



# Gene news

**“A PEOPLE WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE OF ITS HISTORY, IS LIKE A TREE WITHOUT ROOTS” ~ MARCUS GARVEY**

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## *A Message from the President:*

History will record that on November 4, 2008, Barack Obama was elected the first black president of the United States. It was a day that few of us will ever forget. I know I thought I would never see the day a black person would be nominated by a major political party and then elected to the highest office in the land. Reflecting back to my elementary school days in the early fifties I remember being told I could be anything I wanted to be. In my mind I knew that was not true because I could never be president of the United States. I, like many others, thought it would never happen during our lifetimes. The 2008 election had a number of firsts, it was the first time in U.S. history that an African American won a majority of electoral votes. It was also the first time two sitting senators ran against each other, as well as the first time an African American was a presidential nominee for a major party. Since the Republican nominee for vice-president was a woman, the eventual winning ticket was bound to be historic, as neither an African American nor a female had achieved either of the respective offices. If John McCain had been elected, he would have been the oldest first-term president. Senator Joe Biden is the first Roman Catholic vice president to be elected.

It was a day 232 years in the making—from the end of chattel slavery to November 4—we were a witness to the most inclusive election enjoyed by the largest, best-informed, motivated electorate in our nation's history. The voters ranged from 18 to 106 years of age. The country as well as the world rejoiced in the election of a man of color to the most powerful position in the world.

~ Robert Scott

## A Research Treasure

by Robert Scott

African Americans often hit a dead end when they try to research their genealogy further back than 1870, when the first complete census of blacks was taken. The Freedman's Savings and Trust Company is a rare document that has a rich source of data pertaining to the ex-slave immediately following the Civil War. Congress passed an Act of Incorporation for the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company and President Lincoln signed it into law on March 3, 1865. The Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, popularly known as the Freedman's Bank, was chartered by Congress for the enhancement of the newly-freed slave, to teach them to save money for the future, to be thrifty and to be productive. A total of thirty-three branches were established throughout the South. In 1874 mismanagement and the financial panic of 1873-74 combined to close the Freedmen's Savings Bank. It had a short life span but it left an abundance of information concerning the depositors, the family, and descendants. The Freedman Bank records left by the Freedmen's Bureau through its work between 1865 and 1872 constitute one of the richest and most extensive documentary source available for investigating the African American experience in the post-Civil War and Reconstruction eras. These records present the genealogist with an unequalled wealth of information. What make these records so important and rewarding are the thousands of signature cards that contain personal data about the individual depositors. In addition to the names and ages of depositors, the files can contain their places of birth, residence, and occupations; names of parents, spouses, children, brothers, and sisters; and in some cases, the names of former slave owners and plantations.

## You're Invited

**AAGG Annual Christmas Party and  
Auction will be held on  
Tuesday, December 9, 2008  
at 7:00 pm at the  
Community College of Philadelphia.**



## Exhibit views black experience

The Constitution Center will host the study of four centuries of African American life in the U.S.

By **Stephan Salisbury**  
Inquirer Culture Writer

The National Constitution Center will host the debut of a major traveling exhibition exploring the four-century sweep of the black American experience, from slavery to the cusp of the presidency, officials announced yesterday.

*America I AM: The African American Imprint* was conceived by talk-show host and author Tavis Smiley, and organized by the Cincinnati Museum Center and Arts and Exhibition International, the private entity best known in Philadelphia for the blockbuster King Tut exhibit at the Franklin Institute last year.

*America I AM*, scheduled to open at the Constitution Center Jan. 15, 2009 for a run through May 3, will feature interactive and video exhibits and more than 150 resonant artifacts, including one that was unveiled yesterday: a simple five-inch brass key to the jail cell where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was imprisoned in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963 and where he wrote *Letter From Birmingham Jail*.

The show opens on King's birthday.

Smiley, on hand for yesterday's news conference, said the exhibit - the result of two years of planning - would seek to answer a question posed by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903: "Would America have been America without her Negro people?"

"This will be the biggest, baddest, boldest exhibition ever that tells the story of African Americans," Smiley said. "Think for a minute. . . . There would be no America without the contributions of black folk.

"From the arrival of the first slaves in Jamestown 400 years ago all the way up to the time of Barack Obama - we're going to tell that story."

Joseph M. Torsella, the Constitution Center's head, said the center had wanted the exhibition since hearing about it a year ago. "We want to use temporary exhibitions to explore all aspects of American history and the Constitution. African Americans from the beginning . . . have been central to telling that story."

Torsella added that artifacts recovered from the historic archaeological excavation that preceded construction of the center would be included in the exhibit. And

the story of the President's House at Sixth and Market Streets, where George Washington lived during his presidency, attended by a number of black slaves, would also be woven into the exhibition.

The doors to the dungeon from Cape Coast Castle off the coast of Ghana, where captive Africans were warehoused before being shipped into slavery across the Atlantic, will be exhibited. The doors are from the collection of the African American Museum in Philadelphia, a block away from the center at Seventh and Arch Streets. The museum is itself pulling together a new permanent exhibition on early black Philadelphia, to be installed next year.

*America I AM* will involve more than weighty historical objects, organizers said. Drawn from dozens of black-history museums and individuals, the show will also feature everything from Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves to materials associated with Motown to the writing table of 18th-century African American poet Phillis Wheatley.

*America I AM* is being underwritten by Wal-Mart, while Exxon Mobil is subsidizing the fuel costs for a kind of museumobile - a mini-exhibit in a tractor-trailer truck that will travel nationwide as the exhibit wends its way from city to city for the next four years. Mark Lach, senior vice president of Arts and Exhibitions International, estimated the exhibit's cost at \$5 million. He said other stops would include Chicago, Los Angeles, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., St. Louis, Denver and New York, among others. He declined to name venues but said they would be announced shortly.

Center officials said tickets for *America I AM* must be purchased separately and would range in price from \$17.50 for adults to \$9 for children. Access to the rest of the center will be included.



## Kissin' Cousins - Understanding Cousin Relationships

By **Kimberley Powell**  
About.com

Most of us don't think about specific cousin relationships in exact terms - "cousin" seems good enough - so many of us aren't very familiar with what these words mean. When working on your family history, however, it's important to understand the various types of cousin relationships.

**First cousins** are the people in your family who have two of the same grandparents as you.

**Second cousins** have the same great-grandparents as you, but not the same grandparents.

**Third cousins** have in common two great-great-grandparents and their ancestors.

When cousins descend from common ancestors by a different number of generations they are called "removed."

**Once removed** means there is a difference of one generation. Your mother's first cousin would be your first cousin, once removed. She is one generation younger than your grandparents and you are two generations younger than your grandparents.

**Twice removed** means that there is a two-generation difference. Your grandmother's first cousin would be your first cousin, twice removed because you are separated by two generations.

Just to complicate matters, there are also many cases of **double cousins**. This situation usually occurs when siblings from one family marry siblings from another family. The resulting children, grandchildren, etc. are double cousins, because they share all four ancestors in common. These types of relationships can be difficult to determine and it is usually easiest to chart them one at a time (through one family line and then through the other line).

## FREE EMAIL ACCOUNTS

As another added member benefit, we would like to offer all our members the opportunity to email in style! If you are interested in an AAGG email address, please send your request to Natasha at: [nscott@aagg.org](mailto:nscott@aagg.org).

## This Old House: Godfrey Cheshire's Family History

By Nicolas Rapold

Soon after Christmas in 2002, the Manhattan-based film critic Godfrey Cheshire, a North Carolina native, learned that his cousins in Raleigh were moving. Not earth-shattering news at first glance, except that his relatives, Charlie and Dena Silver, lived in the family's ancestral home. Midway, a bona fide plantation house, was built on land first acquired in the 18th century and had been home to generations. This would be a move in the most literal sense. The Silvers were planning to pick up the manor and wheel it away to a new location — an act fraught with significance and potential.

"My first idea was I should take a digital camera and make a document for the family," Mr. Cheshire, the director of the forthcoming documentary "Moving Midway," said. "But when I asked some friends what kind of camera to get, and



Lissa Gotwals

Cheshire stands in front of Midway before it is driven to another location

said what I wanted it for, they said, 'Oh no, this is too good — you need to make a real film.'"

The result, five years later, is "Moving Midway," which uses a chronicle of the move to explore the history, the myths, and, in a sense, the family bonds that can tie a nation together. Mr. Cheshire examines on-the-ground logistics and the mixed emotions behind uprooting the house, and includes an essay-style cultural dissection of the plantation house as an object of fascination, from "Uncle Tom's Cabin" through "Birth of a Nation," "Gone With the Wind," and beyond. Hearing out kinfolk and delving into slavery and its legacy, Mr. Cheshire grapples with deep-seated questions of Southern identity.

"Growing up, I was enthralled with the mythology of the South and very much

into the lore of the Confederacy," Mr. Cheshire, who as a boy summered with his "country cousins" at Midway, said. "And I grew up during the civil rights era, when that was first thrown into question somewhat. When I was a little kid, it was not in question anywhere. When I was intellectually cognizant for the first time, I could see it being buffeted."

Further deepening the story of the Southern experience in "Moving Midway" was the discovery, during production, of an African-American branch of the filmmaker's family, one that traces back to a union between a great-great-great-grandfather and a Midway slave. By chance, Mr. Cheshire then came across a letter to the editor of the New York Times Book Review from a separate descendant, Robert Hinton, a professor at New York University whose ancestor was another slave at Midway. After the two met, Mr. Hinton became an integral part of the project, conducting research and providing the film with wise and witty commentary on the thorny issues at hand.

"Now I can't imagine the film without him," Mr. Cheshire said. "Robert has an emotional connection to all of it, and yet he also has a real intellectual perspective on it. And he's a really good teacher."

For Mr. Cheshire, the process of filmmaking was also illuminating for another aspect of his identity: practicing film critic. He made his professional start in 1978, and currently writes regularly for Raleigh's Independent Weekly from his base in New York. For his filmmaking debut, he and his camera crews deployed HD, 35 mm, 16 mm, Beta SP, and small digital cameras. But maybe the biggest milestone in his new endeavor came after filming.

"The number one thing I've discovered in this whole process that impacts my assumptions as a reviewer is that I don't believe any filmmaker knows anything about what they've got until it goes up in front of a real audience," Mr. Cheshire said. "It was a completely hypothetical thing until it was in front of an audience. And all of a sudden it's alive, it's real, and you see."

"Moving Midway," screenings of which are often accompanied by question-and-answer sessions with Mr. Cheshire and sometimes Mr. Hinton, has found enthusiastic and inquisitive audiences at Lincoln Center's New Directors/New Films series and elsewhere. (An earlier version was rejected by Sundance: "The best single thing that happened to the film throughout its history," Mr. Cheshire, who initiated a

top-down re-edit, said.)

The precise nature of the reception varied across the country, even within the South.

"Southerners seem to see the film as a



Mary Boddie Carr Hinton, Godfrey Cheshire's great-great-grandmother, circa 1900, at Midway. (Moving Midway, LLC.)

whole, and each element in it related to their lives, so they were seeing it as a film about their lives in the South," Mr. Cheshire said. "Northern audiences seem to see it as different components: Some people were more interested in the movie stuff, or the racial stuff, or the family stuff. Out West, it's almost like it's about another country. Whereas in North Carolina, it's so close to home that it's almost a little prosaic. The most fervent reaction has come in Virginia and Mississippi: They're far enough away from it that they react to it as the Southern myth, rather than their backyard."

Responses from Mr. Cheshire's own family have included both an embrace of its success and a grumbling inevitably bound up with the move of the house. As for Mr. Hinton, who teaches African studies at NYU, his research for the film will form the groundwork for a book he plans to write.

"It will be a story of the whole relationship between his family and my family from the 1720s down to the 1870s," Mr. Hinton said. "This is sort of my life's work from now on." \*

It's an inspiring continuation of the illuminating dialogue that the film helps foster. Meanwhile, even as Mr. Cheshire introduces more audiences to Midway, his work is cut out for him: He's busy plotting out two historical dramas, as a screenwriter and producer. The stories of the South: to be continued.

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## 5 Things You Can Learn From Death Records

By Kimberley Powell  
About.com

Many people looking for information on their ancestors skip right past the death record, heading in a beeline for information on the individual's marriage and birth. Sometimes we already know where and when our ancestor died, and figure it's not worth the time and money to track down the death certificate. Another scenario has our ancestor disappearing between one census and the next, but after a half-hearted search we decide it's not worth the effort since we already know most of his other vital facts. Those death records, however, can tell us much more about our ancestor than where and when he died!

Death records, including death certificates, obituaries and funeral home records, can include a wealth of information on the deceased, including the names of their parents, siblings, children and spouse; when and where they were born and/or married; the occupation of the deceased; possible military service; and cause of death. All of these clues can be helpful in telling us more about our ancestor, as well as lead-

ing us to new sources of information on his life.

### Date & Place of Birth or Marriage

Does the death certificate, obituary or other death record give a date and place of birth? A clue to the spouse's maiden name? Information found in death records can often provide the clue you need to locate a birth or marriage record.

### Names of Family Members

Death records are also a good source for names of parents, spouse, children and next of kin. The death certificate will usually list at least the next of kin, while an obituary notice may list numerous family members - both living and deceased.

### Occupation of the Deceased

What did your ancestor do for a living? Whether they were a farmer, an accountant or a coal miner, their choice of occupation probably defined at least a part of who they were as a person. You may choose to just record this in your "interesting tidbits" folder or, possibly, follow up for further research.

### Possible Military Service

Obituaries, tombstones and, occasionally,

death certificates are a good place to look if you suspect that your ancestor may have served in the military. They will often list the military branch and unit, and possibly information on rank and the years in which your ancestor served. With these details you can then look for further information about your ancestor in military records.

### Cause of Death

An important clue for anyone compiling a medical family history, the cause of death can often be found listed on a death certificate. If you can't find it there, then the funeral home (if still in existence) may be able to provide you with further information. As you go back in time, however, you'll begin to find interesting causes of death, such as "bad blood" (which often meant syphilis) and "dropsy," meaning edema or swelling.

In addition to these five clues, death records also offer information that may lead to further research avenues. A death certificate, for example, may list the burial place and the funeral home - leading to a search in cemetery or funeral home records. An obituary or funeral notice may mention a church where the funeral service is being held, another source for further research.



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**AAGG meets the 2nd Tuesday of  
each month (from September to June)  
at 7 pm at the  
Community College of  
Philadelphia located at  
4725 Chestnut Street in  
West Philadelphia**