

## Genealogy Ethics and the Call for Diversity

By LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, JD, LLM, CG

The specter of racial or ethnic bias has the potential to tarnish the reputation of genealogy as a profession. Should our field respond to ongoing calls for diversity? This article intends to open a conversation on the question. A comprehensive treatment of a perceived lack of diversity is, however, beyond its scope. The Genealogist's Code as set out in *Genealogy Standards* (hereafter, BCG Code) embodies principles that argue in favor of an explicit response. Three of its provisions have particular relevance to the issue, namely, the admonitions to promote a truthful approach, act in the best interests of the profession, and strive for civility.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

*Contemporary blog posts and related commentary charge that the profession has failed to foster diversity.* The "establishment" has been assailed for an undue focus on European frames of reference, as well as the underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>2</sup> Criticism has been leveled at the insistence on what are viewed as disadvantaging practices—such as the focus on documentation in the face of antebellum laws that prevented most of the enslaved population from creating their own records.<sup>3</sup> The lack of diversity in topics and attendees at national conferences has also been decried.<sup>4</sup>

*The universe of interested parties is not limited to members of racial or ethnic populations.* Concerns about a lack of inclusiveness in the profession have resonated in the wider genealogical community.<sup>5</sup> Many genealogists of European ancestry research families with other antecedents.<sup>6</sup> The growing popularity of genetic genealogy has sparked the interest of people who have discovered ancestors or collateral relatives of a different race.<sup>7</sup>

### Guidance Provided by the BCG Code

BCG trustees developed genealogy's first

code of ethics in 1964.<sup>8</sup> Since 1971 all associates have been required to subscribe to the BCG Code because "questionable or unethical conduct casts discredit not only on the individual, but also on the certifying . . . organization, and upon all others who received similar recognition from the same source."<sup>9</sup> The reverse is also true; the perception of bias in the profession has a similar potential to harm the reputation of its members.

The BCG Code is fortunately broad enough to provide guidance relevant to the question whether the profession should engage in a discourse on diversity. Three of its principles offer a rationale for responding to criticism about the lack of diversity in a manner that is consistent with the overarching objective of striving "for the highest level of truth and accuracy in all phases of [our] work."<sup>10</sup> Similar provisions are found in the Code of Ethics promulgated by the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG).

1. Promote a truthful approach: I will not publish or publicize as fact anything I know to be false, doubtful, or unproved; nor will I be a party, directly or indirectly, to such action by others. (Adherents of the APG Code agree to "promote a coherent, truthful approach to genealogy, family history and local history."<sup>11</sup>)
2. Act in the best interests of the profession: I will act, speak, and write in a manner I believe to be in the best interests of the profession and scholarship of genealogy. (The APG Code requires adherents to "promote the welfare of the genealogical community."<sup>12</sup>)
3. Strive for civility: I will participate in exposing genealogical fraud; but I will not otherwise knowingly injure or attempt to injure the reputation, prospects, or practice of another genealogist. (The APG Code admonishes members to "refrain from public

behavior, oral remarks or written communications that defame the profession, individual genealogists, or the Association of Professional Genealogists."<sup>13</sup>)

### Our Profession's Response

These three principles could inform the decision whether to respond to critics of the current state of affairs.

*Promote a truthful approach.* The quest for truth would presumably examine the historical backdrop against which modern genealogy standards were crafted. Some of the needed analysis has already been published; for example, a fairly recent history relates how the "Civil War profoundly altered the meaning and practice of [American genealogy] by turning it into "a way to exclude others" and by elevating the "importance of race."<sup>14</sup> Notably missing is a systemic review of the implications of this history, in terms of the dearth of resources for racial and ethnic minorities.

The suggested approach does not presage any particular resolution, but it does assume that a good faith effort to engage on the issues of diversity would acknowledge the past. This means, for example, that we cannot ignore the unsavory implications of a chapter entitled "Genealogy and Eugenics" in the otherwise well regarded and still recommended volume that was first published in 1930 by the "founder" of the "modern American school of critical genealogists."<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, it would also be important to survey and evaluate on-going efforts aimed at fostering inclusiveness, such as *SpringBoard's* series on diverse communities<sup>16</sup> and the spate of articles with African-American subjects that have dominated the National Genealogical Society's annual family history writing contest in recent years.<sup>17</sup> Whether developments

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such as these are adequately publicized or would be viewed as sufficient progress are questions that may not be answerable until stakeholders are engaged in a dialogue.

Promoting truth might also require rooting out any "implicit bias" that creates unidentified barriers.<sup>18</sup> The importance of taking account of interactions between enslaved persons and slaveholders is well established,<sup>19</sup> and "the genealogist, if conscientious, will not even consider falsifying the facts as the records disclose them."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, we saw a public example of the continuing impulse to shy away from revelations about slave-holding ancestors when an actor was accused of exerting improper influence over the PBS show, *Finding Your Roots*.<sup>21</sup> This incident highlights the continuing need for vigilance to guard against unconscious inclinations to present genealogies in a way that soothes modern sensibilities.

*Act in the best interests of the profession.* It seems clear that inclusivity is in the best interests of the future of the profession, in terms of adding and retaining new members. Questions would likely arise, however, regarding the advisability of specific actions. For example, there might be a question about the extent of any affirmative obligation to engage in outreach to diverse communities. As another example, a question might arise regarding whether it would be advisable for conference organizers to evaluate prospective instructors by reference to whether proposals would either

- contribute to diversity in the profession, or
- be of interest to diverse communities.

The "best interests of the profession" principle can be applied to these and any other situations, with the stipulation that diversity is an appropriate criterion.

*Strive for civility.* However passionate

the discourse on diversity might become, one hopes that all involved would focus on the current state of the profession and where we go from here. Ad hominem arguments from any quarter would be counterproductive. It should be possible to engage in a dialogue on the subject of diversity in a manner that is respectful of divergent views while working toward reconciliation.

**Conclusion**

The BCG Code and similar ethical standards support the view that it is in the best interests of the profession to respond to charges of bias. Genealogy is not the only discipline grappling with issues arising from the marginalization of racial or ethnic communities.<sup>22</sup> Lessons can be learned from other fields of study that have tackled these issues.<sup>23</sup> Our profession has what may be a unique opportunity to respond to calls for redress in a manner that fosters reconciliation. At the least, concerns about the lack of diversity in the profession warrant an examination of the historical treatment of diverse communities, as well as the dissemination of information about current efforts to foster diversity.

Websites were viewed 13 December 2016.

1. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards* (Nashville: Ancestry, 2014), Appendix A: The Genealogist's Code, 45–48.
2. Nicka Smith, "The Problem of the Color Line," posted 5 October 2015, *Who is Nicka Smith?* (<http://www.whoisnickasmith.com/genealogy/the-problem-of-the-color-line/>). Also, Nicka Sewell-Smith, moderator, "BlackProGen LIVE Talks Diversity in Genealogy and Family History Research," 12 October 2016, *YouTube* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1Z7Anc4Fj8&feature=youtu.be>).
3. Ellen Fernandez-Sacco, "Oral history, Alex Haley's Roots and the question of proof," posted 18 October 2016, *Latino Genealogy* (<http://latinogenealogy.blogspot.com/2016/10/the-genealogy-of-genealogy-oral-history.html>).
4. Liz Loveland, "Making American Genealogical Events More Welcoming to All," posted 19 December 2014, *My Adventures in Genealogy* (<https://adventuresingenealogy.wordpress.com/tag/>

diversity-in-the-genealogical-community/).

5. See Pat Richley-Erickson, "When the papers are purposefully burned or merely succumb to the ravages of time," posted 19 October 2016, *Dear Myrtle* (<http://blog.dearmyrtle.com/2016/10/when-papers-are-purposefully-burned.html>). Also, Genealogy Jen, "5 Simple Ways to Promote Diversity in our Genealogy Community," posted 7 October 2016, *Repurposed Genealogy* (<https://www.repurposedgenealogy.com/2016/10/07/5-simple-ways-to-promote-diversity-our-genealogy-community/>).
6. For example, see Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Isle of Canes and Issues of Conscience: Master-Slave Sexual Dynamics and Slaveholding by Free People of Color," *Between Two Worlds: A Special Issue of The Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 43 (Winter 2006): 158–75; digital image at Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Historic Pathways* (<http://www.HistoricPathways.com>).
7. For example, see Anastasia Harman, Natalie D. Cottrill, Paul C. Reed, and Joseph Shumway, "Documenting President Barack Obama's Maternal African-American Ancestry: Tracing His Mother's Bunch Ancestry to the First Slave in America," article, 15 July 2012, *Ancestry.com* ([http://c.mfcreative.com/offer/us/obama\\_bunch/PDF/main\\_article\\_final.pdf](http://c.mfcreative.com/offer/us/obama_bunch/PDF/main_article_final.pdf)). Also, Judy G. Russell, "Coming to the table," posted 28 May 2016, *The Legal Genealogist* (<http://www.legalgenealogist.com/2016/05/28/coming-to-the-table/>). Russell's blog post discusses the discovery of an African American DNA relative who, based on preliminary analysis, may be related through the author's slaveholding, nineteenth-century ancestor.
8. *Genealogy Standards*, 45.
9. Walter Lee Sheppard Jr., "Professional Ethics in Genealogical Research," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 67 (March 1979): 3–11, specifically page 4; digital image ([http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/ngsq\\_archives](http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/ngsq_archives)).
10. An earlier version of the BCG Code required associates "pledge to strive for the highest level of truth and accuracy in all my work . . . to act honorably toward other genealogists and the profession." Although the Code has evolved, the overarching objective of striving for truth and accuracy is still a core principle of BCG.
11. "Code of Ethics," *Association of Professional Genealogists* (<https://www.apgen.org/ethics/index.html>).
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. For example, see François Weil, *Family Trees: A History of Genealogy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); page 112 of 304 in e-book. This historian posits that "[i]n the wake of the war, many whites felt the need to bind up wounds and restore unity. . . . The relation they established among ancestor worship, nationalism,

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and racism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made genealogy into a political and social tie for some Americans, as well as a way to exclude others.”

15. Donald Lines Jacobus, *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession*, 2nd ed. (1968; reprint, Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1999), 2, 102.

16. Rhoda Miller, “Diverse Communities: Researching Jewish Ancestors,” posted 8 June 2016, *Springboard* (<http://bcgcertification.org/blog/2016/06/diverse-communities-researching-jewish-ancestors/>). Also, LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, “Researching African American Families that Came Out of Slavery,” posted 5 January 2016, *Springboard* (<http://bcgcertification.org/blog/2016/01/researching-african-american-families-that-came-out-of-slavery/>).

17. See Leslie Elaine Anderson, “Tabitha (Bugg) George Smith of Mecklenburg County, Virginia,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 103 (March 2015): 5–28. Also, Paul K. Graham, “A Love Story Proved: The Life and Family of Laura Lavinia (Kelly) Combs of Atlanta and Augusta, Georgia,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 101 (December 2013): 245–266.

18. See Christine Jolls and Cass R. Sunstein, “The Law of Implicit Bias,” *California Law Review*, 94 (July 2006) 969–996. The Implicit Association Test “finds that most people have an implicit and unconscious bias against members of traditionally disadvantaged groups.”

19. Alycon Trubey Pierce, “Slave Records Correct Cato West’s Confused Ancestry,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 99 (March 2011): 5–14.

20. Jacobus, *Genealogy as Pastime and Profession*, 18.

21. John Koblin, “A PBS Show, a Frustrated Ben Affleck, and a Loss of Face,” *The New York Times*, 25 June 2015, HTM edition, archived (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/26/business/media/a-pbs-show-a-frustrated-ben-affleck-and-a-loss-of-face.html>).

22. Annette Gordon-Reed, “Slavery’s Shadow,” *The New Yorker*, 23 October 2013; online copy, *The New Yorker* (<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/slaverys-shadow>). This historian wrote that “slave narratives are often said to raise special concerns as items of historical evidence,” and noted “history’s cruel irony” in that “the vast majority [of the enslaved] could neither read nor write, and they therefore left behind no documents, which are lifeblood of the historian’s craft.”

23. For example, see Denice Adkins, Christina Virden, and Charles Yier, “Learning about Diversity: The Roles of LIS Education, LIS Associations, and Lived Experience,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 85 (April 2015): 139–49; digital image, *JSTOR* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680153>).

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