

COMING HOME: A JOURNEY FROM VIRGINIA TO NEW YORK

BY KENYATTA D. BERRY

I believe we all have a quest and a desire to understand our heritage. Genealogy is an area for enthusiasts and the occasional hobbyist; over 60% of retired Americans are interested in Genealogy. With the introduction of the Internet, there has been a tremendous growth in the Genealogy industry. Using sites such as *Genealogy.com* and *Ancestry.com*, genealogists are able to access the federal census online, vital records, newspaper, etc. African-American Genealogy has always been challenging since most records of African-Americans do not exist before slavery. However, with some work and dedication, an African-American genealogist can reconstruct the past and understand their ancestors' lives as slaves. Using court documents, tax lists, federal and state census records, as well as plantation documents, the African-American genealogist can paint a picture of his family's past.

This quest has been attempted by many and resulted in some great works such as *Roots* by Alex Haley and *Slaves in the Family* by Edward Ball. Using a variety of techniques and years of research, these authors, African-American and white respectively, have been able to tell the story of their ancestors. I have been researching my family for over eight years and I have been able to identify the last slave owner, visit the location where they were slaves, see and photograph a building where some of them once lived and worked. I have learned many more things about the lives of my ancestors.

The Discovery

In 1996, while still in law school in Lansing, Michigan, I wrote to the town historian in Le Roy requesting information on my great-grandmother Esther Lewis Kendrick and her grandmother Emily Carter Sellers. The Le Roy historian at the time put me in touch with my first

cousin three times removed, Marion Sellers Phillips. During our conversation, I learned that Emily Carter Sellers migrated to Livingston County from Culpeper, Virginia.

After graduating from law school, I moved to Arlington, Virginia. I never lost interest in my family roots in upstate New York. During those three years of school, I began to weave a story of their lives as slaves in Madison and Culpeper counties. I discovered Culpeper by accident, while traveling to a golf tournament in Gainesville, Virginia. When I saw a sign that stated “Culpeper 38 miles,” my heart jumped and my mind began to race. Was I really just 38 miles away from the ancestral home of my family in Virginia? The next day I drove to Culpeper and walked the streets of downtown, wondering if my ancestors roamed those same streets. After discovering Culpeper, I began to make bi-weekly trips there and to neighboring Madison County to do research and photograph the area where my family once lived and worked.

Walking in the footsteps. . . .

While in Madison County, I discovered that Lewis Carter and Martha Payne were slaves there and the proud parents of seven children, all born there. Little is known of Lewis and Martha’s life as slaves. Evidence suggests that they lived and worked on the farm of J. W. Taylor. Fannie Belle Carter, the third child of Lewis and Martha Carter was also known as “Fair Belle.” She was twice married, once to a man thirty years her junior and she outlived both of her husbands. Fannie had eight children by her first husband and when she married for the second time; her eldest son was older than his step-father. When Lewis Carter died, Fannie sued Emily and her sister Mary Carter Price for the inheritance. At that time Emily and Mary were both residing in upstate New York. The crux of the dispute was land located in Culpeper County that was purchased by Lewis Carter and his then deceased son Marcelleus Carter. Unfortunately, I have not been able to learn the outcome of the chancery case; the files are currently being restored by Culpeper County and are not available for public viewing.

Of all my ancestors, Fannie intrigues me the most because I know the least about her life in Culpeper County. I am confident that she has descendants in the Culpeper area and I intend find those descendants and restore the connection to that area. The descendants of Lewis and Martha Carter in Virginia include the surnames, Murray and Perry in Culpeper County, and Mallory in Madison County.

According to the 1870 Federal Census, Lewis Carter and Martha Payne Carter lived next door to a prestigious boy's school, Locust Dale Academy. Locust Dale Academy was founded in 1858 by Andrew James Gordon, a native of Vermont, and was adjacent to the property of Andrew J. Gordon's father in law, Larkin Willis. Larkin lived with his wife and children in a white home with green trim at the corner of routes 634 and 15 in Madison County, Virginia. Upon obtaining a map of Madison County, I ventured to locate the home of Larkin and Lelia Willis.

When I arrived at their home, I was stunned at the condition, it was abandoned but in perfect shape. I drove up to the house and stared in astonishment. As I walked the grounds, I looked out to the neighboring property and realized that I was standing in the footsteps of my ancestors. Over 130 years ago, they stood where I was standing and as I closed my eyes, I could hear them in the distance. As I drove away, I decided to head to Culpeper County to find Cedar Grove Baptist Church.

I drove along a tree lined road to Culpeper County and with every twist and turn, I took in the scenery. Railroad tracks lined the road and as the sun crept in the distance, I realized I was home. I had crossed the county line to Culpeper County and within a few minutes, I arrived at Cedar Grove Baptist Church. Cedar Grove Baptist Church was established in 1883. In 1887, J. P. Sellers, Robert Murray and Richard Taylor purchased the half acre of land where the church now stands.

Emily Ann Carter, the daughter of Lewis and Martha Carter, married James Phillip Sellers on March 7, 1867 in Madison County, Virginia, The ceremony was performed by James Garnett II, the well renowned pastor of Crooked Run Baptist church in Culpeper, Virginia. James

P. Sellers the son of Phillip Sellers and Delia Green was born in 1847 in Scottsville, Albemarle County, Virginia near Charlottesville, home of the University of Virginia. Around 1890, J. P. and Emily Sellers migrated from Culpeper County to Fowlerville, Livingston County, New York with their eight children.

J. P. and Emily Sellers would establish the Sellers family in upstate New York which today includes descendants in Erie, Genesee, Livingston and Monroe counties. Upon arriving in Fowlerville, J. P. and his sons, James, William and Phillip began farming land, while the women took care of the home. On September 22, 1893 on the Rose farm in Livingston County, Martha Marie Sellers, the eldest child of J.P. and Emily, married John Lewis. John Lewis came to York about 1884, where he worked as a farm laborer. John and Martha had three daughters, Esther, Emily and Martha Lewis. When Emily Sellers died on June 29, 1938, she was survived by two daughters, three sons, one sister, sixteen grandchildren and twenty-one great grandchildren.

Upon arriving at Cedar Grove Baptist Church, I parked on the dirt road beside the church. The church was green and white with a chapel in the front and an addition in the back. A small cemetery was located to the right of the church and upon cursory review of the cemetery; I was not able to locate any relatives. I took several photographs of the church. In my mind's eye, I could see J.P. and his family walking the same steps as I.

Coming Home

Six years passed before I got in touch again with Mrs. Phillips. During the summer of 2003, I began planning my vacation to my ancestral home, Livingston County, New York. I decided to visit in October when the leaves were turning; it would be a beautiful time in upstate New York. Two weeks prior to my trip, I contacted town clerks, historians, relatives, church members and whoever I could find to let them know that I was coming.

I arrived to a warm and welcoming reception from those I met in the tri-county area (Monroe, Livingston and Genesee Counties). With the aide of town clerks in Livingston County,

I discovered additional information about the Bundy Family and their connection to J. P. and Emily Sellers. On August 17, 1892 Delilah Sellers, the second child of J.P. and Emily married Charles Pope Bundy. Charles P. Bundy was born in 1863 in Middlesex County, Virginia, the son of free blacks Samuel and Mary Bundy. In 1881, Charles came to New York to join his brother Thomas in the trade of barbering. Thomas H. Bundy served as a Union soldier in the Civil War. There is, sadly, very little known about his civil war experience. Charles earned an education and upon the death of his brother in 1885, opened his own barber shop which he managed until his death. He died the day after Christmas in 1896. He had endured Interstitial Hepatitis for many years. His funeral was held at the United Presbyterian Church in Caledonia and he is interred at the cemetery located behind the church. When he died, he was survived by his wife Delilah and two young children James Samuel Bundy, age three and Benjamin Franklin Bundy, nine months.

Delilah Sellers Bundy and her children moved in with her sister and brother in-law, Martha and John Lewis. Martha died unexpectedly on March 23, 1899, leaving John to raise their small children. On November 21, 1901, John Lewis married his deceased wife's sister, Delilah Sellers Bundy. John Lewis died on September 22, 1929 leaving behind his wife, Delilah, three daughters, a step-son and six grandchildren. Delilah Sellers Bundy Lewis died on December 18, 1972 at the age of 102. At the time of her death, Delilah was survived by three step daughters, 12 grandchildren and 32 great-grandchildren. Delilah died when I was just six months old, how wonderful it would have been to have known her. Thirty-one years later, I continue to learn more and more about her each and every day.

My ancestral journey is remarkable and overwhelming at the same time. I uncovered a tremendous amount of history about African-Americans in Livingston County from descendants who still reside in Caledonia. Most of the African-Americans who reside in Livingston and Genesee Counties have ancestors from Culpeper County, Virginia. Like James and Emily Sellers, they migrated north, leaving behind family and friends. It is my duty and my calling to continue this journey. My goal is to establish a connection between those left behind in Culpeper County

and those who left to build new lives. I will continue to walk in the footsteps of my ancestors as I search and discover my ancestral home.