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## THE GENEALOGIST'S ASSESSMENT OF ALEX HALEY'S *ROOTS*

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The American Bicentennial celebration spawned hundreds of new family histories, thousands of bumper stickers, and millions of lapel buttons; but nothing had the tremendous impact upon the psyche of America as did Alex Haley's novel, *Roots: the Saga of An American Family*. When Haley cried "My God! . . . I found you! Kunta Kinte!", he tugged the heart strings of the uprooted peoples of America, and cheers arose from all cultures in which ancestors are revered. As is true with any work of such import, it was also challenged. A public schism resulted between those who accepted *Roots* and those who were disappointed by its flaws. As Hamlet might have expressed the issue: "To believe or not to believe—that is the question."

For those who are sincerely interested in the field of genealogy, the question goes much deeper. At stake is the future of genealogy as a legitimate scholarly pursuit. At stake is the whole body of standards, the academic "code of ethics," which is at last developing in genealogy. At stake is the right of genealogists to use any and all of the best archives of America and receive the same degree of respect and the same degree of assistance that the scholar of history routinely receives.

Among archivists and professional historians alike, genealogists have suffered a reputation for academic mediocrity, for a naive acceptance of anything told them or anything that appears in print, a reputation for shallow research, amateurish methodology, and poor standards. This general charge is no longer just; countless genealogists are doing superb work. They have fought an uphill battle for several decades to introduce rigid standards into the study of genealogy and to convince the millions of genealogical newcomers of the crucial importance of these standards.

Then came *Roots*, a book advertised as an authentic family history, as the ultimate expression of the black experience in America, despite the caveats of some leading black historians. This saga has been hailed as the epitome of genealogical success, even though serious questions were raised about the validity of Haley's African and American episodes. *Roots* has been adopted within public schools and universities as a tool for the teaching of Southern and Black History, and it has been used as a banner by avant-garde historians, who claim to find more reality in oral tradition than in documentary evidence. It has also been accepted, unquestionably, by legions of neophyte black genealogists, naive as all genealogists initially are, who believe *Roots* should be the model for their own work.

The question of *Roots*' validity as a black family history is an important one to genealogists of all races. Although some Americans have been conditioned to superimpose racial divisions upon almost all aspects of life, such academic distinctions cannot exist in the science of genealogy. No ethnic group has a

monopoly upon oral tradition or documentation, literacy or illiteracy, mobility or stability. Among all peoples, each individual and family is unique; yet certain characteristics are basic to humanity and can be found in every ethnic group. It is true, at the same time, that certain procedures in the pursuit of black genealogy do differ from those in the pursuit of English genealogy, that the pursuit of ancestral research among white Creoles of Louisiana is different from that among the Pilgrims of Massachusetts, that research in Virginia differs from research in Tennessee, that research on black families in Alabama differs from that on black families in New York. Geographical and cultural differences do exist, but they coexist with the basic similarities of all mankind.

If genealogy is to be accepted as a legitimate field of study, of the same value to society as geography or diplomatic history, it must be governed by a set of standards; one set of standards that must apply to everyone. Moreover, every genealogist worthy of the name must be able to discern good genealogy from poor genealogy, and no one can accept mediocrity without significantly damaging the progress that the science of genealogy has made. Every family historian needs to possess the ability to critically appraise the work that others have done, to learn from the strengths of others and to profit from their mistakes. A critical analysis of Alex Haley's *Roots* provides to all genealogists an unparalleled opportunity to debate the application of standards, the effectiveness of various methodologies, the crucial importance of interpretation, and the limits of literary license.

A half dozen years ago, I was in the same position as many university professors of Southern and Black History. The appearance of *Roots* breathed fresh student interest into the humanities. A generation of youth who equated history with a boring litany of dates, wars, and elections suddenly realized that history was real. Alex Haley had proven to them that it could be as exciting as anything the television networks ever produced from sheer imagination. Students of Black History and Southern History wanted to study *Roots* rather than Frank Owsley's *The Mind of the South* or John Hope Franklin's *The Free Negro in North Carolina*.<sup>1</sup>

As I began to contemplate the best way to legitimately incorporate this novel into a university-level study of history, as I compared Haley's depiction of slave society with the concepts I have drawn from my own research and writing, as I reviewed the reams of press literature that were generated, and as I discussed the issue with my colleagues, there existed one element that troubled me more than any other. Certainly historical inaccuracies existed in *Roots*. No one's work is entirely free from error, but even the extent and the magnitude of the obvious problems found within *Roots* were not as disturbing as a fundamental deficiency that I noted among academic historians and genealogists. Professor Oscar Handlin of Harvard best expressed this problem (although he used the word "anthropologists" instead of "genealogists") in his commentary: "The historians say, 'Well, the anthropology must be correct,' and the anthropologists say 'Well, the history must be correct.' But if you add them together, there are a lot of interesting elements which raise the question of how a book like this can be successful."<sup>2</sup>

The crux of the problem was that no one had considered these elements together. Both the supporters and the detractors of *Roots*, on the academic level, were scholars of either history, or genealogy, or anthropology. Each recognized the problems within his own realm of expertise but did not realize the extent of the problems overall. There did not exist a cadre of scholars in Black History who were qualified to judge good genealogical work, nor did there exist a body of genealogical experts with solid training in Black History. As I particularly discussed this deficiency with my wife and colleague, Elizabeth Shown Mills (who had been working with Southern Black genealogy for many years), it became increasingly obvious to me that I could not conscientiously teach, as history, such a controversial novel without first resolving the interdisciplinary conflicts that existed. We also realized that we were in a unique position: while each of us, individually, faced the same handicaps as other historians and genealogists, we did have, in combination, the requisite background to make an interdisciplinary analysis of *Roots* as a tool for the teaching of history and genealogy.

The task was to consume years, rather than the weeks or months that we anticipated, and it proved to be only half of a dual analysis that eventually appeared. Our work stopped at the water's edge. We backtracked, through Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia, the Afro-American ancestry presented in *Roots*, as well as that of the masters who allegedly owned Haley's progenitors. Our findings, which exceeded the most dire projections we might have made, were published in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* as the lead article in volume 89 (January 1981). Meanwhile, separate work was being done on Haley's Gambian chronicle by Professor Donald R. Wright of the State University of New York—Cortland, a specialist in African pre-history with extensive experience in the collection of Gambian oral traditions. In the course of one of his field trips to the Senegambia a decade ago, Wright, in fact, had interviewed the same Juffure elder, Fofana, who had spun for Haley the tale of Kunta Kinte's origins. Dr. Wright's analysis of Haley's African experience appeared in the professional journal, *History of Africa*, in the same year that Elizabeth's and my article appeared.<sup>3</sup> The following genealogical assessment of *Roots* draws principally from these two studies, although time limitations preclude any possibility of presenting a complete discussion of our findings or those of Wright.

## ORAL HISTORY VERSUS DOCUMENTATION

The issue of Oral History vs. Documentation is the essence of almost all problems which Haley encountered in his genealogical efforts, and it will, in the same manner, determine the ultimate success or failure of the work of any would-be genealogist. Family tradition is invaluable as a beginning point in the research process. It holds the clues to ancestral identities, to the places and time frames in which those ancestors might be found, and to the special circumstances in which they may have been involved. Utilized in this manner, tradition is a powerful tool, but it can also be the proverbial millstone around one's neck if one exalts tradition to a state of sacredness that it does not possess.

Haley wrote eloquently of his personal despair as his work failed to bear fruit. As he made one Atlantic crossing, trying to envision the emotions of his legendary Kinte, the same thought occurred to Haley that came to some captive slaves in the middle passage who contemplated their hopeless situation—that of plummeting himself into the ocean.<sup>4</sup> Yet, Haley's chains were self-made. He had bound himself to the burden of proving an oral tradition, every holy word of it. His crusade was destined for failure.

There is no such thing as the Gospel According to Aunt Lizzie. Any genealogist who successfully traces a family lineage accepts this fact. Generations are omitted with extreme frequency in the oral begets of a family, as it appears to have happened in Haley's case. Anecdotes undergo metamorphosis, often to the point that they change substance entirely. Such transformations are to be expected. Aging memories develop wrinkles just as people do. Handed-down stories, like heirloom silver, take on a patina of their own.

To question Aunt Lizzie, to insist upon documenting each detail, is not to question her integrity (or to "impugn" her "dignity" as Haley has expressed it).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the issue of questioning the word of another is an intrinsic one to *Roots'* problems, to *Roots'* success, and to the course of genealogy as well. Haley developed such an attachment to his old aunt's story that he could accept no documentary evidence that deviated from it; the integrity of his family's traditions was not to be questioned. When Haley succeeded in convincing himself that documentary evidence was invalid and that the family's sketchy tradition was all the documentation needed, he announced to the world that he had traced his *Roots*, and most of the world accepted his pronouncement; to do otherwise would have been to question his integrity. Genealogists for centuries have adhered to this same tenet. They have accepted everything handed down to them, everything they read, everything any other genealogist told them, without documentation, because to do otherwise would be to question the other person's integrity.

Genealogical scholarship has now advanced past this point. The most significant achievements made in the field of genealogy, in the acceptance of genealogy as a worthwhile subject of study, has come about because genealogists have recognized the absolute necessity of documenting every fact, regardless of who or what its source. Haley himself recognized the need for documentation; indeed, he made countless declarations that his work was extensively documented, until it was proven otherwise. Unfortunately, since that time, his advice to fledgling black genealogists has been:<sup>6</sup>

... slaves were sold and shifted much like livestock, so records were sporadic. Nor did records reflect things like children born from unions between white masters and black women. So to expect these records to provide an accurate account is pure naiveté. When it comes to black genealogy, well-kept oral history is without question the best source.

The experienced historian and genealogist can only interpret this statement as a cop-out, an attempt to excuse inadequate research, and an inference that double standards in scholarship should exist because of past wrongs. In truth, records of slaves were sporadic, but the same handicap is faced by genealogists of all races whose ancestors were in the advance guard of the ever-moving frontier. Contrary to Haley's assertion, countless records exist to document

white paternity of children born to slave women and white maternity of part-black children.<sup>7</sup> Haley's ultimate pronouncement that "well-kept oral history" (whatever that is) is the best source cannot be accepted by any knowledgeable, successful student of family history; and if the practitioners of this field permit someone so misinformed to stand as a spokesman for the science of genealogy, then irreparable harm will be done to the next generation of genealogists, and the progress that this generation has made in raising the standards of genealogical scholarship will be eroded.

The validity of tradition as a pure reflection of historical truth knows neither racial nor geographical bounds. In the past, genealogists who placed great emphasis upon documentation of American lineages often relaxed their standards when they went abroad. Some have felt that there they are closer to the truth, while others assert that greater care has been taken in older countries to protect the quality of oral accounts. Such genealogists are naive. The crossing of an ocean, to Africa or to Europe, is not a holy rite of passage beyond which oral accounts are sanctified. (In Europe, there is not heard the American expression "to lie like a dog"; there it is said, "to lie like a genealogist"!) The fabrication of lineages for personal reasons, the embroidering of sagas to make immortal heroes of mere men, have been traits basic to all peoples of the world. The indiscriminating genealogist will, like Haley, fall victim to scams in some cases and to his own ineptitude in others.

## THE SEARCH FOR GAMBIAN ROOTS

Having failed through the use of American resources to document the origin and the transportation of his legendary Kinte, Haley went to Africa. Although he was aware that he would have to rely upon oral tradition, his methodology violated the basic rules of obtaining oral information. After a scholar of African linguistics suggested to him the geographic area from which his handed-down words and phrases apparently came, Haley appeared at the doors of that region's officials, told them the story he had learned at his old aunt's knee, and then they went out into the countryside to question the *griots* (the official "oral historians" of the villages). Predictably, one village entrepreneur listened to Haley's story, recognized the potential of the opportunity, and replied, in essence: "Ah, but yes! Of course I remember that story. . . ."

Unfortunately for Haley, and for the credibility of *Roots*, Fofana the *Griot* was not a *griot*. He had failed to meet community standards for that important post; and in all his years he had not earned the respect of his village. When professor Wright interviewed Fofana, shortly after Haley, the Juffure elder<sup>8</sup>

. . . showed no inclination to recite long (or short) genealogies of any families. He was eager, however, to speak of the Kunta Kinte episode, to the extent that in the entire interview . . . Kunta Kinte was the only individual about whom Fofana provided any specific information. Yet I recorded nothing of the kind of information that Haley received. Before the interview was over two inhabitants of Juffure, who had been listening to the questions and answers, began responding, because they believed they knew some things better than Fofana. The latter yielded his position.

On a second trip to Juffure, Professor Wright did not ask to speak to Fofana by name. Instead he asked "to speak to the person best versed in the history of the

village and its families." According to Wright, "I was taken to speak to four other people; Fofana's name never came up."<sup>9</sup>

Even more disturbing doubts over the reliability of Haley's self-styled *griot* emerged when it became known that a representative of the Gambian national archives had visited Fofana and taped his oral account of the Kinte genealogy (something Haley did not do). According to reporter Mark Ottaway of the London *Times*, who compared that tape with Haley's published account, there were numerous genealogical contradictions in the two versions. On the archives tape, Fofana identified Kinte's father as Lamin. In *Roots* Kinte's father is Omoro. On the archives tape, Kinte's father was the first in his family in the village of Juffure; in *Roots*, Kunta's grandfather was the first Kinte in the village. On the archives tape, Kinte's brothers were Usula, Suwandi and Omar. Within *Roots*, they are Lamin, Suwadu, and Madi.<sup>10</sup>

The credibility of Haley's African begats has been totally destroyed; but for the genealogical world the implications are broader. Was Haley's experience a fluke, created by his naiveté in telling first the story that he hoped to be told? If so, the researcher with more sophisticated methodology should be able to locate an authentic *griot*. Or, is it even possible to find an oral historian who can provide the type of African family history which Haley asks us to believe? Bakary Sidibe of the Gambian archives allegedly wrote Haley in 1973 to warn him that he had been duped; and in that letter he stated "to get a long detailed and sustained narrative from [a village] elder is rare." Professor Wright, who has interviewed some one hundred Gambian *griots* and elders, states: "From often disappointing experience I learned that . . . oral traditions of the lower Gambia simply do not contain specific information about real people living before the nineteenth century."<sup>11</sup>

In a historical, rather than genealogical, sense the significance of Haley's saga goes far beyond the validity of his alleged begats. Haley insists that the historical essence of his work is valid and that the Juffure narrative is an expression of the black experience in Africa. Both reporter Ottaway and Professor Willie Lee Rose of The Johns Hopkins University immediately challenged Haley, reminding him that Juffure was *not* the bucolic, pastoral village in which white men never set foot (although the villagers had heard fearful rumors of *toubob* slavers). Indeed, Juffure was a white trading village, two white military posts were within a mile of it, and the villagers were collaborators in the slave trade, helping whites capture slaves from points upriver.<sup>12</sup>

Rose and Ottaway's challenge brought an admission from Haley that he had taken literary license. He conceded, in fact, that "he had *purposefully* fictionalized his description of Juffure [because] Blacks long have needed a hypothetical Eden like whites have."<sup>13</sup> In the years since, this has been Haley's customary response to criticism. Challenges to the authenticity of his saga are taken as a public denial of racial oppression and of the special needs of the oppressed. After the appearance of the articles by Ottaway and Rose, for example, Haley retorted that the reporter had made "a cheap shot. It's like saying that Anne Frank never existed or that the whole Nazi thing was a

hoax."<sup>14</sup> In a 1979 article, *Roots*' author again rebutted criticism by stating: "what really upset me most was that, also, by implication, it clearly sought to impugn the dignity of black American's African heritage."<sup>15</sup> However, the black journalists and historians who appear among Haley's critics take a different view. Film critic Eugenia Collier has written:<sup>16</sup>

I think that I would give almost anything I own to know who my African ancestors were . . . And here is a man who had the oral tradition, the financial resources, the contacts, and the determination to find out this very thing—and who blew it. . . . I believe that Haley sold out. Capitalized on his Negro-ness. I doubt that he was ever committed to much beyond his own ego. Otherwise he would never have permitted such a travesty on his/our history.

All genealogists must agree with Ms. Collier's further statement: "History is sacred. If we lose our history, we lose our Selves."<sup>17</sup> The genealogist cannot afford to tamper with historical truth, to whitewash his own people, to idealize their role in society. He cannot, in his writings, distort that society to fit whatever purpose he hopes his literary license will achieve. Too often such distortions are incorporated into the text of conventional history, as Fofana's tale of Kunta Kinte has now been incorporated into African oral accounts. Almost all genealogists can cite similar examples in America in which a fabrication has been repeated so often that it is believed to be truth. Any such attempt to distort history ultimately obscures one's own heritage; and it can do so to such a point that one never finds the ancestors whom he seeks.

For these, as well as other reasons, Haley did not find his roots in Africa. But what of America? This is the question that Elizabeth will address in the next half of this paper.

In his 1977 *Reader's Digest* article, "My Search for Roots," Alex Haley asserted: "through plantation records, wills, census records, I documented bits here, shreds there. . . . By 1967, I felt I had the seven generations of the U.S. side documented."<sup>18</sup> In actuality, the same plantation records, wills, censuses, legal conveyances, and other record categories touted by Haley *not only fail to document his story, they contradict every statement of Afro-American lineage, prior to the Civil War, that appears in Roots*. While the fictionalized format in which *Roots* is presented provides its readers with almost no evidence of sources of methodology, Haley's various writings have outlined some of his thought progressions and research procedures, and they have spotlighted a number of problems that are still far more common to genealogy than one might hope, principally: illogical reasoning, inadequate historical background, insufficient research (or inadequate use of records consulted), the warping of documented facts to fit a specific need, careless notetaking, and poor-to-nonexistent documentation.

## BRIDGING THE OCEAN: *ROOTS*' APPROACH TO SOLVING THE CLASSIC IDENTITY PROBLEM

According to Haley's family tradition, his African ancestor (Kinte alias Toby) was brought to America through the port of Annapolis. Of course, tradition does not supply the year, and port records do not identify by name the forced immigrants from Africa as they sometimes do with forced immigrants



from Europe. However, it is Haley's contention that Kinte arrived in Annapolis in 1767 aboard the *Lord Ligonier*, and he based this decision upon two factors. First, Fofana's account of Kinte's capture held that it occurred "the year the King's soldiers came" to the Gambia. Second, at Lloyd's of London (supposedly) Haley found ship rolls lying unopened in long-abandoned cartons, which revealed that one Colonel O'Hare brought a troop of soldiers to the Gambia in 1767, the same year that a ship sailed from the Gambia laden with slaves, bound for the port of Annapolis.<sup>19</sup>

*Roots* had scarcely rolled off the presses before questions arose over the validity of Haley's African-American connection. Lloyd's of London notified the genealogical world that it has no long-forgotten records of any kind, no unopened cartons, no ship rolls, and no records which identify the cargo of the specific vessels they insured in that era. Reporter Ottaway further pointed out that Haley misdated the arrival of Colonel O'Hara (not O'Hare's) forces, and that they did not arrive the same year that the *Ligonier* sailed. Moreover, the first group of "King's soldiers" actually arrived in Gambia in 1661, 106 years before the group of "King's soldiers" which Haley fixed upon. According to Ottaway:<sup>20</sup>

When I asked Haley why out of all these "king's soldiers" he should have selected those under O'Hara, he said it was because his *researchers in America* had indicated that his ancestor *must have been* shipped to Annapolis, Maryland before 1768. The *only ship he could trace* which had made the voyage from the Gambia to Annapolis during the 1760s had done so in 1767. In other words, Haley simply found an African event to fit his American research.

On the other hand, the evidence also suggests the opposite, that Haley's earliest American research was based upon his predetermination that the 1767 ship was the one which carried his ancestor in its hold. According to Haley:<sup>21</sup>

I went to Richmond, Virginia. I pored through microfilmed legal deeds filed within Spotsylvania County, Virginia, *after September 1767*, when the Lord Ligonier had landed. In time, I found a lengthy deed dated September 5, 1768, in which John Waller and his wife Ann transferred to William Waller land and goods, including 240 acres of farmland . . . and then on the second page 'and also one Negro man slave named Toby.'

"My God!" Haley exclaimed at that point, and every genealogist knows the ecstasy of such a movement when one first finds in print the name of a long-sought ancestor. However, the competent genealogist does not fall into the snare of embracing as his own any man of record who happens to bear a name identical to the one he seeks, until he gathers all possible evidence and unless the preponderance of that evidence weighs in favor of this being one and the same man.

At this point, Haley again failed in the identification of his African ancestor. According to the tradition he sought to prove, Kinte (alias Toby) belonged to one John Waller, from whom he escaped. In punishment a portion of his foot was cut off. The document which Haley found does show one Toby in the possession of one John Waller. However, if Haley had not arbitrarily chosen the date 1767 for Toby's arrival, or if he had even tested the accuracy of this theory by searching pre-1767 records, he would have discovered that this Waller slave Toby appeared in at least six documents prior to the arrival of the *Ligonier*.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, if Kinte was captured in 1767, he was not the Waller slave Toby.

When interviewed by a *New York Times* reporter on his reaction to Haley's saga, one noted Yale professor dismissed allegations of such errors in *Roots* as unimportant. *Roots*, he said, was "a statement of someone's search for identity. . . . It would seem to me to retain a good deal of impact no matter how many mistakes the man has made. In any genealogy there are bound to be a number of mistakes."<sup>23</sup> However, among competent genealogists, such lax expectations from our science are no longer acceptable. Errors in identity matter a great deal from a genealogical standpoint, and a single error of identity can invalidate an entire lineage.

In the case of Haley's *Roots*, there are a number of such genealogical errors, each of such magnitude that even alone it could not be overlooked. The cumulative effect is damning. For example: according to *Roots*, Toby remained celibate for twenty-two years after his arrival in America (in short, a whole generation). Dr. Waller favored Toby over some two dozen or more slaves that he owned, and Toby was chosen to drive the doctor as he made his rounds of the county. In 1789, Toby married Bell, the cook for Waller's mansion-house; and in 1790 Bell bore a daughter Kizzy, who grew to maturity on Dr. Waller's main plantation.

Historical evidence reveals a far different story. Tax rolls clearly show that William Waller owned no mansion-house for Bell to cook in; he owned no buggy for Toby to drive; he owned no plantation in this period—and no slaves. There is no indication that he practiced medicine at all past 1770, which was a mere three years after Kinte supposedly arrived. What the evidence does suggest is that Dr. Waller was ill and incapable of caring for himself, much less for others. When his father's estate was settled (four years before the arrival of the *Ligonier*), Dr. Waller deeded his entire inheritance to his brother John who, in turn, was to provide him with clothes, food, and all other necessities. The brother John then proceeded to squander the estate. In 1768, in the document found by Haley, Dr. Waller took back from John all that remained of his inheritance, 240 acres and a black male named Toby. There is no further record of this slave Toby, and in 1770 Waller sold the last of his land. Twice in the years that followed, he executed agreements with relatives, promising to give them the inheritance he would one day receive from his mother; and again in these instances the conveyances appear to have been made in exchange for their caring for him as his derelict brother had first promised.<sup>24</sup> It is clearly proven that Waller owned no slaves in 1789 when Toby allegedly married Bell, nor in 1790 when Kizzy supposedly was born, nor in 1806 when Waller is accused of selling Kizzy away from her parents.

Not only do these facts destroy the entire substance of nearly two hundred pages of Haley's alleged family history (the whole Waller plantation episode) but it also calls into question the very parentage of Kizzy. Given the fact that Waller at no time owned a slave named either Bell or Kizzy, and given the fact that Kizzy was allegedly born twenty-two years after Toby's last known existence, it is impossible to accept the assertion that Toby was Kizzy's father.

## GETTING TO THE ROOTS OF "FACTION" (I.E., THE TRANSFORMATION OF GENEALOGICAL FACT INTO SALEABLE FICTION)

If, however, one assumes that Haley neglected to use the tax rolls and therefore did not discover that Dr. Waller was propertyless for nearly all of his adult life, one still cannot justify certain deliberate distortions of the evidence which Haley *did* uncover: According to *Roots*, in 1786 Waller's brother John fathered a daughter called Missy Anne, who became Kizzy's childhood playmate and who eventually betrayed the faith of her black friend. Three years later, allegedly, Dr. Waller drafted a will in which he left his slaves "to little Missy Anne," on condition that he did not marry first.<sup>25</sup>

County records do yield such a document, although it was not a will, it was a deed of gift. By the terms of this document, Dr. Waller promised to his niece Anne, daughter of John, three slaves he expected to receive when his mother died. However, if Dr. Waller were to marry before his death, then the deed of gift to Anne would be voided. One astounding discrepancy exists between the document and Haley's version: it was actually drafted twenty-two years earlier than the date Haley gave. By the time that "little Missy Anne" was allegedly born, her father had been dead eleven years. By the time that Kizzy was born, Miss Anne Waller had a husband and children of her own.<sup>26</sup> Under such circumstances, there can be no conclusion but that Haley deliberately altered the documented facts, as he did in the case of the village of Juffure, in order to create a better story and more dramatically stage the stereotyped and fictionalized injustice that he wanted to depict.

There is yet another major problem within *Roots* which hinges upon a date, a problem that again calls paternity into question: according to *Roots*, on the first Monday of October 1806, Kizzy helped her sweetheart escape. The following Saturday, a slave trader took her on a four-day journey to Caswell County, North Carolina, where she was immediately purchased and assaulted by one Tom Lea. Simple arithmetic and a perpetual calendar indicate that the alleged rape occurred 15 October 1806, yet, it was "in the winter of 1806" that Kizzy was delivered of her "pecan-colored" child, according to *Roots*.<sup>27</sup> This was surely the shortest pregnancy on record.

Again, in the case of Tom Lea and his family, as with William Waller, all documents generated by the Leas contradict every alleged fact and event that make up Haley's portrayal of his family's servitude in North Carolina: The character of Tom Lea and his birth family was grossly distorted (as outlined in considerable detail in our article). A similar analysis of the Lea slave household reveals even more disturbing discrepancies. Various documents exist which identify the slaves of Tom Lea, by name, age, sex, and relationship. Not one of the characters in Haley's saga was ever owned by Tom Lea.<sup>28</sup> Again, the only possible conclusions are: 1) that Haley's research has not revealed the actual names of his ancestors; or 2) that his slave progenitors did not belong to the Tom Lea whom he claims as his own forefather.

The Tom Lea estate file completely negates another major incident within

Haley's North Carolina saga. A very emotional episode focuses upon Lea's alleged economic disasters, of his dispatch of his misbegotten son, Chicken George, to England to satisfy debtors, upon his heartless sale of George's father during his absence, and of Lea's ultimate refusal to honor the promise of freedom he had made George before sending him away. We are told that George enticed his father into a drunken stupor and stole his freedom papers before going in search of his lost family. This incident allegedly occurred in the 1850s. Aside from the obvious point that Chicken George's presence in England (where slavery was illegal) would have won him an automatic manumission under both English and American law, there remains the fact that Tom Lea died in the winter of 1844–1845. Even if Haley does descend from Lea, the heartwrenching episodes just outlined, which covered many pages of his saga, did not occur.<sup>29</sup>

Yet again, it appears that Haley "purposefully fictionalized" (to use the words he chose for his admission of guilt in Gambia) his entire American saga from the enslavement of his family to their emancipation at the close of the Civil War. Haley has called his brand of fiction "faction," and he defines this as the presentation of fact in a fictionalized format, the transformation of his "grand passion for truth"<sup>30</sup> into the passion of dialogue. In truth, it is difficult to find any shreds of fact within Haley's "faction."

From a commercial standpoint, Haley's "faction" has been a success. From a genealogical viewpoint, it is totally irresponsible. Family historians deal with real people and have a moral obligation to portray their subjects honestly. Literary license does exist, and it can be applied to works of fiction; but when a genealogist (as Haley has proclaimed himself to be) publishes his "roots," he does not have the right to villainize or slander the Tom Leas, the Anne Wallers or the John Does who coexisted with his ancestors.

The chasms that exist between *Roots* and legitimate family history go far deeper than these few problems. A litany of other genealogical and historical discrepancies exists, embracing almost every character within Haley's saga and most of its events. Many (though certainly not all) of these were outlined in our prior article. Professor Rose's work cited other historical *faux pas* within *Roots* and they pointed out:<sup>31</sup> "These anachronisms are petty only in that they are details. . . . They are too numerous to chip away at the verisimilitude of central matters in which it is important to have full faith." Still, amid Haley's melange of misinformation and misconstrued circumstances, some threads of genealogical evidence are visible. Among those discussed in our articles are two very exciting ones:

1. A historical connection does exist between the Lea family of North Carolina and the Wallers of Virginia. If Haley had pursued this, some if not all of his genealogical problems might have been solved. Haley attempted to bridge the geographical gap between these two families by inventing a slave trader who took Kizzie from one state to the other. Apparently, he did not discover, or did not recognize the significance of the fact, that both Tom Lea's father and his father-in-law were natives of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, where the Lea and Waller families were neighbors. In fact, the grandparents of Mrs. Tom Lea were the original patentees of the very tract of 240 acres which Dr. Waller and his brother John later conveyed to each other, together with the slave man Toby.<sup>32</sup> However, if the legendary Kizzy was taken to North Carolina by the Lea families at the time they removed from Spotsylvania, then Kizzy was at

least a generation older than that which Haley shows. This may explain the apparent gap between the alleged birthdate of Kizzy and the last known record of her alleged father.

2. Documents do exist showing that the Wallers owned a crippled slave. However, the time period was the decade before the arrival of the *Ligonier*, and the name of the slave was not Toby; it was George, a name that was popular in Haley's ancestral line. While Kizzy's son was supposedly called Chicken George, this earlier Waller slave was called Hoping [Hopping] George, a nickname that would be quite appropriate for a slave who had lost half of one foot. It is also important to note that none of the six documents found about Toby mentioned any physical infirmity or deformity, although such references were made time and again in the Waller records. Moreover, the estate of Col. William Waller (father of Dr. William), to whom Hoping George belonged and in whose household Toby appears to have been born, also contained a slave woman *Isbell*, whom Col. Waller had inherited from his own father.<sup>33</sup>

In short, various names connected to Haley's family tradition do appear together in history, and certain key slave names do appear in the Waller households. But they do not match the personal identities, relationships, and time frames which Haley invented for them in his attempt to mold real people from the skeletal remains of his family's tradition.

## THE LONG-RANGE IMPACT OF *ROOTS* UPON HISTORY AND GENEALOGY

In the years that have elapsed since Haley's settlement of the last plagiarism suit filed against him, the popularity of *Roots* among scholars and academicians has drastically waned. Eugenia Collier best expressed the disillusionment among her ranks when she wrote:<sup>34</sup> "The suit was settled out of court with Haley admitting indiscretions on the part of his research assistants. *What* research assistants? I was given the impression that the work was based on Haley's own quest. And how come he was un-knowing enough to let them get away with copying parts of this white man's work?"

There have been several accounts of how material from other authors of fiction could find its way into Haley's allegedly factual account of his personal quest for roots: vague references to slips of paper given to him by enthusiastic audiences at his lectures or to the culling of this material by graduate students who supposedly did not know that sources had to be identified.<sup>35</sup> Such explanations are at once incredible and credible. It is difficult to believe that at any American university there could exist a body of graduate students who are not aware that research has to be documented. However, it is very easy to comprehend how a neophyte genealogist, who has not had academic training in historical research or methodology, can gather reams of unorganized notes on scattered pieces of paper, all devoid of documentation. One can make an excursion through any genealogical library and still find people enthusiastically scribbling notes or xeroxing pages out of publications without making adequate notations of source.

The widespread negative publicity which *Roots* received, after the initial burst of public enthusiasm, has to a great extent been good for genealogy. It has made American researchers more cautious, more diligent, and more responsible. The dabblers in genealogy, who are more likely to watch Roger Mudd's newscasts than to read Richard Lackey's *Cite Your Sources*,<sup>36</sup> have nonetheless been made cognizant of problems that can result from sloppy notetaking or inadequate documentation. More serious genealogical hobbyists

have followed the press-mill stories of Haley's long years of research and they have deduced that the number of years in which one pursues genealogy is far less meaningful than the quality of the work that is done.

Yet, negative legacies left by *Roots* still persist. They probably will always persist. Like Ms. Collier, we fear that the people to whom *Roots* could have meant the most will be those who are the most damaged by it. In a 1972 article in the *Genealogical Helper*, Haley billed himself as "probably . . . the person most knowledgeable about black genealogy,"<sup>37</sup> and in the years since, he has, according to his own count, delivered thousands of lectures to college audiences and advised countless numbers who seek their own roots.

The fledgling field of Black Genealogy is in need of role models. *Roots* billed itself as exactly that: the story of twenty-five million black Americans. When Haley asserts that his saga "isn't the story of a family, it's the saga of a people [because] I have charted the history of every black American,"<sup>38</sup> he is believed by the masses who need a figurehead in whom they can take pride, such as Kunta Kinte, instead of the Stepin Fetchits of yesteryear's literature.

However, society has now merely traded stereotypes, because stereotypes are the essence of Haley's novel. Failing to find his real past, he fictionalized, drawing from already published works the ideas and the elements that he preferred to believe. Yet in perpetuating his own unschooled concept of black history, in encouraging the masses to accept these stereotypes as the ultimate experiences of Black America, he has negated in the popular mind much of the legitimate and revolutionary research that is being done by the nation's best black historians.

As a professional genealogist and a historian living in the Deep South and working in the field of black family history, we have noticed in the post-*Roots* era a distinct shift in the psyche of black genealogical enthusiasts. Among those with whom we come in contact, a search for the origins of one's family surname is guided less often by Herbert Gutman's study of black naming patterns<sup>39</sup> and more often by Haley's generalization that slaves always took the names of their masters and changed their names every time they were sold. The researcher's concepts of slavery mirror Haley's naiveté rather than the extensive econometric studies of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman.<sup>40</sup> The black genealogist of today seems also more prone to share Haley's tenacious faith in the sanctity of his family's traditions and less willing to explore clues or accept documents that might question the validity of what he has been told; after all, "Mr. Haley's family tradition proved true, every word of it. Why not mine?" Librarians and archivists as well have observed an ingrained frustration, a sense of ultimate futility, on the part of some black patrons who fear they will not be successful because they cannot afford to go to Africa as Haley did.

Yes, *Roots* filled a need that Black America has long felt, a yearning for a literary hero with whom it could identify. It is unfortunate that this need was filled under the guise of legitimate family history. The extent to which this work of fiction negatively affects our field depends upon all of us, principally upon the degree to which we adopt and adhere to the standards of research, documentation, and publication that are set before us by the National Genealogical Society, the American Society of Genealogists, the Association

of Professional Genealogists, and their fellow societies of the same calibre. The issue of standards is the ultimate genealogical issue that *Roots* has raised, and it is the ultimate issue that confronts the field of genealogy as it seeks to progress past the *Roots* era.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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