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ROOTS AND THE NEW "FACTION"

A Legitimate Tool for Clio?

by GARY B. AND ELIZABETH SHOWN MILLS*

fac•tion (fak'shen) *n.* 1. A literary social-document based upon exhaustive research and characterized by the presentation of historical fact through the medium of fictionalized dialog.

—*The Popular Press' New Dictionary of Black History* (repeated editions, 1976-1980)

IN retrospect it may well be said that no published work of the seventies, and perhaps none of the century, has had the social or cultural impact of Alex Haley's *Roots*. Acclaimed by critics as an "extraordinary social document,"¹ touted by its publisher as "the story of 25,000,000 Americans of African descent,"² and endorsed by the American Education Association, the printed and filmed versions enthralled more readers and more viewers than any saga in publishing or cinematic history. *Roots* has coined new words and popularized new characters that lexicographers and encyclopedists cannot ignore, and it has immeasurably boosted black pride (as well as the economy of at least one African nation). Labelled by its author as "faction," and classified by the Library of Congress as Afro-American Genealogy, America's best-known "family tree" has come to symbolize a new era in genealogical research and has served as the foundation for a host of education courses, seminars, and lecture series, all labelled "Black Studies" or "Afro-American History."

*Gary B. Mills is associate professor of history at the University of Alabama, Gadsden. Elizabeth Shown Mills is a certified genealogist who specializes in the ethnic minorities of the South.

¹ Paul D. Zimmerman, "In Search of a Heritage," *Newsweek* (September 27, 1976), pp. 94-96.

² Book jacket, Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976).

It is this last point which this article addresses—the authenticity of *Roots* as a history of the Black Family—of a black family in particular. How much fact or fiction is embodied in that enigmatic catchword *faction*? Is *Roots* the model “statement of someone’s search for an identity,”³ a symbol of success for black Americans yearning to trace their heritage as white Americans have long done? Or is it, in actuality, a graphically symbolic statement of the genealogical frustrations that plague black ancestral research? Can *Roots* be accepted as a pioneer work of black family history, or is it a delusion that encourages mediocre scholarship in the nascent field of Afro-American genealogy and relegates black family history to the academic dark ages from which Caucasian genealogy has already emerged? In short, is *Roots* a legitimate tool for Clio?

That historical errors exist—indeed, abound—in *Roots* has never been disputed by the academic community. Professor Willie Lee Rose’s review in the *New York Review of Books* catalogued a number of sins against Clio,⁴ and a host of daily newspapers carried a litany of similar comments by eminent scholars. By and large, such observations also included qualifiers that in those first postpublication weeks appeared quite reasonable. “It’s a work of fiction,” one eminent historian observed enthusiastically. “And it’s importance is as a work of fiction and a very powerful one. I don’t think it’s importance rests on whether or not such and such a ship was in such and such a place. . . . It’s a powerful book for other reasons altogether.” In a similar vein, a leading student of Black History echoed, “Any knowledgeable historian can go through the work and point out a lot of mistakes. . . . I never applied to it the standards I would have if it had been written by C. Vann Woodward or Oscar Handlin.”⁵ “There is great danger in misinterpreting the *objectives* of a book like *Roots*,” another social scientist counselled. “By no means was Haley attempting to develop a definitive, or even a representative, perspective on the experience of slavery. Taken on its own terms as an attempt to augment our understanding of slavery by looking at the experience of *specific individuals in a microcosm*, the book is an important contribution to our broad perspective.”⁶

Literary reviews of *Roots* often followed this same however-nonetheless

³ Edmund S. Morgan, quoted in Israel Shenker, “Some Historians Dismiss Charge of Factual Mistakes in ‘Roots,’” *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, p. 29.

⁴ “An American Family,” *New York Review of Books*, XXIII (November 11, 1976), 3-4, 6.

⁵ Bernard Bailyn and Robert W. Fogel, quoted in Shenker, “Some Historians Dismiss Charge,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, p. 29.

⁶ William T. Carlisle, “Slavery and the New History: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Intellect* (October 1977), pp. 160-163. The first italics within the quote are italicized in the original; the second have been italicized by the authors of this present analysis.

sequence. Reviews labelled its characterizations and story line as "overly-familiar and without suspense."⁷ They likened its dialogue to "wet face flannel. . . redolent of soapy water,"⁸ and described the book as a whole as "most clearly resembl[ing] a historical novel, a form that Haley does not seem to have studied too carefully."⁹ Yet these and other critics almost universally agreed that *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* had one overwhelming, overriding quality so marvelous that "all flaws pale"¹⁰ in comparison. That is, *Roots* is not merely the figment of a stereotyped imagination, but the *experience of specific individuals in a microcosm*—the true story of one man's family.

Undeniably, personal authenticity has been the factor that has set this one historical novel apart from all others in the minds of both academia and the public. "It is undoubtedly on the assumption of accuracy that the book's commercial success is founded," proclaimed the *London Daily Express*. "The dialogue in this epic is imagined but the events and characters are real. . . . This is the true history of Haley's family."¹¹ America's own *Newsweek* expresses this conviction even more dramatically: "Beneath its gaudy dress of historical pageant is an extraordinary social document, grounded in exhaustive research and animated by a grand passion for personal and historical truth. Alex Haley . . . has achieved the abiding Afro-American dream. He has tracked down his own ancestry."¹²

A cynical American public recognizes and accepts the fact that press releases and promotional advertising often make extreme claims, but the acceptance of *Roots* as a true statement of Mr. Haley's ancestral experience cannot be attributed to overenthusiastic advertising. It is indeed the nucleus from which the entire saga evolves, page by page; and in the summary chapters, as well as in countless publications and public forums, the author has reaffirmed the veracity of his story. Speaking at a reception in his hometown the author "called himself a 'conduit' rather than a creator of the Tales of 'Roots'."¹³ In other interviews and public appearances he has consistently "noted that his narrative had been fleshed out with dialogue and that some descriptions were obviously fictionalized,"¹⁴ but that to "the

⁷ Larry King, "From the Seed of Kunta Kinte," *Saturday Review* (September 18, 1976), p. 21.

⁸ Dennis Potter, "Black Magic and Chalk Dust," *The Sunday Times* [London], April 17, 1977.

⁹ R. Z. Sheppard, "African Genesis," *Time* (October 18, 1976), pp. 109, K11, K15.

¹⁰ King, "From the Seed of Kunta Kinte," *Saturday Review* (September 18, 1976), p. 21.

¹¹ Quoted in Mark Ottaway, "Tangled Roots," *Sunday Times*, April 10, 1977.

¹² Zimmerman, "In Search of a Heritage," *Newsweek* (September 27, 1976), pp. 94-96, italics added.

¹³ *The Commercial Appeal* [Memphis], May 20, 1977, Mississippi Edition, p. 27, italics added.

¹⁴ Robert D. McFadden, "Some Points of 'Roots' Questioned; Haley Stands By Book as a Symbol," *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, p. 29.

best of my knowledge and of my effort, every lineage statement within 'Roots' is from either my African or American families' carefully preserved oral history, *much of which I have been able conventionally to corroborate with documents.*"¹⁵ Yet again, in a *Reader's Digest* article bearing his by-line, Haley stated: "I began following the story's trail. In plantation records, wills, census records, I documented bits here, shreds there. . . . By 1967, I felt I had the seven generations of the U.S. side documented."¹⁶

In truth, those same plantation records, wills, and censuses cited by Mr. Haley not only *fail to document* his story, but they *contradict* each and every pre-Civil War statement of Afro-American lineage in *Roots!*

This statement is not made lightly, nor is it meant as a personal indictment, only as a professional critique. Historical evidence indicates that Mr. Haley has been heir to the same frustrations faced by untold numbers of other amateur genealogists who seek to document family traditions and legends, and he has fallen victim to the same psychological hangup that has entrapped many others: a reluctance to accept any truths that deviate from the cherished family legend.

The current, and even trendish, emphasis upon oral history has obscured for many the basic fact that *there is no such thing as The Gospel According to Aunt Lizzie*. Family traditions are surrealistic images of the past, blurred by time, colored by emotion and imagination. They are valuable as cryptic maps that can lead to rewarding personal revelations; but the careful researcher must decode them through dogged exploration of the actual documents our ancestors left us. Family traditions are not definite, intrinsically authentic roadmaps to one's heritage, and it matters not whether one's family is Afro-American, Irish, Italian, or Japanese.

Every family genealogist soon reaches the point of discovering that family tradition deviates from documentary evidence to a small or great degree, usually to a great one. Details are confused, generations are omitted, especially in the recital of the family's begats from the legendary immigrant ancestor. Black family traditions are no exception, in spite of the impression left by the Haley family chronicle. The family historian inevitably faces the challenge of reconciling tradition with evidence. Indeed, the discerning genealogist soon discovers that even documentary evidence is often contradictory, and the manner in which the researcher responds to the task of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, italics added; see also *Roots*, p. 584.

¹⁶ Alex Haley, "My Search for Roots; A Black American's Story," *Reader's Digest* (April 1977), p. 149.

knowledgeably and judiciously weighing this evidence is a major determining factor in the ultimate quality of his or her work.

In this respect, *Roots* has failed unqualifiedly the most basic tests that must be applied to any family history. The author's years of research are not questioned, but a lifetime of research is for naught when an author elects to ignore all evidence that contradicts a family myth. Basic historical or genealogical criteria simply cannot be suspended for any individual or any ethnic group without damaging scholarship and the integrity of that group's heritage.

The temptation is perhaps great, for the professional historian who has traditionally disdained genealogy, to shrug one's shoulders and conclude that *Roots* or any work of similar weight "would seem to me to retain a good deal of impact no matter how many mistakes the man has made. In any genealogy there are bound to be a number of mistakes."¹⁷ Such an approach to genealogy—although many historians remain unaware of the fact even yet—is no longer acceptable to the discerning professionals in that field who have struggled to upgrade their craft and have at last begun to win academic recognition of genealogy as a legitimate field of scientific inquiry.

The most recent guide to genealogical standards, compiled by a member of the State Bar of California and a Fellow of the American Society of Genealogists, sets forth ten criteria by which a legitimate family history must be judged. *Roots* fails to meet any of them. Given its fictionalized format, some of the criteria could not possibly be applied; therefore these should not be held against Mr. Haley's chronicle. However, the fifth criterion is very definitely applicable to the specific statements made within *Roots*:

Obviously, if a compiler states facts regarding wills and administrations of estates, places of birth, marriage and death, and residence with the requisite dates, *it should be possible to verify the facts* if the records are in existence in some official record repository, depository, or place of custody—this is particularly true regarding probate and other court records.¹⁸

Roots is a chronicle of such events, facts, dates, and records, and its author has continually referred to the existence of *much* documentation of the facts and relationships which *Roots* chronicles. Haley does not cite, and has not cited, any of these documents by specific volume, page, or repository, al-

¹⁷ Professor Edmund S. Morgan, quoted in Shenker, "Some Historians Dismiss Charge," *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, p. 29.

¹⁸ Noel C. Stevenson, *Genealogical Evidence; A Guide to the Standard of Proof Relating to Pedigrees, Ancestry, Heirship and Family History* (Laguna Hills, Ca., 1979), pp. 155-156.

though generalized references are made to many specific records and archives. By contrast, exhaustive research in the same repositories that he cites indicates the existence of only three peripheral documents that were incorporated into *Roots*, and all were misinterpreted or misrepresented. In addition, a boundless number of other documents exist which undeniably contradict the identifications, relationships, ownerships, and other specific facts that are crucial to the story.

Mr. Haley's American family begins with the character Kunta Kinte, a seventeen-year-old African who arrived aboard the *Lord Ligonier* at Annapolis, on September 29, 1767. The process by which the author determined ship and date is detailed in his last chapter.¹⁹ Significant questions regarding the reliability of his methodology have already been raised and need not be reexamined herein. It is sufficient to note only that the author concedes some problems and has redescribed the African portion of his saga as "symbolic."²⁰ However, this determination of *date* of arrival is crucial to the establishment of Kinte's American identity.

Upon the basis of this predetermined date, and upon the basis of a family tradition that Kinte was owned by the well-known Waller family of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, the author then proceeded with research in American archives "dar[ing] to hope there might actually exist some kind of an actual documenting record." His account continues:

I went to Richmond, Virginia. I pored through microfilmed legal deeds filed within Spotsylvania County, Virginia, *after September 1767*, when the *Lord Ligonier* had landed. In time, I found a lengthy deed dated September 5, 1768, in which John Waller and his wife Ann transferred to William Waller land and goods, including 240 acres of farmland . . . and then on the second page, "and also one Negro man slave named Toby."

My God!²¹

This is a poignant recital of a heart-wrenching moment, but the document referred to in no way establishes the identity of Kunta Kinte as Toby. Indeed, it disproves it. Had Mr. Haley not chosen arbitrarily to limit his research to only those records filed *after* the arrival of the ship that he had

¹⁹ Pages 571-587.

²⁰ Ottaway, "Tangled Roots," *Sunday Times*, April 10, 1977. In a Gambia interview carried by the New York Times News Service, Haley expressed this thought somewhat differently, admitting that he "fell back upon poetic license" in his description of the Gambian village. However, "The central tenet of the book, that he is a direct descendant of a man named Kunta Kinte . . . stands up, he insisted" (see "Haley Assails Reporter Who Challenged 'Roots,'" *The Commercial Appeal*, April 19, 1977, p. 10). It is the reliability of this claim to descend directly from Kunta Kinte that will be examined in the present analysis.

²¹ Haley, *Roots*, p. 583, italics added.

already "identified" upon questionable premises, had his research indeed been as exhaustive as assumed, he would have discovered that *this Waller slave Toby appeared in six separate documents of record over a period of four years preceding the arrival of the Lord Ligonier*. Toby Waller was not Kunta Kinte.

The known origins of the slave Toby date back to 1762, at which time the will of Colonel William Waller was submitted for probate. By the terms of that will, drawn in 1756, all his estate, including slaves, was to be divided among his wife and children. Most of those slaves were not cited by name. The subsequent inventory of the estate, taken on April 5, 1762, was more explicit. Among the enumerated bondsmen to be divided by the Waller heirs appeared one "Toby."²² Attempts to trace the acquisition of Toby by Colonel William Waller have been unsuccessful. This slave does not appear as an inheritance from the estate of Colonel Waller's own father, John, who had died just two years before the colonel. Nor has there been found record of a deed of conveyance by which the colonel acquired Toby from anyone else. It would appear possible that Toby was born on the Colonel Waller plantation to one of his numerous female slaves.²³

The settlement of the Colonel Waller estate and division of his property was made the same year of his death, and a document drawn the following January (1763) indicated that Toby and nine other slaves were inherited by the colonel's second son, Dr. William Waller (who preferred to style himself "Will"). By the terms of this document, for reasons to be discussed shortly, Dr. Will Waller transferred Toby, and all other property that he owned, to his brother John,²⁴ who is identified in county records as "John Waller, Clerk." (He held the position of Clerk of Spotsylvania County as others in his family had done before him, and this title was used in his signature to distinguish him from other Waller family members who were also named John.) The conditions upon which the conveyance was made were not met by John Waller, Clerk, and in August of that same year he and his brother Dr. Will executed a new agreement permitting John to retain, upon other considerations, the ownership of the slave named Toby and other property which the doctor had inherited from their father.²⁵

In September 1765 this Waller slave, Toby, appears yet again on public record when the financially troubled John Waller, Clerk, executed a mort-

²² Will Book B, pp. 445-450, Spotsylvania County Records.

²³ Will Book D, pp. 16-18, Spotsylvania County Records.

²⁴ Deed Book F (1761-1766), pp. 231-233, Spotsylvania County Records.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

gage against him and several other slaves. Again the following month, John Waller, Clerk, used Toby and several of these same slaves as collateral in another mortgage; and in the spring of 1766, these and other slaves were mortgaged for yet a third time.²⁶

These six documents relating to the Waller slave Toby were all drawn prior to the September 1767 arrival of the *Lord Ligonier* with, supposedly, Kunta Kinte in its hold.

The last document of record relating to Toby is the one found by author Haley. On September 5, 1768, John Waller reconveyed to his brother Will a fraction of the doctor's original inheritance: one 240-acre tract and "one Negro man slave named Toby."²⁷ This tract of land, known locally as the McNeal tract, was soon after sold by Will;²⁸ and subsequent personal and property tax rolls of the county through 1800 indicate that *Dr. Will Waller owned no other land or slaves.*²⁹ A gap of fourteen years exists between the last deed record relating to Toby and the first extant property tax roll, making it impossible to determine the year in which Dr. Will ceased to be the owner of this slave, and no conveyance record exists to indicate that Waller sold Toby to any other owner. It may be presumed therefrom that *Toby died prior to the draft of the 1782 tax roll—which was at least eight years prior to the birth of Kizzy, according to ROOTS.*

As indicated in the above paragraph, Haley's identification and characterization of the alleged owner of his supposed ancestor deviates from fact. Indeed, it deviates drastically. Dr. William Waller is identified by *Roots* as a virile young widower at the time he acquired Toby in 1768, a practicing physician who remained active in his profession until, at least, his 1806 sale of Kizzy. He was the owner of twenty slaves in the year 1771,³⁰ and that household steadily increased in size. His considerable personal property included the horse and buggy that Toby drove for him, and his real estate included a mansion house in which Toby's wife Bell served as cook, a large plantation on which all of Haley's Spotsylvania characters resided, and other tracts which included, as late as 1789, the 240-acre tract which Dr. Will acquired from his brother John in company with Toby.³¹

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 656, 708, 714.

²⁷ Deed Book G, pp. 226-227, Spotsylvania County Records.

²⁸ Deed Book G, cited in William Armstrong Crozier, editor, *Spotsylvania County Records, 1721-1800; Being Transcriptions, from the Original Files at the County Court House, of Wills, Deeds, Administrators' and Guardians' Bonds, Marriage Licenses, and Lists of Revolutionary Pensioners* (Baltimore, 1955), p. 279.

²⁹ Personal Property Tax Rolls, Spotsylvania County, 1782-1800, and Special County Land Tax Rolls, 1782-1803, Spotsylvania County, Virginia State Library, Richmond.

³⁰ Haley, *Roots*, p. 230.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

County records contradict all of the above.

There exists no document of record past 1770 which identifies Will Waller as a doctor. The explanation for this curious fact apparently is to be found in the January 1763 document, previously cited, wherein "William Waller, Doctor of Physic," conveyed his entire inheritance to his brother John. The conveyance was made "in trust" with the condition that John was to manage the property, apply all proceeds toward the payment of all legal debts which Dr. Will currently owned or which would accrue. In addition, John was to provide "Boarding, Cloathing & Furnishing . . . with all necessaryes in such decent & Creditable manner as the Profits . . . will afford or his station & Dignity require for & during the natural life of him the sd. William Waller."³² While this represents unusual compensation for property conveyed, such documents are not rare in the county archives of colonial and antebellum America. More commonly such documents were drafted by aged parents in favor of their offspring—an advance of their inheritance in exchange for the promise of being cared for.

The assumption is inescapable that the young Dr. Will Waller was similarly infirm, and similarly in need of care. The other known facts support this assumption. Within seven years he would cease to be identified as a physician. Tax rolls indicate that he owned no property although he continued to pay his poll, and twice afterwards—in the wake of his brother's financial disasters which stripped the both of them of their inheritances from their father—Will was to make a similar donation to a niece and a nephew, conveying upon those occasions the three slaves he expected to inherit from his aged mother.³³

The identification of the slave wife of Toby (assuming that he had one) also cannot be made from existing records. The aforementioned 1756 will of Colonel William Waller bequeathed to his wife one female identified as *Isbell*, and the inventory taken of his property in 1762 indicated that this woman was still part of his 48-member slave household.³⁴ Making the very broad assumption that this Isbell was one and the same as Haley's claimed ancestress Bell, there still remain the unreconcilable facts that Isbell never belonged to Dr. Waller, that she was not purchased by him at the age of sixteen after having been callously sold away from her two babies. Unde-

³² Deed Book F (1761-1766), pp. 231-233, Spotsylvania County Records.

³³ Wm. Waller to Ann Waller, November 9, 1767, Deed Book G, cited in Crozier, *Spotsylvania County Records*, p. 261; and Wm. Waller to Hugh Roy, April 6, 1785, Deed Book K (1782-1785), pp. 435-436, Spotsylvania County Records. In this last document, Will restates the condition that the donation is made "for and in consideration of my support and maintenance During my Life."

³⁴ Will Book D, pp. 16-18, Spotsylvania County Records.

nably such sales occurred often in the annals of slavery, but Haley's presentation of this stereotyped event as a heart-wrenching aspect of his personal heritage cannot be substantiated nor does it appear as part of the family tradition that he has frequently related.

The aforementioned criterion for genealogical authenticity—the assumption that all stated “facts regarding wills and administrations of estates, places of birth, marriage and death, and residence . . . should be possible to verify” from existing records—may also be applied to numerous other facets of the Spotsylvania County saga. Specific events and conveyances are frequently described which should be documentable in county records:

- pre-1767 marriage of Dr. Waller to one “Priscilla”
- 1783 sale of Waller's driver Luther
- 1786 birth of “Missy Anne” Waller
- 1789 will of Dr. Will Waller
- 1806 runaway of Noah
- 1806 sale of Kizzy

Not only do the requisite documents fail to exist, but the archives of the county yield other documents contradicting at least two of the above items. Evidence exists, moreover, that Mr. Haley was aware of certain of these documents but chose to juggle historical fact in order to create a more dramatic (and, again, a stereotyped) story line.

Reference is specifically made to: 1) the alleged birth of Missy Anne in 1786, a date which enabled her to assume the character of the beloved childhood playmate who ultimately betrayed Kizzy's trust; and 2) the 1789 “will” of Dr. Waller wherein he stipulated (in Bell's own words) that “if he die an' ain't got married, his slaves gon' go to little Missy Anne. But de will say if he do marry, den he wife would git us slaves when he die.”³⁵

The cited document which Haley's research obviously uncovered (the second of the lone three documents which can be substantiated) was neither a will nor was it drawn in 1789. It also clearly indicates that Ann Waller, daughter of the doctor's brother John, was not born in 1786 but that she was, indeed, a grown woman long before Kizzy supposedly was born. On November 3, 1767, twenty-two years before the date attributed to the document, Dr. Will drafted a “Deed of Gift” by which he conveyed to “Ann Waller, daughter of Jno. Waller, Clerk of Spts. Co., brother to the sd. Wm. Waller” those slaves which the doctor expected to inherit from his mother.

³⁵ Haley, *Roots*, p. 270.

"In case the sd. Wm. Waller should marry, then the sd. Ann Waller does not inherit the slaves."³⁶ Additional county records further indicate that the doctor's niece Ann, daughter of John, was a grown and married woman at the time she supposedly served as Kizzy's childhood playmate.³⁷

The misrepresented birthdate of Ann Waller also introduces yet another aspect in which *Roots* not only distorts its author's ancestry but also that of the Waller family. While the Spotsylvania chapters state that John Waller, Clerk, fathered this daughter in 1786 (and while the televised drama irresponsibly attributed Ann's birth that year to Dr. Waller's cuckolding of his own brother), the county archives reveal that John Waller actually died some eleven years before the year in question. His estate was opened for probate in Spotsylvania County in August 1775,³⁸ and his wife thereafter wed one Thomas Pritchett.³⁹

Moreover, a survey of all Waller documents filed in Spotsylvania County between its establishment and 1810, and a continued study of all probate records filed by family members through 1833, fail to uncover a single Waller slave by the name of Kizzy or by any other name attributed to Waller slaves in *Roots*. Yet it cannot be argued that there is no truth to the family legend which holds the Waller family to have been the owners of Haley's ancestors. Several genealogical alternatives exist:

1) It is possible that tradition has erred in the identification of specific ancestors by their slave names.

2) It is possible that Toby, an actual ancestor and the temporary property of Dr. Waller, indeed fathered a daughter named Kizzy by a slave woman belonging to another master, in which case this Kizzy would have been born a generation earlier than the date attributed by *Roots*, and in which case one significant generation of Haley's ancestry has been omitted.

3) It is also possible that the immigrant slave ancestor who was mutilated for his rebelliousness was not named Toby at all, and one document of record lends support to this possibility. The estate inventory of Colonel William Waller, 1762 (and subsequent documents involving the Waller slave property) identifies slaves not only by name but by personal characteristics which also include infirmities. No such distinguishing characteristic was provided for Toby in any document, but fellow bondsmen were therein identified as Great Jenny, Old Sue, Young Sue, Cate Great, Mad Cate, Young Cornelia,

³⁶ Deed Book G, abstracted in Crozier, *Spotsylvania County Records*, p. 261.

³⁷ For example, see Thomas Pritchett and wife to Wm. and Bowker Waller and Ann Jones, Deed Book O, July 2, 1795, abstracted in Crozier, *Spotsylvania County Records*, p. 476.

³⁸ Will Book E (1772-1798), pp. 131-132, *Spotsylvania County Records*.

³⁹ Deed Book O, abstracted in Crozier, *Spotsylvania County Records*, p. 476.

Old Cornelia, and "hoping George."⁴⁰ Given the inconsistency demonstrated by scribes in that era in the use of single and double consonants, it appears possible that "hoping George" was meant to be "hopping George," and this description would indeed be applicable to a slave who had half of his foot amputated.

Speculation aside, there remains the inarguable conclusion that the 182 pages and thirty-nine chapters in which the Virginia lives of Haley's "ancestors" are chronicled have no basis in fact. Neither of the two relationships that are crucial to his pedigree (the identity of Kizzy as daughter of Kinte alias Toby, and the relationship of Bell as wife of Kinte and mother of Kizzy) can be established by even the weakest genealogical evidence. Moreover, the evidence indicates no basis for any of the events, dreams, or heartaches that this story chronicles, and the only personages who can be documented by records (members of the Waller family) have been indiscriminately and whimsically distorted beyond recognition. Clearly, the Virginia chapters of his saga do not represent a documented ancestry for the author or for the descendants of the white family alleged to have owned his family.

The Virginia saga, surely, must be classified under the same heading as the initial African adventure. As Haley himself described it, it is *symbolic*. But what of the remaining portion of his family lineage—the crucial descent of Haley from the white North Carolinian Tom Lea who purchased then raped the sixteen-year-old Kizzy? An analysis of North Carolina's archival records is, in fact, as disappointing as the Virginia search.

Problems with this portion of the author's family begats are evident within *Roots* itself. Pages 353 to 363 of the novel relate Kizzy's complicity in the flight of her sweetheart Noah and her subsequent sale to Tom Lea. According to the chronology of the narrative, Noah fled the Waller plantation on the first Monday of October 1806. The following Saturday, Kizzy was turned over to the slave trader who took her on a four-day journey to Caswell County, North Carolina, where she was immediately purchased—and violated—by Tom Lea. The incident therefore occurred in mid-October 1806. Then "in the winter of 1806" (p. 368) Kizzy was delivered of her "pecan-colored" child. This surely is the shortest pregnancy on record. Granting indulgence to the author, this one "flaw" may be excused as a mathematical error. It is the official records themselves which present those discrepancies which cannot be reconciled.

⁴⁰ Will Book D, pp. 16-18, Deed Book F, p. 656, Spotsylvania County Records.

The Lea household is described by *Roots*, for the 1806-1810 period, as follows:

TOM LEA—aged 40, owner of "eighty-some" acres, of poor white trash origins, raised in a 2-room house on a 10-acre farm "scuffling and half-starving" with ten brothers and sisters who remained a constant embarrassment to him throughout his life.⁴¹

MRS. LEA—considerably younger than her husband, a "po' cracker like him" and barren.⁴²

An analysis of county, state, and federal records indicates that there lived in Caswell County, North Carolina, in 1806-1810 only one head of household named Tom Lea—or, more correctly, Thomas Lea. Both public documents and Lea family genealogies almost totally contradict the character portrayal of this individual and his family that has been presented within *Roots*. Thomas Lea married Sally Lea, his own cousin, on October 13, 1801.⁴³ The 1810 and 1820 federal censuses reveal that both were between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of their marriage.⁴⁴ County tax rolls and conveyance records indicate that Thomas owned 100 acres between 1802 and 1805, and that he purchased an additional 86 $\frac{2}{3}$ acres in November 1806 (the month after his alleged acquisition of Kizzy) which raised his total holdings to 186 $\frac{2}{3}$ acres, not the "eighty-some acres" attributed to him in those years by *Roots*.⁴⁵ Tax rolls continue to attribute ownership of 186 $\frac{2}{3}$ acres to Lea until the year 1817 at which time he was taxed for only the smaller tract, and a deed of conveyance dated February 14, 1817, reveals that Thomas sold the one-hundred-acre tract, adjoining his relative John Lea's more extensive holdings, to one David Nothington.⁴⁶

Even more significant—at least to the actual descendants of the Lea family—is the fact that Mrs. Lea was not barren. The federal censuses indicate that she bore at least two boys and two girls, and the estate of

⁴¹ Haley, *Roots*, pp. 366, 415, 417, 419-420, 422, 458, 475, 518-519.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 365, 369.

⁴³ Caswell County, North Carolina, Marriage Bonds, typescript, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, p. 172.

⁴⁴ Third and Fourth Censuses of the United States, 1810 and 1820, Caswell County, North Carolina, Population Schedules.

⁴⁵ Documents C.R. 020.401.3 and C.R. 020.701.17, also "Caswell County List of Taxables, 1805-1806, Richmond District 1805," all filed in North Carolina State Archives; see also Deed Book O, p. 271, Caswell County Records. The cited reference within *Roots* to Lea's "eighty-some acres" seems to indicate that its author's research uncovered Lea's purchase of this second tract in 1806 but not his acquisition of or payment of taxes upon the first.

⁴⁶ Doc. C.R. 020.701.11, Richmond District, 1809, also "Caswell County Taxables, 1812, Richmond," and "Caswell Taxables, 1817, Richmond District," all filed in North Carolina State Archives; also Record of Deeds & Grants, Book R, Caswell County Records.

Thomas Lea reveals that at least one son and one daughter lived to produce progeny of their own.⁴⁷ Likewise, the portrayal of Lea's heritage as "po' cracker" is a gross distortion. The Caswell County Tax Roll of 1804 reveals that the Lea family owned a total of almost 16,000 acres in Richmond, Gloucestership, and St. David's districts, and that Tom's grandfather, James Lea, Sr., held over 9,000 of these acres in his own name. The 1820 federal census attributes ownership of some 220 slaves to various members of the family.⁴⁸ Primary and secondary accounts relating to the county reveal that Thomas's uncle Gabriel Lea was a state legislator in 1794, that Thomas's father was a respected magistrate of Grainger County, Tennessee, that his younger cousin and namesake Thomas L. Lea served as sheriff of Caswell for nine years (1833-1842), that relatives William and James Lea also held that office, that cousin William H. Lea and a nephew-in-law, the Honorable Calvin Graves, served as delegates to the state constitutional convention of 1835, and that his first cousin's son, Judge John McCormick Lea, served as governor of Tennessee from 1853 to 1857.⁴⁹ While Haley's mis-characterization of the Waller family might be considered of peripheral importance to his own lineage, his distortion of the Lea family constitutes a serious misrepresentation of his own claimed ancestry since he purports to be a Lea descendant.

A similar analysis of the Lea slave household reveals even more disturbing discrepancies. As depicted in *Roots*, the various members in the 1806-1810 period may be identified and described as:

MALIZY—black, the big house cook, born 1776 to 1781.⁵⁰

UNCLE POMPEY—black and aged.⁵¹

SARAH—light-skinned, born of a Cajun mother ca.1776-1780 and purchased by Lea in 1793.⁵²

⁴⁷ Third and Fourth Censuses of the United States, 1810 and 1820, Caswell County, North Carolina, Population Schedules; Will of Thomas Lea, C.R. 020.801.4, North Carolina State Archives.

⁴⁸ Doc. C.R. 020.701.11, North Carolina State Archives; Fourth Census of the United States, 1820, Caswell County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.

⁴⁹ "Lea Family, Caswell County, N.C., Diary, from Miscellaneous Records, Book No. 1," Microcopy Z.4.6P, North Carolina State Archives; Katherine Kerr Kendall, *Caswell County, 1777-1877; Historical Abstracts of Minutes of Caswell County, North Carolina* (n.p., 1976), pp. 49, 52, 57, 68, 80-81, 121; William Gaston Chapter, *Daughters of the American Revolution, Caswell County Records*, typescript, pp. 165, 229; William S. Powell, *When the Past Refused to Die: A History of Caswell County, North Carolina, 1777-1977* (Durham, 1977), p. 526; John Bennett Bodie, *Historical Southern Families*, V (Redwood City, Ca., 1960; reprinted Baltimore, 1967), 220-226.

⁵⁰ Haley, *Roots*, pp. 364, 368, 421.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 367, 421.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 367, 372, 375, 421, 430. Although historical *faux pas* are not the subject of this article, it must be pointed out that the author and his editors obviously do not understand the

MINGO—black, born 1755-1760, purchased before 1794, a chicken-trainer.⁵³

KIZZY—black, born 1790.

GEORGE—mulatto, born 1806.

Yet, the federal census of 1810 reveals a completely different slave household.⁵⁴

THOMAS LEA	1 male	26-45	1 female	26-45
	2 males	0-10	2 females	0-10
	2 slaves			

On the surface it might appear that the two slaves could represent Kizzy and child George, but this would be an incorrect assumption. The 1803 will of John C. Lea bequeaths to his daughter Sally and her husband Thomas Lea "one slave girl Rachel."⁵⁵ Between 1804 and 1809 Thomas Lea annually paid "one black poll" for this slave. The 1810 census indicates the existence of a child born to Rachel, and the next tax lists (1812 and 1817) do not levy a poll on slave infants; yet these do indicate the existence of another black of taxable age.⁵⁶ The 1820 census indicates that this second adult was a male, aged 26-45, probably acquired as a husband for Rachel and possibly the father of one or all of the three female children which Rachel appears to have borne between 1810 and 1820. The 1830 and 1840 censuses show further increase within this nuclear family, and Caswell County conveyance records indicate the purchase of no further slaves by Thomas Lea.⁵⁷

It is the estate records of Lea which reveal the identities of these other slaves, and also support the census-indicated assumption that Lea's slaves

meaning of the ethnic term "Cajun," and their misuse of this term has further contributed to the popular confusion regarding this ethnic group. The term "Cajun," a corruption of the word Acadian, is applicable only to descendants of those driven from the Isle of Acadia by the British in the 1750s. Any Acadian mother of Sarah in 1776-1780 (the period of her birth) would have been necessarily white, in which case no racially mixed offspring of hers could have been born into slavery since children followed the status of their mother under the laws of American slavery. Similarly, fortunetelling was not characteristic of Cajuns; indeed it was condemned by the Roman Catholic faith to which the Cajuns staunchly adhered.

⁵³ Haley, *Roots*, pp. 387, 394, 422.

⁵⁴ Third Census of the United States, 1810, Caswell County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.

⁵⁵ Doc. C. R. 020.801.4, North Carolina State Archives.

⁵⁶ Docs. C. R. 020.701.11 and C.R. 020.701.1, also "Caswell County, List of Taxables, 1805-1806, Richmond District 1805," "Caswell County Taxables, 1812, Richmond," and "Caswell Taxables, 1817, Richmond District," all in North Carolina State Archives.

⁵⁷ Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Censuses of the United States, 1820, 1830, and 1840, Caswell County, North Carolina, Population Schedules.

might all be the offspring of the slave girl Rachel. Three separate lists of these slaves appear in the probate file, in addition to a partial list provided in Lea's will. In composite these slaves are:⁵⁸

Old Rachel	Rebecca/Beck "& her 2
Old Sye	children" ⁵⁹
Ibby and her 3 children:	Cornelia
Barbary	Lucretia
William	Leannah/Leonora
Nelson	Arch
Lynely/Lynch and her 5 children:	Warren
Marie	Isabella
Henrietta	Henry
Harriet	Mary
Henderson	Susanna
Louisa	

The dates spanned by this probate file are 1844 to 1848. According to *Roots* the Lea slave household in these years consisted of:

Malizy	Matilda	James
Uncle Pompey	Virgil	Lewis
Sarah	Ashford	Young Kizzy
Kizzy	George, Jr.	Mary
George	Tom	

By no stretch of the imagination can one household be construed to represent the other. Again, the only conceivable conclusions are: 1) that Haley's research has not revealed the correct names of his ancestors, or 2) that his ancestors did not belong to the Tom Lea whom he claims to be his direct ancestor by right of Lea's purchase and rape of the adolescent Kizzy.

The chasm that exists between *Roots* and historical evidence goes still deeper. A significant and emotional segment of the drama rests upon Tom Lea's economic disaster in the mid-1850s, his dispatch of Chicken George to England to satisfy his debtors, his heartless sale of George's family during his absence, and his ultimate refusal to honor the promise of freedom that he made to George, "his own son"—whereupon that son led the father into

⁵⁸ Doc. C.R. 020.801.4, Estate of Thomas Lea, Sr., North Carolina State Archives.

⁵⁹ It is not possible from extant records to identify which of the other named slaves constituted these two children of Rebecca.

a drunken stupor and stole his own freedom paper before going in search of his sold-away family.

Aside from the obvious point that Chicken George's presence in England in the 1850s, where slavery was illegal, would have won him automatic freedom under both English and American law, there remains the fact mentioned previously that Thomas Lea died between October 1844 and March 1845. If Haley descends from Lea, then the dramatic episodes summarized in the foregoing paragraph and chronicled over some fifty pages of his narrative still did not occur.⁶⁰ Yet, these events are crucial to the essence of his story.

As with the official records of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, the archives of Caswell and Alamance counties, North Carolina, fail to document even one of the following deeds of record described within *Roots*:

- 1806 Lea's purchase of Kizzy from slave trader.
- 1827 Lea's purchase of Matilda from MacGregor.⁶¹
- 1855 Lea's posting of a \$1,875 bond relative to the Jewett-Russell cock-fight.
- 1856-1857 Lea's sale of George's family to a slave trader.
- 1856-1859 Murray's purchase of George's family from this slave trader.
- 1855-1858 Murray's inheritance of an estate from an uncle.
- 1855-1858 Murray's mortgage of his home in satisfaction of the debt incurred in the purchase of the Lea slaves.
- 1858 Curry's sale of Lilly Sue and Uriah to Murray.
- 1858 Holt's sale of Irene to Murray.

Moreover, an analysis of all estate and conveyance records dealing with any individuals by these family names fails to reveal any slave property by the names attributed to Haley's family.

Again, not only the authenticity of *Roots's* evidence is called into question by the total absence of documentation for any alleged event, individual, or relationship, but doubt also falls upon the very essence of family life portrayed in *Roots*. In order for Matilda and George to enjoy the relationship attributed to them and their children, given the claim that they initially belonged to different masters, it would have been necessary for one master or the other to have acquired the slave spouse. The same is true of the marital relationships attributed to Virgil and Lilly Sue and to Tom and Irene.

It is not until the post-Civil War years that any documentary evidence

⁶⁰ Haley, *Roots*, pp. 472-522.

⁶¹ Both county records and federal censuses failed to identify any planter within the county of Caswell by this name.

can be found on any of the individuals identified in *Roots*. Again, that evidence does not always agree with the *Roots* account. Marriage records of postwar Alamance include a marriage for Kizzie Murray, presumably the daughter of George Lea, but it also reveals a marriage four months later of a black Kizzie A. Jeffries whose bondsman was A. Murray.⁶² According to *Roots*, there existed only two Kizzies, the first of whom was given a distinctive African name by her father in spite of the peril in which this act supposedly placed him,⁶³ and the second, Kizzie Murray, being a granddaughter of the original Kizzie by her only child George. If the begats chronicled by *Roots* are accepted as accurate, then the existence of this third Kizzie, Miss Jeffries, cannot be explained.

Curiously, the 1880 census of Alamance County reveals yet another Kizzie associated with the Lea/Murray family—this one a female born supposedly in 1838 of a North Carolina-born mother and father. She and her husband Brown Lea (aged 49, native of North Carolina as were both his parents) are identified as *mulattoes* living next door to families Murray and Holt.⁶⁴ Since this last Kizzie was born in the same approximate year as Kizzie, daughter of George Lea, it might be erroneously assumed that the two were one and the same; however, the same 1880 federal census enumerates George's daughter as a widow or divorcee living in the same household with him in Lauderdale County, Tennessee,⁶⁵ while Kizzie (Mrs. Brown) Lea continues to appear with her husband in Alamance County records as late as 1886.⁶⁶

⁶² Alamance County, North Carolina, Marriage Bonds, typescript, North Carolina State Archives, pp. 8, 13.

⁶³ The claim of exclusive African origins of the name Kizzy (translated within *Roots* as "you stay put") is itself questionable. According to Newbell Niles Puckett and Murray Heller, *Black Names in America: Origins and Usage* (Boston, 1975), pp. 401-405, Kizzy and Kizzie are derivatives of the name Kiziah/Kizzeih/Kiseah, with various meanings in several African languages, while a similar form Kei See/Kesia/Kissiah carries the meaning "restrain, prevent, stop" in the Mende language. Joan Comay's *Who's Who in the Old Testament, together with the Apocrypha* (New York, 1971), p. 247, identifies Keziah (from the Hebrew "Cassia") as the name of the "second daughter born to Job after the Lord had redressed his fortunes (Job. 42:14)."

As a Biblical name, Keziah was popular among *white* families of colonial and antebellum America, and the diminutive "Kissie" or "Kizzie" similarly appeared in white families. For example, see Kissey Fuller, white female, Family 100, Dwelling 100, p. 134b, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Covington County, Alabama, Population Schedule. This white Kissie's ancestry has been traced for three generations through the states of Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina with no discovery of even a hint of African ancestry.

⁶⁴ Family 226, Dwelling 232, Melville Township, pp. 24-25, Supervisor's District 8, Enumeration District 2, Tenth Federal Census of the United States, 1880, Alamance County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.

⁶⁵ Family 3, Dwelling 3, 3rd Civil District, p. 1, Supervisor's District 5, Enumerator's District 80, Tenth Federal Census of the United States, 1880, Lauderdale County, Tennessee, Population Schedule.

⁶⁶ Record of Deeds, Vol. 12 (1885-1887), p. 279, Alamance County Records.

A comparison of the various postwar census records with *Roots* reveals other discrepancies suggestive of the juggling of facts to make a better or more socially acceptable pedigree—or perhaps a misdirected attempt to force records to conform with incomplete family legend.

1. The 1870 and 1880 censuses of Alamance County enumerate the children of Tom and Irene Murray as they appear in the left column below, while *Roots* provides a conflicting birth pattern as indicated on the right:⁶⁷

<i>Census data</i>		<i>Roots</i>	
Maria	1853	Maria Jane	May 1860
Mary	1855	Ellen Mary	1861
Lavina	1858	Viney	1862
Salissey	1863	Salissey	(omitted)
Matilda	1864	Matilda	(no date)
Elizabeth	1867	Elizabeth	1867
George Thomas	1870	Tom	(no date)
Cynthia	1871	Cynthia	1870-1871

The *Roots* reconstruction of this family, wherein the births of the first six children are crowded into seven years, is not plausible. Numerous cliometric studies have indicated that nursing mothers, as Irene surely was, bore children at an average two-year interval.⁶⁸ The attribution of these birthdates to the offspring of Irene has apparently been made in an effort to have all born to the socially legitimate slave marriage of Tom and Irene, while the family pattern disclosed by the census indicates a steady birth of three successive children to Irene *prior* to the date which Haley gives for her slave-marriage. An interval of five years then suggests the termination of her first alliance prior to her second alliance with Tom. Alternatively, it is possible that all children were fathered by Tom, and the five-year

⁶⁷ Dwelling 235, Family 235, p. 31, Melville Twp. 10, Post Office: Mebaneville, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Alamance County, North Carolina, Population Schedule; and Dwelling 15, Family 17, 3rd Civil District, pp. 2-3, Supervisor's District 5, Enumeration District 8, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Lauderdale County, Tennessee, Population Schedule.

⁶⁸ For example see John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth; Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York, 1970), p. 158; Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," in Michael Gordon, editor, *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* (New York, 1978), p. 284 n. 35; Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca and London, 1970), p. 112; Stevenson, *Genealogical Evidence*, p. 7.

interval reflects the early death(s) of one or more offspring, in which case the union of Tom and Irene was initiated years prior to the date given within *Roots*. This hairsplitting over dates (a trait which all genealogists must develop) is significant since the backdating of the slave-marriage would place it in the time period when Tom was allegedly still a resident of Caswell County and Irene was, supposedly, an Alamance County slave. In any case, the discrepancy raises significant genealogical questions as to the paternity of the first three children and would be immensely important to their descendants attempting to reconstruct their own lineage.

2. The only postwar census in which George Lea has been located (1880 Lauderdale County, Tennessee) states that he was born in 1806 in North Carolina of a North Carolina-born father and a Virginia-born mother. However, two curious other points are raised by this census:⁶⁹
 - A. While the enumerator racially identified other individuals in the county as "mulatto," George Lea and all his offspring were identified as "black."
 - B. George is therein identified as a *widower* living with his daughter Kizzie (widowed or divorced) and two grandchildren. All were servants of the Wm. P. Posey family. George's alleged wife Matilda does not appear in any other household in the county; presumably, therefore, the census correctly identifies George as a widower. Moreover, the preceding (1870) census of Caswell and Alamance counties, taken the year before the family's move to Tennessee, reveals the existence of more than one black George Lea; but the only one whose age comes close to approximating that of Haley's Chicken George is enumerated with a wife Rhoda. There has been found no postwar document, indeed no document, that verifies the identity of Matilda as the wife of George Lea, either before or after the war. Yet the *Roots* narrative chronicles Matilda's death *after 1883* as a consequence of a family dispute created by young Elizabeth's too-white beau.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Dwelling 3, Family 3, p. 1, and Dwelling 15, Family 17, pp. 2-3, 3rd Civil District, Supervisor's District 5, Enumerator's District 8; also Dwelling 148, Family 161, 4th Civil District, Supervisor's District 5, Enumerator's District 81, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Lauderdale County, Tennessee, Population Schedule.

⁷⁰ Dwelling 295, Household 295, p. 304[b], and Dwelling 13, Household 13, p. 351[b], Ninth Federal Census of the United States, 1870, Caswell County, North Carolina, Population Schedule.

Beyond this point a litany of other genealogical problems descend in import to the level of nit-picking and, together with the readily admitted historical *faux pas*, this article will ignore them. The point at issue should be well enough made by the problems already discussed.

The *degree* of discrepancy which exists between the Haley family chronicle and documentable facts inevitably calls into question both the legitimacy of *Roots* as "history" and its very essence as an expression of one family's heritage. In the shadow of so many doubts and contradictions it is difficult to see the "exhaustive research" or "grand passion for truth" attributed to the work by its reviewers, and it is impossible to accept the author's previously quoted assertion that "By 1967, I felt I had the seven generations of the U. S. side documented."

By the same token, the present researcher is convinced that Alex Haley's family tradition has some legitimate—though yet unidentified—basis. Documentary evidence dangles several tantalizing clues which may well point for Haley the path to his family's true heritage:

1. There did exist a "historical" connection between the Waller family of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, and the Lea family of Caswell County, North Carolina. Haley has attempted to bridge the geographical gap between these two families by the invention of a slave trader to take young Kizzie from one state to the other. Apparently he did not discover or pursue a more plausible explanation suggested by the records themselves. Both Thomas Lea's father and father-in-law were natives of St. George's Parish, *Spotsylvania County, Virginia*, where the Lea and Waller families were neighbors. Indeed, the grandparents of Mrs. Thomas Lea were the original patentees of the very tract of land (the 240-acre "McNeal tract") which Dr. Will Waller and his brother John later conveyed and reconveyed, together with the slave man Toby.⁷¹

2. Caswell County records hint of yet additional connections between these two families. The will of Mary (Widow William) Lea, drawn 1784 in Caswell, was witnessed by one *Waller* Brown. The reader is also reminded that these names are again coupled in the postwar era in the person of the mulatto Brown Lea, husband of one of the unidentified Kizzies.

See also Haley, *Roots*, pp. 555-558, which presents a discussion of Matilda's "role" in the 1874-1875 establishment of the New Hope Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. It is also asserted that the church ordered its stained glass windows at that time from "Sears, Roebuck." However, Richard Warren Sears did not found his mail-order watch business until 1886, and Alvah C. Roebuck did not join the firm until a year later.

⁷¹ John Lea to Colonel John Waller and James Lea to John Chapman, Deed Book E (1751-1761), abstracted in Crozier, *Spotsylvania County Records*, pp. 191-192; "Lea Family," Microcopy Z.4.6P, North Carolina State Archives.

3. The slave-trader ploy was again used by *Roots* to convey his slave ancestors from the ownership of a Caswell County planter to an Alamance County planter. Although the actual conveyance and time of conveyance cannot be substantiated by any record and several existing records invalidate the assertion that either Thomas Lea or a Mr. Murray were involved in such a transaction in the mid-to-late 1850s, there does exist a more plausible explanation for the transferral of Haley's family from one county to the other: Alamance was not created until 1849, at which time it was cut out of Orange County (the original parent-county of Caswell as well). To the Afro-American inexperienced in genealogical research, such a change of domicile might well trigger an immediate assumption of a sale, but the experienced family historian is aware that a given ancestor may change his county of legal residence even as many as five times within his life without ever moving from the plot of land on which he was born.

The existence of numerous Leas, both black and white, in Alamance County and their neighboring residences to the Murray and Holt families lend further weight to this possibility, as well as to the Haley family's legendary association of the Lea and Murray families.

The true origins of this one Afro-American family, these "specific individuals in a microcosm," remain unearthed. If "truth is stranger than fiction" then the world may eagerly await a revisionist account of the Haley family history. In the meanwhile, professional historians who seek to present to their students the most perceptive, the most legitimate, interpretations of Afro-American history—and Afro-Americans in search of patterns to guide their own genealogical inquiries—must reappraise the legitimacy of *Roots* as a tool for either task.

It is difficult to see how the critical historian can continue to accept the heretofore prevailing attitude so well exposed by one who observed in 1976: "The historians say . . . 'Well the anthropology must be correct,' and the anthropologists say 'Well, the history must be correct.'" ⁷² As a literary work, *Roots* is beguiling, enthralling, and thoroughly heart-wrenching, even in its simplicity and its stereotype; but its legitimacy as a family history has not been accepted by the most discriminating journals within that field, and it is ironical that the professional historian who has long condemned family genealogists for indiscriminate and amateurish standards should now embrace as legitimate history a work which fails not only the most critical but even the most basic standards of genealogical inquiry.

⁷² Professor C. Vann Woodward quoted in Shenker, "Some Historians Dismiss Charge," *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, p. 29.

It cannot be denied that the historical novel or dramatization has far more impact upon public thought than the most masterfully interpretative work of the professional historian. At the same time it cannot be denied that *Roots*, as a historical novel, will have seriously adverse effects upon the public concept of America's history since it followed the same stereotyped patterns that insured popular and commercial success for *Mandingo* and a host of similar literary presentations. At the least, it may only retard the public awareness and acceptance of the legitimate discoveries being made by America's best students of Afro-American history.

However, the utilization of *Roots* as an educational tool by academicians, particularly by historians, is a far more portentous matter; and the development of courses and course materials upon an uncritical acceptance of the postures presented in *Roots* is highly questionable. "*Roots* is not a mirror reflection of black history in America," Eric Perkins has pointed out—in vain. Toby, Kizzy, and George, as depicted in this novel, represent "an elite family of slaves far removed from the brutal life of plantation hands . . . [and] false history produces a false consciousness."⁷³ Moreover, the mass of Afro-Americans who have found a spiritual identity with this fictionalized family have also failed to discern in *Roots* an ironic indictment of their own heritage: almost all slaves within the novel, Haley's "ancestors" excluded, were stereotyped Sambos, complacent and insensitive to the pain, the drive, the motivation that Haley's "family" displayed.

In rebutting criticisms of the quality of his historical research, the author has taken refuge in the position that any criticism of *Roots* constitutes a criticism of Black America. In the wake of Ottaway's highly publicized critique and in the midst of various legal controversies, author Haley wrote:

I was incensed that the article [by Ottaway] which gained swift worldwide circulation, attempted to cast doubts on the authenticity of *all those years* of the most painstaking and meticulous research efforts. But what really upset me most was that, also, by implication, it clearly sought to impugn the dignity of black Americans' African heritage.⁷⁴

It might also be suggested that *Roots* and its author have themselves created a stumbling block to the integrity of the Afro-American heritage and to the academic development of Afro-American family research. Since 1972 at least, Haley has billed himself as "probably . . . the person most knowledge-

⁷³ Syndicated interview with Philip Noble, "Haley's 'Roots' is eroding under attacks," *Gadsden [Alabama] Times*, May 16, 1977, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Alex Haley, "There are Days When I Wish It Hadn't Happened," *Playboy* (March 1979), pp. 115, 136, 212-216.

able about black genealogy,"⁷⁵ and the numerous years spent by Haley in delivering thousands of lectures upon this subject have been a popular grist of postpublication press mills. However, an analysis of Haley's own genealogical endeavor raises the question of whether he has advised or *misadvised* the thousands of trusting black Americans who have turned to him for guidance and for standards in their own work.

Countless Afro-American family genealogists across America are struggling now, as generations of Caucasians have long done, to reconcile their family traditions with documentable fact. The trend began even before the publication of *Roots*, but archivists, professional genealogists, and genealogical societies everywhere have reported a surge of interest on the part of black genealogists. The authors of this article, who have been frequently called upon to assist these endeavors, have also noticed an increased sense of disillusionment and frustration by many when their research exposes those inevitable deviations from "The Gospel of Aunt Lizzie," as well as an increased sense of injury when those family legends are subjected to the same tests of scholarship that all historical assumptions must pass. If the Haley legend proved correct, down to the last word, why should their legends not be unimpeachable also?

Professor Edmund S. Morgan, despite his reluctance to apply the same scholarly standards to Haley's "family history" that he would apply to the work of a fellow historian, has nevertheless summed up very succinctly the public psyche: "You can point out errors to your heart's content and it won't affect people's attitudes. It [will] just make them mad."⁷⁶ This attitude may suffice to guide relations between academia and the general public, but the professional historian, or the sincere family historian, would be better served by the criteria which Haley called upon his own critics to observe:

The most that one can ask . . . is that the writer conduct himself with sincerity and with a sense of responsibility to portray his subject as fairly as he can.⁷⁷

Can *Roots*, as an acclaimed "social document" and tool of Clio, survive the application of this same test?

⁷⁵ Quoted in Peggy J. Murrell, "Black Genealogy," *The Genealogical Helper* (September 1972), p. 417.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Shenker, "Some Historians Dismiss Charge," *New York Times*, April 10, 1977, p. 29.

⁷⁷ Haley, "There are Days When I Wish It Hadn't Happened," *Playboy* (March 1979), p. 216.