

# WHEN DID YOU BECOME BLACK?

Gail Turley Houston

Growing up in a Mormon home, I was raised on genealogy. Both sets of grandparents led back through four generations of devout Mormon stock who had left England or Ireland to come join Joseph Smith's new church in America. On the Turley side (my paternal grandfather), after being converted by Parley P. Pratt in Canada, Theodore Turley moved to Kirtland, Ohio in 1838 and followed the Saints to Nauvoo. The Wilson line (my paternal grandmother) goes back to Robert Wilson, born in 1612 in Warwickshire and dying in London in 1644. The Udalls (my maternal grandfather) were called by Brigham Young to settle northern Arizona and became a sprawling, proud family of lawyers, judges, teachers, a congressman, and the Secretary of the Interior in John F. Kennedy's administration. The Lees (my beloved maternal grandmother) were a funny, close, and tragic lot, being direct descendants of John D. Lee of Mountain Meadows infamy.

My great uncle Jesse Udall had the habit of exclaiming at every gathering that the Udalls were the royal family, without batting an ironic eyelash. I was trained to believe that my Mormon ancestors and their tales of pioneer hardship in the service of the Church made me royal too. Even with that tainted Lee streak—we knew John D. was a scapegoat for Brigham and became, for us, a kind of hero in refusing to escape the kangaroo courts put together to convict him as, purportedly singlehandedly, he killed 120 men, women, and children. We were happy, when, after three decades of searching, our maiden Aunt Elma cracked the code of where the Udalls came from in England—and even found living relatives there in Kent. The Lee line stopped with John D.'s

father, the rascalion Ralph Lee, who lived in Kaskaskia, Illinois in the early 1800s before absconding to unknown parts.

In 2015 I decided I wanted to learn even more about my genealogy and asked to have my DNA tested as a Christmas present. I wanted to know if one of my great grandmothers was Swiss Italian and if the Turleys really did go back to Ireland (MacToirdealbaigh) or if it was possible that the line went back to the south of France and was of Norman origin. I have been partial to France and the French language all my life and also loved the idea of being Irish or Italian. I also felt that I might get a little unexpected twist of *je ne sais quoi* in the DNA study. And, indeed, French, which so powerfully says so many things that can't be said in any other language, has a wonderful word that described my reaction perfectly: "*frisson*." I felt a shiver, a shudder, a pleasure mixed with utter surprise when I received the DNA results.

No surprise in the 47.5 percent British/Irish. A bit of a skitter with the 7.2 percent Scandinavian, but not surprised in afterthought for we know the Vikings made their presence felt in the British Isles. A warm grace in 18.9 percent German/French/Swiss. But the wonder, the *incroyable* moment—the *frisson*—was in learning that I was .1 percent of Central African and African hunter-gatherer descent. Immediately, the academic in me wanted to know all the ins and outs, hows, whys, wheres, and whos of this unforeseen knowledge about myself and my heritage.

Where to begin in answering all those questions? But at the most basic level, I simply liked that I was from Africa. The percentage was small but the jolt large and wondrous. In the nineteenth century, the United States had the one-drop rule about race: if you had one drop of African blood you were considered to be Black. Strangely this absurd doctrine couldn't consider it the other way around, that one drop of white blood might make one white. I don't know how to set my experience against that hypodescent notion of race. Nor do I know how to set this knowledge against what I have been teaching for years: that gender and race are fictional entities imposed by disciplinary institutional structures.

The fictionality of those categories cannot negate, of course, the very real and painful effects of racism and sexism.

Then a year later or so the website that tested my DNA gave more information. They created an “Ancestry Timeline” for each ancestry line I came from, showing “How many generations ago was your most recent ancestor for each population.” For my African hunter-gatherer population the most recent ancestor was between 1680 and 1770, six to nine generations back. Further, it was noted that this particular ancestor was likely to “have descended from a single population,” meaning a full-blooded African. Astonishing. A veritable gleam came into my eye—the genealogist’s gleam, the academic researcher’s gleam. I had to find this ancestor.

Previous to this discovery of my DNA, I had become deeply attached to the story of the first known autobiography by a female British slave, Mary Prince. I had taught her amazing story many times in my classes. We don’t know her exact birth date, probably in the 1780s, and nor do we know if she was a second-generation slave or had direct ancestors who had been brought from Africa generations before. In any case, after years of abuse by her owners, the Woods, she was brought to England by them in 1828. There she met some anti-slavery activists and after many wrangles with and continued dreadful abuse from the Woods, she walked out their door and left them forever. This was possible, because, based on the famous Somerset case ruling made by Lord Mansfield in 1772, it was believed that slaves were free on British soil. Thus, slaves brought to England after that were technically considered no longer slaves. For a brief while after Mary wrote her “History” of being a slave, with the help of Sarah Strickland and Thomas Pringle, she was a cause célèbre in the abolition movement. Two court cases ensued in 1833 regarding the claim that her history was a libel against her owners. But this is the last we hear of her life. Like so many slaves, the rest of her history is gone.

I fell hard for Mary Prince. I went to Bermuda to see Brackish Pond where she was born. Across the way was a church she may have attended.

I saw the church the slaves built at night for themselves. I saw the small island where runaway slaves were hanged as examples for other slaves, and the poles sticking out of the ground for enchaining slaves. I followed her to Turks & Caicos, where she worked in the miserable salt fields on Turks Island and possibly Salt Cay under a burning sun, blistering salt, sun and water curdling the skin on the slaves' legs. These islands are almost unbelievably beautiful, but did the slaves see that beauty? And if so, how did they relate it back to the truth of their own condition as human beings? Now I must follow the trail of my own ancestor from Africa. I must know the outlines of this ancestor's daily life.



I grew up in the fifties and came of age in the sixties, a time of enormous change and tumult in race relations in the United States. As a thirteen-year-old in 1963, I gaped at our black and white TV when a burly white man named Bull Connor used water cannons to assault innocent Black people in Birmingham. I was sickened and didn't know what it all meant. My dad was racist. He grew up in Colonia Juarez, Mexico, where, though he spoke the beautiful Spanish language fluently and with the Mormon colony exploited the lush resources and land, he hated the Mexicans. He only spoke this way in front of my brothers on fishing trips with them. My mother regularly referred to the US citizens in the small town she grew up in as "Mexicans," and she told me once how she had once used the term "Jew" as a verb when talking to a friend whom she didn't know was Jewish. It was the end of the friendship and she was appalled with herself.

I took what the Church told me about race naively and devotedly. Blacks were not valiant in the War in Heaven before coming to earth; they had sat on the fence in that fight, and so they deserved the "mark of Cain." We chosen people of the Church, we white people, that is, should not marry across racial lines—that was a sin. I remember a white friend

of my older sister, who I thought was the sweetest person I had ever met, who fell in love with a Pacific Islander. After much reflection and anguish, she gave him up because of Church teachings about miscegenation. She ended up marrying a man who physically abused her, but at least he was white. At the age of sixteen I could not understand why she, who was innocent and good, could not marry the man she loved with all her heart.

All through the sixties I heard the stupid jokes that adult Church members told about Black people; I heard rumors about how Blacks might come to Utah to riot and make an assault on the Church; or how they might rise up and invade peaceful white neighborhoods. In response to Church teachings that Black men could not hold the priesthood, many college basketball teams in the sixties and seventies protested having to compete with the BYU Cougars. I remember many Church members in our ward felt they were the misunderstood victims of such protests. These stories and fears whirled around me, and I did not know how to process it all. I was white—I had the privilege of not having to understand, not having to think about the meaning of race.

We went to an all-white grade school. In high school, there were only two Black young men. They were brothers. I admired them like everyone else. They were good looking, in all the clubs and student government offices, and on the football team, smart and going somewhere. I was somewhat of a cipher in high school. One day, the younger brother, who was in one of my classes, asked me on a date. I was floored—he was somebody and I was nobody. I don't know what I said, some lame thing about being busy or something. But I know that my answer came straight out of the unacknowledged but very real Mormon handbook that said, "Do not date or marry across racial lines." I saw the hurt in his eyes when I rejected him. The handbook didn't explain how to deal with the pain inflicted by its policies.

Afterwards, I was disgusted with myself, feeling a guilt I still cannot erase, yet, still, I was fiercely devoted to the Church that had trained me

to respond that way. I thought I had done the right thing even though I would not have been able to explain my belief if someone had asked me why ungodly behavior was alright. Only years later did I come to my own conclusions about the racism that was foundational to the Church I so loved at that time.

Foundations are everything. Biologists tell us that we are all Africans ultimately. Every race and ethnicity goes back to Africa. She is the motherland to us all. Millenia ago, the first humans arose on African soil. After more millenia some of them began to move across the land up northward into what are now known as the Middle East, Western and Eastern Europe, Asia and across the Bering Straits. My Central and South African ancestor came or was brought to England, I presume, sometime after the beginning of the continual presence of Blacks in England in 1555, when “five Africans arrived to learn English and thereby facilitate trade.”<sup>1</sup> By 1768 there were about 20,000 Blacks living in London on every level of society, from upper to lower class: prostitutes, servants, beggars, scholars, sailors, students sent by rich African leaders, or slaves who were the ornamental accoutrements to rich and middle-class Londoners wanting there stark white skin to appear whiter next to the slave’s Black skin.<sup>2</sup> Some were soldiers who had fought for the British in the American Revolutionary War and had been promised their freedom for doing so.<sup>3</sup>

Most Blacks brought to England in this time were men, and so many married white women and had families. Thus, “many thousands of British families,” if they “traced their roots back to the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, would find among their ancestors an African

---

1. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 3.

2. *Ibid.* 15.

3. *Ibid.* 18–19.

or person of African descent.”<sup>4</sup> My ancestor may have been brought to one of the slave ports, like Bristol, Birmingham, London, or Liverpool by his master. I do not think it was the Udall line, which goes back to the bucolic Kent, England, which had no large cities or ports. I suspect it might be the Turley line, for Theodore was born in Birmingham. It might be the Lee line, for we do not yet know Ralph Lee’s origins in England, Ireland, or France. Or it could be Robert Wilson, who was living in London in 1644.

We are all Africans. The only question is when we became Black. I became Black between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This facile but true statement does not give me the right to co-opt the Black experience. I experience all the privileges of being white, and because of that I have only begun my journey toward understanding race. Foundations matter, and I have learned something foundational about my being. I long to know my ancestor—but, what is more, I am now honor-bound, deeply so, to know what race does to people. I was honor-bound before to people of color, for we are all human and go back to a great mother together. But now my *amour propre* has been dignified and seared by my new feelings about ancestry. Who am I but one who must grasp for higher levels of awareness, of painful histories of generations of peoples, and the sorrows and glories of individual lives seared themselves by ancestry and race.

---

4. Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 1984), 235.