



COMING TO THE TABLE

A Case Study in Researching Southern Slaveholding Ancestry

By Rev. David Pettee, with help from Susan Hutchison

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Feeling confident from my success in researching my own slaveholding ancestors (see “A Case Study in Researching Northern Slaveholding Ancestry”) I offered to help my friend Susan research a slaveholding ancestor, William Trotter, who had lived in antebellum eastern Mississippi. Susan had begun researching on her own, after finding a brief slavery-related reference to William in a book on Trotter genealogy. She was inexperienced with genealogical research, but simple Google searches using various combinations of Trotter’s names (first, middle, last), town, county and state, “slave,” and “slavery” had yielded:

- reference to a 200-plus page “history and defense” of slavery written by Trotter, available on microfiche via interlibrary loan (the text has since been made available online – a good example of the ongoing explosion of material being made available on the web),
- 1850 and 1860 Slave Schedules for Trotter’s county, listing him as enslaving 16 people in 1850 and 45 in 1860,
- a brief description, photo, and address of Trotter’s large house, which still stands,
- genealogical forum postings by a descendant of Trotter’s brother, a reply to which yielded some important genealogical information to round out the beginnings of our research base.

Susan had to travel for business to Jackson, MS, which is only two hours from Trotter’s home, close enough for a research side-trip. I offered to do what research I could from home, and to use a soon-to-expire airline voucher to join her in Mississippi to help “on the ground.” Not having the advantages associated with living in Mississippi, I knew that preparation *before* our visit was essential.

I searched the web for local history and genealogical sites and for more Trotter-related postings at ancestry.com and rootsweb.com. I found gold in the web site of a county resident who has amassed an amazing collection of deeds, cemetery records, newspapers, obituaries, census records, and most importantly, indices to Chancery Court records. (The Chancery is where all the official county records are now kept, such as land deeds, wills, inventories, tax records, etc.). The site is an incredible labor of love. I found numerous references to Trotter using the site’s search engine. I also found gold at mymississippigenealogy.com.

These resources allowed me to compile a substantial list of documents to search for in the Chancery at the county courthouse, as well as the location of the family burial plot with Trotter’s grave. I expected that wills and inventories would provide more detail about

slavery in the Trotter family, and hoped they would list names of slaves, to help us make connections with living descendants.

Meanwhile, Susan used the Trotter house address and a reverse lookup feature on whitepages.com to find a phone number for the current owner of the home. She had a wonderful conversation with Sarah, the owner/resident, who was open to a visit and happened to know that descendants of Trotter slaves lived in the area. She also referred Susan to Joanne, another Trotter descendant who had visited years before and spent days in the courthouse copying Trotter records. Joanne shared information and lore about Trotter and his family, and the disappointing news that all the photocopies from several days at the courthouse had been burned in a house fire before anyone had had a chance to read through them. She remembered finding documents indicating that Trotter had given each of his several children two slaves.

To try and locate living descendants of Trotter slaves, Susan searched for Trotters in the area using whitepages.com and peoplefinder.com. She composed a letter introducing herself and her connection to William Trotter and sent it to three of the several addresses from her search. Two of the three letters she sent came back undeliverable. She made calls to some of the phone numbers, which led to some new information, but nothing that definitively connected anyone to William Trotter or those enslaved by him. (It later became clear that the people she found were almost certainly descendants of two different people enslaved by William.)

Our visit to Mississippi was a combination of disappointment and great success. A bomb scare closed the county courthouse for half of the one day we were in town. The realtor who'd last sold the house shared a copy of Trotter's military

portrait, and a copy of his business card (he was an attorney).

The most exciting moment came at the end of our visit to Trotter's house (which has been beautifully restored). Our hostess, Sarah, was more welcoming and gracious than we could have hoped for. After giving us a tour of the house, serving us lunch and sweet tea, and hearing more from us about Coming to the Table, she mentioned that her housekeeper of 20 years was a descendant of a Trotter slave. We were stunned! She promised to talk to Mamie about us when she came to work in a couple of days. We picked our jaws up off the floor and reluctantly drove away.

Our search in the courthouse cut short by the bomb scare, we had to work fast. We had hoped to find a will and probate inventory for Trotter, who died in 1862. Instead we found documentation that he died "intestate" (without a legal will). A big disappointment, and not what we were expecting from a lawyer! We did however find several documents referring to "renting" slaves out, as well as other slavery related records.

Two discoveries were particularly powerful and chilling. One was a probate document for Trotter's sister. It listed three "lots" of people who had been enslaved by Trotter's sister, with first names and "valuations," the groupings carefully arranged so that they each carried the same value. The document described a drawing of lots by the deceased's three surviving siblings, indicating which sibling would inherit which group of people.

Another short document in the probate records included the names of two people, Rhoda and Handy, who had been given by Trotter to his youngest child, Susan's great grandmother, when she was an infant or toddler.

About three weeks after our visit, I checked the message boards one last time to see if there were old messages worth reviewing, now that we had a good understanding of the Trotter family. There was a new message from a William Trotter descendant, with a link to an African American Trotter family website. I called Susan with the news and she quickly made contact with the man who had posted the query. Maceo was thrilled to hear from her, and referred her to Gary, one of the family historians. Phone calls with Gary yielded the information that William

Trotter was listed as the father on the death certificate of the emancipated ancestor of this Trotter line.

Several months, phone calls and emails later, Susan traveled back to Mississippi. She had a wonderful conversation with Gary and met his family, and enjoyed a delicious meal and delightful visit in Mamie's home with a dozen newfound cousins. She has been invited to the next family reunion and plans to attend. Their relationships have just begun.

Mission

Seeking to acknowledge, understand and heal the persistent wounds of the U.S. institution of race-based slavery and its legacies.

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