

**“Tell me who I am”:  
Finding Personal Identity and Connections to History  
Through Genealogical Research**

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## Introduction

Most genealogists can pinpoint the specific event in their lives that inspired them to pursue building their family trees. For John F. Baker, Jr., the moment that would define him as a family historian came when he opened his seventh grade social studies textbook and saw a photograph of an African American family. Baker relates in his ancestral narrative, *The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation*, that he thought there was a strong resemblance between his maternal grandmother and the woman in the photograph, but it was not until his grandmother came for a visit and showed him the same image in a 1976 edition of the *Robertson County Times* that he learned he was looking at a one hundred year-old photograph of his ancestors.<sup>1</sup> Thus began a thirty-year journey for the author to learn everything he could about his relatives.

For Henry Louis Gates, Jr. the pivotal moment that sparked his desire to map out his lineage came in a quiet moment with his father after his grandfather Gates' funeral. Upstairs in his grandparents' bedroom, Gates' father opened a trunk and removed several leather-bound scrapbooks. As he tells the story in his printed companion to the PBS series, *In Search of Our Roots*, the scrapbooks were filled with newspaper clippings and funeral programs. Gates' father silently turned the pages and finally paused at the obituary of an ex-slave, Jane Gates, the author's great-great-grandmother. Upon hearing that Jane was the "first Gates," ten year-old Henry stared at the picture until he had her face memorized. "That same year," he wrote, "in the fifth grade, I developed an obsession with my family tree."<sup>2</sup> He describes his obsession as "searching not just for the names of my ancestors but for stories about them, . . . Each new name that I was able to print in my notebook—was

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Baker, Jr., *The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation* (New York: Atria Books, 2009), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed their Past* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009), 2-4.

an enigma for me, a conundrum of the colored past that had produced, by fits and starts but also, somehow, inevitably, the person I had become and was becoming.”<sup>3</sup>

All of the family historians discussed in this treatment have gone beyond constructing family trees or pedigree charts. Their searches may have begun with an interview with a living relative or by tracking down the validity of a strand of oral history handed down to them. As Gates explained in *Faces of America*, uncovering the complete story of a family includes hunting down “marriage licenses and birth certificates, land deeds, estate records, ships’ passenger lists, immigration files, and gravestones.”<sup>4</sup> Added to these searches, knowledge must be sought of the social customs, economic and political conditions, the environment, and major events and calamities concurrent with an ancestor’s life to serve as the setting and provide the historical context for all of these statistics. Only then can the interrelation of powers acting upon an ancestor and the choices he made begin to illuminate his life and the narrative of that life be written.

Uncovering the reasons behind a family’s migration, understanding its interaction with government entities and its position in society, and perceiving how family members met the challenges of life informs a researcher’s sense of identity and personal connection to history. Genealogists who embark on this journey of discovery and understanding often can trace the origins of their own personal strengths and character attributes. Knowing an ancestor better leads to a better understanding of the past and to the ability to recognize one’s own place within history. In fact, some historians are quite clear about the damage not knowing one’s history can have on individuals and on entire groups.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the writings of these family historians contribute to a broader discussion of history with regard to the effects of events and policies on individual lives and how everyday lives played a part in the creation of the human story. Gates contends that “Restoring the stories of the lives of the members

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<sup>3</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Faces of America: How 12 Extraordinary People Discovered their Pasts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this paper, one’s own history refers to generations of time and ancestors preceding the genealogist, not just to the events of his own lifetime.

of our extended families can directly transform the way that historians reassemble the larger narrative of the history of our people.”<sup>6</sup>

English philosopher R. G. Collingwood defines history as the study of the past: “To be an historian is to know how things have come to be what they are.”<sup>7</sup> He insists that everything has a history. To use the term history, then, is to delineate the study of and the writing about the origin of something, or, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall defines it, to reconstruct accounts from the “documentary traces of an absent past.”<sup>8</sup> When Patricia Nelson Limerick, in *The Legacy of Conquest*, asked, “What happened to Western history?” she was not suggesting that the American West ceased to be, but that its account was incomplete or inconsistent with the remnant evidence of the lives that were lived and the struggles that took place there.<sup>9</sup> Many of the sources consulted for this essay, however, do use the term history to refer to the past or to the passage of time and all of its events leading up to the present and not necessarily to refer to the writings about the past. Whenever a passage in a source that uses the term history in these ways is quoted or paraphrased, I allow for the source’s more generous and inclusive meaning of “history.”

Use of the term “family historian” in this essay does not imply a professional historian concerned with family, but a genealogist who endeavors to fill in the spaces of an ancestor’s life that vital records cannot. Some of the family historians referenced for this discussion are professional historians who set out on a journey to discover their own families’ stories. While their comments provide additional insight to the following discussion, their status is not an argument to recommend that all genealogists be considered as professional historians. Rather, as suggested by Collingwood, history “is therefore a universal and necessary human interest . . . and not the affair of a special group

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<sup>6</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> R. G. Collingwood, “The Philosophy of History,” in *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. William Debbins (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press 1965), 124.

<sup>8</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘You Must Remember This’: Autobiography as Social Critique,” *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1985): 443.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), 20.

of professionals.”<sup>10</sup> Historical research begins with the recognition of unanswered questions and a determination to find facts that will answer those questions.

If history is the study of how things of the past became what they are, historical memory is comprised of the narratives that describe the past. Public memory is represented by the artifacts preserved for and the sites and monuments established for commemoration about the past. A few of the authors consulted below are concerned with an updated approach to the concept of collective memory. While it is not central to my thesis, a brief description might be a useful aid to understanding these authors’ comments. Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), who was a student of sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), theorized that an individual is not capable of recalling all of the details of an event without the input and influence of others who shared in the event.<sup>11</sup> As Jeffrey Olick explains it, “History is the remembered past to which we no longer have an ‘organic’ relation . . . collective memory is the active past that forms our identities.”<sup>12</sup> Collective memory is active because it can continue to be shaped by new information and new participants in the shared event. In her essay “‘You Must Remember This’: Autobiography as Social Critique,” Hall describes an aspect of memory very similar to collective memory known as social memory. As she summarizes the post-Civil War literary and cultural phenomenon in the southern United States known as The Lost Cause, she explains that social memory is the “shared, informal, contested stories that simultaneously describe and act on our social world.”<sup>13</sup> The, at times, intentional selection of the perspectives and voices included in and excluded from social memory is what imbues social memory with the power to effect individuals and groups.

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<sup>10</sup> Collingwood, *Philosophy of History*, 124, 137.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 46, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Olick, “Collective Memory,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<http://www.virginia.edu/sociology/publications/faculty%20articles/OlickArticles/galecm.pdf> (accessed November 14, 2012). For more on the development of the social memory field, see Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, editors. *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Pages 136-149 specifically address the contributions of Durkheim and Halbwachs.

<sup>13</sup> Hall, “You Must Remember This,” 442-3.

My own interest in genealogy began upon inheriting a letter written by my paternal grandmother, whom I had never met. In the letter, she had written down every name and birth date she could remember for her and her husband's extended family. My grandmother's death in 1989 gave me the motivation to complete and pass down that information. However, it was not until I took a break from teaching to have my daughter that I found the time to devote to the research. My interest in exploring genealogy and identity as an academic pursuit was piqued while I was processing the Muriel C. Spoden Collection for the Archives of the City of Kingsport. When I began processing Series XI, Spoden Personal Family Files, the news clippings, sepia-toned photographs, letters, and memorabilia preserved by Muriel inspired me to go beyond a printed narrative and to create a visual archive of her family's history for my capstone project.

Muriel Spoden (1920-1999) was a local historian whose goal was to trace Kingsport, Tennessee's, history from the pre-colonial era to the present day. She was an active advocate for historic site restoration, a map maker, and a prolific writer. She used the tools of genealogy to uncover Kingsport's past, to research her own family's story, and to serve her professional clients. She believed that there are lessons to be learned from our ancestors and that strengths and personal characteristics can be attributed to our forebears. In the preface to the history she compiled on her husband's line, she wrote, "One of the values of a family history is to learn that others in our own family have gone through heartbreaks and joys; that there is no such thing as a 'new' tragedy; and that we all get our fortitude and gentleness from those who went before us."<sup>14</sup>

### **Genealogy as a Tool**

The German philosopher Martin Saar offers a critique of genealogy, the study of the origins of a subject, in "Genealogy and Subjectivity." In his critique, he compares the approaches of Michel Foucault in such works as *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* and

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<sup>14</sup> Muriel M.C. Spoden, *The Spoden, Wild, Thies and Dietrich Families of Chautauqua County, New York State*, Series III.B., Muriel C. Spoden Collection, 1730-1999. KC Manuscript Collection 516. Archives of the City of Kingsport, Tennessee. Hereafter cited as KCMC 516.

*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* to the analytical model of Friedrich Nietzsche in earlier works such as *Thoughts on the Presumption of Morality*.<sup>15</sup> Each of these works uncovers the history of a subject by examining its becoming in relation to the social and political events and discourse of its time. Saar claims that genealogy, as it concerns the self, deals with relations to that self and requires reflexivity. He breaks down the three functions of a genealogical model to be a “way of writing history,” a form of evaluation, and a writing genre.<sup>16</sup> Saar observed that for those scholars who applied Nietzsche’s model, genealogy “historicizes things that had no significant history before,” therefore, “expanding the field of the historical.”<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that studying the origin of a discourse or person imposes importance upon the object, but rather that its genealogy reveals its relevance to a broader discussion of the past.

As an evaluating model, genealogy of a subject explores the powers that work on the subject and its own participation in the struggle that ensues, or as Saar says, it tells the subject “the story of its own becoming.”<sup>18</sup> This is a useful aspect of the model for the family historian exploring identity formation. As a writing genre, genealogy focuses on the dramatic confrontations between the forces surrounding the subject and its reaction to these forces.<sup>19</sup> Is it possible for a family historian to construct relevant genealogical histories that are loyal to the Nietzschean model while avoiding hyperbole and judgment of these uncovered dramatic moments? This is a question that Ronald Bishop, and many other scholars, set out to answer.

Although Bishop’s goal was to perform a narrative analysis on the completed surveys and research journals of sixty family history researchers to construct a genealogy of genealogy, the participants’ responses also shed light on what they gained from their research in terms of identity

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Saar, “Genealogy and Subjectivity,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 231-245.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 232, 34, 38.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

formation and connection to history.<sup>20</sup> Their remarks concerning motive and method, however, suggest that genealogy can be a tool for correcting mistakes in oral and written history. Bishop found that most respondents made it a practice to refrain from passing judgment upon the people about whose lives they were learning. One wrote, ““I just love to read and know more about my ancestors and I don’t care what it is just so I can properly document it.””<sup>21</sup> Another made a point to verify the research of a sister-in-law and correct any errors.<sup>22</sup>

Muriel Spoden’s own research uncovered Revolutionary War veterans, slave owners, frontiersman, and college dropouts in her ancestral lines. She strove to uncover as much historical detail as she could about each relative, finding something to appreciate about each one, but withholding judgment about their lives. She preferred to record the stories she uncovered and let her readers gain from these accounts what was meaningful to them. In a 1968 letter to her daughter, she included a few specifics about her third-great-grandfather William Stewart. Her research revealed him to have been a trapper, a sheriff, and a veteran of the War of 1812. In her narrative, she wrote “Many Kentucky historians have written about him, describing his unusual and interesting characteristics. . . . He never confirmed nor denied the strange tales about him.”<sup>23</sup> Countering his reputation for being a fearless killer, Muriel chose to share with her daughter the inscriptions on two of his gunpowder horns: “Health to the sick, Honor to the brave, Wealth to the poor, And freedom to the slave” and “Teach me to feel another’s woe, To hide the faults I see, That mercy I to others show, That mercy show to me.”<sup>24</sup> She continued her letter with a plea to her daughter to not place the “yoke of judgment” on her and hoped that she would not be judged unfairly, as well.

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<sup>20</sup> Ronald Bishop, “In the Grand Scheme of Things: An Exploration of the Meaning of Genealogical Research,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 3 (June 2008): 393-5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 397-8.

<sup>23</sup> Spoden, *An American Ancestry*, 325-6, KCMC 516.

<sup>24</sup> Muriel C. Spoden to Diane Spoden, Series II, KCMC 516.

Elizabeth Yakel, who interviewed twenty-nine genealogists for her investigation into the information-seeking behavior of family historians, discovered that genealogists want to do more than just gather records and transcribe them accurately; they want to correct oral traditions whose details have become rather unbelievable in the re-telling process.<sup>25</sup> One genealogist felt it important to take each of her mother's stories and track down details in order to record accurate versions. In the case of her paternal great-grandfather, this genealogist was told that he worked in a gunpowder factory and was killed in an explosion. She discovered that his arm actually was caught in a machine and it was the resulting amputation that led to a stroke and his eventual death. In fact, the responsibility of recording and passing down family history was taken so seriously, Yakel discovered that even official records were not always taken at face value.<sup>26</sup>

Another example of genealogy serving as a tool to correct historical inaccuracies can be found in *The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation*. Since the Wessyngton plantation owners kept detailed records that included a slave's first name, Baker only had to compare plantation records with the slave schedule in the 1850 Census, which listed a slave's race, age, and sex. He discovered that the census records listed only seventy-nine slaves for the Washingtons – much fewer than what he could account for in the plantation records. He hired a Washington, D.C., area genealogist to investigate the discrepancy at the National Archives and Records Administration. The researcher discovered that the pages were out of order when they were microfilmed and that the Wessyngton slaves had been credited to another Robertson County plantation.<sup>27</sup> In an interview, Baker elaborated, “if I had not taken it upon myself to straighten out that information, many of the families from the plantation from that period may have been lost forever.” He continued, “Many people listed on the 1850 census were

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, “Seeking Information, Seeking Connections, Seeking Meaning: Genealogists and Family Historians.” *Information Research* 10, no. 1 (October 2004), <http://informationr.net/ir/10-1/paper205.html> (accessed January 31, 2011), “Methodology.”

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, “Genealogists as a ‘Community of Records,’” *American Archivist* 70, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 108-9.

<sup>27</sup> Baker, *The Washingtons*, 86.

dead by 1860 and outside the Wessington records there would have been no proof that those people ever existed. That's why each document is so precious to me."<sup>28</sup> While this may be a dramatic example of correcting the historical record, it demonstrates how the work of family historians can be restorative and corrective to the existing documentation of and perceptions about the past.

Robert Charles Anderson classifies the product of genealogical endeavors as building blocks for other scholarly studies. He explains that people are the fundamental building blocks of any society and, therefore, the study of the marital and biological relations between them are fundamental to the pursuit of any understanding of which the social sciences would have an interest. Anderson recommends that even the methods utilized by the careful, professional genealogist could be of use to the social scientist.<sup>29</sup>

Genealogy is a tool that allows its practitioners to connect to history in two ways. First, it serves as a mechanism to enlighten participants in the research process about their present by informing them about their past. Barbara Metcalf, a former president of the American Historical Association, shared her views about the necessity of historians using primary sources to interpret history, but admitted that more than documentary evidence contributes to our understanding of the past. "History may in some ways be the purview of the professionals, but it is also an intimate part of personal identity and a critical element in social belonging."<sup>30</sup> When genealogists create narratives about the lives of their ancestors, the narratives serve as informational instruments that allow them to participate in the making and writing of history. Focusing on the role an ancestor played in history increases the family historian's understanding of that era and allows him to make step by step connections from that history to himself and to his current circumstances. "History," Metcalf

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<sup>28</sup> John F. Baker, Jr., interview with author, via e-mail, October 14, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Charles Anderson, "The Place of Genealogy in the Curriculum of the Social Sciences," in *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History*, ed. Robert M. Taylor, Jr. and Ralph S. Crandall (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), 83, 88. This chapter, as well as Chapter 1, "Historians and Genealogists: An Emerging Community of Interest," gives a very interesting timeline of the rise of genealogy in America; especially in relation to the establishment of history as an academic discipline.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, "Historians and Chemical Engineers," *Perspectives on History* 48, no. 2 (February 2010), <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2010/1002/1002pre1.cfm> (accessed September 2, 2012).

explained, “does not tell us what to do . . . But an analytical examination of the past illuminates the frameworks of our perceptions, and helps us see the origins of present predicaments more clearly.”<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, genealogists actively participate in the work of history when their writings become the expression of collective memory. In her article “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” Susan A. Crane explains that while collective memory consists of lived experiences shared by many, it is articulated by the individual, and that historical memory is the preservation of those memories in the form of records. “A revised notion of collective memory,” she suggests, “may provide a theoretical basis for imagining a different kind of historical memory, which would focus on the way individuals experience themselves as historical entities.”<sup>32</sup> Genealogy allows the participant to see himself as an inheritor of history or as recipient of what his ancestors accomplished in the past, as a creator of history, and as a recorder of history to be passed on to the next generation.

### **Stumbling Blocks to Identity Formation**

Scholars and genealogists have pointed out the stumbling blocks that complicate the development of family history narratives and the formation of personal and family identity. These barriers range from poor history curriculum in schools, to the narrow focus of many genealogical societies, to major political upheavals. When an individual identifies herself with more than one race, has ancestors who migrated multiple times, has paternal and maternal ancestors who spoke different languages or came from different social categories, she may have difficulty in finding a genealogical society or repository that can support all of her research interests or represent all sides to her family’s story.

Angel Adams Parham found that in New Orleans, Louisiana, where the history is richly diverse, individuals attempting to explore their ancestral backgrounds were “limited by the

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<sup>31</sup> Metcalf, “Historians and Engineers.”

<sup>32</sup> Susan A. Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997): 1375.

organization of family history activities into racially distinct social networks.”<sup>33</sup> Parham’s study focused on two online forums in New Orleans and two organizations, namely: the St. Domingue Special Interest Group, which is comprised of mostly European Americans that likely descended from slave owners in eighteenth century French Colonial Haiti; and the Louisiana Creole Research Association that focuses on the genealogy of free and ex-slave St. Domingue immigrants of color.<sup>34</sup> Members of both groups are hindered in identity formation and in understanding history when the stories of immigrants contemporary to their ancestors are absent from the genealogy dialog. Parham especially saw the need for cooperation between groups when she began interviewing members and hearing the stories of how their families were formed and what they endured.<sup>35</sup> Some of those distinct lines, in recent years, have begun to blend, creating an even greater need for the sharing of history explorations. Karla B. Hackstaff’s research concurs with that of Parham. When researchers attempt to establish their own identity and participate in present-day discourse about history and equality, genealogical associations organized by racial, ethnic, or national identities can reproduce “the very categories that have been created for exclusion.”<sup>36</sup>

John Baker begins the narrative of his “family’s journey to freedom” by pointing out that “In the 1970s little was taught in public school about black history other than the Civil War period.”<sup>37</sup> John Siblon, a British-born black man, struggled with identity throughout his childhood. In his article “A Mistaken Case of Identity,” he discusses the difficulty non-white youth have in establishing identity when confronted by racial labels while attending a school system that does not adequately teach its country’s own racial history. It was not until he reached his mid-twenties, after a visit to Guyana and

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<sup>33</sup> Angel Adams Parham, “Race, Memory, and Family History.” *Social Identities* 14, no. 1 (January 2008): 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, “Race, Memory, and Family History,” 20-21.

<sup>36</sup> Karla B. Hackstaff, “Family Genealogy: A Sociological Imagination Reveals Intersectional Relations.” *Sociology Compass* 4, no. 8 (2010): 664.

<sup>37</sup> Baker, *The Washingtons*, title page, 1.

embarking on his own research, that he was able to “explain my identity using history and not socially-constructed categories.”<sup>38</sup>

The history of the hundreds of years of black presence in England was absent from British education. According to Siblon, who is now a school teacher himself, the formula for the three years of history instruction in British secondary schools is fifty percent British History, twenty-five percent European History, and twenty-five percent World History and, ironically, World History is “usually a unit on slavery and its consequences in the Americas with emphasis on the Southern USA.” Considering that the American South was responsible for only seven percent of the world’s slave population, Siblon says it is possible to “leave a secondary school in England without knowing that Britain had anything to do with the slave trade apart from its abolition.”<sup>39</sup> Improved educational instruction concerning the history of an area and its people not only would improve identity formation and the connection to history of the underrepresented populations, but it would improve that of the represented ones, as well. Now that Siblon understands his parents’ British Guiana roots, the multi-ethnic economy under colonial rule that existed there before his parents’ 1960 departure, and the real story of people of African descent in Great Britain, his objective is to “build upon the research and good works of others who have unearthed this hidden history of black people and bring it before the public eye.” He argues, “There is no dichotomy between this and the ever-present search for an identity.”<sup>40</sup>

As one example of political upheaval and the atrocities committed during the Nazi rule, the Holocaust poses problems for researchers on both sides of the genocide since evidence and memories were buried and many families and family records were destroyed. In Hackstaff’s exploration of C. Wright Mills’ quest for perspective on the relationship between history and biography, which he called

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<sup>38</sup> John Siblon, “A Mistaken Case of Identity.” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 52 (Autumn 2001): 253-4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 259. Gates claims that according to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, approximately 389,000 Africans were brought to the Americas forcibly, or closer to 4% of the 12.5 million total, and that another 66,000 came here through the Caribbean. See *In Search of Our Roots*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

“sociological imagination,” she reports that while political and social inclusion and exclusion can complicate identity formation, genealogical research into extreme examples of this, such as the Holocaust, can promote healing. The research brings together fragments of memories and secrets and restores family history continuity.<sup>41</sup> One such genealogist bravely investigated the fate of his father’s family and discovered it took an entire town, several flights, and scholars and translators on both sides of the Atlantic to recover the history that a collection of letters concealed.<sup>42</sup> The enormous effort this researcher expended hints at just some of the difficulties global tragedies and political upheavals create for the family researcher.

American family historians who are descendents of slaves often have success in their research going back to the 1870 U.S. Census. This first post-Civil War census no longer listed black people as property. The census listed the surnames they had adopted for themselves. The 1870 Census also included a black person’s age, occupation, and parents’ names.<sup>43</sup> Gates asks, “What about our ancestors who didn’t make it to 1870? What about the ones who didn’t live to see freedom?” A slave ship only listed its passengers by quantity – human cargo.<sup>44</sup> A genealogist can attempt to discover the origin of the self-selected last name of an ancestor, however, these last names did not always match with that of a white slave owner. In a study performed on the testimonies given before three Civil War reparations commissions by 696 ex-slaves, Elizabeth Shown Mills found that approximately seventy-three percent of ex-slaves chose for themselves the surname of a former master, while twenty-five percent chose a name unrelated to any previous owner.<sup>45</sup> Nor did all slave owners keep and retain detailed records like the Washingtons did, or refrain from the deplorable practice of selling off young slaves to other plantations, a practice that often permanently separated families.

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<sup>41</sup> Hackstaff, “Family Genealogy,” 663-4. C. Wright Mills’ proposal in *The Sociological Imagination* was also extremely influential upon Parham’s research in “Race, Memory, and Family History.”

<sup>42</sup> Victor Rosenberg, “The Power of a Family Archive.” *Archival Science* 11, nos. 1-2 (March 2011): 77.

<sup>43</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Ethnicity and the Southern Genealogist: Myths and Misconceptions, Resources and Opportunities,” in *Generations and Change: Genealogical Perspectives in Social History*, ed. Robert M. Taylor, Jr. and Ralph S. Crandall (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), 101-2.

A troubling stumbling block to identity formation can occur when collective memory of the past has been shaped by commemorations and historical writings that assume revised motives and eliminate unwanted voices. In Hall's study of the post-reconstruction era South through the writings of the Lumpkin sisters, she found that new professional historians, women's organizations, and veterans groups hurried to commemorate historical sites, establish monuments, and publish histories and genealogies that, for the most part, left out stories of slavery, the struggle for freedom, class inequality between whites, and many other subtleties of the South's past.<sup>46</sup> Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin grew up in the home of a Civil War veteran. Like Siblon, after receiving her education, she also attempted to disseminate how history affected her identity formation. Hall points out that because Lumpkin was raised in a family that actively participated in the cultural proceedings of The Lost Cause, she had to peel back the layers of public display and even the inaccuracies in personal history perpetuated by her own parents to uncover the forces that influenced the historical narrative of the time and to understand the disappointments and the ambitions that molded them. About Lumpkin's process, Hall writes, "She made history a weapon for dismantling social memory, but she also used memory (and autobiography) to breathe life into history."<sup>47</sup> If it is true, as Hall says, that we are what we remember, then it is also true that we are partially what other people remember. Identity formation and connections to history are made more difficult by reconfigured collective and social memories. According to Hall, it is our identities that "enable us to navigate, legitimate, or resist the present order of things."<sup>48</sup>

There are other stumbling blocks in the path of family historians. Adoption and today's medically assisted pregnancies can create conflicts about which lines to pursue and with which personal characteristics to identify. The custom in many countries of inheriting the male surname often means the researcher devotes more time to the paternal line while neglecting the maternal. This custom can be especially troubling when the maiden name is unrecoverable. Shifting national boundaries not

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<sup>46</sup> Hall, "You Must remember This," 449, 453.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 465.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 440.

only confuses identity, but can cause the loss or destruction of records or confine vital records behind political red tape. Many ancient cultures did not keep written records or use surnames. When writing did come into common use, occasionally the oral history was discontinued or lost. In the case of Gates' investigation of the history of Dr. Mehmet Oz, he discovered that Oz's father was born in a province in Turkey that still did not keep written records in the 1920s. As a consequence, Mustafa Oz does not know his own birthdate or that of any of his siblings.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Turkish law did not require its people to have surnames before 1934. Oz learned much about his ancestors by studying the names they chose for themselves, but he was not able to go back any further in his pedigree.<sup>50</sup> When brick walls prevent further research, it makes the information gathered that much more significant.

### **Impact on Identity**

As a genealogist begins to extend his research beyond the information needed to complete a pedigree chart, his searches encompass sources that evidence his desire to find meaning for his ancestors' lives, as well as his own. Yakel found that "Self-identification and self-discovery through the role of family historian were an important dimension of the genealogical research process."<sup>51</sup> In the course of discovering an ancestor's identity, the genealogist recognizes foundations for, connections to, and possibilities for, his own identity. Sometimes researchers discern certain qualities in themselves or in a parent and they resolve to track down the origin of such a quality; looking for patterns in daily behavior or in pivotal moments that demonstrate the application of this quality. Such was the case for pediatric neurosurgeon Ben Carson.

Carson was born in 1951 in Detroit, Michigan, to an ex-GI father and to a mother whom he would later learn was illiterate and only thirteen years old upon marriage. He explained in an interview with Gates that when he was eight years old, his mother discovered that her husband had a second

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<sup>49</sup> Gates, *Faces of America*, 112-3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Yakel, "Seeking Information," 9.

family and the couple consequently divorced.<sup>52</sup> To support her two sons, Mrs. Carson often worked from six o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night. She was determined to see that her sons progressed in school and made good choices in life. "She basically sacrificed her own life to make sure that we were successful," Carson explained.<sup>53</sup> Carson wanted to know more about his ancestors because he felt that his mother "didn't just appear. She had to come from somewhere. That determination, the will not to just be like everybody else, not to just give up? That came from someplace, and that came through my heritage to me."<sup>54</sup>

Carson's maternal great grandfather, John Copeland, was three years old when his owner died in 1859. At his death, the owner's property, including his slaves, was divided up into equal parts and dispersed among his inheritors. Slaves each had a different value based on their age, size, and gender. Young John Copeland was separated from his family into Lot Number 3 and sent to live in a county on the eastern border of Georgia. In the 1870 Census, a twelve-year old John Copeland reappears in Harris County in western Georgia, living with other Copeland family members. Even though most separated slave families never saw one another again, and considering that most post-war ads in black publications searching for lost relatives were ineffective, John Copeland found his way back into the arms of family. Carson made the observation, "He was obviously determined. Maybe that's where my mother got it from."<sup>55</sup>

When I interviewed John Baker, I asked him if he noticed any traits common among the family members he interviewed and if he could tie any of those traits to himself or to his ancestors. His response was surprising because I had not previously thought of "love for family" as a character attribute. He wrote,

I really have a great love for family and I have been told that most of my ancestors were the same way. I get very excited every time I meet a new cousin as a result of my research. It even

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<sup>52</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 179-81.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-94.

means a great deal to me when I meet others whose ancestors came from Wessyngton that are not related to me. Although we are not blood related I feel a bond because our ancestors knew one another and they helped each other survive slavery. There are many other traits that I inherited from my ancestors such as singing and storytelling. My great-great grandfather Emanuel Washington led most of the songs in their prayer services on the plantation. I sing and play the piano at my church. He would often assemble all the white and black children on the plantation and tell them ghost stories. I have written about him and the others so in that sense I'm a storyteller.<sup>56</sup>

It was nearly universal among the researchers I interviewed and also among those interviewed by Gates, that once a genealogist established a commonality between himself and his ancestor, in terms of a personal quality or purpose in life, that that genealogist felt a renewed confidence to put this quality to use or to pursue a life-purpose with more direction.

Brittany A. Chapman was a student at the University of Leicester when she wrote her thesis on her ancestor Ruth May Fox. Ruth was a woman of the Victorian Era, a British immigrant to the United States, a pioneer, and a suffragist. She was also Chapman's great-great grandmother.<sup>57</sup> With access to her autobiography, personal diaries, and other handwritten letters and documents, Chapman was able to place her ancestor within a historical setting while sketching out for the reader details about her daily life, her struggles, her ambitions, and her accomplishments. To educate women about their rights and potential was one of Ruth's ambitions. This she achieved when she had articles printed in the *Woman's Exponent*, through her work with the Utah Women's Press Club and other organizations, and by having her poetry and hymns published. Concerning being published, Ruth wrote in *My Story* that the "recognition greatly encouraged me."<sup>58</sup> When asked if Chapman, a published author and editor, could relate to the experience of writing and becoming published, she responded, "I remember the first

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<sup>56</sup> Baker, interview with author, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Brittany A. Chapman, "Ruth May Fox: Portrait of a Nineteenth Century Woman in Historical Context," Master's thesis, University of Leicester, 2007. Ruth May Fox lived from 1853-1958. Chapman is about to publish a new biography on Ruth May Fox and is the co-editor of the seven-part series *Women of Faith in the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2011).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-9, 34. The *Woman's Exponent* was a newspaper style periodical that was first published in Salt Lake City, Utah, in June of 1872 and continued through February, 1914. It printed world news, minutes of women's community organizations and religious meetings, and encouraged the submission of articles, essays, and prose by women. *My Story* was never officially published, but a 1973 edition of *My Story: Supplemented by Miscellaneous Articles Pertaining to Her Life* is accessible to patrons at the Church History Library in Salt Lake City, UT. Manuscript compiled by Leonard Grant Fox.

evening I found out I was going to be a published author. The most incredible feeling came over me that I was contributing to a vast pool of women's thoughts that had gone on before...I can relate to the thrill and encouragement that being published can give."<sup>59</sup> Chapman went so far as to indicate that she felt guided or looked after in her own literary work by her ancestor.

Beyond talents and character strengths, the family history researcher often identifies with a life's mission or purpose shared with an ancestor. Ruth May Fox's purpose in promoting women's suffrage was two-fold: she saw her role as securing the vote for women and educating those women who were not yet open to self-improvement. "To Ruth," Chapman wrote, "these women were shackled unawares, blind to the chains that held them bound."<sup>60</sup> When interviewed, Chapman explained that so many women, today, are educated or are in school that she feels her purpose takes on a different function. "I feel a sense of responsibility to nurture womanhood and sisterhood by sharing the stories of Mormon women. I certainly did not feel the same before getting to know [Ruth May Fox.] She has helped me to see that the actions of one person can make a difference, and the story of one well-lived life can make a difference."<sup>61</sup> Ruth felt duty-bound to encourage women to live a life worth writing about while Chapman feels compelled to publish the stories of those lives. Still, knowing that she has a talent for writing in common with her ancestor, Chapman considers herself not only connected to her great-great grandmother, but inspired to pursue what she sees as her mission more confidently.

Family history research often reveals the hardships ancestors had to confront and overcome. The knowledge of what has been achieved by those who came before has an interesting impact on personal identity. In some cases, the suffering was caused by battle, drought, or epidemic – something everyone in the area at the time had to endure. Knowing that an ancestor endured it, as well, makes the event more tangible for the researcher as their own life is tied to someone else's survival. Muriel Spoden wrote about the journey her ancestors Edward B. and Margaret M. Clark took when they

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<sup>59</sup> Brittany A. Chapman, interview with author, via e-mail, October 15, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Chapman, "Ruth May Fox," 63.

<sup>61</sup> Chapman, interview with author, 2012.

decided to leave their farm in Lynchburg, Virginia, and relocate with their seven children to Missouri.<sup>62</sup> While stopping to rest and resupply in Russellville, Kentucky, Edward fell victim to the 1835 cholera epidemic that was sweeping through Logan County. Margaret became a widow at age forty and was left to care for her children in a strange place; her youngest was only three years old. Muriel's narrative records that the family abandoned the Missouri plans and the oldest son immediately began working. As the younger ones matured, they joined him in various, successful business ventures. Margaret bravely carried on without her husband until her passing at age seventy.<sup>63</sup>

As she recorded this story and many others shaped by epidemic, war, the Great Depression, and loss, Muriel advised her readers that walking in her forebears' footsteps, with the talents and faith inherited from them, could only lead to a "fulfilling life experience."<sup>64</sup> Her own father died at just forty-six years leaving a wife and three children under the age of eighteen. Muriel and her older brother got jobs while her mother sold off the car and furniture and moved the family into a small apartment. Together, the siblings were eventually able to purchase a home for their mother and pay for their educations.<sup>65</sup> "You have a rich and fascinating heritage," she wrote. "It is a worthy goal to try and live up to it" and she did.<sup>66</sup>

One of the Wessington Plantation descendants was Henry Polk. In Baker's book, Polk shared the story of attending a funeral service of one of Baker's Lewis relatives. "I remember when Uncle Ed Lewis died in the winter of 1951 and during his burial, a white man came up and interrupted the burial and asked some of the men to push his car out of a ditch. Uncle Ed's son...gave the man a good cussing for disturbing the service. Later that night the church burned to the ground. We couldn't ever

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<sup>62</sup> Spoden, *An American Ancestry*, 145-6, KCMC 516. The *Missouri Intelligencer* reported on the epidemic in Russellville ten times, listing the names of the dead in each issue, between June 6 and September 5, 1835. Edward Clark died on August 10.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Dedication.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 53-7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., Author's Message.

prove it, but I know that man did it.”<sup>67</sup> Polk concluded his story by saying, “Our people need to know what all those people went through back then for us to get to where we are, now, especially the young folks.”<sup>68</sup>

Baker commented on this conversation in his interview with me. “There were many struggles and sacrifices our ancestors endured for us to have some of the rights and privileges we have now. Voting is something I don’t take lightly. Every time I vote I think of the countless number of people (black and white) who died or were brutalized just for me to be able to do something as simple as voting, and there are countless other things.”<sup>69</sup> Baker is retired from his day job and works as a professional genealogist full-time, but he lectures on his Washington family research whenever he can. His presentation style is straightforward and unemotional. Using charts, photographs, and documents, he tells the stories of his family’s journey and of his journey to get to know them: essentially fulfilling Mr. Polk’s request.<sup>70</sup> With a heightened sense of the reality of what his ancestors endured, Baker goes about activities like voting and even church attendance, gaining strength from knowing and sharing his family’s stories.

Gates wrote about the dehumanizing aspects of slavery in the introduction to his work. Slavery took away men and women’s given first names and denied them a surname and the right to have their familial relationships recognized by law. These and many other aspects of slavery make it difficult to understand how they survived from day to day. He claims, “Until their stories are reconstructed and told, these ancestors of ours will not exist as human beings, as agents, as actors in a great drama.”<sup>71</sup> Not knowing our ancestors and our past, he explains, limits how people in the present think of themselves: “crippling our ability to know ourselves and understand our past, to defer gratification, to

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<sup>67</sup> Baker, *The Washingtons*, 264-5. The Antioch Baptist Church of Turnersville was originally built by freed Wessyngton slaves in 1869. It was burned down under suspicious circumstances and rebuilt several times.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>69</sup> Baker, interview with author, 2012.

<sup>70</sup> John F. Baker Jr., <http://www.wessyngton.com/> (accessed November 7, 2012). Baker addressed the membership at the October 2011 conference of the Society of Tennessee Archivists at which I was in attendance.

<sup>71</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 7.

believe in the future as an extension of a noble and admirable collective past of which most of us remain painfully unaware.” He goes further to explain that not knowing our ancestors’ history is to not know our own, which serves as a “profound limitation on what we can achieve, on the history each of us can make.”<sup>72</sup>

Sometimes the lack of knowledge about why an ancestor made certain decisions undermines our appreciation of their situation and our comprehension of what they hoped for themselves. While for some slavery may hold the keys to the mystery of “where we came from,” for others understanding the mysteries behind immigration can answer “why they came here.” When Gates approached Mario Batali with the opportunity to explore his ancestry, Batali agreed, but supplied that he was confused about why his family would ever leave “the idyllic world of Italy... Why,” he asked “would you leave what was perfect?” Although he was proud to be an American, he just did not understand the motivation his ancestors had to leave their home country.<sup>73</sup> Batali feels connected to his roots through his cooking, which he learned growing up in Seattle from his parents and his paternal grandmother, and through his three and a half year apprenticeship in Italy. But, he is a third generation American and, therefore, distanced from the relatives who made the move to the states.

The research revealed that Batali’s maternal line came from a small farming community in Italy. His great-grandparents immigrated in 1896 to mine coal in Washington State. His paternal line also came from the same community and can be traced back over four hundred years. His paternal great-grandfather left Italy in the 1890s to mine silver and copper in Butte, Montana, a town that was almost completely populated by Italian immigrants by the time the 1900 Census was taken.<sup>74</sup> Both sides of the family were part of a massive migration of Italians to America over a twenty-year period. The marriage record of Batali’s great-great-grandparents listed all of the wedding witnesses as tenant farmers. The groom’s birth certificate lists him as an orphan. This would indicate that the Batalis did

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<sup>72</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Gates, *Faces of America*, 128-9.

<sup>74</sup> Gates, *Faces of America*, 133-136.

not own land and were living a meager existence as tenant farmers at the bottom of the social and economic structure. Not only did the son of this marriage emigrate, but many of the son's brothers and cousins did, as well. The 1899 ship's manifest listed these familial travelers' destination as Butte, Montana; indicating that in their minds, leaving behind the poverty of farm life for mining was an improvement.<sup>75</sup> Within fifteen years of arriving at the mine, after suffering incredible losses in the family due to black lung, an extremely high infant mortality rate, alcoholism, and accidents, the great-grandfather took his savings to Washington State and bought a farm. Within one generation, both sides of Batali's family were land and business owners. In spite of all of the hardships, none of his ancestors returned to Italy.<sup>76</sup>

Batali now understood why they left Italy, why they stayed in America, and the kind of mental and emotional gifts they must have had to overcome their predicaments. "I always wondered why they left Italy... These people must have been very poor in Italy. Because it's not like they were in a great world in the mines here,... I don't have any idea of the tenacity and intensity for survival that people in this era must have had."<sup>77</sup> The information he learned about his ancestors also made him appreciate his own life's opportunities more and helped him to see his connectedness to the past, as well. "What we represent is the best possible expression of all the good parts of our genetic stuff, and some of the bad ones, becoming part of something completely new. And for me that is the greatness of America."<sup>78</sup>

### **Increased Understanding of and Connection to History**

One of the questions Bishop asked his respondents was what they knew about their ancestors before they began their research and how the new information they gathered about their family lines

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<sup>75</sup> Gates, *Faces of America*, 136-7.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-140.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-5.

changed the way they thought about them.<sup>79</sup> These questions are intriguing because they can also lead to discussions about what the genealogist learned through her studies about the past and about her ancestors' part in history. In my interview with Chapman, I asked her how she would describe her ancestor prior to her research. She answered, "I would have described her as a woman everyone really admired who was a pioneer, General Young Women President, and who wrote 'Carry On.'" In response to the question of how her description changed afterwards, she wrote, "Now I see her more as a complex, rich, inspiring woman who overcame much, magnified her talents, was given opportunities because of her willingness to work, was very deep, and would fight to live her convictions to the death."<sup>80</sup> Her explorations allowed her to place these characteristics and motivations against the backdrop of Ruth's day and gain an understanding of how her great-great-grandmother interacted with the powers and forces of her time. Chapman also offered that looking over the entire lifespan of her relative helped her to see that each experience prepared Ruth for the next challenge she would face, until she was able to "forward good, important causes."<sup>81</sup> She feels a part of and strengthened by this history and can see herself connected to it by the generations before her.

A letter written by Muriel to a cousin demonstrates the emotional connection to history that genealogical research can create. In the letter, she thanks her cousin for lending her the family Bible so that she can share it with her extended family members. She confesses, "I cried when I saw my beloved father's name so tenderly placed there. It meant more to me to see than you can possibly imagine."<sup>82</sup> Recognizing that Muriel was fifteen years old when her father died, her emotional response makes sense. However, each find along the path to family discovery prompted her to do more; in the similar way that these little connections inspire most genealogists to uncover more of their own history.

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<sup>79</sup> Bishop, "Grand Scheme," 395.

<sup>80</sup> Chapman, interview with author, 2012. "Carry On," in *Hymns*, copyright 1948, IRI.

<sup>81</sup> Chapman, interview with author, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Muriel Spoden to Cousin Carty, Series III.B, KCMC 516.

Yakel found several examples among the genealogists she interviewed of research processes that went beyond the vital and personal records directly related to the ancestor. “The expanded information seeking served as a means of learning about the historical narrative more broadly and at the same time fill in the personal story of an ancestor’s life.”<sup>83</sup> In one instance, a family historian was researching the life of a Civil War soldier. She read a diary of another soldier in the ancestor’s company. By doing this, the family historian was able to discern what hardships the men faced and, in this case, what may have caused their and her relative’s deaths.<sup>84</sup> When the researcher broadens the search for information about an ancestor, it has a direct effect on broadening the historical understanding of the researcher.

Yakel explained further in her follow up article “Genealogists as a ‘Community of Records’” that as a genealogist’s work progresses, her idea of what records may be applicable to her search expands. In order to add more historical detail to an ancestor’s life narrative, interactions with archivists and other researchers also increase. “By widening their information search,” she found, “genealogists put themselves and their families into a broader historical frame.”<sup>85</sup> Where vital records and family documents once sufficed, now local histories, archival collections, maps, and diaries are consulted to offer additional context for and provide more insight into the everyday life of an ancestor.

These wider searches into the historical narrative also include the private papers of individuals who might not seem to have had a significant role to play on the stage of history. Victor Rosenberg inherited a personal archive of 110 letters upon his father’s death. The letters were written by his two uncles, his grandparents and several other relatives during the pivotal era of 1938-1946. In his article “The Power of a Family Archive,” Rosenberg describes the arduous task of having the letters translated from Yiddish, Hebrew, and German into English.<sup>86</sup> As they were translated, the heart-

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<sup>83</sup> Yakel, “Seeking Information,” 5.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Yakel and Torres, “Genealogists as a ‘Community of Records,’” 99.

<sup>86</sup> Rosenberg, “Family Archive,” 77-80.

breaking saga of the Rosenberg family emerged. Alfred, Rosenberg's father, had been living in the United States since August of 1938. Eugen, the middle brother, left for Palestine in 1935. But Julius, the oldest, remained in Breisach, Germany, with his parents, trying to find a way for them to escape and looking after the Jewish members of his community who remained in Germany. The Rosenbergs endured the privations of war in Germany until 1940, when all of the Jews of Baden were deported to an internment camp in Gurs, France.<sup>87</sup> The letters, the majority of which were written by Alfred's brothers, parents, and a few other relatives, continued from France until the family was transported to Auschwitz in August of 1942. Julius did not live out the month, though his father and cousin survived beyond liberation.<sup>88</sup>

These letters were not written to or by government officials or by anyone of prominence, yet they shed light on a time and place about which there cannot be enough written if memories are going to be recovered and a repeat of past horrors is to be prevented.<sup>89</sup> Rosenberg described the letters as "The otherwise ordinary writings of ordinary people," which "take on greater significance when created during extraordinary times."<sup>90</sup> Not only do the letters make real the personal lives of those who were a part of history, they bring to life the realities of that time and place in history.<sup>91</sup> The writings produced by genealogical researchers through the careful study of letters and diaries, in combination with that of other records, make possible a connection to history for all who read such history writings by putting names and details to the overwhelming statistics of the Holocaust and other global tragedies.

Another example of how the documentation created by an otherwise ordinary individual can be of interest to scholars researching an extraordinary time is the scrapbook compiled by Muriel Spoden of her husband Hal's participation in the Roosevelt Administration's Lend-Lease Act. The scrapbook

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<sup>87</sup> Rosenberg, "Family Archive," 81.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 78, 81.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. Rosenberg wrote that by "common consent," the letters and accompanying artifacts were not read or discussed by family members because of the pain and anguish associated with them.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

includes Hal's photographs of Pan American's Northern Africa operations and his letters home to Muriel, to whom he was engaged at the time, and to his parents.<sup>92</sup> The letters span a fifteen-month period from 1941-1942 and the photographs depict the military passage between New York and Africa, the engineering projects undertaken on the African continent, and relations with the local populations. The letters are rich with description of the surrounding environment, native cultures, climate, the hardships of rural travel, evidences of the accelerating war, and the difficulty posed by the rampant spread of diseases such as malaria and dysentery. The letters also reflect the humor, homesickness, professional ambitions, and patriotic motivations of Mr. Spoden. This personal archive reveals the human story behind the vast amounts of material, money, and man-power put forth by the United States in defense of the Allies before and after its official entrance into the war.

Part of the increased sense of connection to history that is realized through genealogical research derives from the feelings of appreciation for one's ancestors that are stirred during the process. Muriel quoted her great uncle William D. Millar in the introduction to her Spoden family history narrative. He said, "The object of this work is not to parade with selfish pride the accomplishments of others that we may be less ambitious to do as much. But that we may not forget the debt owed to them and others of their time for the sacrifices they made, principles for which they strove, and the benefits we have reaped as a result of the efforts they put forth."<sup>93</sup> The fact that she chose this quotation shows that she must have shared a similar outlook. It is interesting to realize that Millar, who was born in the 1880s, also felt a comparable sense of obligation to the family members who lived before him.

An intriguing twist occurred in my interview with Chapman. I asked her if, after learning to recognize what the social and political conditions were that shaped Ruth's life, she could then identify what circumstances, today, are helping to mold her own identity. She said that she absolutely could,

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<sup>92</sup> "Adventures of Hal T. Spoden in Northern Africa," Series XI., KCMC 516.

<sup>93</sup> "The Spoden, Wild, Thies, and Dietrich Families of Chatauqua County, New York," Series XI., KCMC 516.

but in her answer, she referred back to her ancestor and the work of her fellow suffragists as influencing the life she leads, today. “Because of their efforts,” wrote Chapman, “equal opportunity for education, employment, freedom to go and do without a chaperone. . . so many things that give freedom of choice to women, were pushed forward by Ruth and women like her.”<sup>94</sup> It is apparent that she sees herself as an inheritor of the good that came from her ancestors and that this is what shapes her life most prominently. She believes she stands upon the shoulders of Ruth and women like her.<sup>95</sup>

It is difficult to determine the order of the emotional and intellectual developments that occur within the genealogist. Does a defining of personal identity that stems from genealogical research lead to a feeling of connection to one’s ancestors and the time in which they lived? Or, does an understanding that people and events of the past paved the road that a family historian presently walks upon create an appreciation for those forebears and an awareness of one’s own place in the human story? Mills’ commentary in *The Sociological Imagination* suggests that the relationship between society and an individual life is cyclical. “By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and its historical push and shove.”<sup>96</sup> It is logical, then, that the internal and intellectual developments that come to the genealogist as she studies the relationship between her ancestor’s life and the society in which he lived would also grow within her in a cyclical, alternating way. “Neither the life of an individual,” comments Mills, “nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”<sup>97</sup>

Rather than occurring simultaneously, it is likely that these developments build upon one another and that their rate of growth depends upon the nature of the current research. A diary, a letter, a map, a reference text, or site visit may each awaken an awareness of past people, events, and places in different ways. Crane, after her careful comparison of various scholars’ memory theories, including her

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<sup>94</sup> Chapman, interview with author, 2012.

<sup>95</sup> *Women of Faith in the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2011). The dedication in Volume One reads, “For the women upon whose shoulders we stand.”

<sup>96</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 6.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

own, ultimately suggests that the sources that scholars and genealogists study are silent. “All narratives, all sites, all texts,” she explains, “remain objects until they are ‘read’ or referred to by individuals thinking historically. . . . These individuals may happen to be professional historians, but, more often, they may simply be people who are thinking historically.”<sup>98</sup> Crane’s proposal that one does not have to have lived the experience to retain collective memory, that learning about history is in itself a lived experience, suggests that the changes that occur within a genealogist concerning her identity and connection to history motivate her to gain, retain, and pass on to others collective memory. Developing appreciation for those who have come before is achieved in gradual stages and requires various activities, including thinking historically, even if the genealogist never considers herself a historian or a historical actor.<sup>99</sup>

### **Conclusions**

For the genealogist, family history research takes him on a journey that results in more than just the discovery of who his family members were and how they lived. Parham found through her interactions with the New Orleans area genealogists that “researching their family’s history means more than filling in the blanks on a family tree. Rather, [the] members . . . live and breathe their history and weave its threads into their understandings of the past and the present.”<sup>100</sup> To live and breathe history is to make a connection to the past that informs the genealogist’s identity but also makes him comprehend history’s vital contributions to his understanding of the world around him. As his ancestors played a part in his present, he accepts that he also must play a part in forwarding good and important causes for those in the future.

The writings that family historians produce stem from their many examinations of documents and make it possible for others to embark upon journeys similar to their own. Rosenberg has donated his father’s letters to the University of Michigan Special Collections. They have been digitized and

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<sup>98</sup> Crane, “Collective Memory,” 1381. Crane references Yerushalmi, Nora, Halbwachs, Derrida, and many others.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 1382, 1384.

<sup>100</sup> Parham, “Family History,” 14.

both the German and the English translations will be available to all researchers.<sup>101</sup> Gates' enthusiasm for the discoveries made by genealogical exploration is hopeful of wider influence, also, as oral histories transfer to written histories. "By telling and retelling the stories of our own ancestors," he exhorts, "history can move from our kitchens or our parlors into the textbooks, ultimately changing the official narrative of American history itself."<sup>102</sup>

The product of genealogical research can contribute to a broader discussion of history. The case of Rosenberg's collection of letters is just one example of how a person's research can bring added light to the narrative of a painful part of history that is taboo or less examined. The letters document the extreme treatment the Jews of Breisach received at the hands of the Nazis. Their businesses were forcibly closed, outside employment was denied, religious meeting places were destroyed, and their cantor was tortured. More deprivations were threatened daily.<sup>103</sup> Because of his research, the current villagers of Breisach were able to mark the sites of tragedy in their community and honor by name their former Jewish neighbors.

After the war, one letter specifically outlined the difficulty survivors had restoring their lives and receiving justice from their former persecutors. "Papa has a lot of work to do caring for these few and above all we must now fight for some compensation from the state, plundered and impoverished as it was by the Nazi government," wrote a cousin. "But the Nazis are too protected, otherwise it wouldn't be so difficult . . . and the Nazis haven't quite all just disappeared."<sup>104</sup> Rosenberg feels that "These letters contribute to a growing body of material that is contemporaneous evidence of the Holocaust and the events that led up to it."<sup>105</sup> Underlining this achievement, of course, is the personal

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<sup>101</sup> Rosenberg, "Family Archive," 92.

<sup>102</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 12.

<sup>103</sup> Rosenberg, "Family Archive," 82-83, 90-91.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

discovery of the struggles his family suffered, the connection he now feels to the region and its people, and his increased awareness of the barbarism of the era.<sup>106</sup>

Because most family historians end up researching the lives of ordinary people, the narratives they construct from their findings may or may not add to a public discourse. What is still important about these narratives, however, is that they often tell the stories of the underrepresented. Hackstaff says this has the effect of redistributing “power in both symbolic and material ways.”<sup>107</sup> Materially, the narrative of history is now inhabited by the powerful and the powerless. Symbolically, a voice is given to those who struggled in the past to conduct their lives without interference; who struggled to be heard. Gates explains it this way: “Many of our ancestors didn’t have a lot of choice over the major decisions in their lives; rather, their choices were delimited by the larger political contexts in which they found themselves. But all too often we let this obscure the fact that our ancestors lived their lives, too. They had daily struggles – ordinary struggles – and I think that much of our ‘official’ history misses that.”<sup>108</sup> Family history constructs a record of those who lived in spite of great tribulation. It offers a record of those who lived quiet lives. And the study of this record brings to the family historian a recognition of the life he, himself, is capable of living.

I have ancestors on my maternal and paternal lines who crossed oceans and plains to secure religious freedom for themselves and their families. Their choices and sacrifices are part of what allow me to live the life I live, today, and certainly inform my personal identity. I feel an obligation to take advantage of these freedoms and to honor their sacrifices by examining and telling their stories. Baker discusses the results of an informed identity in the conclusion of his book. “One of the most positive results of my journey has been seeing the increased interest among African Americans in learning about our own histories. . . . The ability to discover much more about our history and ourselves is growing. Young African Americans react very favorably to this new sense of positive identity; I am

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<sup>106</sup> Rosenberg, “Family Archive,” 92-93.

<sup>107</sup> Hackstaff, “Family Genealogy,” 660.

<sup>108</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 13.

always especially pleased when this happens.”<sup>109</sup> Carson also responded positively to the information he learned about his family and, ultimately, about himself. He said, “Everybody wants to know what their ancestors did, how they contributed. If you don’t have that in our society, you are kind of lost. Even if you don’t know it.”<sup>110</sup>

Carson’s comments raise the questions, “How would our society look, today, if everyone knew something about how they got where they are and if they knew something positive about their ancestral family members?” When interviewed about the airing of an upcoming documentary, Gates told a reporter, “Understanding how you got to where you are as a human being through your ancestors is the most important element in shaping your sense of self and your self-esteem.” He offered as an illustration of the effect genealogy can have on identity formation, “It’s one thing to put pictures of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman on the wall of a classroom. It’s another thing to know that your family survived the middle passage, survived the evil of slavery, survived Jim Crow racism, and that they made it—that they made it and that you can make it too.”<sup>111</sup>

The exploration of an ancestor’s life opens a window that sheds light on a family historian’s own identity but also provides a portal from which to view history. The genealogist’s sense of connection to the past is enhanced not just through his increased knowledge of it, but by caring more about it. When asked if after conducting her research Chapman was better able to see how her identity was inspired by or connected to her ancestor, she responded, “That may be one of the largest impacts she has had on me. Studying the life of an ancestor in depth has provided a real sense of belonging, and given me a great sense of roots and identity. I gain strength from her strength, I learn from her lessons, and I benefit from her convictions.”<sup>112</sup> Bishop’s respondents came to similar conclusions. He explained that, once confirmed, the information genealogists assemble is blended into a family’s story where, as

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<sup>109</sup> Baker, *The Washingtons*, 357.

<sup>110</sup> Gates, *In Search of Our Roots*, 196.

<sup>111</sup> Television Review, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 5, 2008, online edition.

[http://www.cleveland.com/tv/index.ssf/2008/02/african\\_american\\_lives\\_2\\_begin.html](http://www.cleveland.com/tv/index.ssf/2008/02/african_american_lives_2_begin.html) (accessed November 14, 2012).

<sup>112</sup> Chapman, interview with author, 2012.

one genealogist described it, one can gain “insight into what they are, how they have become and what they might not want to be.”<sup>113</sup> Another summed up the family history journey and its impact on personal identity by noting that genealogy “tells me who I am.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Bishop, “Grand Scheme,” 409.  
<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 403.

## Appendix A

### **Muriel C. Spoden Collection**

#### Series I. Audio-Visual Materials

- Subseries I-A. Film
- Subseries I-B. Oral History Recordings
- Subseries I-C. Photographs and Postcards
- Subseries I-D. Scrapbooks

#### Series II. Correspondence

#### Series III. Genealogical Research

- Subseries III-A. General Files
- Subseries III-B. Family Files

#### Series IV. Journals, Ledgers & Receipt Books

#### Series V. Maps & Oversized Materials

- Subseries V-A. Maps
- Subseries V-B. Newspapers
- Subseries V-C. Presentation Materials

#### Series VI. Netherland Inn Records

#### Series VII. Printed Materials

#### Series VIII. Professional Organizations

#### Series IX. Publications by Muriel Spoden

- Subseries IX-A. An American Ancestry of the Clark-Morton and Tyman-Millar-Adams Families
- Subseries IX-B. The Ancestors and Descendants of Richard Netherland, Esq.
- Subseries IX-C. Early Years on Bays Mountain
- Subseries IX-D. Historic Sites of Sullivan County
- Subseries IX-E. Historical Map of the Long Island of the Holston
- Subseries IX-F. Kingsport Heritage: The Early Years 1700 to 1900
- Subseries IX-G. The Long Island of the Holston: Sacred Island of the Cherokee Nation
- Subseries IX-H. The Netherland Inn Chronicles
- Subseries IX-I. Miscellaneous

#### Series X. Research Files / Materials

- Subseries X-A. American History
- Subseries X-B. Tennessee History
- Subseries X-C. Sullivan County & Kingsport History

#### Series XI. Spoden Personal Family Files (Redacted)

#### Series XII. Subject Files

## Appendix B

Interview with John F. Baker, Jr. via e-mail.  
October 15, 2012.

Question: You recount the experience of seeing a family photo in your junior high social studies textbook and then later having your grandmother explain how the people in the photograph were related to you, but what about this incident spurred you on to begin genealogical research? Can you describe it?

I have always been fascinated by history, especially family history. I suppose my earlier years were preparing me for the research for as a child I spent most of my free time around older relatives and friends of the family listening to their stories. As soon as I learned that the photograph was of my ancestors it sparked a great desire to learn all I could about them. When I interviewed other people who knew my great-great-grandparents personally and they related their family stories of their ancestors at Wessyngton it made me want to search further and find out what life was like for everyone on the plantation. When I looked through the records and learned of their accomplishments under the conditions in which they lived I really wanted to know more. I was so surprised when I learned that men from the plantation had enlisted in the Union Army to fight for their freedom; former Wessyngton slaves purchased hundreds of acres of land, shortly after they were freed, part of which they had been enslaved on; every male on the plantation was a registered voter as soon as they were given rights to vote, and people from the plantation who were as old as fifty went to school to learn to read and write. Their desire and tenacity for striving for a better life for themselves and their children really impressed me.

Question: Some family historians surveyed have mentioned the need to “get things right” in their work, by either correcting oral history passed down to them or by using multiple sources. In your work, you even discovered that original 1850 census records in Washington, D.C. had a microfilming error that would have caused several of your ancestors to be lost. Can you relate to this feeling needing to get things right, and if so, how?

The document was the 1850 Slave schedule, which does not list the names of the slaves. It only lists the name of the slave owner, the number of slaves they owned and their race, sex and age. Fortunately the Washingtons kept such detailed records that it was possible to put names with the otherwise anonymous list of slaves. Unfortunately some of the pages got mixed up and they were microfilmed out of order and listed one of the Washington’s neighbors with his slaves. I knew the correct number of slaves that the Washingtons owned from other plantation records from Wessyngton but if I had not taken it upon myself to straighten out that information many of the families from the plantation from that period may have been lost forever. Future generations would likely not have figured out what really happened with the slave schedule error. Many people listed on the 1850 census were dead by 1860 and outside the Wessyngton records there would have been no proof that those people ever existed. That’s why each document is so precious to me and why it is so important to preserve our history.

Question: Your relative Henry Polk described a funeral service that was interrupted by a disgruntled white man and how later that night his church was burned down. Did learning about what your ancestors endured change the way you think about yourself?

It made me realize that I should not take things for granted and to appreciate what I have more. Some of the things we enjoy now our ancestors could not imagine.

Question: Mr. Polk told you that what your ancestors went through helped your generation get to where you are, now. Did you agree with him?

I do agree with Mr. Polk. There were many struggles and sacrifices our ancestors endured for us to have some of the rights and privileges we have now. Voting is something I don't take lightly. Every time I vote I think of the countless number of people (black and white) who died or were brutalized just for me to be able to do something as simple as voting, and there are countless other things.

Question: You interviewed many, many people in your work. Did you notice any traits that family members had in common? If so were you able to tie them to your own characteristics or to those of your ancestors?

I really have a great love for family and I have been told that most of my ancestors were the same way. I get very excited every time I meet a new cousin as a result of my research. It even means a great deal to me when I meet others whose ancestors came from Wessyngton that are not related to me. Although we are not blood related I feel a bond because our ancestors knew one another and they helped each other survive slavery. There are many other traits that I inherited from my ancestors such as singing and storytelling. My great-great-grandfather Emanuel Washington led most of the songs in their prayer services on the plantation. I sing and play the piano at my church. He would often assemble all the white and black children on the plantation and tell them ghost stories. I have written about him and the others so in that sense I'm a storyteller.

Question: Can you explain any kind of responsibility you might feel you have to the people who came before you?

I feel I have a responsibility to my ancestors and all the others from Wessyngton to let their descendants know who they were and would they stood for and to take advantage of all the opportunities not available to them to live their best lives.

Question: The research for your book spanned twenty years. Did your sense of identity change during those years?

The research spanned thirty years. Going up in a small town surround by extended family I always had a strong sense of pride and family in knowing who I am. The research allowed me to get to know the personalities of my ancestors and discover the origins of some family traits.

Question: How did anchoring your ancestors to history change your own sense of connection to history?

Learning who my ancestors were and of their contributions to the founding of this country made me realize the importance of knowing my own history.

## Appendix C

Interview via e-mail with Brittany A. Chapman

October 15, 2012

Question: In addition to having access to the typescripts of your ancestor's autobiography and journal, did you have any documents in her own handwriting in your possession?

I had access to the handwritten diaries at the Church History Library and her original typescript autobiography (which she typewrote). I also had access to other handwritten documents in the possession of a relative.

Question: Family history researchers often mention that they are where they are in life because of their ancestors. In your research, you discovered that Ruth worked as a dressmaker in a Philadelphia cotton mill in order to help her parents raise money for the journey West. Ruth recounts an incident in which she helped another religious girl withstand the taunting of fellow workers. As you realized that Ruth, herself, must have already had to deal with this taunting, did you see your position in society impacted in any way by Ruth's life?

Not specifically by this story. When I read this story, I acutely felt the uncomfortable tension of religious taunting because I personally experienced it to some degree. I admire Ruth's courage—it says much about her personality that the girls did not taunt her like they did the other. This story is evidence of Ruth's commitment to her faith, which has certainly impacted my life.

Question: Ruth May Fox was a writer and commented in her autobiography about her opportunities to have her works published. Can you relate to her experiences, and if so, how? Do her experiences influence you in any way or change how you see yourself?

I remember the first evening I found out I was going to be a published author. The most incredible feeling came over me that I was contributing to a vast pool of women's thoughts that had gone before, able to have the means and medium to share an important message; given a voice louder than you could speak on your own. I can relate to the thrill and encouragement that being published can give. Ruth felt validated and successful by having her poetry in newspapers, periodicals, and books. It can have that effect. As supernatural as this may seem, I do believe she has played a role in opening up publishing opportunities for me. Her experiences influence me more than I realize, I think. Through her literary experiences in the Utah Woman's Press Club, for example, I got a glimpse into what writing meant for Ruth and other women in the nineteenth century—a voice, sisterhood, an outlet from domestic affairs, validation, contribution to society—so many things.

Question: Does understanding how the Victorian times motivated and molded Ruth's life help you to observe ways in which today's circumstances shape who you are or provide opportunities for your life?

Absolutely. I see the limitations that she experienced as a woman in the Victorian era with a very defined social role. She saw the potential that women had to step outside of that role and their capacity to achieve more, standing equally beside males. She had ambition, and was motivated to campaign for women's rights for her daughters, granddaughters, and subsequent generations. Because of their efforts, equal opportunity for education, employment, freedom to go and do without a chaperone...so many things that give freedom of choice to women, were pushed forward by Ruth and women like her.

Question: Since your research, are you better able to see the ways in which your identity is inspired by or connected to your ancestor and to the history she was a part of?

Definitely. That may be one of the largest impacts she has had on me. Studying the life of an ancestor in depth has provided a real sense of belonging, and given me a greater sense of roots and identity. I gain strength from her strength, I learn from her lessons, and I benefit from her conviction that her religious beliefs were true. Learning about her has given me greater vision and really helped me to (to use vernacularisms) to gain a testimony of Mormonism in a deeper way. She has inspired me to do things, be involved, and nurture sisterhood. I have learned to appreciate the power and beauty of female relationships.

Question: Ruth seemed to feel a sense of responsibility to educate and uplift her female peers, to not leave behind the women who were “shackled unawares.” Do you feel any sense of responsibility to your peers? If so, did you feel so before you got to know your ancestor?

I want to feel more of a responsibility. I suppose I do not see the same need that she saw, with women not being educated because most are in school and many go to college. Because women were not educated, they could not comprehend the greater joys that awaited them through knowledge. I feel a sense of responsibility to nurture womanhood and sisterhood and sharing the stories of Mormon women. I certainly did not feel the same before getting to know RMF. She has helped me to see that the actions of one person can make a difference, and the story of one well-lived life can make a difference.

Question: How would you have described your ancestor prior to your research? How did this description change afterwards?

I would have described her as a woman everyone really admired who was a pioneer, general YW president, and who wrote “Carry On.” Now I see her more as a complex, rich, inspiring woman who overcame much, magnified her talents, was given opportunities because of her willingness to work, was very deep, and would fight to live her convictions to the death.

Question: Does knowing what she faced and achieved impact how you perceive your identity?

Yes, it does. It has helped me to realize that we never know how the Lord is going to use us. He prepares us along the way, and if we are willing tools, He will use us to forward good, important causes. Learning about her has helped me to realize that I can do more than I think I can. It inspires and challenges me to do more and work harder. I see myself as a Mormon woman carrying on a multi-generational tradition, and strengthens me in my own convictions.

Follow up: Does knowing the role she played in history cause you to look more earnestly for your purpose?

It has caused me to allow my purpose to happen. I do not need to ferret it out. I have a sense of purpose.

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