The Talk

Branches on Obama's family tree

Genealogist Megan Smolenyak, who traced President Barack Obama's roots to Moneygall, Ireland, says it's not unusual for people with an ancestor who arrived early in North America to have plenty of cousins they can document — including a few famous ones. Brad Pitt is Obama's ninth cousin, she says. Other distant cousins of President Obama's:

Warren Buffett
George H.W. Bush
George W. Bush
Dick Cheney
Rush Limbaugh
Sarah Palin
Brad Pitt
Harry Truman

Source: Genealogist Megan Smolenyak, author of a new book, "Hey, America, Your Roots Are Showing."

Star cousin? It's relatively common

A genealogist explains we all are likely linked to celebrities, albeit distantly

By Katherine Skiba

WASHINGTON — The news stories invariably raise eyebrows. Barack Obama is related to Brad Pitt. Madonna and Ellen DeGeneres are cousins. John Edwards and Britney Spears are cousins, too.

How can it be?

Genealogist Megan Smolenyak explains it in a new book, which features chapters on Barack and Michelle Obama. If a person goes back 10 generations, he or she will have 1,024 direct ancestors, she says.

The result is that each of us is bound to have "millions of cousins — and a few of them are going to be famous," Smolenyak says.

The genealogist, who traced Obama's roots to the Emerald Isle, which the president visited amid fanfare last May, notes that socioeconomic and cultural factors contribute to the mind-boggling blood ties.

In her book, "Hey, America, Your Roots Are Showing," due out in February, Smolenyak notes that 200 years ago, few people lived in cities and transportation options were scant. Absent an upheaval — such as war or famine — people probably descended from those who had sided in the area for generations, and knowingly or unknowingly, they married cousins. The gene pool shrank even more from the old-world Irish custom of kinship, she said.

Smolenyak, from Hadsonfield, N.J., says colonial times in North America are a "sweet spot" for famous cousins. How's that?

Two factors come into play. The period is distant enough for "genealogical math" to work its magic but recent enough for a paper trail.

So much-touted cousins almost always involve a share of colonial American ancestry or a French-Canadian forebear, she says.

If your family tree has a single branch of early European "arrivers" to North America, your chances of having loads of documentable cousins, including a few famous ones, are high, Smolenyak says.

But celebrity cousins are rarely more closely related than seventh cousins and most often are eighth, ninth or 10th cousins, she says.

One chapter of her book is called "There's No One as Irish as Barack O'Bama," which borrow the name of a song by Ireland's Corrigan Brothers. It's more than a wee exaggeration, however, because, Smolenyak says, Obama is one-thirty-second Irish.

She names Pullmoth Kearney — Obama's maternal great-great-great-grandfather — as the president's most recent connection to the old sod, and describes the detective work she used in 2007 to track down facts about Kearney, who left Ireland for New York in 1850. A breakthrough: a tombstone in Ohio giving Moneygall as the birthplace of Joseph Kearney. Pullmoth Kearney's father, another immigrant. An Anglican priest in Ireland and a specialist in Irish genealogy helped with her research.

Smolenyak traveled to Moneygall for Obama's celebrated visit to Moneygall, when he visited aGuinness, lamented the lost apostrophe in his surname and met with Henry Healy, an eighth cousin.

The genealogist, who traced Michelle Obama's heritage back four or five generations and gave her the findings in 2009, also features the first lady's roots in two chapters of the book.

Almost three years ago, Smolenyak began looking into the first lady's heritage for a story written by New York Times reporters. She kept digging deeper for months after the initial story appeared in part because of the significance of Michelle Obama, her mother and daughters being the first descendants of slaves to live in the White House as members of a first family.

By now the saga of Melvina, a young, illiterate slave girl from South Carolina once valued at $475, has become fairly well-known because of Smolenyak's findings. Melvina is Michelle Obama's great-great-great-grandmother.

In the book, the genealogist shines the light on branches of the first lady's family tree that were discovered about 260 miles from the White House in Virginia's Henry and Pittsylvania counties. One-quarter of Mrs. Obama's ancestry can be traced to the two counties along the border with North Carolina.

The genealogist also discloses that Mrs. Obama's Virginia ancestors included slaves set free before Emancipation. One relative by marriage was Marjorie Jumper, who in 1946 was arrested in Roosnake for refusing to give up her seat on a bus when a white man boarded and she was asked to move. Smolenyak found it.

It was almost a decade before Rosa Parks' arrest in Montgomery, Ala., in similar instance set her on the path of becoming a civil rights icon.

The Jumpers, by the way, have some Native American blood, meaning the first lady does, the genealogist said.

President Obama, with a father born in Kenya, a mother born in Kansas, a half-sister born in Indonesia, and bloodlines running to Ireland, England and Germany, has well-documented, far-flung roots.

Consider Mrs. Obama's heritage, and Smolenyak says Obama daughters Malia and Sasha bring to mind the song, "We Are the World."

"These two girls are related to almost every ethnicity possible," she says, "especially if you include relatives by marriage."