

We Need to Learn More About Our Colorful Past

By Maurice A. Barboza
and Gary B. Nash

Back in 1925, American society tended not to advise young white males about the consequences of intimacy with the black maid. Even if the 22-year-old Strom Thurmond considered himself a father, the standards of the time did not require him to give the daughter born of that intimacy any love, support or acceptance. He did, however, irretrievably give her his bloodline.

Essie Mae Washington-Williams, the offspring of Mr. Thurmond and his family's black maid, 16-year-old Carrie Butler, recently announced that she intended to join the Daughters of the American Revolution based on her Thurmond bloodline. Reared apart from her father, Ms. Washington-Williams did not have the same privileges as Mr. Thurmond's white children during his life, yet she is seeking the right to some of the privileges of her lineage.

She is not the first to do so. Ms. Washington-Williams said she was motivated by the battle of Lena Santos Ferguson to join a Washington chapter of the organization and by Ms. Ferguson's quest to honor black soldiers. Ms. Ferguson's grandmother, a black Virginia woman, had married a white man from Maine whose ancestor, Jonah Gay, was a patriot. In the 1980's, Ms. Ferguson fought a four-year legal battle for full membership and to enter her local chapter. It wasn't until the organization was faced with the potential loss of its tax-exempt status in Washington that she was permitted to join.

Perhaps more significantly, Ms. Ferguson demanded, and received, a settlement agreement that bars discrimination and requires the D.A.R. to identify every African-American soldier who served in the Revolutionary War. It was important to Ms. Ferguson that black women know of their ancestors' contribution to the founding of this nation and that they embrace it.

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At the time of Ms. Ferguson's settlement, the D.A.R., as an organization, likely knew of many black soldiers who served in the Revolution, yet the organization was not open with the information nor was it receptive to black members. Ms. Ferguson's settlement required the D.A.R. to publish the names they had and to do research to identify more black soldiers, those who were somewhere, undiscovered, in historical records.

On this matter, the D.A.R.'s behavior has been troubling. By early 2000, six years after the settlement agreement, the names of only 1,656 black patriots had been published in 11

How many black soldiers fought in 1776?

D.A.R.-issued pamphlets. Yet some historians estimate 5,000 African-Americans served in the Revolutionary War. The organization's own genealogist, James Dent Walker, said estimates were "deceptively low" and that "no one took the time to examine the records."

The settlement required the D.A.R. to do historical and genealogical research to find the names of black soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War. Yet, while doing this research, the D.A.R. has failed to use census records and other historical documents that could help identify the races of soldiers. It has also used a narrow classification system for race, one that increases the potential for underreporting: the D.A.R. includes only men described in historical records as "black," "Negro" or "mulatto," on their lists of black soldiers. However, whites of the period used a far greater range of colors to describe African-Americans. They meticulously recorded color distinctions among slaves: labels like "brown," "yellow," and "copper" (among others) were used consistently in advertisements for the return of runaways. Excluding those "colored" patriots puts them off-limits to prospective black D.A.R. members who might otherwise make the connection.

Yielding to pressure, in 2001, the

D.A.R. published "African-American and American Indian Patriots of the Revolutionary War." The number of names grew to 2460 names from 1,656, including an additional 744 previously assumed to be "white." But there are still many more African-American soldiers to be identified, and while it acknowledges a handful of "brown" soldiers as black, as well as many "yellow" ones, the D.A.R. still holds to a narrow definition of an African-American.

This may give a clue to the D.A.R.'s resistance: when confronted with 64 "brown" soldiers who could have sired members, the organization conceded that as many as 57 may be listed in its index of proven Revolutionary war soldiers (patriots whose descendants became D.A.R. members). Yet, for generations, descendants of "brown" patriots married "light" or "white" mates, thus increasing the chances that white society, including organizations like the D.A.R., would be a safe harbor for their offspring. When the lists are complete, many people whose families assimilated into white society and cloaked their African heritage may learn, for the first time, of their complicated ancestry.

And in the black community, many people are unaware of their Revolutionary War heritage or reluctant to embrace it — whether their ancestors were white or black. They may fear ostracism from other blacks who may view white ancestry as a source of shame and a reminder of the injustices and indignities of slavery. The Daughters of the American Revolution's efforts to hide the complicated realities of the past have fueled these types of feelings. But every American, regardless of color, must realize that the past is not pretty, linear, or easily explained. □