



# The Baobab Tree

Quarterly Journal of the African American Genealogical Society of Northern California, Inc.      Founded 1996

## Diary of a Disenfranchised Chickasaw

Bettie Love Ligon was born on March 01, 1865 in Burneyville, Indian Territory. As a child of mixed parentage, she suffered discrimination from her father's people. Her great-grandson's fictional account of her life pays homage to the struggles of an oppressed people. See page 8.

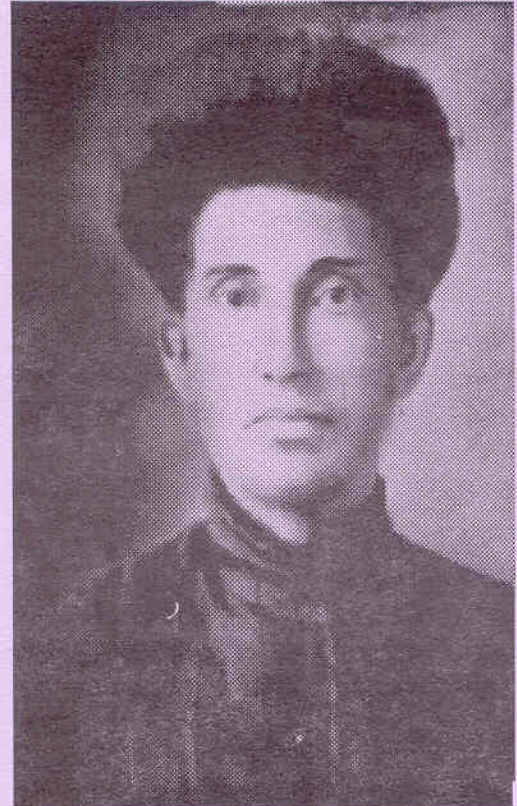


Figure 1: Bettie LIGON nee LOVE  
March 01, 1865; Burneyville, Indian Territory

### Table of Contents

Message from the President .....	2
Society News .....	3
"Rooted in History" Family History Conference - Lenora Gobert .....	4
The History Detectives - Loretta Henry .....	5
My Family Health Portait .....	6
The Bathrobe Genealogist - Lisa B. Lee.....	7
Diary of an Disenfranchised Chickasaw - Terry Ligon.....	8
Before Kwanzaa There Was ... - Loretta Henry.....	14
Surnames Found in This Issue.....	15
"Rooted in History" - VOLUNTEERS NEEDED.....	16

Make plans to attend the  
"Rooted in History"  
family history conference,  
February 26, 2005.  
See page 4.



# President's Message

## THE YEAR IN REVIEW



I cannot believe another year is almost gone.

The year started out with the membership voting to revise the organization's bylaws. AAGSNC

Board member and 2nd Vice President, M. Howard Edwards began work to further revise our bylaws. One revision was to change the election process to more involve the members of the AAGSNC in the Board of Directors election process. You will hear more about this.

We had some great programs for our general meetings this year. The topics included: Funeral and Church Records, Tracing Native American Roots, Organizing Your Research, Heritage Albums, How To Prepare For A Research Trip, and World War I Records. Good stuff. And, of course, when we returned from our 2-month hiatus in September we shared research stories during the ever-

popular Braggin' and Lyin' meeting.

In February, AAGSNC also participated with the Church of Latter-day Saints Oakland, California's branch in the "Finding Your Roots" conference. Our society provided speakers for some of the workshops and volunteers for other tasks. In October, many of our members attended the West Coast Summit on African American Genealogy in San Diego.

Community outreach continued this year with AAGSNC represented at the Black Family Gathering at Stanford University in May, at Juneteenth Festivities in Berkeley, and during Labor Day weekend at Oakland's Art & Soul Festival. We plan to expand our outreach in 2005 by holding some of our general meetings at area sites other than the Dimond Library.

The Publishing Committee produced a *Beginner's Guide to Genealogy* which is available for purchase by anyone interested at a cost of \$10.00. AND, we

held our first-ever cruise in October after the annual West Coast Summit, featuring genealogy workshops. It was a grand success and we hope to repeat this event.

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED** - The Society thanks Upperton Hurts for volunteering to take over the duties of Membership Chair. And thank you, Howard, for filling in temporarily 'between Chairs,' so to speak. We have other openings in our officer ranks as one person has moved out of state, and another had job scheduling conflicts.

Therefore, we are looking for volunteers for Recording Secretary and Corresponding Secretary.

These are not onerous jobs but do require you to attend the Executive Committee meetings, which are usually held after the general meetings on the 3rd Saturday of the month.

*Melvyn Gillette*

AAGSNC President - 200-2005  
president@aagsnc.org

The African American Genealogical Society of Northern California, Inc. (AAGSNC) was founded in Oakland, CA in 1996, under the leadership of Kathryn Burgess Smith.

**AAGSNC FOUNDING MEMBERS:**

Kathryn Burgess Smith	Jeanette Braxton Secret
Ranie G. Smith	Rayford Bullock
Electra Kimble Price	Charles T. Brown
Charlesetta Braggs-Ford	

**OBJECTIVES** of the AAGSNC:

- To promote interest in genealogy, biography and related history among African Americans.
- To supplement and enrich the education of African Americans through the collection, preservation and maintenance of African American genealogical materials.
- To promote the accumulation and preservation of African American genealogical and related historical materials and make such materials available to all.
- To promote and maintain ethical standards in genealogical research and publications.

**BOARD of DIRECTORS:**

Lisa B. Lee, Chairman	lee@aagsnc.org
M. Howard Edwards	vicepresident@aagsnc.org
Thelma Elbert	elbert@aagsnc.org
George Geder	geder@aagsnc.org
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Historians:	Thelma Elbert	elbert@aagsnc.org
	and Joyce Summerville-McDaniel	historian@aagsnc.org

**MEETINGS**

Meetings are held the **third Saturday** of every month, at **noon**, at the Oakland Public Library, Dimond branch, 3565 Fruitvale Ave, Oakland, CA. No meetings during the Summer hiatus (July and August). Guests are always welcome to attend these open meetings. The AAGSNC Executive Committee meets immediately following the regular membership meetings (from 4:00 pm - 6:00 pm). Guests may attend these meetings.

**JOURNAL**

The *Baobab Tree* is published quarterly (in March, June, September, and December) by the AAGSNC and is provided free to all members. Additional copies and past issues may be purchased for \$10.00 per copy.

- Membership categories are Regular \$25, Youth (16 and younger) \$15, Family \$35, Organization \$45, Life Membership - Individual \$200, Life Membership - Family \$300.
- The AAGSNC accepts no responsibility for statements of fact or opinion made by contributors. Deadlines for submission of material for publication in *The Baobab Tree* are: February 5 for the March issue, May 6 for the June issue, August 6 for the September issue, and November 5 for the December issue.
- Correspondence on editorial matters, submission requests, or permission to reprint articles may be obtained, at no cost, by written request to the editor (journal@aagsnc.org)

*This entire document was created on an Apple G5 using Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, and MicroSoft Excel. Thanks to Kay Smith and Lenora Gobert for proofreading. Macs rule!!*  
- Ed.



# AAGSNC - SOCIETY NEWS

## Upcoming Meetings

AAGSNC meetings are held on the **third Saturday** of the month at the Dimond Branch of the Oakland Public Library. Meetings consist of a Beginning Genealogy Class, which starts at noon, followed by our regular meeting, which starts at 1:30 pm. Members and guests are always welcome to attend.

### • December 18th

#### **Pot Luck and "Black Elephant Sale"**

Bring a dish of food to share, your checkbook, and come prepared to have fun. Everyone is invited to bring their "gently used items" to sell during the Black Elephant Sale. All proceeds will go to the AAGSNC. Don't leave your thinking caps at home you will need them for the Triva Contest.

## Research Assistance

### • Mentor Program

All AAGSNC members living in northern California may request a mentor — an experienced AAGSNC researcher who can help him/her to understand genealogy fundamentals and to develop research plan. The mentor will help you to begin, explain how to use libraries, archives and online resources. This service is offered free of charge to all AAGSNC members.

### • Limited Assistance

A number of qualified AAGSNC members are available to assist you in more intermediate research areas. They will help you develop a plan and do some of the research for you. The cost is \$30.00 per hour and is available to the public.

### • Complete Research

Several of our members have had many years of experience and fully comply with the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG) Code of Ethics and are willing to do the research for you. The cost is \$40.00 per hour and is available to the public.

For more information about the Research Assistance Options, please send an email message to: [research@aagsnc.org](mailto:research@aagsnc.org) or call us at (877) 884-2843.

## DECEMBER BIRTHDAYS

- Julia A. Baker
- Janet Keys Benson
- Cornell A. Celestine
- Cheryl Elliott
- Melvyn L. Gillette
- Samuel Golden
- Rose M. Lee
- Carol Neal
- Jackie D. Stewart
- Gloria Wells

## SPECIAL JANUARY ISSUE

A special issue of *The Baobab Tree* will be published in January of 2005. The Board has made a number of changes and would like to share the information with our members. Features to be included are: the revised bylaws, 2004 financial statement, the mission statement, Officers and Board Members and the Program for 2005. In addition, the AAGSNC's Surname Directory will accompany this issue.

## JOURNAL SUBMISSION POLICY

• *The Baobab Tree* is a publication of the African American Genealogical Society of Northern California. It accepts articles and manuscripts focusing on African ancestry, genealogy, history, and culture; subjects in the field of genealogy; documents dealing with African American families (ancestry charts, family group sheets, personal family papers); other related African ancestry research and notices of up-coming events and conferences. All submitted materials will be evaluated for accuracy and may be edited for clarity and grammar by the Editorial Board. Both original and previously published works may be submitted. Author(s) will retain copyright and other rights. Submit materials by email to: [journal@aagsnc.org](mailto:journal@aagsnc.org)

## Notes of Interest

### •The Second Bay Area African American Health Summit

AAGSNC will sponsor a booth at this event which will be held January 28-29, 2005 at the Oakland Marriot Convention Center, 1001 Broadway from 8:00a.m. to 5:30p.m. The Summit is the Bay Area's largest FREE public nutrition and exercise health fair for African Americans and will be opened to the public.

## New Members in 2004

We'd like to thank the following people who joined the AAGSNC in 2004:

- Arthur Blackwell
- Monica Hill Blakely
- Elbert Bullock
- William Churchill
- Rosemary Clemmons
- Geraldine DeBerry
- Cheryl & George Elliott
- Michelle Fisher
- Jimm and Teri Green
- Michelle Hammad-Crowell
- Myrtle Hartfield
- Archie & Debbie Herndon
- Dolores Hill-Newman
- Webb Jackson
- Cleveland and Matha Jones
- Norma LaBat
- Arthur Mayo
- Rhonda Moore
- Geraldine & Ted Mungin
- Fannie Murray
- Mary Ogilvie
- Jamersina Preston
- Cavin Sim
- Debra Smith
- William Smith
- Jamie Walker Harris
- Gloria Watts
- Gloria Wells
- LaVetta & Rondia White

**REMINDER:** All AAGSNC members may request a FREE mentor to assist them in their research. To request a mentor, either send an email to [membership1@aagsnc.org](mailto:membership1@aagsnc.org) or call the AAGSNC message line (877) 884-2843.



## “ROOTED IN HISTORY” AAGSNC’S FAMILY HISTORY CONFERENCE

We will be presenting another family history conference on **Saturday, the 26th of February, 2005**. This is very exciting for our organization because it builds on the successes and learning of past conferences which will make this event a wonderful learning experience for new and experienced family researchers.

Some of you may remember one of our conferences in 2000 at the YWCA in Oakland. Tony Burroughs, author of *Black Roots, A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree* was our keynote speaker. We've held several conferences over the years, some in support and assistance of Wells Fargo Bank. Turns out Wells Fargo is also deeply

a booth at the Juneteenth Celebration in Berkeley. It was a wonderful day. AAGSNC's Board President, Lisa Lee was roaming around and came back excitedly telling me that Wells Fargo was at Juneteenth and they were giving out compact disks entitled "How to Find Your Family History." This disk was developed by Wells Fargo's Chief Historian, Dr. Andy Anderson. Well, you can imagine how excited both Lisa and I were to discover this kind of connection with our society!

Later, I was thinking about a corporation that I could approach for funding and other assistance for *Rooted in History* Conference and connection of African Americans, Blacks, Negroes (you know what I mean) with

**Love of Liberty” The African American Soldier, 1866-1919.** How interesting and what a resource! So, bottom line is... Wells Fargo is going to help us in a major way to make our conference a huge success and we thank them very much. You'll be hearing more about what they're doing in later communications.

Our *Rooted In History* Family History Conference for 2005 is being held at the beautiful Golden Gate Club at the Presidio in San Francisco. We chose this venue because we want the society to have an event that is closer to our members in SF as all of our other activities are usually held in the East Bay. We also needed a on the grounds! And, finally, the view is magnificent.



# THE HISTORY DETECTIVES

A GENEALOGIST'S "NEW BEST FRIEND"

- BY LORETTA HENRY, EDITOR

Some of the most popular programs on American television are reality-based shows. People love to hear "The Donald" say, "You're fired." We delight in watching contestants gag on worms and sleep with scorpions. We are so thankful as we watch others suffering in relationships with people who are more obnoxious, overbearing, self-centered and arrogance than the people we know.

If you like watching reality programs and have an interest in genealogy, you will enjoy *The History Detectives*. This PBS show solves the historical mysteries of real people. They use genealogical investigative techniques and modern technologies to find the truth about local folklore, objects, family legends and heirlooms. Unlike shows on the History Channel, its focus is not on the event but on the people involved. Who they were, why they did what they did and connects the object to a living person.

The researchers use the same resources and invest the same amount of time and energy solving each mystery. Objects and problems are sent in by regular people.

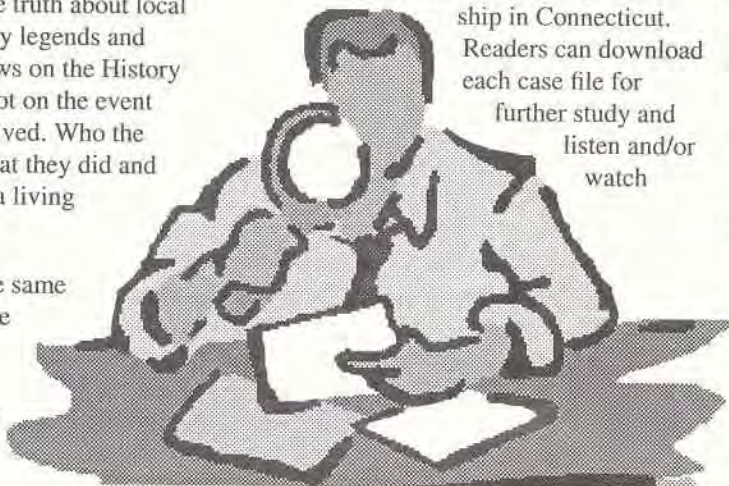
The four investigators are: Wes Cowan, auctioneer; Gwen Wright, architectural advisor; Elyse Luray, appraiser; and T. J. Kufu Zuberi, professor of Sociology. Many of the solutions are beyond the scope of most genealogists, as most researchers do not have access to a large production staff, experts and an operating budget to assist them. However, following the solution of each problem, one of the investigators provides the audience with tips to solve similar problems using the resources available to the average person.

The *History Detectives* website, found at [www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/index.html), is very easy to navigate and offers hints that can be useful to the average family historian.

Surfers of the website can browse the case files for the first two seasons. Some of the stories of interest to African Americans include: A golf club used by Hanno Shippen Smith, an African American whose participation led to the cancellation of the 1896 U. S. Open; Charlie Parker's missing saxophone; a baseball field named for John Henry "Pop" Lloyd in 1949; an 1780 muster roll with the name Paul Cuffee, the dummy used by ventriloquist, John Cooper in the early 1900s; an abolitionist's flag; a box of letters from abolitionist, John Brown; the Natchez, Mississippi home of a former slave,

Robert Smith; and a slave ship in Connecticut.

Readers can download each case file for further study and listen and/or watch



supporting evidence, such as music played on Charlie Parker's saxophone.

The *History Detectives* web site contains a game and quiz section which is fun. Respondents can discover which one of the four detectives they resemble in the quiz: *Who Are You?* One can test their Architectural skills to discover the age of a house; A viewer can go through articles found in a trunk buried in the back yard to discover its age. *Trivia Quizzes*, you can answer questions about each of the case studies completed during the first two seasons. The final game, *On the Case*, lets you solve an actual Mystery.

Anyone working with middle and high school students knows it is almost impossible to get them excited about

anything except MTV or BET. The site has two lesson plans that teachers can adapt to fit their needs. One involves visiting an historical site and the other is basics of searching for artifacts found in the attic.

Genealogists may find the Do It Yourself — How-To Guide helpful in solving their own family history dilemmas and overcoming brick walls. One can find assistance in using documents found in an archive. Ideas on preparing and getting the most out of research sessions are given.

Under each topic there is background information and how to do it tools and tips. A case study provides the reader with practical ideas. A printer-friendly checklist of things to do will help you to focus and organize your research. Additional Internet leads are given to help you organize your research.

The Research Topics are:

- **Archives:** How to use them, how to prepare for a visit and how to get the most out of them.
- **Art and Photos:** Provides ideas of how to identify subjects and analyze artwork and photography.
- **Building Background:** is a guide to use construction materials to investigate the history of a building.
- **Military History** helps you to target and use official military records
- **Preservation** shows you how to keep your heirlooms in the best possible condition.
- **Printed Items** is an "how to" on researching documents and personal papers.
- **Tracking People** has tips on locating people both dead and alive
- **Very Old Objects** helps you to evaluate old objects and artifacts.

The new season will begin in January of 2005. In the northern California, *History Detectives* is shown on KQED (San Francisco), KVIE (Sacramento), KTEH (San Jose), and KCSM (San Mateo). For more information see: [www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/index.html).



# My Family Health Portrait

- BY LORETTA HENRY, EDITOR

Genealogists want to know who we are and from hence we came. We spent hours gathering dates, locations, and occupations to fill in a picture of our family. But the portrait is not complete without a knowledge of the illnesses and diseases that affected your ancestors and close relatives.

It's in the genes. How many times have you heard that statement? She has her father's eyes. He has his mother's cheekbones. He gets his height from granddad. She has grandma's smile. We all know that physical traits such as hair color, dimples, height and the body structure can be passed from parent to child.

Children also inherit illness and diseases from their ancestors. Scientists and medical personal recognize that health risks such as sickle cell anemia, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, cancer, allergies, alcoholism, asthma, blindness, cancer and heart disease run in families. One of the best indicators of how long a person will live is his/her family history. Those whose parents and grandparents lived to their 80s have a better chance of living that long then those of us whose parents and grandparents died in their 50s.

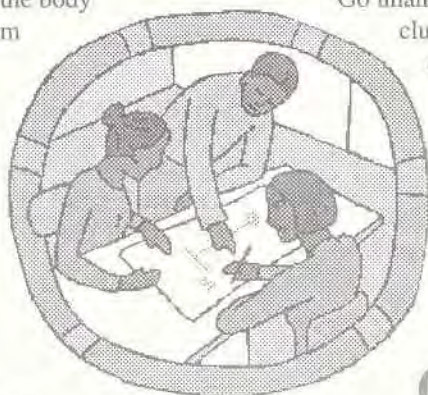
When you visit a new physician, dentist or health care facility, a large portion of the interview questions deal with past illness and diseases of both you and your blood relatives. Health professionals know that your family history is one of the strongest indicators on your predisposition of developing illness. Even though you cannot change your genetic makeup, knowledge of one's family health history can help to reduce the risk of developing serious health problems and increase the length and quality of one's life.

We all knew that the goal of genealogy is collect as much information about a family group as possible to provide as complete a portrait of the family. A quick

search of books and articles describing research techniques used by family historians provide specific details of how to locate and use records from federal and state censuses, slave schedules, health departments, probate courts, land records, military departments, libraries and archives.

But health questions such as: *Why did half of the children lose their eyesight? The census shows she had 8 children but only 3 lived to adulthood. What happened to them? Why did so many people in this family die in their 40s?*

Go unanswered. Beyond clues found on death certificates, there is little information how to collect material on health related topics. Without family health records, the family history is not complete.



One reason it has been difficult for genealogists to obtain information about health related issues has been the lack of medical records. Our ancestors rarely sought medical care. They treated illness and diseases with home remedies and the advice of family and friends. Obtaining the services of a doctor was often the last resort. Doctors did not keep detailed records or preserve them. Government health agencies were non-existent. Even today it is difficult to collect the information. One's medical records are confidential. No one can have access to them except the patient and sometimes, it is even difficult for a patient to obtain his or her own records. In the past, interested genealogists have collected and processed health history information onto handwritten 3 by 5 cards. Recently genealogy computer programs have been revised to allow the user to add fields dealing with physical characteristics, medical history and cause of death into their databases. Geneweaver is a new computer tool for maintaining

family health history. In November of 2004, another tool for family historians collecting family health history became available.

## U.S. Surgeon General's Family History Initiative

To help focus attention on the importance of family health history, U.S. Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona, M.D., M.P.H., in cooperation with other agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched a national public health campaign, called the U.S. Surgeon General's Family History Initiative, to encourage all American families to learn more about their family health history.

## National Family History Day

Surgeon General Carmona declared Thanksgiving 2004 to be the first annual National Family History Day. Thanksgiving is the traditional start of the holiday season for most Americans. Whenever families gather at holidays, celebrations, family reunions, vacations, and funerals, the Surgeon General encourages them to talk about and to write down the health problems that seem to run in their family. Learning about their family's health history may help ensure a longer future together.

## Your Family Health Portrait

Because family health history is such a powerful screening tool, the Surgeon General has created a new computerized tool to help make it fun and easy for anyone to create a sophisticated portrait of his or her family's health.

This new tool, called *My Family Health Portrait*, can be downloaded for free at [www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/download.html](http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/download.html). Software available for Windows 98, ME, 2000, XP and NT systems can be installed on your own computer to collect the data. For Macs or paper users, a PDF version in either English or Spanish may be printed from the same site. Additional copies may be ordered from the website.

The portrait will help you to organize



# The Bathrobe Genealogist - View Microfilms Online -

- By Lisa B. Lee

I LOVE doing research in my underwear. And thanks to computers and the internet, I can accomplish amazing things that would have been impossible as recently as two years ago. This spares me the embarrassment and hassle of being forcibly removed from my local Family History Center (those Mormons really don't have much of a sense of humor when it comes to doing research in ones underwear ... trust me), but more than that, many of the online options now available provide high resolution, scanned images of **original documents** that you can either print on your own printer or download onto your computer.

Geez, I'm going to miss the days of feeding quarter after quarter into a temperamental microfilm printer, wasting copy after copy as I try, in vain, to get a fairly decent copy.

That said, I'm the first one to tell you that in many cases, there's no substitute for going to an archive, library, courthouse, cemetery or any variety of other repositories of information, in order to document the lives of our ancestors. But that's all starting to change. Over the next few issues of *The Baobab Tree*, I'll share some of my favorite information sources of **original documents** available via the internet.

Free, you ask? Not on your life, buddy, but in my humble opinion, the costs for these options are worth their weight in gold. I'll explain, later.

## • ONLINE MICROFILMS

The Maryland State Archives ([www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/homepage/html/refserv.html](http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/homepage/html/refserv.html)) has taken a pretty radical approach to the whole subject of Inter-Library Loans of microfilms — they don't do them anymore. Rather, they scan the entire microfilm reel, place it online, then send you a link with viewing instructions. The film remains online for a minimum of one year and costs \$40 per film.

I can hear you already, \$40??? But think

about it. I can access the entire roll of film from home, in my bathrobe (okay, I was getting cold in my underwear), at 3:00 in the morning. Plus, I have a whole year to get through it, so I can take my time to do a really thorough scan for the information I need.

BUT, in addition, I can print out whatever images I want and I can download them directly onto my computer. No more having to travel to Maryland to view the film, no more rushing to the Family History Library after work, before they close, and best of all, no more fighting with those awful microfilm printers that always seem to run out of paper or toner the moment I sit down in front of them.

Why is this important? Well not only does the Maryland Archives have a pretty amazing collection of information, but this cutting-edge use of technology will certainly be copied by institutions across the country. Remember, these are **ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS**, just as if I'd gone to the archives, viewed the microfilm and printed them out there. And without the cost of travel.

Several months ago, I rented (they call it "purchasing," but since I can use the information for a limited amount of time, I call it "renting") the **Baltimore County Court Certificates of Freedom** (MSA CM 821) from the Maryland Archives Online Microfilms program ([www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/refserv/html/interlibloan.html](http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/refserv/html/interlibloan.html)). This film contains the actual court registers of FPOC (free people of color) who registered with the Baltimore County Court between the years 1806 - 1864. These certificates mention how the person came to be free (born free, manumitted and by whom), a physical description of the person, approximate age, where they had been raised, family relationships, and who was appearing on behalf of the FPOC.

In my opinion, the images are quite

good, they print very well, and rather than stopping with just the records that pertained to my family (the Cooks), I've decided to print out the entire film, all 1051 pages, with the intent to transcribe the information and place the date into a searchable database that I can share with other genealogists ... one of these days.

You can order these microfilms via an email to [ref@mdsa.net](mailto:ref@mdsa.net) or fax to (410) 974-3895. They accept Discover, MC and Visa credit cards and their related debit cards. Online microfilm orders are processed within 2-4 weeks, at which point you'll receive an email with the URL link to the database containing your film.

## ADVANTAGES

- I can access "my" film/s from any computer that has internet access.
- I can use any computer (Mac or PC) and any browser, with excellent results.
- I don't have to scan any desired images onto my computer ... I can just download that image directly onto my hard drive (GIF image).
- The internet never closes. I can access my film/s 24x7.
- Maryland Archives has an amazing collection of desired microfilms that are available for this program.



Lisa B. Lee is a Systems Administrator for a publishing company and has been researching her family's history for over 30 years. In 2004 she self-published her first book, *Skin Deep: My Journey to Discover the "Black"*

and "White" Descendants of William Lee, which chronicles not only the story of her black Canadian ancestors but the research process she underwent in the process — including all the mistakes. You may purchase a copy of *Skin Deep* at her website: [www.TheGeneQueen.com](http://www.TheGeneQueen.com). Ms. Lee may be contacted at: [lee@aagsnc.org](mailto:lee@aagsnc.org).



Excerpts from: **Diary of a Disenfranchised Chickasaw**  
-by Terry Ligon



**Terry Ligon** has a BFA in Photography from The University of San Francisco and a BA in commercial photography from the Academy of Art College in San Francisco. Terry is an avid genealogist and an original member of the African American Genealogical Society of Northern California. He has done

extensive research on his own Black, Chickasaw, and Choctaw family history. Terry is the founder and publisher of the website [www.estellusti.com](http://www.estellusti.com). The website is dedicated to preserving the history and genealogy of the Oklahoma Freedmen.

Terry may be contacted at: [estelusti@aol.com](mailto:estelusti@aol.com)

**Preface**

It has been about fifteen good years I've devoted to researching the history and genealogy of my family. It began with a few names in a conversation with my father telling me little stories about his Indian grandmother that were a little hard to believe. Though as children growing up, my brothers and sisters would hear some things about our mother's family, there was very little discussion of my father's family, so his stories never quite made a believer out of me. I thought he was doing one of those self hatred things and trying to be anything but black!

One day while visiting my father, he brought out two large, LARGE cardboard boxes full of pictures, frames with pictures in them. I love photos! I love photos and Warren G. knew it! He was going through some issues and beginning to deal with his mortality. Knowing I had a background in photography, and LOVED photos, he entrusted me with the family's history in photographs.

Within the boxes were the usual embarrassing black and whites that caught you not at your best. There were the unusable photographs because the person on the other end of the camera couldn't take a good image if his or her life depended on it! You know the ones with the heads cut off, arms and feet missing, out of focus; you get the "picture."

You have to understand I left home at the tender age of 18 to attend college away from home and had never really sat down and asked about the family genealogy prior to this time. Neither parent really discussed the topic, at least in my presence or memory so I had no idea who a lot of these people in these boxes were. Truly an

unfortunate circumstance for me and the family, because for a good twenty years we could have had a conversation on our history, especially because some of the original Dawes enrollees were still alive!

I digress. Contained in these boxes were other pictures I never knew existed! One was especially interesting. In an oval wood frame, with a convex glass was the portrait of a very, very fair skin woman, dressed rather well. In my mind, she appeared for all intents and purposes, to be a "white" woman. Well of course I asked my father about the portrait and who the woman was and he told me it was his Indian grandmother! O K A Y!

This discovery, many years ago, is taking me on a wonderful journey in "American" History, the History of the "Five Civilized Tribes" and especially, the history of my family! These two boxes of photos are helping to piece together a story that has found its way in the Supreme Court records. A history book on the "Chickasaw Freedmen" within the Chickasaw Nation, my father's grandmother's story has remarkably been reported in the newspapers of Indian Territory. The story of my father's Indian grandmother has some how made a journey into the records of the Congressional Record. Her journey and mine have been made more meaningful, because her story needs to be told. For her story is the story of many people who have one of the most unique histories in this country and must be told.

One of the other interesting things to come as a result of researching my paternal ancestors was the discovery of my mother's ancestors in the Choctaw Nation. But that's another story!

The following short story is a fictional

account of my father's grandmother as far as the dialogue and diary goes. But many of the incidences referred to are based on historical "fact." It is my humble attempt to bring light on this interesting and important history with hopes that others will make the journey of "discovering" their own unique history. I've been asked on more than one occasion, what makes me continue the research into the lives of my ancestors and what motivated me to write this story.

First and foremost, it seemed to me, other people had more faith in my abilities as a writer than I do. But more to the point, there are two things that come to mind when I attempt to write and discuss the history of the so called Oklahoma Freedmen.

My father related a story to me that as a child he, his mother and the rest of his siblings had to flee from his father's farm. Apparently my grandfather was abusive towards Callie Mae and after several years of abuse, she took her children at the time and fled to western Oklahoma and sharecropped with her brothers and father Caro CHRISTIAN.

In 1932 word got to Callie that Mitch had died, the circumstances according to my father were suspicious, and upon learning of his death the family decided they could move back to the Ardmore area to live. My father and his older brother, Clayton, decided they would go into Ardmore and claim their father's land that was allotted to him by the Dawes Commission in 1907.

The memory of this event evidently left an indelible mark on my father because when he and his brother brought the matter up with the Country Clerk they were told to, "get on away from here boy, ain't nothing





## The Diary

here belong to you!" I believe it was this incident and the impression it left on my father caused him to seek a piece of Oklahoma land for the rest of his life.

I never understood his "obsession" over purchasing "a few acres" of Oklahoma land until I traveled there with him in 1995 and was captured by the beauty of the rolling green hills and slower pace of the country.

It was this story and his constant and unrelenting urging me to WRITE ABOUT HIS GRANDMOTHER! Throughout our trips and discovery, I never felt I had enough of the story or ability to tell it and give it the voice it so richly deserved. Though my hunches have been correct and I have discovered a wealth of information since that time, I still regret not having written something for him while he was alive.

The reason I couldn't write about these ancestors before is because I did not feel I captured their voices at the time my father was "urging" me to write about our discoveries. Through the years and especially over the past three, I have come to discover so much more material that it saddens me not to be able to pick up the phone and tell the old man of all the wonderful paper trail I've uncovered! So this is my contribution to give a voice for thousands of people who have remained until now, silent on the pages of history in Indian Territory and the Five Civilized Tribes. Along the "Trail of Tears" they traveled, but little is said of their journey. Now it is up to their descendants to give voice to their story and let the next generation hear their words, their victories and their defeats, their fears and their heroism, voices of our ancestors, and in giving them voice I hope to find my own.

So this is my purpose and humble attempt to finally show my father and all the other "freedmen" descendants who may have been told "there ain't nothing here that belong to you!" quite the contrary, we have a significant role in the history and development of America and especially Indian Country.

Terry LIGON  
AAGSNC Member

**March 01, 1873,** It is my eighth birthday today and my daddy came by the house to give me a present of this diary.

He told me it would be a good way for me to deal with the issues I come across being a mixed blood Chickasaw. You see, my father is also a mixed blood Chickasaw. He is half white and half Chickasaw.

Since the end of the war of the rebellion he tells me that the Chickasaws have been trying to get the freedmen to leave the territory, but this year for some reason the tribal council was going to pass a bill that would adopt freedmen like my mother and all my brothers and sisters.

I don't understand it all but he and momma tell me that I am not a freedmen and because of my daddy that make me a Chickasaw Indian. They say people will try to tell me some other thing but they want me to know that I have Chickasaw blood and I am the daughter of a very important person in the tribe. He say he hope the council and the United States government will pass the bill for adoption since it has already been seven or eight years since the Treaty of Fort Smith.

Daddy tell me he was one of the men who signed the treaty and if I'm interested I can see his signature right there on it. Robert H. Love.

**April 03, 1873,** My brother William has learnt how to read and he say he can teach me what he know. One of the way he say he learnt to read is by reading the newspapers. This way he not only read but he can find out what be going on in the nation. William always been a bit different, he think he will grow and be a lawyer or something so he say he must study hard since there are not many schools in the nation for the freedmen children.

Since the colored mens have been trying to get the Chickasaw council to build a school for the colored children he feel he must get as much learning as he can until then. I always like his attitude about things, William want to fight, but he say he will fight with words and not with guns.

**March 01, 1875,** Today is my birthday, I'll be ten years old and have plans to go visit my father down near his farm on the banks of the Red River. Since the end of the War of the Rebellion my daddy has had most of his former slaves working on his farm for wages. Mamma says I shouldn't be going over there but it is my birthday and he told me he had a present for me.

My daddy use to be very important in the Chickasaw Nation. He was a lawman and was one of the first to come west about thirty years ago On the "Trail of Tears." Momma told me she was also on that trail with his brother, my uncle Colonel Ben Love. She says she was a slave and if anybody was shedding some tears, it was the slaves!

**August 03, 1875,** We were up early this morning getting prepared to attend the Emancipation Celebration on the Red River. Momma always gets excited this time of year. It has only been nine years since the Chickasaws emancipated her and the others who were enslaved in the nation. There is much talk about becoming citizens in the Chickasaw Nation because of the legislation passed two years ago.

Most of the freedmen were convinced after the tribal leaders passed the legislation to adopt them as citizens that they would receive the same treatment as the blood citizens. They are still waiting for the United States Congress to pass some legislation that will finally put in effect articles three and four of the 1866 Treaty of Fort Smith.

In our family it is strange how some of us like my brother William are considered to be Freedmen, while because my father was a Chickasaw, I'm considered to be a Chickasaw Indian by all of the folks that live here around Burneyville. It's all confusing to me and one day I hope momma will explain it to me

**September 18, 1875,** I was reading in today's newspaper the "Indian Nation" about a Special United States Commissioner J. P. Shanks came to the territory recently and he was on his way to the Chickasaw Nation to attend our National Council in Tishomingo. The



article said he was coming here to settle the issue of the colored people who were held as slaves in the Chickasaw Nation. When I read to this to momma she was excited about the news because she was born a slave in Alabama and came her with Colonel Benjamin Love, my father's brother.

The paper went on to say that the Chickasaw's had to give up three hundred thousand dollars; and adopt all of the former slaves like my mother as citizens of the tribe. That the part that kind of upset momma. The paper mentioned that if the Chickasaw Nation didn't adopt my momma as a citizen she could be removed with all of the other colored people and send them and their descendant's to some place called the lease district.

I don't think momma is ready to move to some lease district. She has been here in the territory most of her life, this is the only real home she knows. It would also mean that I would have to leave this place that where I was born just because of our color, it don't make much sense if you ask me.

**December 23, 1875,** It is almost Christmas time and this is a very joyous time of year around our house. Momma remarried and Mr. Wilson I call him is having all of his relatives coming over to the house this year. It seems they had all been split up during the war of the rebellion and because of the pieces put in the newspaper they were able to locate each other again and this Christmas will be like a reunion for them.

**January 13, 1876,** The holidays around the house were truly a joyous time. This was the first time I got to meet my other brothers and sisters. It is good to know I have a big family and now that we are all together, I hope they all stay in the territory despite the trouble the Chickasaws give us for being here.

William always seem not to have any patience for the boys who think because we are considered colored they can do or say any mean thing they can about us. He especially don't like it when some of the Chickasaws calls us names like bastards

and thin bloods.

**November 06, 1876,** Once again the United States has had an election for president with some man named Rutherford B. Hayes been elected president, and again momma says the coloreds are denied the rights of citizenship in the United States as they are in Indian Territory. She and the

Sugar George Esq., attorney and counsellor at law, practicing before the courts of the Creek Nation visited Eufaula last Saturday looking after the ways and means to build the new school building for the colored students of the nation, \$1,000 was appropriated by the Council for that purpose.

other people in our town cain't seem to understand what the war was supposed to be about if it did not offer the colored people a chance at full rights as citizens and vote like anybody else in the territory.

Momma say the colored people had high hopes that president Grant would help the colored people cause he and Mr. Lincoln were fighting to free the coloreds. But each week there are more reports of colored people being hanged and abused by the white cappers. Theys think is because the colored people are trying to take form them, but momma says we have worked to build this country just as much as anybody else and we should be able to live as people just like the whites and such. She tells me and William she is hopeful we will one day have freedom like Mr. Lincoln promised. She says she is getting old and afraid she may never see that day.

I don't say nothing about my not being a freedman, cause it only upset her to think I might choose to be a Chickasaw after the way they treat her and separate her from her mother. It may be my daddy is a Chickasaw, but I been raised to recognize both the freedmen ways and the Chickasaw ways. It not like I choose to be a freedmen or choose to be a Chickasaw, I been born to both and have no choice in who I am!

**April 24, 1878,** William was excited about another newspaper article he read today. There was an article in the *Indian Journal* about the famous Creek attorney, Sugar George. Sugar George was a war hero, and what they like to call nowadays, a colored Creek. Sugar George was visiting Eufaula last Saturday April the 20th and he was looking after ways and means to build the new school for the colored students of the

Creek Nation. It said in the article that Sugar George was asking for and got "three thousand dollars appropriated by the council" to build that school.

My brother had heard about Sugar George long ago and always thought he was something special. Not only did he fight in the War of the Rebellion, he was also a leader in the Creek Nation and was a member of the House of Kings there. This would never happen in the Chickasaw Nation, for some

reason, the Chickasaws don't allow their coloreds to hold any office in the government, and when I ask my daddy about it, all's he say is the Negroes will never be able to hold any office in the Chickasaw Nation.

**November 13, 1878,** From everything me and William read in the papers, it don't seem the war of the rebellion meant much to change the circumstances of the freedmen or the state Negroes. This reconstruction that was put in place to help the state negroe was removed by president Hayes not long after he got in office.

He even go so far as to put a confederate named David Key in his cabinet. It is no wonder the white cappers and Chickasaws don't allow the coloreds citizenship. The coloreds don't have citizenship in the states and the freedmen don't have citizenship in the territory cept for the Cherokee, Muscogee, and Seminole blacks. Here in the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations we don't have no rights of citizenship.

**March 01, 1879,** Today I turn fourteen years old. I tried to see my daddy today but his wife was none to pleased to see me at their house. She musta knowed I would be coming by to see what daddy got me? I always come by on my birthdays.



Today I wanted to ask him if it would be possible for him to send me to a college when I turned sixteen. His answer puzzled me because he said that despite my being his daughter, he didn't think he could get me into the Dawes Academy. I thought it was a school for Indians and since I wanted to get more education he could find a way to help me, but he didn't think it was possible. I have to believe it has more to do with my having some colored blood like my mother. He suggested I have a talk with my mother so she could give me her opinion.

**March 01, 1881,** Today is my sixteenth birthday. I visited with my daddy as usual on my birthday. I have come to find it increasingly difficult to make these visits. As I get older I'm being asked to choose which part of me should be more important in my life, the Negro or the Chickasaw. I have never thought they were

In my heart I can't make the difference between the two. Do I turn my back on my mother? We all speak Chickasaw and we eat the same food they eat. I have lived here all my life and would not care to live any place else, but it is hard here for most of us. It is not just the people who share my history, it's all the whites who have come to the territory and with them bringing so much hatred and violence against us, the people who according to my elders have been here from the beginning, how should I feel?

**May 18, 1881,** I was telling my brother William about this new article I found in the *Cherokee Advocate* yesterday about some Quakers and some colonization of the Oklahoma Territory for the Negroes. Will says they may have a point when it comes to the freedmen of Indian Territory but he is not sure it applies to the Negroes of the United States.

The article mentioned these eastern philanthropists and Quaker Commissioners over see the interest of their Indian neighbor "have made an important discovery that the Negroes are the only citizens in the United States who have by treaty a right to settle on the ceded lands in the territory and parties are now at work in earnest organizing colonies of

colored men to colonize Oklahoma."

**March 01, 1882,** Today is my seventeenth birthday and I have become increasingly involved with the Freedmen's Brotherhood Association. We have developed strategies to get the thousands of so called freedmen adopted as citizens in the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations. We have joined with the Negro Protection League and have become active in the politics of having our grievances met by the governments of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nation.

We hear all the time the Indian Nations have quarrel with the United States keeping its treaty promises to the Indian Nations, yet we have seen first hand how the so called Five Civilized Tribes have disregarded the treaty it signed after the war of the rebellion and how the nations should treat all of its citizens.

I remember attending an Emancipation Celebration not to long ago and hearing the speakers ask the question, "who's country is this?" his point was people like my mother who were enslaved by these people, people like my father have turned their backs on the very people who provided the opportunity to become wealthy and take from the land that was the fruit of my mother's labor.

I was not born in the United States; I was born in Indian Territory! My rights should be the rights of a Chickasaw, not some state Negro!

**May 05, 1882,** I don't know what to say about that man they have as the governor of the Chickasaw Nation, his name is Overton or something. Momma was telling me that back in 1873 the Chickasaw Nation finally passed a bill to adopt the Chickasaw freedmen into the tribe as citizens according to the Treaty of 1866, but the United States government did not do their part so the nation has decided to change their mind about the adoption. Now Governor Overton is back in Washington City to protest against the adoption of the Chickasaw freedmen as citizens.

The freedmen were good enough to be brought here against their will, now it seems they want to send them out

of the territory against their will, then all they want to do is give them one hundred dollars and they call it fair. The Chickasaws has destroyed the lives of countless individuals and after finding no more use for them, they decides to discard them like yesterdays newspaper, and they call themselves civilized nation..... I can't understand these people to save my life! Are we Chickasaw citizens are just intruders as they like to call everybody else?

**May 25, 1882,** Today is my brother Williams birthday. He will be eighteen today and it is customarily a day when he will be consider a man. William has taught me much when it comes to reading and writing and with his interest in politics, everyone is hoping he will one day become a lawyer and help fight for the rights of the Chickasaw freedmen.

I spect William will become a full member of the Freedmen Brotherhood now and be more active in the struggle to gain the rights that was promised in the Treaty of Fort Smith. Sometimes he and me discuss how my daddy played a role in that treaty and he tells me all the time that I should talk to my daddy about that treaty and ask him why the Chickasaws don't want to adopt the freedmen or why they like to pretend the children the Chickasaw men have with the freedwomen are not considered to be Chickasaw by blood?

I sometimes bring this up when I visit with my daddy but he does not like to discuss the subject much. It appear he be vexed over how he should answer the question. Surely he know I want to know cause it affect me, but he think I shouldn't be asking questions like this cause it only gone cause trouble in the nation.

One time he told me that the true reason the nation not want to adopt the freedmen is because there be to many of them. That if the nation adopt the freedmen they could become to powerful and try to control the nation and all the nation business. He say the negroe not capable of handling the nation business. So I ask him, if they not capable of handling the business, why are the Chickasaw so afraid? He didn't give me a answer to that one yet.



**June 30, 1882,** Today was an interesting day. Ordinarily momma doesn't go to any of those religious meetings but for some reason she decided she wanted to go see this preacher by the name of Roberts or something. I think it was Ned Roberts. Well I've seen these big old camp revival meetings they would have from time to time in the territory and the people would come from miles around to attend these events.

On this day there was a family there by the name of Ligon and I happen to meet one of the nicest men I had ever met before. His name was William, like my brother, but he say everybody call him Hadley. It seem they were state Negroes and came from across the Red, somewhere in Texas, not sure exactly, but they did seem to be nice enough people and he was at least not dirty and disheveled like most of the men in these parts.

After the services the people usually sit out under some put together arbors and have their supper before everybody pack up and go home. Hadley and I had a great time talking, I was surprised he knew so much about the territory and the tribulations of the colored folk here, especially cause I find out Hadley cain't read or write. It seem he and his family are mainly sharecroppers and he ain't had much time for schooling.

I show Hadley how to spell his name so he can at least be proud of that! He seem to not mind what I do, I could tell he like me, but he don't know I kinda like him too. Hadley is a tall man and with a stocky build, I guess that come from working on a farm. He had some strong looking hands like the kind most of the former slaves I seen down near our place in Burneyville. All rough and ashy, guess he cain't help being who he is, anyways, I like him and I hope he like me enough to come courting one day.

Hadley also a little older than me by about five years but he still very respectful when I tell him I'm only seventeen years old. He smile and say that marrying age where he come from! I just smile and don't say nothing, don't won't to lead him on or nothing. I never thought about marrying before. We have a hard enough time trying

to scratch out a living with the way the Choctaws and Chickasaws treat us. Anyways, since we live near the Red and they's have to go that way to get back to Texas, our families join in with the others going that way, hitch up the mules to the wagons and journey south towards home. Don't know if I's gone see Hadley again, but I did have a nice time talking with him.

**May 31, 1883,** There was some joy in the Choctaw Nation among the freedmen to hear the Choctaw Council passed the "Freedmen Bill." As I understand it the bill provides for all persons of "African descent" and residents in the nation at the time of the Fort Smith Treaty September 13, 1865 and were enslaved by the Choctaws are now entitled to all rights and privileges in the Choctaw Nation.

I guess some people would consider it a victory, but I'm not all that sure it is. There was the added exception that the Choctaw Freedmen would in be a second class citizen because they could not share the annuity moneys and the public domain, yet for many of the Choctaw freedmen like my mother, sisters and brothers, this is supposed to be an improvement in their condition and settles the issue of their citizenship within the nation that has been unresolved since 1865.

**July 11, 1883,** I got a letter today from Hadley. He has learned how to read and write and has credited me with his motivation for doing so. He recalls how wonderful he felt the first time we met at the camp revival last year and goes on about how much he desires to see me once again.

His writing is not that of someone who has gone to school but he has found his voice with each letter formed and each word constructed to convey his thoughts and dreams of a better life. Hadley says he will be coming north soon and plans on making a home in the territory, he wants to know if I have married and would it be possible to court me?

I do like a man who knows what he wants and he has shown by his willingness to learn to read that he is a man destined to become greater than his circumstances. He

goes on to say that he will be moving to the territory as soon as he can find work and get a permit from the Chickasaws to enter the territory lawfully. It is my understanding there is a need for laborers in Ardmore for men to work in the asphalt fields. I hope he gets hired on there, Ardmore is about a days ride from Burneyville and it would be easier for us to see one another should he move there.

Over the years the Chickasaws have allowed freedmen like my mother and her husband to locate on a piece of the common land and make a living by farming, but it is still a hard scabble life in the territory for the freedmen. Myfather has been a little bit of help so we are not completely destitute, but he continues to insist that the laws of the Chickasaws won't allow him to do more because it is prohibited and he is an old man now and not able to withstand the cruelties of the lash upon his flesh.

I try to tell him of the burden I carry as someone with mixed blood and living in two worlds, and not be accepted by the world of my father and if not for the love and caring of my mothers world, I would be cast out as someone considered to be a bastard child and not accepted in either.

You would think he would understand since his father was a white man and his mother a Chickasaw, but it is a curious form of reasoning to come up with the idea that somehow African blood can be so powerful to completely contaminate the blood of his mother and father. In my mind, this is a complete abuse of intelligence!

**August 03, 1883,** Hadley made good on his promise to move to the territory. He got himself some work as a laborer on the farm of my father's brother Samuel's farm about six months ago. You'd think he woulda said something but he says he waited until he was able to save up some money before he came by our place outside of Burneyville to ask for my hand in marriage.

Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations .

**May 03, 1884,** I am now about four or five months pregnant with our first child.



five months pregnant with our first child. Hadley and I got married as we planned and have been busy working our farm for the past six months. Since I have been considered a Chickasaw because of my daddy we had no problem getting land in the nation to farm as much as we can. We grow a bit of cotton and produce most of the food we need with some to sell to the markets in Ardmore and down in Dennison, Texas just on the other side of the Red.

I was reading the paper today and was still trying to understand the article I read about the bill being proposed before the Congress of the United States and was introduced by mamma's old friend King Blue and John Adkins, both members of the Choctaw Brotherhood Association. The article went on to say that both men were in Washington City and representing the freedmen of the Chickasaw Nation to get this bill before congress.

Of course the editors of the *Indian Champion* would not think this would be a good idea for the freedmen to petition the United States Congress to seek relief from the depredations visited upon the freedmen, but should anyone be surprised? It is now almost twenty years since the end of the war of the rebellion and the Chickasaws have gone back and forth over the third and fourth articles of the Treaty of Fort Smith and have not adopted the former slaves of their nation and there doesn't appear they ever will. Most of the people have the understanding that a treaty between two nations should be the supreme law of the land, but you couldn't prove that by the Chickasaws and their behavior towards the freedmen.

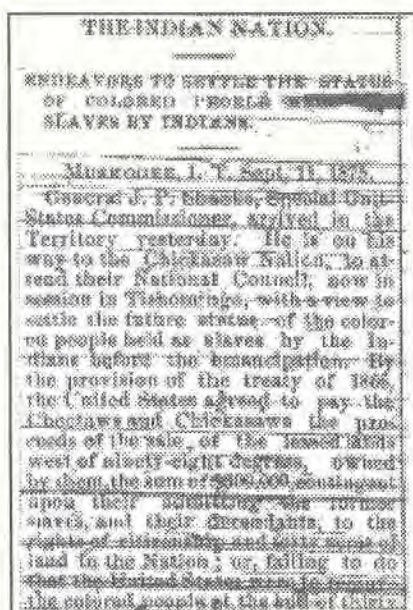
I can't believe the editors would even think that the freedmen were getting a fair deal from the Chickasaw Nation when all they wanted to do was remove anyone with a drop of African blood out of the territory.

The lies and deceit practice by the Chickasaws and the United States is the real problem afflicting the freedmen. They came up with a treaty that gave the Choctaws and Chickasaw an option of adopting their freedmen, an option they did not give to any of the other tribes. It is

quite a curious option when you consider the two tribes were the most disloyal to the union and should have been punished the most if anyone was going to be punished, yet they received the most favorable terms any tribe could hope for.

The United States is also at blame in this mess. Clearly they could have honored the treaty like the Quakers said years ago; these are the only people in America that have a treaty negotiated right to the lands mentioned in the treaty.

**August 10, 1884.** I give birth to a baby girl today! We gone call her Maybelle after Hadley's mother. He say since his



mother died last year this would be a good sign if we carried her name forward in our family.

**January 08, 1885.** The Chickasaw Brotherhood Association has been quite busy lately trying to get rights for the Chickasaw freedmen. We hear the Choctaws are finally going to enact a bill to adopt the Choctaw freedmen and the Chickasaw Brotherhood Association does not want to be left knowing that the Chickasaw freedmen are the only people in Indian Territory without any rights or property on account of the treaty of 1866.

**March 01, 1885.** I seen my daddy the other day. He come by the house to see how I's doing and see his grandbaby. He seem to always come around for my birthday. Daddy appear to be a bit sick

today. Appear to have this cough that make him draw all up and hard for him to breath.

Daddy and Hadley never seem to get along well when they together. Hadley think he could be more help to me and smooth things over with the authorities about how they treat us when we bring our crops to market. ....he never like it when they try to get the cheapest prices for our crop when they should be paying top dollar because of the fine quality we bring.

**March 05, 1885,** The newspaper say there is a new president of the United States sworn into office yesterday. He is Stephen Grover Cleveland, the first Democratic president in twenty four years .

**April 15, 1886,** Momma and all the other Choctaw Freedmen have been registerins as citizens of the nation for over a yar now and the newspaper say today "Governor McCurtain issued a proclamation declaring all those freedmen as bona fide citizens with the ability to vote in all elections" just as any blood citizen or otherwise. This news make momma and her other children so happy with joy.

**August 01, 1886.** The Choctaw Brotherhood Association is holding another Emancipation Day Celebration, this time it be over to Picken's field and they'spect a big turnout this year. The Choctaw Brotherhood been pretty much celebrating getting adopted into the tribe and feeling pretty good about themselves as citizens of the nation.

Momma say it okay to be a citizen, but still the tribe don't give them no money for the schools, they don't share in the capita payments and they sure as hell don't get to run for no office in the nation. You have to ask yourself what good citizenship if you cain't participate in the government?

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*For a copy of the complete manuscript with endnotes, please contact Terry Ligon at [estelusti@aol.com](mailto:estelusti@aol.com).*



## EDITOR'S PAGE: BEFORE KWANZAA THERE WAS ...



Millions of Americans of African descent observe Kwanzaa during the cold dark winter months. This festival, whose name means "first fruits of harvest"

in Swahili, was designed to celebrate African-American culture, to strengthen the family and to reinforce a value system based on the black experience. Participants are encouraged to use the days from December 26th to New Year's Day as time to reflect of past accomplishments and to plan for the future. Kwanzaa is more of a cultural celebration than a holiday. For many it has become a tradition

Genealogists, family historians and other researchers looking for clues about how black families celebrate the festival will be not be able to discover any Kwanzaa traditions passed down from great-grandparents to grandparents to parents to child. There are none. Kwanzaa is a modern invention first celebrated in 1966 by Dr. Maulana (Ron) Karenga. The professor created the event by combining elements from several African harvest festivals because he wanted African-Americans to have a unique celebration.

Many young black people think that there were no uniquely African American celebrations aside from Black History Month and Juneteenth before Kwanzaa was introduced.

They feel that black people in the United States practice holidays in the same manner as whites. But these assumptions are not true. We have been doing "our thing" in "our own way" for a long time.

Blacks did not leave their traditions, music, beliefs and culture in Africa when they arrived in this country. Just like other ethnic groups they brought their celebrations with them adapting their old world festivals to the environment they found in an often-hostile land.

One of the traditions that cross the Atlantic was the masquerade. Even today, it is an important part of African culture.

Participants dance completely covered in costumes made of fabric, feathers, fur and other materials. It is thought that while they wear the mask they become the object that the costume represents.

A form of the masquerade was practiced in the new world beginning in the middle 1700s. During the Christmas season, slaves celebrated the holiday with a festival. It was called Jonkanus in the United States and Jonkonnu in the Caribbean islands. The community gathered to watch a musical event based on the life of an ancient African chief. King John Conny, a celebrated "cabocero" ruled in what is now southwestern Ghana around 1720.

It became so popular that groups practiced all year until the big day when they went from plantation to plantation entertaining their fellow slaves. The costumes and masks were made of rags, old clothes, metal and wooden objects and other recycled materials. The event was known for the creation of original songs and chants accompanied by drums made from animal skins, and instruments made from animal bones and horns, sticks, grass reeds

Family historian needs to look at the ways black families celebrate the winter holidays. Genealogists will find a rich source of information when they discuss the seasonal traditions that have been passed from generation to generation with their relatives.

and a triangle.

Jonkanus festivals have died in the United States but are still celebrated in Jamaica and has been revived in Bermuda. Traces of it can be seen in the United States in the Mummer's Groups in Philadelphia and New Orleans's Carnival.

Another African American Christmas holiday tradition among southern slaves was a gift giving game call Christmas gif'. When two people met on Christmas day, the first one to call out "Christmas Gif!" was given a small present by the other person. The gifts were little trinkets, candy or fruit. Often the game was played between adults and children with the

youngster being the winner.

It is important to acknowledge their existence. Genealogists need to to understand that black slaves were able to modify some of their old world traditions to bring moments of joy and a sense of belonging during difficult times.

Today both of these traditions are no longer practiced. Following the end of slavery, African Americans want to erase all memories from their painful past and discontinued holding the events.

The region of the country and the family's economic and social standing in the community have also influenced New Year's Eve and New Year's Day celebrations. Some people attend midnight dances, while others attend church services, spent time with their loved ones or sleep through the excitement. There are some many different traditions that it is difficult to find a common ground.

One thing common to both Christmas and New Year celebrations is food. Like other ethnic groups, blacks eat foods that reflect their culture. Many blacks prefer sweet potato pie to pumpkin pie, cornbread

dressing to chestnut dressing, and canned yams to mashed potatoes.

There are regional

differences in traditional black cooking which determine the foods people eat during celebrations. Often the dishes were everyday ones just more was eaten to celebrate the occasion. Some people will enjoy gumbo while others will relish chitterlings. Most black people agree that there is no New Year's Day meal without black-eyed peas that are often served with ham hocks, greens and cornbread. Many feel that eating a meal of black-eyed peas will bring them luck and/or more money in the New Year.

Whatever the meal, many ethnic groups believe that what you do on New Year's Day is a prediction of the things that will



happen to you during the entire year. The Japanese pay off all of their debts before New Year's Eve so they will be prosperous in the New Year. They also believe that the people you meet on New Year's Day will not die during the year and they spend the day with family members to ensure them of a long life. Similarly, many blacks will try to have some money in their wallets on New Year's Day so they will not be poor during the year. In some regions, it is believed that if you leave the house before 7:00AM on New Year's Day someone will die.

And the music, oh the music! Holiday songs sung in a black church by a black choir speak to the heart and soul. The Temptations' version of "Silent Night" sounds nothing like the Morman Tabernacle's version.

One reason the observation of Kwanzaa is growing is because many black people experience a sense of pride in celebrating their heritage. However, blacks will continue to practice traditional celebrations because they are members of

the larger community.

In the not to distant past, black holiday celebrations were not visible to the larger community. There were no black Santas and few if any black dolls. We celebrated in our own way doing our own thing in our family. It will be a shame if we forget our past of Jonkanus festivals and ethnic traditions in the rush to embrace a future of Kwanzaa festivals and national norms. We will lose more then a few songs and recipes; we will lose our uniqueness and our history.

Family historian needs to look at the ways black families celebrate the winter holidays. Genealogists will find a rich source of information when they discuss the seasonal traditions that have been passed from generation to generation with their relatives. What special foods did the family eat? How was the house decorated? When was the tree put up? How did the outside of the house look? What types of gifts were exchanged? What songs were sung or music played? What was the role of the church? What activities did the

family do together? Did the family travel or stay home? What were the roles of each adult and child? These are a few of the questions you could ask. How you celebrate the holidays are not only a part of your family history, they are some of your most precious memories.

Take time to learn how your family observed the holidays before there was a Kwanzaa. Keep a record of the customs so your descendants will know how their ancestors celebrate the holidays. The complying of dates and facts is essential to the study of genealogy history. Discovering the foods, folklore and traditions that were important to your ancestors are also a part of the story. They will enrich family history work and make the study more worthwhile. Collecting facts and traditions both will help you to flesh out the family's genealogical body. One is the skeleton and the other is the blood that makes the heart beat.

*Loretta Henry*  
Editor

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### INDEX OF SURNAMES IN THIS ISSUE

Surname	Page	Surname	Page	Surname	Page	Surname	Page	Surname	Page
Adkins	13	Clemmons	3	Golden	3	Lincoln	10	Price	2
Anderson	4	Cleveland	13	Green	3	Lloyd	5	Roberts	12
Baker	3	Cook	7	Hammad	3	Love	1, 9, 10	Secret	2
Benson	3	Cooper	5	Harris	3	Luray	5	Shanks	9
Blackwell	3	Cowan	5	Hartfield	3	Madden	2	Sim	3
Blakely	3	Crowell	3	Hayes	10	Mayo	3	Smith	2, 3, 5
Blue	13	Cuffee	5	Henry	1, 2, 5, 6, 15	McCurtain	13	Stewart	3
Braggs	2	DeBerry	3	Herndon	3	McDaniel	2	Summerville	2
Braxton	2	Edwards	2	Hurts	2	Moore	3	Walker	3
Brown	2,5	Elbert	2	Jackson	3	Mungin	3	Watts	3
Bullock	2,3	Elliott	3	Johnson	2	Murray	3	Wells	3
Burgess	2	Fisher	3	Karenga	14	Neal	3	White	2, 3
Burroughs	4	Ford	2	Key	10	Newman	3	Wilson	10
Carmona	6	Geder	2	Kimble	2	Ogilvie	3	Wright	5
Celestine	3	George	10	LaBat	3	Overton	11	Zuberi	4,5
Christian	8	Gillette	2,3	Lee	1, 2, 3, 7	Parker	5		
Churchill	3	Gobert	1, 2, 4, 16	Ligon	1, 8, 9, 12, 13, 15	Preston	3		

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## Family History Conference

“Rooted in History”

• Saturday, February 26th, 2005 •

***Volunteers Needed!***

**W**e're going to need help with all aspects of the conference. Lots of volunteers are needed for different committees. Here are some of the ways you can help.

1. **Set-up committee:** We need early birds to help us work with the onsite staff to prepare the venue.
2. **Vendor associates committee:** We need people to assist the vendors.
3. **eBus committee:** members who can assist attendees to access genealogy sites on the Internet
4. **Workshop committee:** society members who can manage the functioning of each workshop room.
5. **Greeting/payments committee:** members who can help with registration, pass out the information bags, and take credit card and cash payments for memberships or other merchandise.

6. **General volunteer committee:** society members who are floaters and can be utilized as needed.

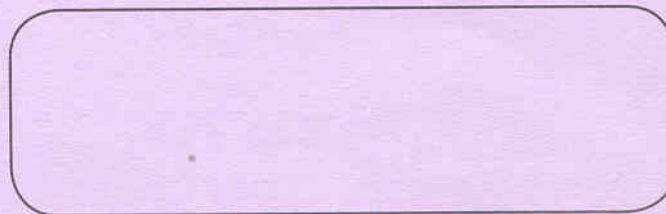
7. **Clean up committee:** no need for explanation on this one.

Posters and flyers need to be distributed around the Bay Area. We've inserted five flyers in each edition of the December journal. Please pass them out to your friends and post them in public places so we can use the full power of our organization to saturate the market.

**It's up to us** to let people in the Bay Area know about this fantastic opportunity for them to learn the basics, and more about researching their family history, why this is important to them from a personal standpoint, how their family connects to the history of this country and how their families helped to make this nation great. Contact Lenora Gobert at [gobert@aagsnc.org](mailto:gobert@aagsnc.org) if you would like to volunteer.

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IT'S YOUR HISTORY ... ISN'T IT TIME YOU TOLD YOUR STORY?