

My Family Tree: In Black and White

The descendant of a master-slave union faces an unexpected challenge: how to relate to the people whose ancestors once owned hers

By Dionne Ford



The author's great-great-grandmother, Tempy Burton (center), with her former enslavers, Col. W.R. and Elizabeth Stuart. The girls may be two of the children Burton had with the colonel. Photo courtesy of the Renee Smith Collection, McCain Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

his mother, Josephine. I filed this history away for decades until my daughter one day declared that she was white, like her father (who is of Irish-Finnish ancestry), and not at all black like me.

My daughter has butterscotch skin; I'm cocoa colored, like my mom, my dad's mom and Tempy. I wanted my daughter, then five, to embrace all her roots, but at almost 40, I wasn't sure I had ever done that myself. Perhaps learning more about Josephine, my mixed-race great-grandmother, would help my daughter identify with my side as well as her father's. So I set out to unearth the story of my own interracial, Confederate-era kin.

As Zora Neale Hurston put it in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "Us colored folk is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways." Investigating my family's branches uncovered enough history to fill a dozen binders; they now line my office shelves, filled with everything from newspaper editorials by Josephine—in eloquent prose, she laid out the dangers of being too prideful—to her great-grandfather's ruminations on the Revolutionary War as he headed off to battle. And it led me to my living history, which included new friends like Monique, my third cousin once removed, who is also descended from Tempy and the colonel. Like me, Monique lives in New Jersey; like me, she is a black woman married to a white man and raising two biracial girls. I was happy to meet her—what I'd never bargained for was also meeting descendants of the people who had enslaved Tempy. But it happened. And what brought us together was a 120-year-old photograph of our ancestors, black and white.

Whenever I mention certain cousins, I have to put air quotes around the word so my husband knows which ones I mean. No air quotes means they're the ones I'm related to through blood. Air quotes, and I'm referring to the ones whose family used to own mine. They are my cousins through slavery.

In 1858, when a wealthy Louisiana cotton broker named Colonel W.R. Stuart married Elizabeth McCauley, who came from a long line of North Carolina plantation owners, her family gave the couple a slave named Tempy Burton as a wedding gift. Elizabeth was sickly, unable to have children. But Tempy could and did have several with her new master, the colonel. Their youngest child, Josephine, was my great-grandmother.

I stumbled onto this tangled legacy back in 1981, when I was 12, by asking my fair-skinned paternal grandfather, Martin Ford, if he was white. In his liquid Louisiana drawl, he said he wasn't and told me the story of his grandparents, the colonel and Tempy, and

Tempy is in the center of the picture. Elizabeth and the colonel are sitting behind her. On either side of Tempy are two mixed-race-looking girls, probably her daughters with the colonel. The one on the left, curly haired and creamy skinned like my daughters, might even be my great-grandmother, Josephine. Ever since I found this photo on a genealogy website on my 38th birthday, it has become like a brand on me, a searing reminder of the people, and the pain, from which I came. The photograph is now the screen saver on my computer, the face of a homemade clock in my office, the sticker attached to a jar full of sand taken from the beach of my ancestral home, Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Tempy's expression is haunting, as if she's trying to solve a puzzle. The puzzle I need to solve: Why would she pose for what amounted to a family portrait, a good 25 years after slavery ended, with people who stole her freedom?

"I've always wondered whether those two girls were children of Colonel Stuart and Tempy Burton," wrote Joel Brink, an art historian from New Mexico, in his first e-mail to me. Joel's wife, Joan, is a descendant of Elizabeth's maternal grandparents, Hill and Judith Jones, the first people we know of to have enslaved Tempy (she came into the family when Elizabeth was a child and probably helped raise her; her previous life remains a mystery). Joel found the picture the same way I did, on the Internet, and reproduced it in a book about his wife's lineage. I didn't consider our complicated connection when I contacted Joel. I just hoped his book might provide new clues about Tempy. In establishing contact with him, I gained a passionate travel companion on my quest to reclaim my ancestors—not exactly a family member, but someone the genealogy community would term a "good as cousin," meaning a person linked through history but not necessarily through blood.

Soon after we got to know each other online, my good as cousin sent me photos of portraits of the colonel and Elizabeth, which were painted by G.P.A. Healy, a renowned artist of the time. (Healy's painting of Abraham Lincoln hangs in the White House.) Joel also sent me both a will in which Tempy was bequeathed as property to an heir and an appraisal of her cash value—a bone-chilling document that listed "Tempy a woman & child, year old" for \$1,600. The child was Josephine's big brother (and Monique's ancestor), Alfred. Monique and I helped my good as cousin, too, sending Joel obituaries we'd found about Elizabeth's family. Together we were reclaiming our kin. Then he found the thing I most wanted: my great-grandmother Josephine's funeral notice.

All Grandpa had ever told me about his mom was her name, Josephine, which he passed on to my dad, Joseph. Other than that, we knew nothing about her. But information in the funeral notice enabled me to obtain Josephine's death certificate, which told me how she'd died (from tuberculosis) and in what year (1922). It also contained a rare thing for African Americans with slavery in their family history: documentation of her white parentage. The certificate listed the colonel as Josephine's father. Thanks to my good as cousin, I had now resolved the greatest mystery of my family's past and uncovered a piece of myself in the process. So when Joel said he was coming to visit his brother, who lived only 20 minutes from Monique, I knew we had to meet.

It was a misty spring afternoon; when Monique and I arrived, Joel was standing at the top of his brother's long driveway, his white hair pulled back in a ponytail and his arms spread wide to greet us. No sooner had we hugged like lost family reunited than my good as cousin got down to ancestry business: Had we heard the rumor that one of Tempy's sons had been lynched?

"I didn't know if I should tell you before lunch," he said as we drove toward a restaurant in town.

It felt as if someone had sunk a hook into my chest and was pulling on it. At the quaint country inn, I stuffed my face with crab cakes and tried to distract myself by guessing what tangled family histories might connect the other diners there to one another. Still, I couldn't help thinking about the son Tempy had lost so violently and the improbability that she had ever sat down at a table while someone served her food the way I was being served. I'd read how some people went to lynchings as if they were the circus, gathering their children, packing a picnic lunch and heading off to see the spectacle. Thinking about it, I could barely speak, but Joel kept the conversation going. We heard how he'd met his wife while they were both in college, how they had lived in Italy while he earned his master's degree, how his children are artists like their mom. Monique had Italian connections, too. Her white maternal grandmother had immigrated to America from Bari.

Then my good as cousin turned the subject to land, asking if I had ever turned up the colonel's will.

Just a few weeks before, I'd called the Ocean Springs probate office for that very thing. The kind woman on the phone tried to find it, even though she wasn't supposed to, but no luck.

Maybe it was this talk of wills that caused Joel to mention one of his wife's ancestors, William Hill Howcott. Will was a cousin of Elizabeth, the colonel's childless widow. As Joel notes in his book, Will acquired land from Elizabeth in 1913 and was named executor of her estate when she died in 1925.

I quietly simmered. Could this be property that had once belonged to the colonel? Without access to his will, I would never know. But this discussion of his estate reminded me that I'd never found evidence that any of his land had passed down to Tempy and her children. And that didn't seem right.

It was time to go. But before saying good-bye, Joel gave me a gift: an antique silver child's cup that had belonged to Elizabeth's sister. "We want to pass this on to you as a family memento. It is to remind us of the connection that once existed and that has been renewed," his wife had written to me on a card she'd made by hand.

The cup fit perfectly in my palm; I balanced it there, trying to imagine Tempy holding it. I could see her face in its shiny surface, stoic and calm. In relief on the front of the cup was a child's face surrounded by flowers. It reminded me of the silver cup a wealthy client of my husband's had given us when our first daughter was born.

Kissing the cup on the side where there was no decoration, I silently thanked Tempy for being so strong, for carrying on and courageously bringing children into a world that refused to promise them even basic humanity. I knew this gift of an heirloom was well intended, a symbol of long history between us. But it felt like a burden.

I didn't want to have to thank Joel and his wife for something my great-great-grandmother may have polished while living in unpaid bondage to their family. I didn't want to comb through any more of their family's wills and deeds, documents in which Tempy was passed down through the generations along with cattle and farm equipment. It seemed a double indignity to have to be so intimately connected to them in the present to learn about my past.

My anger scared me. I feared that if I gave it an inch, it would open like a crater in my soul and swallow me whole. It's an emotion that I consider a luxury belonging to others—people, like my freckle-faced husband, who don't have to fear being stereotyped as an angry black person. I tried to meditate my fury away, outrun it on the elliptical machine. But the second I thought I had it licked, Joel would do something innocent like e-mail a picture of his wife, her sister and their mom with the subject line your cousins, and I would go into a rage.

As uncomfortable as I felt, however, I didn't want to close the door on this journey. Still, I needed a road map for how to proceed—or at least a chance to hear from others in the same situation, such as the descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Perhaps we could start a support group, another AA: Ancestry Anonymous.

It's two and a half years later now, and I've gotten an e-mail from my good as cousins inviting me to a family gathering. My feelings about them, the information they've shared and what I should do with it, have been as varied as the palette of skin tones in my family tree. In those first weeks after that lunch at the inn, I'd vacillated between two plans: hiring a lawyer to see if we had any claims on the colonel's estate and going back into therapy and forgetting all about this family-history business. Last night, when I saw Joel's name in my inbox, I just smiled.

I was wrong to think that the key to my identity lay solely in reclaiming my African ancestors. After all, to know Josephine, I had to learn not only about her black mother, Tempy—so full of faith that three ministers spoke at her funeral—but also about her white father, Colonel Stuart, a planter who was audacious in all his pursuits. In the 1980s, when Jesse Jackson declared that we should start calling ourselves African Americans, I clung to the term *black*. Africa was a huge continent with people as diverse as Egyptians and Ethiopians. It had been more than a century, maybe even several, since any of my relatives had actually lived there. African was my ancestry, but *black* was my experience. It had taken me so long to feel comfortable in my own skin and unashamed of my color that I wasn't going to let the word go, even if it was not PC. Now even *black* seems too small a container to

hold me. These days I think of myself as a member of various African and Celtic tribes. In the same way, researching my ancestors has broadened my understanding of family. I define it now as not just the people with whom I share blood but also those with whom I share transformative experience.

Monique and I have been to the graveyard where our ancestors are buried. Tempy, the colonel, Elizabeth, Josephine and Alfred all rest in the same cemetery, the way families do. I've had lunch with Elizabeth's cousin twice removed while the colonel stared down at us from a portrait that hangs in her living room, and have spoken by phone with this woman's brother, who met Tempy when he was just a boy; I felt as if I'd reached out and touched my great-great-grandmother via his memories.

I've even found that new AA, the Ancestry Anonymous support group I longed for. It's called Coming to the Table. Started by the descendants of enslavers, including a relative of Thomas Jefferson's, it is dedicated to healing the wounds of slavery. When I was invited to speak at one of its events, one of my good as cousins, Renée Monroe, came to support me.

"Thank you for doing all of this research," she said. "It is something that we all need to face." We both wore, pinned to our shirts like badges, the photograph of our ancestors that had brought us together. That night, whenever anybody asked, I pointed to the picture over my heart and introduced Renée as my cousin.

My relationship with all of my good as cousins continues to evolve. Recently I met Joel's wife, Joan, for the first time. Now she and I have begun our own conversation about our complex connection.

There's nothing we can do about our mean and messy history, but there is something we can do about our legacy. We can acknowledge our past, be one another's present and live.

To see pictures of Dionne, her family and her good as cousins, plus portraits of the Stuarts, visit [My Family Album: In Black and White](#).

[Dionne Ford](#) is at work on a memoir about her slave and master ancestors and her immediate interracial family. For more about her research, check out her blog, [Finding Joesphine](#).

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