



THE ZEITGEIST AND SERENDIPITY

Aaron Goodwin

In light of current events and the preceding article (“Inconvenient Facts”), the most recent issue of *NGSQ* is of particular interest. It’s also particularly timely, an almost impossible achievement for any journal with a production schedule that stretches over many months of planning, developing, editing, and finalizing.

LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, JD, LL.M., CG, CGL, authored the issue’s lead article, “Parents for Isaac Garrett of Laurens County, South Carolina: DNA Corroborates Oral Tradition.” Earlier this week, Garrett-Nelson wrote a Facebook post about the publication and its timing.

Zeitgeist. The image on the cover of the June issue of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly (NGSQ) is my great-grandfather: Wister Lee Garrett (1863–1928) of Laurens County, South Carolina. The NGSQ editors could not have predicted the death of George Floyd or the ensuing protests that would focus the nation’s attention on unjustified killings of Black people by police, yet they selected the image of a parent who suffered the pangs of having his unarmed nineteen-year-old son killed by a white peace office, after his son complied with a request to step outside a church. The peace office was held blameless after he testified that the victim had “made a flourish as if” to draw a pistol and he feared for his life.

My great uncle’s killing took place 101 years ago, one of many in a long line of racially based injustices that continue into the present. Genealogy can be a force for social change, especially in a time that may well be an inflection point in race relations. By correcting misconceptions and fostering intellectual integrity as we tell the lives of our ancestors, genealogists can contribute to the process of racial reconciliation.

The June issue of the NGSQ includes my great-grandfather’s bio on the inside cover, my article that uses DNA to corroborate indirect evidence and oral history about his Garrett grandparents, and a local newspaper report about the killing of his son.[1]

That same day, Elizabeth Shown Mills, CG, CGL, FASG, FNGS, FUGA, and past editor of *NGSQ*, shared Garrett-Nelson’s post and added her own commentary.

bit of genealogical history . . .

In 1982, this journal, the National Genealogical Society Quarterly, became the first peer-reviewed genealogical journal to publish a genealogy of an enslaved family.[2] It was a contribution jointly researched and authored by my late husband and I.

In Spring 1987, with our first issue as new co-editors of NGSQ, we had the opportunity to publish the second such genealogy—that one authored by the late Johni Cerny based heavily upon research by Gordon Remington, FASG.[3]

Across the next sixteen years, we had the pleasure of working with some of the best African American genealogists in existence—including Curtis Brasfield, CG (previously the author of the genealogy of Chicago’s Mayor Harold Washington), Douglas S. Shipley, Del Jupiter, Ruth Randall, Rev. C. Bernard Ruffin III, and others—several of them on multiple articles.

Our successors at NGSQ (first, Thomas W. Jones with Claire Bettag then Melinde Lutz Byrne; and now the team of Nancy Peters and Alan Peterson) have continued to seek out and publish similar and superb case studies and family histories. Each demonstrates the struggle to reconstruct African American families and the methodology that can break through their unique walls. The current issue follows in that tradition, offering the second contribution by LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, J.G., CG, current president of the Board for Certification of Genealogists.

After I posted this link to LaBrenda’s article, without comment, someone messaged me privately to ask whether articles such as this could help him, given that he had no African American ancestors (to his knowledge).

I’m now adding this commentary for others who may wonder the same. From the work of all these contributors to NGSQ, I have learned much—not just about records, family, human nature, and research methodology, but also the extent to which families are intertwined across all ethnicities.

In 2003, when NGS asked me to deliver its 100th Anniversary banquet address,[4] I ended with a statement I still believe is true—even more so than then:

“In a society that causes historians such as [Ann] Cooper to fear the result of multiculturalism, genealogy is no longer a mere ego trip. It is a vital form of education that no other branch of history can match, because it teaches a powerful truth: None of us can harbor prejudice against another group of people when we realize that, with the very next document we find, we could be a part of them.”[5]

It’s good to know that NGS has notably improved since its membership formally barred African Americans from membership in 1960. It’s also good to gather additional information about the organization’s past and evolution. A somewhat fuller picture is beginning to come into view.

But this is no time to rest on our more recent laurels. The field of genealogy, its societies, and many of its practitioners were long leaders and key participants in actively silencing African Americans, their history, and genealogy. We have a special obligation now to take complete stock of our past, acknowledge all the ways we contributed to the problem, determine how to address inequities we perpetuated, and take real action to make amends.

For readers who would like more background on Garrett-Nelson’s article and the research involved in writing it, you have two opportunities. First, her presentation, *DNA Corroborates Oral Tradition About the Parents of a Freedman* (along with five other presentations about African American research), is available at Legacy Family Tree Webinars for free June 26–28 (https://familytreewebinars.com/webinar_details.php?webinar_id=1524), then continues to be available to paid subscribers.

Second, Garrett-Nelson can also be heard talking about her research with Bernice Bennett on Bennett’s Blog Talk Radio series, *Research at the National Archives and Beyond*, in the episode titled “DNA, Oral History, [and An] Enslaved Ancestral Couple with LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson.”

[1] LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, Facebook post, 23 June 2020. Reprinted with permission.

[2] Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills, “Slaves and Masters: The Louisiana Metoyers,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 70 (1982), 163–189; PDF, *NGSQ Archives* (https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ngsq/ngsq_archives/ ; 27 June 2020).

[3] Johni Cerny, “From Maria to Bill Cosby: A Case Study in Tracing Black Slave Ancestry,” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 75 (1987), 5–14; PDF, *NGSQ Archives* (https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ngsq/ngsq_archives/ ; 27 June 2020). The third such article to appear in a peer-reviewed journal was Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Mézières-Trichel-Grappe: A Study of a Tri-Caste Lineage in the Old South,” *The Genealogist* 6 (Spring 1985): 4–84; PDF (<https://www.historicpathways.com/download/mezieres.pdf> ; 27 June 2020). Though the third article would seem to be the second chronologically by virtue of its inclusion in the Spring 1985 issue, the publication of *The Genealogist* was several years behind at that point, so it did not actually appear until 1988 or 1989.

[4] Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Genealogy in the ‘Information Age’: History’s New Frontier?” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 91 (2003), 261–277; PDF, *NGSQ Archives* (https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ngsq/ngsq_archives/ ; 27 June 2020).

[5] Elizabeth Shown Mills, Facebook post, 23 June 2020. Reprinted with permission.

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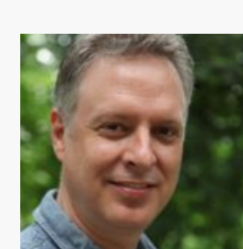
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Aaron is a genealogist and house historian specializing in New York City research across all time periods, from the Dutch colonial era to the 20th century. His book, *New York City Municipal Archives: An Authorized Guide for Family Historians*, won the National Genealogical Society’s 2017 Award for Excellence: Genealogical Methods and Sources. He is also editor of *NGS Monthly*, former contributing editor of the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, and former editor of the *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine*. In 2011, he received the American Society of Genealogists’ Scholar Award.

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