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# **The Black Family Is Alive and Well From Two Slaves, 600 Descendants; Just ask my 600 relatives**

**BY ATHELIA KNIGHT; ATHELIA KNIGHT IS A METROPOLITAN STAFF REPORTER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST**  
**By Athelia Knight; Athelia Knight is a metropolitan staff reporter for The Washington Post**

MY FAMILY, AS FAR as we can trace it, began 127 years ago in the tiny eastern North Carolina village of Corapeake, in Holly Grove Township. It was there that my great-grandfather Timothy was born into slavery and later married my great-grandmother Easter.

They had 19 children and their children had 81 children and the family has now grown to some 600 descendants, including teachers, school administrators, dentists, federal employes, accountants, engineers, journalists, ministers, broadcasters, actresses, composers, police officers, beauticians, carpenters and small businessmen.

Last month, more than 300 of us came together for a three-day reunion to celebrate our heritage. It began with two days at a hotel, we booked in Portsmouth, Va., and culminated with a tour of the family homestead and an emotional family service at my great-grandparents' church, New Middle Swamp Baptist, in Holly Grove (population today: 1,336).

To those critics who claim that families in general and black families in particular have been crumbling, I say, on behalf of my family members, it just aint' so.

I am referring to those like historian E. Franklin Frazier, who wrote in 1950: "As the result of family disorganization a large proportion of Negro children and youth have not undergone the socialization which only the family can provide.

"The disorganized families have failed to provide for their emotional needs and have not provided the discipline and habits which are necessary for personality development."

Frazier was followed by Daniel P. Moynihan, who in 1965 sparked much controversy with: "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family."

Those folks just don't know what they are talking about. My family, and I bet thousands of other black families, side with historians Herbert G. Gutman and Andrew Billingsley.

In "The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom," Gutman pointed out in 1976 that black families have strong, stable

networks that have survived from slavery to present. Billingsley in 1968, in "Black Families in White America," stated that the range and variety of black families don't suggest, "as some commentaries hold, that the Negro family is falling apart, but rather that these families are fully capable of surviving by adapting to the historical and contemporary social and economic conditions facing the Negro people."

"How does a people survive in the face of oppression and sharply restricted economic and social support?" Billingsley asked. "There are, of course, numerous ways, but surely one of them is to adapt the most basic of its institutions, the family, to meet the conflicting demands placed on it. In this context, then, the Negro family has proved to be an amazingly resilient institution."

That's us.

Let's begin with my great-grandparents. My great-grandfather, whom everyone called "Grandpappy Tim," was a short, soft-spoken man who sported long sideburns and a long mixed grey beard. He was separated from his mother at an early age when she was sold to another slave master. Parentless, he was raised by other slaves.

After slavery was abolished, my great-grandfather Timothy continued to work on the plantation, first renting and then owning a 50-acre tract that he tilled until his death.

He met "Grandmammy Easter," a fair-complexioned woman with hair flowing across her shoulders and down her back, when she moved to Holly Grove in the early 1870s from Cypress Chapel, Va., where she had worked as a domestic slave on the Lee Plantation. She twice bore children by the slave master.

Then on one night in the early 1870s, she fled the plantation, taking her two children with her. In 1874, Grandmammy Easter, who smoked a corncob pipe, and my Grandpappy Tim were married.

Besides the two oldest children, they had 17 others, whom they raised in a strict and religious household where hard work and determination were stressed. Everyone had to go to church on Sunday, and whenever the church pastor came for dinner, the children had to wait until the grownups finished and cleared the table before they could eat. My great-grandfather made the wine for church communion and his wife made the bread.

Although neither of my great-grandparents had any formal education, they encouraged their children to get as much schooling as possible. All their children attended grade school and went as far as they could go until they had to leave school to help on the farm.

My great-grandfather was a strong disciplinarian. He not only kept his children in line, but didn't hesitate to do the same for his children's children. "He'd say, 'Go get yourself a whip,'" one victim recalled at the reunion. "And he didn't beat the clothes. He made you take them off."

My great-grandparents were married 60 years when my great-grandfather died in 1934. My great-grandmother never remarried and died in 1938. Not exactly your disintegrating family.

They left an able clan that continued many of their traditions, including the large families. My father's mother, Nettie, was one of those 19 children. My father was one of 11 children. I was one of eight.

When many of my great-grandparents' children became adults, they left the farmland in North Carolina and headed north, where they were more job opportunities. They began migrating north in the early 1900s -- with one family member helping another.

As they settled in Philadelphia, Connecticut, New York and other relatives wrote brothers, sisters and cousins to tell them about the jobs they found up north. During the summer, they would return to the countryside in their cars and new clothes. Others couldn't wait to join them.

My father, Daniel, a tall, stern, no-nonsense man who can quiet a crowded room of noisy teenagers with a bat of his eyes, was one of them. He left North Carolina in 1933 and was headed for Waterbury, Conn., an industrial city where many of my relatives had settled. But he stopped off in Virginia and never got any further. His first jobs were in a restaurant in Norfolk and in a soybean plant in Portsmouth.

When my parents moved to Virginia, they could not afford their own home, so they stayed with my father's first cousin and her husband for a while. They weren't the only ones there. My father's brother and his wife also stayed there. Months later, my parents moved into a four-bedroom house of their own.

Since my parents only had one child at that time, they had room for relatives. Several cousins, brothers and sisters lived for various periods at my parent's home.

Meanwhile, my father was steadily finding the job he wanted. He began working in a metal shop at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth in 1940 and later moved to the Naval Air Station in Norfolk, where he worked on planes until he retired in 1972 after 32 years of service. My mother, who never worked outside the home, often took care of other children of relatives, who could not afford a babysitter.

My parents, who have been married 48 years, had four sons (one drowned in 1965) and four daughters. I am what some folks call the "knee-baby," which means I am next to the baby.

When we were growing up, this family that was supposed to be disintegrating spent a great deal of time visiting relatives in North Carolina. I remember fondly those Sunday trips from our house in Portsmouth to my grandparents' home in North Carolina, where we gathered with other small cousins and chased the chickens and hens in the yard. Sometimes my uncle Simon, who to this day has the largest hands I have ever seen, would let us pet the horse named Lightning.

My brother Joe and I liked to go to North Carolina to see my grandparents so much that we once headed there on my tricycle. Of course, we gave up three blocks from the home when Joe forgot the way and our church minister admonished us for being so far from home.

These memories made me more than anxious to attend the reunion.

It was a dreary, rainy Friday when we began arriving at the inn my family had booked in Portsmouth, but the rain did not dampen the spirits of my relatives.

Why Portsmouth, you might ask? Simple. That's where the majority of the relatives who planned the reunion live. Besides, my great-grandparents' hometown, Holly Grove Township in Gates County, does not have an inn or hotel that could have accommodated us.

From every part of the country they came. There was a bus load of 50 from Philadelphia. Others arrived from New Jersey, Virginia, Connecticut, New York, the District, Michigan, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, Georgia and North Carolina. My sister and her two sons flew in from Hawaii.

Everywhere you turned there was a relative ready to greet you with hugs and kisses and handshakes and tears. There were cousins who were finally meeting for the first time, others who had not seen each other in years.

"I never knew Dan had a daughter this pretty," one cousin said, giving me my umpteenth hug of the weekend. There was the "My, you're not married, yet? What are you waiting for?" One of my cousin took the opportunity to find me a husband, but the distant cousin she picked for me turned out to be married and had two children. "What do you care?" she asked. "I hear that doesn't mean a thing in Washington."

I got reacquainted with my great-uncle Jordan, whom I remembered seeing on the trips to my grandparents' home as a child. Great-uncle Jordan, who is 84 now, is one of two remaining children of my great-grandparents. His sister, Cherry, is 97. Because of illness, she was unable to attend the reunion.

Great-uncle Jordan walks a bit slower now and his back is slightly bent, but he still walks with his head held high and is as sharp as ever. One morning I asked him how he had slept the night before. "All right, I guess," he said slowly. "Would've been better if I had a lady friend."

There were other light moments. My 18-year-old nephew, who had been a little reluctant about attending the reunion, turned out to be having so much fun I had to ask what his secret was. He said he decided "to go for it" with any female beyond first cousin. Another cousin, from Philadelphia, found he would not be alone when he enrolled this fall at Hampton Institute, a predominantly black college in Hampton, Va. There'll be two other cousins from New York joining him.

The reunion provided other firsts for a number of relatives. For some, especially some of the city-slicker teenagers who grew up on the streets of Philadelphia and New York, it was their first trip to the family homestead and family church.

Many appeared enthralled by the whole weekend. They weren't alone.

One cousin marveled at how, in a time of economic strain, so many people could find the time and the money to get together with family. "Family will survive even hard times," another cousin remarked.

My Family knows that, oh so well. We have what I like to call an army of relatives who keep the pulse of the family. When someone needs any type of help or support, they are there. Just recently a sick uncle who lives alone was hospitalized. He was unable to walk when he returned home, so his sisters, brothers and cousins volunteered to provide around-the-clock help until my uncle got well.

Similarly, when a family member graduates from college, it's not unusual for carloads of relatives to attend the graduation. I know. They did it for mine.

Bringing all of us together for this reunion was no small feat. The seeds for the reunion took root in two cousins in their mid-twenties who just decided that it was time for the whole clan to get together.

Back in November my cousin Daryl, a credit analyst in Columbus, Ohio, began sending out leaflets. The word began spreading from relative to relative, and within a month she had the names and addresses of dozens of kinfolks who were interested in coming. Others got on the phones and did their own campaigning to get family members to come back home.

By January, a 20-member planning committee, under the coordination of my cousin Lucille, started making plans, booking the hotel, arranging for a banquet and disco and reserving the entire church for our Sunday family service.

All 11-page souvenir booklet with a picture of my great-grandparents, the family history, a genealogy chart with 439 of the 600 descendants (a cousin and an aunt spent three days putting the chart together) and a schedule of reunion activities was printed. It was inserted in a registration kit which was given to each family member.

To me, though, the highlight of the arrangement was the Sunday motorcade from the hotel to Corapeake, a 40-mile trip. We stopped at the family homestead, which is owned today by a cousin. Up the dusty lane from the paved road, a portion of the house where my great-grandparents raised their 19 children still stands. No one lives on the land now. My cousin rents small parts of it to farmers who raise corn and soybeans.

Past the homestead, the pastures where the cows grazed and the clapboard houses mixed in with newly built brick homes, we drove to "Wiggins X-Road" where New Middle Swamp Baptist Church is located a few miles down the road.

Inside the white walls of the century-old church, with its white-tiled ceiling and stained window panes, the family choir -- 35 brothers, sisters and cousins dubbed the "Singing Cousins" -- sang to the top of their voices. Many of the women in their colorful dresses and hats and men in three-piece suits and ties waved the hand fans from the local funeral home to keep cool. Beside the wooden pews, folding chairs were placed in the red-carpeted aisles to accommodate the overflow crowd. But they were not enough.

Some of the younger ones gave up their seats to older relatives and spent their time roaming the church cemetery where my great-grandparents, my grandparents and many other relatives are buried.

Surveying the aunts, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, cousins, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren in the church, my cousin LeCounte summed up the feeling when he said: "We have something to be proud of. We have come from slavery. We have come from hard labor on the farm to a clan like this. . . .It's a great feeling to know where you came from and to know you have a family this size. This shows that his family can go a long way because they have come so far."

But perhaps Lerone Bennett Jr., in this month's issue of *Ebony*, even better summed up those feelings when he wrote: "There is . . . plenty of evidence to show that black men and women -- despite slavery, despite desegregation, despite everything -- created a modern love song in life and art that is the loveliest thing dreamed or sung this side of the seas."

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**CAPTION(S):** Since 1981, Lucille Wiggins has organized the Benton family reunion, being held this weekend. During yesterday's cruise aboard the Spirit of Norfolk, Lucille Wiggins had breakfast with 5-year-old grandson Andrew Wiggins and Ray Irving. Left, J. Leon ***Knight*** recorded the occasion as Evelyn Monroe watched. The cruise was one of many reunion events being held over the weekend. The couple who started it all, Tim and Easter Benton, and their graves in Corapeake, N.C.

## Cousin Lucille, Preserving The Reunion

**BY ATHELIA KNIGHT**  
**Washington Post Staff Writer**

My cousin, Lucille Wiggins, had warned on more than one occasion that she was getting up in years and would not be able to carry the responsibility of organizing our family reunion forever.

But it wasn't until I found myself in her room in the rehab center where she was recovering from hip surgery that it really sank in. Sitting in a wheelchair, Lucille looked frail. Her bluejean jacket hung loosely from her shoulders, and she looked thinner than when I last saw her.

Earlier, she had undergone open-heart surgery and bounced back to marshal the planning effort. But heading into the final stretch for this weekend's reunion, I realized how much work had yet to be done. How would she weather the demands of pulling off this event? And equally troubling, what would happen after this one?

For nearly a quarter-century, the descendants of my great-grandparents, Tim and Easter Benton, have gotten together every three years to pay tribute to our past and celebrate the family today. About 250 of us converge on the tidewater city of Portsmouth, Va., for a three-day gathering that ends with a Sunday service in Corapeake, N.C., at the church where Tim and Easter once worshiped and are now buried.

In between, we catch up with relatives we haven't seen for a while. We take over the conference room of the Holiday Inn, where we set up a mini-museum with such memorabilia as tools, quilts and dolls from our family. We gather for a banquet and we board a small ship for a breakfast cruise. Over the years, we have been treated to surprise events such as my sister's marriage at the reunion 15 years ago, as well as the much-anticipated perennial fashion and talent shows, which feature young and old.

Three years ago, Lucille had asked me if I would take over

Three years ago, Lucille had asked me if I would take over as chief organizer of the reunion. I said no -- twice -- but said I would be willing to co-chair the planning committee, which met monthly at her home.

I could tell, though, that Lucille, at 76, was getting tired. And that she was disappointed that no one had stepped forward to take her place.

Finally, at a recent meeting, she put her cards on the table: "I don't want to drop it like a hot potato. We came in style. We're going out in style." But, she added emphatically, "This is my last year serving as chairperson."

My earlier responses to her request to take over the reunion were not sitting well with me. This is my family history that she has nurtured and preserved for future generations. How could I possibly not do this? I left that meeting with a list of things to do, and a nagging feeling that would be harder to dispense with.

My family reunion has evolved into an \$18,000 operation that involves contracts and negotiations and site visits and meetings. It calls on dozens of people to fill 20 committees, among them: finance, audiovisual and displays, family directory, hospitality, music, North Carolina trip, and cooking Benton-style. There is a family newsletter, a who's who guide and family directory, a calendar, souvenir book, letterhead stationery, pens, mugs, cups and T-shirts. We have a family emblem, a motto, colors and flower.

We reserve an entire ship for a Saturday breakfast cruise and the entire church for our Sunday service. The goal is to try to get as many family members who are scattered around the country to come to Corapeake, N.C., where our great-grandparents, former slaves, married in 1874 and started their family. Corapeake doesn't have an inn or hotel, so we book 50 rooms at the Holiday Inn in Portsmouth, then drive the 40 miles or so to North Carolina for the closing events.

In terms of cost and elaborateness, our reunion fits somewhere in the middle of the thousands of family reunions that take place each year. Of the 328 million trips that Americans plan to take this summer, about 35 percent are for family reunions, according a survey by the Travel Industry Association of America. Like ours, most are taking place this weekend, over the July 4 holiday.

The Benton family reunion is modest compared with others, like the one next week at the Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort in Solvang, Calif., where 60 members of the Valentine family have reserved a third of the place at \$15,000 a night for four nights. Ours is not as large as those organized by the Harlan Family in America, a nonprofit association that has a Web site and attracts as many as 800 family members to its reunions. It is not as old as the one held by the Washington area Quanders -- one of the oldest black families in the country, which will gather next month for its 80th reunion.

But ours is more involved than the majority of reunions in this country, which is typically a barbecue in a family member's back yard, according to the Travel Industry Association.



Compared with others, our homegrown event may seem old-fashioned because none of it is outsourced to event planners or travel agents. But for that reason it seems to embody what William Falk, chairman of the department of sociology at the University of Maryland, suggests is one of the most important aspects of family reunions: They "celebrate the strength of the family to maintain itself through difficult times."

When I was growing up, we rarely traveled anywhere where we didn't have family. I remember my parents being concerned when I moved to Columbus, Ohio, in 1973 because there were no relatives there. Or in Chicago, where I later moved for a job at the Chicago Tribune. They wanted me to have a family member to call in case of an emergency.

Since 1981, when our first family reunion was held, the network of relatives around the country has grown and with it the family support system. One relative offered to pay the expenses for another, who lost her job, to attend this year's reunion. When my cousin Lucille underwent hip surgery, my three sisters and I drove to Portsmouth to check on her.

This familial closeness -- on my father's mother's side of the family -- is not reflected on the other sides. We don't have family reunions with my father's father's family. My mother's mother's side of the family has tried to get relatives together for an annual barbecue at another relative's home in the Portsmouth area. I have attended once in the past five years. It is a warm occasion, but I don't feel the strong need to attend, as I do with the Benton family reunion.

For 24 years, we have been getting together for this reunion. It has strengthened our ties, led to new and renewed friendships. Most of this is due to Lucille.

Lucille and I share a grandmother, Nettie, who was one of Tim and Easter's 19 children. Lucille's mother, Hattie, and my father, Daniel, were two of Mama Net's 11 children.

Family has always been important to Lucille. Her father was killed in a logging accident when she was a year old. She and her younger brother, who was born a month after her father died, lived with her father's parents for 11 years, while her mother worked in Portsmouth during the week and came home to Corapeake on the weekends to care for them. She also spent time with her mother's parents, who lived nearby.

When Lucille was little, Mama Net would give her scraps of material and teach her how to sew clothes for her doll baby on the treadle machine. Lucille dreamed of becoming a fashion designer. But when she graduated from college in 1950, she needed money before she could think of starting her own business. So she became a substitute teacher in Portsmouth. She discovered she liked working with students and took a job as a home economics teacher. She taught fashion design at I.C. Norcom High School for 20 years before she retired in 1991.

A spare bedroom in her house is full of fabric -- silk, wool, suede in bright red, purple, gold -- all stacked on shelves. Bolts line one wall. Another is covered with fabric from floor

to ceiling.

"When I see the fabric, the beauty of it, I can visualize it made up," she says. But there isn't enough time to make all the garments she sees in her mind. Between her reunion organizing and work with other groups, Lucille says she "would make garments for somebody else and put myself last. So, therefore my fabric still stayed there."

Lucille's background in education and fashion is woven into the reunion. After the Saturday night banquet, there is a fashion show, where Lucille and other relatives model outfits they made. Lucille usually models three or four, at least one with a wide-brimmed or otherwise stylish hat.

Preserving the family history for future generations has been the primary goal under Lucille's leadership. She enlists committee members from different generations and with varied interests.

A tall, elegant woman with high cheek bones and a tiny mole under her left eye, Lucille is organized and gentle, but authoritative. She never speaks loudly or raises her voice but is adept at getting others to see things her way.

One day, a cousin and I were going over the menu for the reunion's opening meet-and-greet. We wanted to try something different from the light hors d'oeuvres that Lucille has ordered for past reunions. Lucille listened and said she thought the hors d'oeuvres would be fine. But she left it up to us to decide. The next day, my cousin and I met with the caterer, who told us the change of menu would add another \$20 a person to the cost, which would exceed our budget. When we took the catering contract to Lucille, stipulating light hors d'oeuvres, she simply signed it and smiled.

Over the years, our reunion has come to reflect Lucille's gentle insistence that our get-together be more than a "hot dog/hamburger reunion," that it be educational as well.

Over the weekend, my relatives and I will share family stories and show off photos and other family memorabilia. We will play and replay a videotape of my great-uncle Jordan, the only child of Tim and Easter Benton to attend one of our reunions, and watch him talk about our family during a segment on ABC's "Nightline" in 1981. He died in 1982. After the Sunday church service, some of us will go to the cemetery and visit the gravesites of my Uncle Jordan, my great-grandparents and other relatives.

This, more than anything else, is what Lucille wants to see continue.

"I feel good that I have been a part of getting information on family and getting it across so the family members can get to know their background," she says. "They should feel proud of their heritage. It gives you a good feeling just to open the souvenir book and just looking at Tim and Easter Benton, Tim standing back there like he owned the world."

I like my family reunion because it is old-fashioned. I like that we greet each other with hugs and kisses. I like that tears flow freely, sometimes for no apparent reason, other than because we are together. I like that my relatives and I can find strength and comfort in being with each other after

can find strength and comfort in being with each other after and during illnesses and after losing a loved one. At a time when many families are scattered and disintegrating, I am proud of the fact that the Benton family reunion has become such an anticipated tradition.

New generations are becoming active in planning. My niece Melanie, who as a 4-year-old was in my sister's surprise wedding in 1990, has put together the family newsletter for the past two reunions. She is now a rising college sophomore. Her sister, Karal, who got married last summer and is looking forward to introducing her husband, Jason, to the family, took over the reins of financial secretary. I like spending time with Karal on our drives from Washington to Portsmouth for the monthly planning committee meetings.

"Most of my friends are very surprised and in awe, just amazed that this is such a huge, thought-out, well-planned event because most of them have a barbecue at someone's house or may be that kind of thing for their reunion," said Karal, 24. "You could have some relatives who say, 'Oh, the older Benton family relatives have already passed away, so why should I come?' But it's still important because you're still passing on a legacy."

There is a poem that Lucille says she tries to live by, which once hung in her classroom and which she taught to her son, and now to her 5-year-old grandson, Andrew. It is titled "Always Finish," and the author is anonymous:

If a task is once begun,

Never leave it till it's done

Be the labor great or small

Do it well or not at all

Not long ago, I sat with Lucille and listened to her talk about the family reunion. I knew how important it was to her. And I knew what I was going to do.

"You know I'm going to carry it on for you," I said.

"You are?" she said, almost disbelieving. "You're going to carry it on." She began to cry.

"I'm going to carry it on," I said, as she swiped tears from her eyes. "You're going to be around to carry it on, too. You're the chairperson emeritus. Don't worry. We're not going to let it die."

To read about the history of the Benton family, go to <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/02/AR2005070201055.html>

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