past fifteen generations. “With this test, you can learn if you and a person with the same last name share common roots,” says Smolenyak. Hundreds of family organizations have begun collecting DNA samples from men and recording the results to develop a database. Databases become increasingly useful the larger they grow. “As results for popular surnames accumulate, clusters emerge: descendants of Ancestor A in this group, descendants of Ancestor B in another group, and so forth. A new person joins the study and can quickly learn which group he matches, or that he matches none, saving immeasurable research time and effort.” For an updated list of surnames currently collecting DNA results, see www.duerinck.com/surname.html.

The bad news about Y chromosome testing is that the genetic material in the nucleus does not last, meaning the procedure will not work on historic human remains. That is why archaeologists working at Jamestown are using another test on the remains of the male colonist they found buried inside the 1607 James Fort site. The mitochondrial DNA—mtDNA—test traces ancestors through the maternal line by examining mitochondria outside the cell nucleus in the cytoplasm. This sort of DNA is relatively stable and

preserves well in bones. Dr. William Kelso, director of archaeology for the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, believes they have found the burial site of Captain Bartholomew Gosnold, the prime mover of the colonization of Virginia who died at Jamestown in 1607. Trying to match a sample of mtDNA from the skeletal remains to a living descendent from Gosnold’s maternal line of the family should verify or disprove the identity.

The DNAPrint test, more than two years old, gives a simple and objective description of the ancestral origins of a person, in terms of major population groups. Test results would indicate the percentages of an individual’s groups, for instance, 70 percent European, 25 percent Native American, and 5 percent African. Smolenyak said the test will become more sophisticated. “But this and the other tests already give you an appreciation of how interconnected we all are. Geneticists say that we’re all fiftieth cousins or closer, and DNA testing helps you understand, and even observe, the overlaps in our ancestry.” The cost of these tests has been falling rapidly, from hundreds of dollars to less than two hundred today. For current prices and information on how to be tested, contact www.familytreedna.com.

From his desk at the Library of Virginia, Clay has seen interest in genealogy expand during the past few decades to a larger segment of the population. “But it still attracts the same kind of people, the kind who wonder, Where did I come from, and why am I who I am?” Today’s genealogists, he said, are as likely to be male as female, more likely to be retired, and less likely to be naïve enough to think they’re going to find noble ancestors. One thing they are *not* is snobbish. “No one who does honest genealogy research could possibly be a snob when they discover how appalling some of the people in their family tree are.” ▲