

1994

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Recommended Citation

Dance, Daryl Cumber. "Seeking Polly, Pretty Polly, Poor Polly, or The Granddaughter Seeks to Remember What the Grandfathers Sought to Forget." In *Grand Mothers: Poems, Reminiscences, and Short Stories About the Keepers of Our Traditions*, edited by Nikki Giovanni, 73-78. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994.

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Seeking Polly, Pretty Polly, Poor Polly,
or The Granddaughter Seeks to
Remember What the
Grandfathers Sought to Forget



By Daryl Cumber Dance

My great-great-great-grandmother is so special to me because I *found* her despite the fact that she was deliberately written out of my *his-tory*. And this is the story of our meeting.

I grew up in a family and a community that was proud of and protected its heritage. We all felt very special because we were of the lineage of Abraham, our founding father, whose legacy we believed was no less honorable, glorious, and praiseworthy than that of the biblical patriarch whose name he shared. The figure of this venerable forebear, whose legendary deeds were common knowledge, loomed as a prominent force and presence in our daily lives. His achievements and his deeds were recorded in our church history and maintained by family griots. His descendants were traced through the years, and their accomplishments

duly noted, so that I could *proudly* trace my line to Abraham and his wife, Susanna—with but one problem. In writing the history, I found out that Abraham left three sons. I later found out about a grandson, Crawford—but Crawford was never listed as one of the sons of Abraham's sons. Whence came Crawford, my great-great-grandfather? Where was the missing link so patently dropped? I wanted to know. How could I complete the chain that ties me to Abraham? As a young person, I asked this obvious question of all the usually talkative family griots, including my maternal grandmother, Sally Carter Brown Bell Brown. All anyone "knew" was that Crawford was Abraham's grandson. When as a slightly more mature young woman, having just finished college in 1958, I pressed one of my elderly great-aunts for information, she finally mumbled something about "having heard the name . . . Polly," but she was so tentative and so uncomfortable talking about it that I knew she wouldn't "know" any more, so I did not pursue the question further.

Over the next thirty years, I didn't get much chance to check on Polly—I was too busy giving her great-great-great-greats, but finally I did get to explore the surviving Charles City County, Virginia, records—deeds, wills, birth and death records, marriage records, court records, etc.—and Polly's name began to turn up, clearly confirming that my great-great-grandfather Crawford had one parent, if not two. First I found Abraham's will and other records of free Negroes that indicated that Abraham and his wife, Susanna, had *several* children other than the three I knew about, including Polly (I expect the achievements of these others were not deemed significant enough to merit inclusion).

But, most important, there *was* a Polly to be deciphered from the reels and reams of insensitive, unfriendly, un-

wieldy, and sometimes unreadable and untrustworthy county records. Born in 1800, she enjoyed a more privileged life than many of her fellow African-Americans. She was the daughter of a free, property-holding family, having in its household upon Abraham's death china and silver, farm equipment, a spinning wheel, a desk and books. She undoubtedly attended worship services each Sunday at the Elam Baptist Church, which her father and other family members founded in 1810 and which was built on land ceded by Abraham and his wife, Susanna. There she, other free Negroes, and slaves listened to sermons preached by the colored members, as their figurehead white minister (required by the laws of the time) merely came, sat in the most comfortable seat to be had, listened to sermons by some of the colored brothers, drew his one dollar for his attendance, enjoyed a good dinner . . . and quietly sauntered back to his feudal home. He rarely undertook to preach a sermon, but whenever he did, he always preached from one text and only one, which was: "Servants obey your masters." Polly may well have had a little education, since there are indications that members of the family attended their own school until the 1831 law made that illegal.

When she was twenty-one or twenty-three (records conflict), Polly gave birth to the first of her three children, possibly the second of whom was my grandfather Crawford. She is the only parent listed on the birth records located. Having found no record of a father to these children, I expect they were born out of wedlock, *which is probably the reason that she was never mentioned in the family.* Recorded family history notes that Crawford was "born at the old homestead of his grandfather, Abraham Brown," and it appears that Polly continued living on property she inherited from her father. The only other records (save one)

that I have found dealing with her are records of sales of land, none of which mentions a husband. They do reveal, however, that she did quite a bit of wheeling and dealing in land for a single woman of her day.

Fascinated by this enigmatic link in the chain of my family tree, I went back to family members, hoping that the *facts* that I could provide them might stimulate them to share with me anything they knew about the family but might be concealing. One cousin, Evalyn Shaed, mentioned to me that she had heard that Polly married her cousin Timothy, but I found nothing to substantiate any marriage. Another cousin who finally acknowledged even knowing the name of Polly was Juanita Carter, who vaguely remembered some tales her mother had told her of "Grandma Polly": she was so beautiful that they had to hide her when the Confederates came through; some of the troops had seen her, and the family had to conceal her to protect her from them (obviously apocryphal since Grandma Polly at sixty probably wouldn't have been such a tempting morsel, though the story might well have grown out of some incident involving troops of some other variety in the county). I uncovered a couple of insinuations that her children were fathered by a prominent white "gentleman" rumored to have begat a number of children by colored women, but the only documented link of any kind between him and this family was the sale of land by him and his wife to Polly's two sons in 1852. While I planned to seek further to find the father of her children, for the moment I was more interested in the life of this newly discovered grandmother.

In addition to the disparagement Polly would have suffered within her family for her illegitimate children, she undoubtedly faced all of the other hardships and restrictions

endured by free antebellum blacks during the first half of the nineteenth century, including the indignation of periodically registering and obtaining documentation of her status—which is how I happened to experience the one and only “meeting” with my grandmother.

One day in the mid-1980s, as I sat in the Virginia State Library Archives Room, carefully and cautiously turning the pages of the dusty and crumbling *Register of Free Negroes and Mulattoes, Charles City County*, for 1819, I came across the entry “Polly (daughter of Abram) bright mulatto . . . [has] a scar on left hand . . . small mole to left of nose . . . 5'2½" tall.” POLLY . . . Pretty Polly, with a scar on her left hand just *like me*—and a mole *right in the place where mine is!* . . . Polly . . . Poor Polly, who had been lined up on January 24, 1819, before this very book that I sat there holding in my hands more than one hundred and sixty years later! And the only picture that I would ever have of her was this description by a registrar, one of a group of whites not noted for the most sensitive depiction of colored people, but charged to observe those characteristics that might be critical to identification if that was necessary. I'm sure Polly wasn't too comfortable under the gaze of an examiner seeking identifying marks and calling for the requisite information—but what an irony that this ordeal required by her society in order to protect itself from the diminutive twenty-year-old remains as the one physical bond between my great-great-great-grandmother and me! I sat riveted in the Virginia State Archives Room on that day, holding on to that dusty volume as if I were embracing Polly's body, staring at the entry over and over, my imagination admittedly running wild, conjuring up the range of emotions she must have felt at the moment when that entry was recorded, and thrilling at the sense that I had truly recovered her. I had

found Polly, truly *found* her. I remained there, enthralled and motionless, fearing that if I moved, if I breathed deeply, I risked losing the spiritual connection that I perceived with her—because I *did* experience a very real sense of her presence; I did know that with the *Register* and me there hovered a once-restless soul, now relieved and peaceful. I felt confident that she would be restored to her rightful place in a line of honored and revered forefathers and mothers.