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## A NOTE ON THE PITFALLS OF BLACK GENEALOGY: THE ORIGINS OF BLACK SURNAMES

Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr.

One assumption long held about the South has been that at the end of the Civil War, newly free Blacks took the surnames of their masters. My research in the records of freedmen working in the late 1860's, however, revealed that not all bore their former masters' names. I became intrigued with questions concerning the origins of Black surnames. Were traditional explanations correct?

### The M.L. Bivins Plantation

In an attempt to find answers, I examined the surnames of Blacks who worked on the Martin Luther Bivins plantation in western Georgia. The records consulted for the study consisted of census records (1870 and 1880), tax digests (1868 and 1871), and papers in the possession of the descendants, including deeds, bills of sale, receipts, estate records, and two freedmen labor contracts (signed in 1865 and 1866).

Located in Marion County, near Cusseta and about thirty miles from Columbus, the Bivins plantation today consists of 854 acres and the main dwelling house built in 1850, is presently owned and occupied by Mrs. Bess Bivins Lockhart, a descendant of the Civil War owners.

Martin Luther Bivins (1816-1878) came to Marion County with his mother and siblings in the early 1830's from Wilkinson County.<sup>1</sup> By 1850, Bivins owned twenty-seven slaves ranging in age from three months to fifty years.<sup>2</sup> His farm consisted of 1,130 acres, 480 of which were improved or cultivated, with a total value of \$11,000. In addition, to the usual farm animals, there were 42 sheep and 120 swine. Corn, oats, rye, and wheat were grown, and the farm had produced 80 bales of ginned cotton the previous year.<sup>3</sup>

On the eve of the Civil War in 1860, the Bivins plantation consisted of 1,800 acres, 100 of which were improved, with a total real estate value of \$14,500.<sup>4</sup> The farm then ranked in size in the upper six percent of agricultural establishments in the State. Cotton production had nearly doubled,

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increasing to 156 bales in 1859. In 1860, there were fifty-five slaves, housed in ten slave cabins. With respect to the number of slaves owned, Bivins ranked in the upper three percent of Georgia's 41,000 slave holders.<sup>5</sup>

Records on slaves living on the Bivins plantation are incomplete. For example, no births of slaves appear in the family Bible. Existing bills of sale, however, document the purchase of thirty slaves from 1842-1860. Of the slaves purchased, one family may be singled out for study because of the unusual first names which make possible easy identification. The following family of five was purchased from Absalom F. Temple of Randolph County, Georgia, for \$1,400 on March 22, 1844: Dublin (forty-five years), Nanny (thirty-five years), Gilbert (fifteen years), Dublin (four years), Seaborn (two years).<sup>6</sup>

### **Surname Selection by Freedmen Working for Bivins**

After Emancipation and the end of the Civil War, Bivins secured the needed labor force by arranging contracts with his and his neighbors' former slaves. The first contract was signed December 30, 1865 (for 1866) and the second on December 31, 1866 (for 1867), both under terms of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands.

. . . to have one hour of rest at noon except from 10th July to 20th August they are to have two hours to rest at noon. All field work is to stop at night. The freed women are to have an hour or two on each Saturday evening to wash.

. . . they may be discharged at any time without compensation for any labor upon failing after being admonished to do their duty. All lost time is to be deducted from the compensation for the year's work . . .

. . . they bound themselves to be careful and kind to the stock they may use and to preserve the property of said M.L. (Bivins) from waste or loss. . .

. . . said M.L. Bivins agrees to furnish the land, stock, waggons (sic), farming implements gins &c necessary to make, gather and house the crop and to haul the crop of cotton to market . . .

. . . As much of the collards and turnips as they will help to raise as they may wish to eat - all the above to be furnished free of charge.

He will furnish them with full rations of meat and meal monthly at the rate that meat of the same kind and corn may sell for on the first of the said month on the waggons (sic) in Columbus. They are to have for their services a third of the ginned cotton and a third of the (other crops raised there)<sup>7</sup>

### **TERMS OF 1865 CONTRACT BETWEEN M.L. BIVINS AND FREE BLACK LABORERS**

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands was created March 3, 1865 in the War Department to assist freedmen as well as white refugees. The Bureau operated effectively until 1868 and officially through 1872. After an insufficient harvest in 1865, it became obvious that the

work force of freed Blacks had to be better organized for the good of both races or everyone would starve. A labor contract system was instituted in early 1865 in order to bring some order to the labor force. However, it did not operate effectively. After that year's poor harvest, the Federal troops in charge worked more diligently to arrange contracts with equitable terms.<sup>8</sup>

These labor contracts were the first records to show the identity of freedmen as they emerged from the anonymity of slavery. For the purposes of this study, tax and census records have also been analyzed to show the acquisition of legal identity (or surnames) of freedmen in the period from 1865 to 1880 (See chart on surname evolution).

In 1865, it appears that the order of names on the contract was an important reflection of the social structure of the plantation. Henry, at the top, was the only freedman on the plantation found to have taken the Bivins name.<sup>9</sup> Noah (fourth in 1865 and the second in 1866) became Noah Davis, and his family remained close to the Bivins family, both in geographical proximity as well as in family services. His daughter, Savannah, became the Bivins' cook in the early 1900's.<sup>10</sup> The 1865 contract, which was the only one to list women in full, apparently listed the slave couples, husband first, as two identifiable couples (Cary and Arbor, and Solomon and Tener) were in that order in 1865 as well as in the 1870 Census.

Most of the eleven surnames seen in 1865 and 1866 have undetermined origins, and these names chosen by the Bivins' freedment indicate that there was no rush to take the Bivins' name. No examples were found of anyone changing surnames once one was selected.

Two men (Washington and Lafayette) obviously chose names of men who were never their masters. They may have been in the same predicament in which Booker T. Washington found himself when a school teacher asked his surname. He had felt he never needed one before and, with only a few minutes, to ponder, chose the most obvious one for a native Virginian.<sup>11</sup> Barnard, the surname adopted by the former slave Barney, was a well-known name in the area, originating with a family of traders who settled along the east side of the Flint River. Seaborn Harrison was purchased by Bivins at age two, yet at freedom, he did not assume the Bivins' name.

Other names that appeared among the first eleven surnames that were chosen indicate a different method of name selection. It is obvious that in 1865, three men were listed as Barney, Cary, and Nicholas; in 1866, they became William T. Barnard, George Cary, and James Nicholas.<sup>12</sup> These

**SURNAME EVOLUTION, 1865 - 1880**

1865(order)	1866(order)	1868	1870	1871	1880
Henry(1st)					Henry Bivins
Barney	Wm.T. Barnard & wife	Wm. Barnett	Wm. Barnard	Wm. Bernerd	
Adam	Adam & wife		Adam Howard	Adam Howard	
Noah(4th)	Noah (2nd) & wife	Noah Davis	(same)	(same)	(same)
Gilbert(5th)	Gilbert & wife (1st)	Mack Gilbert	?	?	Gilbert Mack
Cary	Geo. Cary & wife	George Cary	(same)	"Cary"	
Arbor (after Cary)			(as wife of Geo. Cary)		
Nero		Nero Jackson			
Solomon			Solomon Johnson	(same)	(same)
Tener (next to Solomon)			(as wife of Solomon)		(same)
Nicholas	Jas. Nicholas & wife	Jas. Nichols		(same)	
Jack Davis					
Sam White					
Nancy					Nancy Wright (as mother of Gilbert Mack)
Dublin			Willy Dublin		Dublin Wiley
Seaborn (last)	Seaborn Harrison (last)				
	Milton Majors				
	Spencer Anthony & wife	(same)	(same)	(same)	?
	Marcus Lafayette	(same)	Mark Lafayette	(same)	Marcus Lafayette
	Joseph Jenkins & wife	(same)	(same)		
	George Washington				

**Derivation:** This chart shows the surname consistency and confusion of selected persons on the Bivins plantation, based upon selected information from the labor contracts of 1865 and 1866, tax digests of 1868 and 1871, and the censuses of 1870 and 1880.

individuals also appeared in the tax digests of 1868 and 1871.<sup>13</sup> Rather than "pick" a surname as tradition indicates, these freedmen chose first names (or revealed their long-suppressed Christian names). This use of the surname as the slave name is not entirely inconsistent with the research conducted by Herbert Gutman, who indicated that many slaves had surnames in slavery but had no way to express or reveal them in legal documentation. Thus, the tradition grew that they had no surnames.<sup>14</sup>

Several inconsistencies can be noted in the appearance of some names in the records. People today often call other by their surnames, and slaves could have been referred to in that manner, leading to the use of the surname as if it were a given name. William T. Barnard, who appears as Barnett on one list and Barnerd on another, reflects a confusing situation probably brought about by the use of "Barney" as a slave. George Cary appears in 1868 with his full name, yet in 1871, only as "Cary", probably because of the addition of a first name as in the case of Barnard. In 1868, Gilbert Mack has his names reversed; in 1880, his identity appears settled. If these points of confusion are not anticipated by researchers and genealogists, the sleuthing could end in a tangle of mixed identities.

Given the name of persons with rather common Christian names among the Bivins' slaves and freedmen, it is not possible to locate all of them in the Censuses of 1870 and 1880 with any certainty. It has been feasible to trace the evolution of the surnames of the family mentioned earlier, that of Dublin and Nancy and their sons purchased in 1844. As this particular family becomes noticeable in the records, one thing is readily apparent: all four surviving members acquired different surnames.

Dublin, the head of the family, does not appear to have survived into freedom (he would have been sixty-six years old). Therefore, it is not known what surname, if any, he had. Nanny (a nickname for Nancy) appeared to be the wife and mother in 1844. She appears in 1865 without a surname, and in 1880, she surfaces as the mother of Gilbert Mack. At age seventy, Nancy, who was born in Georgia, has the surname of "Wright."<sup>15</sup> Gilbert, the eldest child in 1844, first appears with a surname in the 1868 tax digest with the name "Mack." There was some confusion as to which name should come first and which last. By the 1880 Census, things had settled, and "Mack" is established as his surname.<sup>16</sup> Dublin, the second child, also suffered name-reversal problems. In the 1870 Census, the first time he is seen with two names, "Dublin" is listed first, though he was supposed to have given his last name first.<sup>17</sup> By 1880, things were more settled and he is listed as Dublin Wiley.<sup>18</sup> Seaborn, the youngest child in 1844, appears only once

with a surname in the records surveyed here. In the 1866 contract, he is listed as "Seaborn Harrison." <sup>19</sup> Seaborn presents an interesting case as his purchase at the age of two precludes his birth on the Bivins' estate. Thus, his surname could represent his actual father, his previous owner, or be a name chosen at random. The ages of Nancy, Gilbert, and Dublin were consistent in 1880 with their purchase age thirty-six years earlier, clearly establishing them as the same individuals.

## CONCLUSIONS AND CONJECTURES

By tracing a group of freedmen families such as those at the Bivins' plantation, one may become better prepared to take a single family of the Twentieth Century and trace its members back to 1865. The Bivins' case study identifies several pitfalls and opens the way to a variety of conclusions about and conjectures regarding surname assumption by ex-slaves.

**I. MULIPLE SURNAMES.** One family may have multiple surnames rather than a consistent one, as in the case of the family studies. None of the four adopted the Bivins' name. This single example of an identifiable family of ex-slaves adopting multiple surnames, poses a number of questions of concern to researchers. How unusual was the adoption of multiple surnames within a cohesive group of ex-slaves? Were the slaves purchased as a group in 1844, a true family unit? In the cases of the children, were the different surnames due to different fathers?

**II. NAME REVERSAL.** The first and last names may be reversed in the legal records, as appears in two instances in the family selected. This may have also occurred in indices, compounding the confusion. Reversal may have happened frequently and could have been caused by the freedom or other spokespersons, not knowing what response was required when an official asked for their names "last name first." Another cause could be the confusion experienced by slaves whose names became their surnames in freedom (for example, Cary and Barney). They may have continued answering to their single names, thus confusing the tax and census takers who might not have known them personally.

**III. SURNAMES ORIGINALLY FIRST NAMES.** The slave's first name may have been used as the surname after freedom, with the freedman picking a first name rather than a surname. This possibility does not appear to be mentioned in recent works on slavery. This current study may be the first time the situation has been analyzed genealogically or with Christian names unique enough to eliminate the confusion of identity. The

possibility that surnames were originally first names in slavery should provide researchers with another tangent to explore when tracing their families or plantation groupings. If it occurred with three out of the thirty-two Bivins' freedmen, practically ten percent, it certainly must have occurred in the cases of larger and better documented plantations.

**IV. OTHER FINDINGS.** The further away from Emancipation one moves, the more accurate the records are likely to be since conditions become more settled. At the Bivins plantation by 1880, freedmen had selected distinct names and had established name sequence which had not been the case in 1870. The consistency of information in this study may discount speculation that freed Blacks picked one name at freedom in 1865 later to change it. The persons in this case study, with surnames in 1865 and 1866, who could be located in 1880, did not change surnames. Even those with the names of famous persons (i.e., Lafayette) retained them. Perhaps the rural area, relatively free from outside influences, may have been a factor in the retention in consistency of the surnames chosen at Emancipation. The lack of relationship among the names that appeared and slave owners in the immediate area, encourages the researcher to accept the names as genuine identification for the future rather than stigmatic links to the past.

These conjecture might also be applicable to the study of Whites to the United States. Like the young Corleone in *The Godfather II*, they might have found themselves adapting to a "new" surname upon arrival in this country and coping with their confused legal identities much the same way as the freedmen did after Emancipation.

**V. ADDITIONAL SOURCES.** In addition to labor contracts, tax digests, and census records sited in this study, other sources which might be consulted would include journals, ledgers, wills, and inventories of slave owners. The slave schedules of the U.S. Census in 1850 and 1860 only listed slaves by age and sex, not by name. Desendants should be located and interviewed to learn something about the surname selection procedures and the sources of some of their names. Cemeteries, such as the Pineville Cemetery near the Bivins' plantation, may be searched for evidence of freedmen burials. A 1900 Census may provide further documentation as a vital link for tracing the descendants into the Twentieth Century.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Interview with Mrs. Bess B. Lockhart, May, 1977; Sara (Robertson) Dickson and A.H. Clark, *History of Stewart County, Georgia*, Vol 11 (Columbus, GA.: Columbus Office Supply Co., 1975), p. 387 (for burial records of Pineville Cemetery, Marion County, GA)

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Census, Schedule 1, Slave Schedule, Seventh Census, 1850, Marion County, GA

<sup>3</sup>U.A. Census, Schedule 4, Agricultural Schedule, Seventh Census, 1850, Marion County, GA., p. 415, line 37

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Census, Schedule 4, Agricultural Schedule, Eighth Census, 1860, Marion County, GA., p. 13, line 33

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Census, Schedule 2, Slave Schedule, Eighth Census, 1860, Marion County, GA., Kinchafoonee District.

Department of the Interior, *Agriculture of the United States in 1860* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), pp. 188, 196, 221, 222, 227, 247, 248.

<sup>6</sup>The Martin Luther Bivins papers, in the possession of Mrs. Bess Lockhart, Cusseta, GA. There are no plantation journals or ledgers. Since Mr. Bivins did not die during slavery, no inventory was made of his slaves other than the U.S. Census, slave schedules, for 1850 and 1860, which only list slaves by age and sex, not by name. Her papers are not in any order, and some deeds or bills of sale could have been misplaced over the years, and yet all are located in the plantation house.

<sup>7</sup>These are the only two labor contracts remaining in the M.L. Bivins papers. It is not known for how many years contracts were used or whether once the obligations became established, they were no longer kept in written form.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Abbott, *The Freedman's Bureau in South Carolina, 1865-1872* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), pp. 4, 67, 69, 73.

<sup>9</sup>U.S. Census, Schedule 1, Free Inhabitants, Tenth Census, 1880, Marion County, GA, 710 Georgia Militia District, household no. 155. Henry Bivins is a 40-year-old Black laborer living within 40 households of the widow Bivins (who is at no. 197), and the only freedman within the 710th G.M.D. with the surname Bivins.

<sup>10</sup>U.S. Census, Schedule 1, Free Inhabitants, Ninth Census, 1870, Marion County, GA, Kinchafoonee District. Noah Davis is at household no. 900, and M.L. Bivins at no. 906; also oral interview with Mrs. Bess Lockhart, 1977, about the Noah Davis family. The actual manuscript of the labor contract for 1865 has "Savannah's father" written next to Noah's name.

<sup>11</sup>Both of these men were born after the deaths of Washington (1799) and Lafayette (1834). Harnett T. Kane, ed., *The Romantic South* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1961), pp. 127-132, in which she quotes from Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (1901), in a chapter entitled, "The Opportunity to Choose His Own Name."

<sup>12</sup>This assumption is made from the uniqueness of the single names and their proximity to M. L. Bivins in the two labor contracts, tax digests, and census records.

<sup>13</sup>Marion County, GA, Tax Digest for 1868, and for 1871 (Department of Revenue copies). Originals located in the Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, GA. The Bivins plantation is located in the 710th G.M.D. (or Kinchafoonee District) in these digests.

<sup>14</sup>Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750 - 1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), pp. 236-237.

<sup>15</sup>U. S. Census, Schedule 1, Free Inhabitants, Tenth Census, 1880, Marion County, GA, 710th G.M.D., household no. 198-205, where she is listed as mother to the head of the household, Gilbert Mack.

<sup>16</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>U. A. Census, Schedule 1, Free Inhabitants, Ninth Census, 1870, Marion County, GA, Kinchafoonee District, household no. 943.

<sup>18</sup>U. S. Census, Schedule 1, Free Inhabitants, Tenth Census, 1880, Marion County, GA, 710th G.M.D., household no. 170-178.

<sup>19</sup>The 1866 freedmen's labor contract has his name at the end in a separate column next to M. L. Bivins. This special position could be due to his youth, as he would have been twenty-four years old in 1866.