Tracing Family History:

It didn't start . . or end . . with Roots!

By Dennis C. Schatzman

Pittsburgh, Pa.: On a chilly day in April, 1951, Lula Providence summoned her eldest grandchild, Clyde Murdock Schatzman to her bedside. Death was drawing near and she wanted to leave her offspring something of great value. It was a handwritten history of the family she had scrawled herself sometime between June and December, 1950.

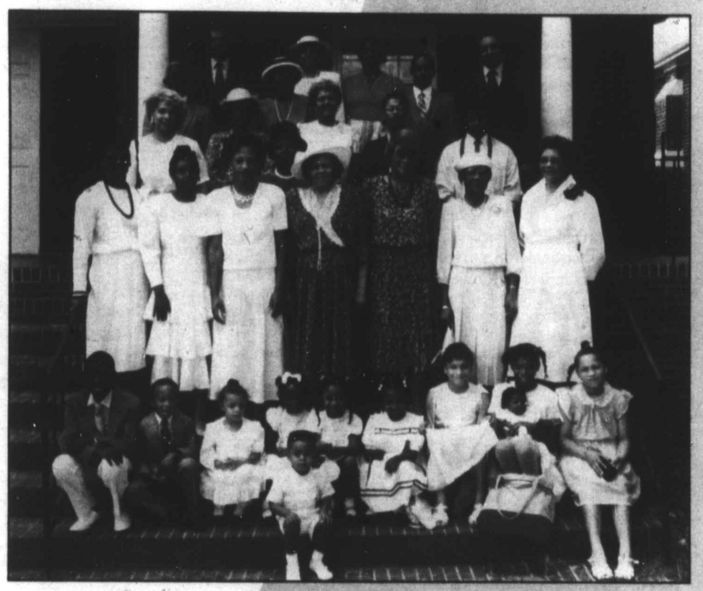
"This history of our family," the document begins, "is being tendered with apologies at its beginning for any mistakes as to dates or spelling of names, etc. It has been compiled from knowledge received from sources too numerous to mention; and is considered to be as accurate as possible."

In four pages, Lula Providence traces seven generations of a family that begins with the birth of Mary Joyce in Frederick, Maryland in 1789. A "celebrated cook," she died on the streets of Baltimore in 1894 at the age of 105. With Thomas Johnson, a laborer who was lost at sea, she parented a daughter, Mary Catherine Joyce.

Mary, the younger, like her mother, was born a slave, the history states. She married John Murdock, another slave on June 20, 1849. "John was freed first," the history continues. "He saved his money, and bought Mary Catherine from her owners for $500.00." Both became rich through real estate, supplying ice to the City of Frederick from their ice house and trading ice in Baltimore for fish and oysters which they, in turn, sold in Frederick. When they died the estate was left to nine children.

The family history moves on for five more generations introducing new surnames; the Stanbacks, the Johnson, the Providences, the Roberts, the Colemans, the Nowlins and finally the Schatzmans.

I ran across this written history when I leafed through the pages of my mother's Bible after she died in 1964. Years later when Alex Haley's celebrated **Roots** hit the best seller's list, I asked myself: "was great grandmother Providence ahead of her time? Here I am, in possession of a complete documentation of my family's history long before the genealogy craze would become popular."



The Fuller Family

Or so I thought. Not until I ran into Sammie Lee Thomas, Jr., did I realize that Lula Providence had only scratched the surface. Had she only known where to look and had a little more time — and help — the family history would have been much more comprehensive — like Sammie Thomas's.

For most of his adult life, Thomas, 29, a Salisbury, Md. native has researched his family's and others' family roots with such proficiency that he has become a recognized, albeit self - taught, authority on Black genealogy.

"Black people need to be aware of their roots," Thomas explains, "in order to feel the bonds that will keep their families together and keep their race from sinking into self - destruction."

To date, Thomas has chronicled the histories of 12 interrelated Black Eastern Shore, Maryland families in his first book, **The Books of Families of the African Diaspora; Volume of the Families Between the Atlantic and the Chesapeake** (August, 1989). Many are already considering this work as a penultimate study on Black genealogical research.

Thomas is convinced that genealogical research is a way "to get families to work together on a common project of historical significance." One of the problems, he believes, in the Black community is the breakdown in the family unit. Once there is a breakdown in that, the whole community, he adds, starts to disintegrate.

"If we encourage our children to learn their family history, they will have pride in their families. They will come together as families. This will cause the whole Black community to come together, since we're all related in some way."

Since beginning his research odyssey about seven years ago, Thomas has become a much sought-after lecturer and workshop presenter on the subject of genealogy research. Here are a few tips he provides on where to look for family history.

ORAL TRADITION — The best way to begin compiling family history, Thomas advises, is to seek out and question the family's oldest relatives for names of ancestors, dates of births, old family Bibles, old photographs, old letters, etc.

CENSUS REPORTS — The National Archives in Washington, D.C. as well as state and county courthouses and libraries can provide census data from 1790 through 1910. (Census information became confidential and private after 1910). If one knows the approximate date of birth of some ancestors and the county of residence, it becomes easy to trace family linage.

COURT RECORDS AND ARCHIVES — This also includes marriage records, emancipation papers, land records, tax records, etc.

Using the freedom of slaves as an example, my ancestors, John Murdock of Frederick, Md., could only have been freed by probate, by deed or by buying one's freedom. It was known that Murdock purchased Mary Catherine's freedom, but it was unclear as to how John "was freed first." By checking the Frederick County probate records of the slave masters (who often freed their slaves in their wills) one could determine how John Murdock was freed.

The Spence Family

MILITARY AND NAVAL RECORDS — Many free Blacks and slaves fought during the War of 1812, the French and Indian War and the Civil War. By combing through military records, Thomas discovered that one of his relatives, Risdon Brewington of Allen, Md., died of pneumonia while serving in the U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War. Risdon's brother, Wesley, records show, suffered "an axe wound to the left knee and deafness in both ears" during his Civil War military service.

When undertaking family research, it's important that one adheres to two important rules, Thomas advises. "First, it is absolutely important that you keep good records and good notes." Information often becomes repetitive. Some records can contain the same information as other records and one can spend long hours, even days, transcribing information you already have.

"Second," Thomas adds, "be sure to develop a good working relationship with family members in key geographical areas. This helps ease the load on the principle family researchers."Also, some relatives who don't know you, won't trust you and won't give you any information.

Tracing one's family history is an important endeavor every family should consider. One never knows what they will find. I, for one, wants to know what happened to my ancestors' property in Frederick County. Why did they leave what seemed like secured wealth to come to Pittsburgh? What happened to the Ice House? Where's the money?

There's one other thing. Why was Great - great - great - great - great - great Granddaddy Thomas Johnson lost at sea? Did the ship sink? Did he jump — or was he pushed?

Well, it's off to the archives. Maybe they can lead me to the answers.