

**American Genealogical Research and Lineage Society Membership: Public Perceptions and Their Impact on the Field of Genealogy.**

Shannon Combs-Bennett, Q.G., University of Strathclyde

**Abstract:**

The study of genealogy has shifted focus in the United States from purely antiquarian studies of the 19th century to the mainstream media of the 21st. Americans have suffered from a love-hate relationship with the field, particularly when it comes to the subject of lineage societies. These organizations, whose membership is based on genealogical proof of descent from an applicable ancestor, have thrived and multiplied even when the media, and public perception, classified them as elitist, classist, and often racist organizations. This presentation focuses on the public perceptions of these organizations, how many have shaped the field of genealogy in the United States, and the preliminary results of a Ph.D. study analyzing their impact on American society and the field of genealogy.

As a professional genealogist, and member of several lineage societies, I am fascinated by how family history research and lineage society membership are closely linked. For me, I joined these organizations to validate my genealogical research since I am the first person in my line ever to join one of these groups. Growing up, my grandmothers would say that our families qualified for the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), but there was always a tone of disdain in their voices. As a child, I did not understand. However, as an adult, and after they passed, I realized that my family was not “the right type” according to older members of these groups due to our politics, religions, and social statuses.

Over the years, the impressions, assumptions, and misunderstandings about the attitudes of members of lineage societies made me curious as to why people join them and how these groups are seen through the lens of history. In particular, I have delved into why many of these groups have a reputation among the public of being classist, elitist, and oftentimes labeled racist organizations.

However, not everyone was fascinated by this phenomenon. Some have always felt this was a veiled attempt by classist Americans to secure an aristocratic social standing over others.<sup>1</sup> This started with the first society formed after the American Revolution, The Society of the Cincinnati. One critic from South Carolina, Aedanus Burke, declared that this society was creating "a race of hereditary patricians or nobility."<sup>2</sup> Even the first president of the society, George Washington, recognized that participating in this organization could suggest elitism to the ordinary person.<sup>3</sup>

Racial, class, and social stratification in lineage organizations mirrored what was occurring in the general population. By the end of the 19th century, the upper classes, no matter ethnicity, turned to genealogy to distinguish themselves from "others."<sup>4</sup> Persons of higher status, who also had ancestors of a higher status, found genealogical research easier to perform than those of lower classes. Wealthy and historically important ancestors were more frequently found in records, unlike impoverished or transient ancestors.<sup>5</sup>

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, leaders at the national level in lineage and heritage organizations found themselves in a precarious position. Segregation could no longer be upheld if they were to be seen as legitimate organizations. Unfortunately, segregation and discrimination were often performed and upheld at the chapter level, forcing the chapters to manage membership wants versus national organization needs.<sup>6</sup> Many organizations refused to deal with chapters that would not integrate or excluded women due to their unacceptability to the chapter members.<sup>7</sup>

These chapters often reflected the communities where the women lived. If exclusivity, exclusion, and segregation were found in their home and town, they would also be found in the chapters.<sup>8</sup> When national organizations attempted to change policy with how the nation was changing, they discovered members were often more loyal to their chapter's wants than what the national organization advised.<sup>9</sup> This often led to an outright refusal by white members to "come to the table" and work on mutual problems with African-Americans.<sup>10</sup>

This led to the opinions about lineage societies differing drastically depending on where the person lived. In the 2020 mini-series *Mrs. America*, this duality is addressed in several ways.

---

<sup>1</sup> Weil (2007) p.409

<sup>2</sup> Weil (2007) p.410

<sup>3</sup> Weil (2007) p.411

<sup>4</sup> Morgan (2010) p.135

<sup>5</sup> Morgan (2010) p. 136 and 142

<sup>6</sup> Laville (2017) p.6 and 8

<sup>7</sup> Laville (2017) p.8

<sup>8</sup> Laville (2017) p.42

<sup>9</sup> Laville (2017) p.5

<sup>10</sup> Laville (2017) p.5

Cate Blanchett's character, Phillis Schlafly, presided over a DAR chapter based in Illinois. While the women were portrayed as white, middle-class, mostly housewives, they contrasted with other groups throughout the episodes. When the southern women were included in the talks about stopping the Equal Rights Amendment, they were openly racist and hinted that they may have been members of groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC).

The UDC are the leaders of the "lost cause" movement in the US south, single-handedly rewriting the history of the American Civil War in textbooks across the country. They have more recently been in headlines around the US for fighting the removal of confederate soldier statues from towns across the southern states. They have been a target of protests since the Black Lives Matter Movement, and on the evening of 30 May 2020, their headquarters in Richmond, Virginia, was set on fire by the protesters.<sup>11</sup>

Historically, published family lineages were often written for or even commissioned by wealthy white Americans. Prospective members of societies frequently use these genealogies as an easy way to connect themselves to an ancestor already approved by an organization. However, these publications could be seen as a way to suppress undesirable individuals or even a way to promote racist ideals.<sup>12</sup> Many organizations excluded unwanted members who might have qualified based on lineage by requiring the chapter to vote on the prospective member.<sup>13</sup> These votes would allow women to decline membership to anyone they considered the wrong type of person, which could further perpetuate feelings that the organizations are racist and classist.

The cases of Karen Batchelor Farmer and Lena Ferguson are two examples of this exclusionary practice causing problems with the DAR. Farmer was the first acknowledged black member of the DAR when she joined in 1977. Those were important words – acknowledged black member. For decades, the DAR has skirted the minority issue by stating they do not ask about ethnicity on their application forms and thus have no way to identify how many minorities are members of the organization. Farmer had tried for several years to join chapters in the Detroit, Michigan area with no luck. It took the President General of the DAR to intervene and find a chapter for her to join.

Ferguson, and Washington, D.C. native, had a similar situation with a less positive outcome. Her nephew was a member of the Washington, D.C. Sons of the American Revolution

---

<sup>11</sup> Oliver, N., & Vogelsong, S. (2020, June 2). Confederate Memorial Hall burned as second night of outrage erupts in Virginia. *Virginia Mercury*. Retrieved April 1, 2023, from <https://www.virginiamercury.com/2020/05/31/a-second-night-of-outrage-erupts-in-virginia/>

<sup>12</sup> Gardner (2003) p.149

<sup>13</sup> Morgan (2010) p.143

and encouraged his aunt to join on their shared ancestral line. However, no D.C. chapter would vote positively to accept her into their membership. Ferguson brought a lawsuit against the DAR on the grounds of discriminating against her due to race. She eventually became a member-at-large (associated with no chapter) in 1985 when the DAR and Ferguson settled out of court.<sup>14</sup> Part of the settlement called for the DAR to publish a book on minority participation in the American Revolution, which resulted in *Forgotten Patriots* being published and the creation of a scholarship fund for minorities.

### **The Project**

Data for this project was collected in two phases. First, an online survey was distributed with volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds. Second, interviews consisting of volunteers from the survey and other persons associated with the lineage society community occurred. Through this process, I discovered the viewpoints of professionals associated with the field of genealogy, members of lineage societies, and many levels of genealogical researchers concerning the accuracy of lineage research for membership in these groups. Non-members were also surveyed to understand how outsiders to these organizations perceived them.

The survey covered experiences researching lineages as professional or hobby genealogists, why the person joined a lineage society, stereotypes of these organizations, and the experiences of minority members. Interviews were then conducted with survey participants who volunteered in addition to others in the field of genealogy. This allowed participants to expand on their written answers and give more personal feedback on the topics covered.

Early on, I encountered pushback from some members of lineage societies about my survey. I posted to the groups I belong to on social media stating the purpose of my research with a link to the Qualtrics survey I created. In one group, a female member replied to my post, stating I was a part of the “woke” academia and that no one should take my survey as I obviously had an agenda. While I did not engage with her, others in the community did, and a rather intense argument ensued.

Once the survey closed, I discovered that there might be an imbalance in my data. There were 1,163 participants, and very few had negative comments. Either this means these

---

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, “Washington Talk: Briefing; Of Black Courage”, *The New York Times* (19 Feb 1985), p.A14, col. 2. Anonymous, “D.A.R.’s President is Fighting Dissent: She Calls News Conference to Deny Abusing Power and Bias Against Blacks”, *The New York Times* (8 April 1984), p.31.

organizations and those affiliated with them have no issues with the groups, they are not answering truthfully, or I have yet to reach those who are truly dissatisfied with these organizations. I did send my survey to members of lineage organizations I personally knew who did worry about public perception or had negative feelings toward an organization. These persons sent the links to other friends, but it appears I received the most feedback from the posts on social media.

During the interviews, there were hesitations from both men and women while speaking with me. I was often asked during an interview if this was confidential and that I would not share their name with other members of their lineage society. Through discussions, it was not a fear of safety. Still, many aspired to become leaders within their groups. They worried that if their answers were identified, older members of the organization(s) would blackball them from the positions.

## **Results**

Those who identified as not a member of a lineage or heritage organization had one additional question to answer concerning why they chose not to join one. The largest category chosen was that they did not know enough about these organizations (30%). Next, 22% stated they were too busy to join one of these organizations. However, 17% stated they had a negative opinion of these groups and were too expensive. Only 10% stated they did not qualify for one, with 5% stating they may join one after they retire.

Often, people who were not members of a lineage society state they do not understand why someone would join. When this question was asked of those who identified themselves as members through this survey, 29% stated they joined out of a sense of family pride. This was closely followed by wanting to verify a lineage (23%), participate in an organization which similar goals (18%), and prove a family story (13%). Surprisingly, only 6% stated they joined because of a family member or a friend.

Members may join and then eventually resign their membership for various reasons. For those who identified themselves as current members of a lineage organization, 14% stated that they have resigned or been dropped from the rolls of at least one organization. Of those, 63% stated they resigned because they did not fit the organization's culture, and 18% left an organization for financial reasons or because the organization was not what they thought it was.

The stereotype that many of these organizations are racially discriminatory permeates the American culture. In the survey, I asked respondents if a member of a lineage organization or a chapter had ever discriminated against them. For those who answered affirmative, 8%

stated they experienced discrimination from a chapter of a lineage society, with 15% stating they experienced discrimination from a member. However, both groups felt they were discriminated against primarily due to their politics (60% and 65%, respectively).

Applications in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may also include DNA analysis for some organizations. Unfortunately, there is no standardized set of guidelines that all organizations use, similar to no standard rules across groups for genealogical requirements. This leads many members (and non-members) angry that DNA is only used in very specific ways. All respondents were asked their opinions on using DNA to prove lineage for applications to these organizations. When asked how and where DNA should be used for applications, 49% stated they felt DNA should be used with strict guidelines from the organization, and 3% felt that DNA results should not be used to prove lineage for acceptance. There were near equal percentages on allowing DNA at any time (12%), should not be allowed at any time (15%), or those who admitted they did not know enough to answer (16%).

Conclusions.....