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## Meanwhile, America could learn more about its past

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Back in 1925, American society tended not to advise young white males about the consequences of intimacy with the black maid. Even if the 22-year-old Strom Thurmond considered himself a father, the standards of the time did not require him to give the daughter born of that intimacy any love, support or acceptance. He did, however, irretrievably give her his bloodline.

Essie Mae Washington-Williams, the offspring of the late Senator Thurmond and his family's black maid, 16-year-old Carrie Butler, recently announced that she intended to join the Daughters of the American Revolution based on her Thurmond bloodline. Reared apart from her father, Washington-Williams did not have the same privileges as Thurmond's white children during his life, yet she is seeking the right to some of the privileges of her lineage.

She is not the first to do so. Washington-Williams said she was motivated by the battle of Lena Santos Ferguson to join a Washington chapter of the organization, and by Ferguson's quest to honor black soldiers. Ferguson's grandmother, a black Virginia woman, had married a white man whose ancestor, Jonah Gay, was a patriot. In the 1980s, Ferguson fought a legal battle for full membership and to enter her local chapter. It wasn't until the organization was faced with the potential loss of its tax-exempt status that she could join.

Perhaps more significantly, Ferguson demanded, and received, a settlement agreement that bars discrimination and requires the DAR to identify every African-American soldier who served in the Revolutionary War.

At the time of Ferguson's settlement, the DAR likely knew of many black soldiers who served in the Revolution, yet the organization was not open with the information nor was it receptive to black members. Ferguson's settlement required the DAR to publish the names they had and to do research to identify more black soldiers.

On this matter, the DAR's behavior has been troubling. By early 2000, six years after the settlement agreement, the names of only 1,656 black patriots had been published. Yet some historians estimate 5,000 African-Americans served in the Revolutionary War.

The settlement required the DAR to do research to find the names of black soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War. Yet, while doing this research, the DAR has failed to use census records and other documents that could help identify the races of soldiers. It has also used a narrow classification system for race, one that increases the potential for underreporting: The DAR includes only men described in historical records as "black," "Negro" or "mulatto" on their lists of black soldiers. However, whites of the period used a far greater range of colors to describe African-Americans. Excluding those "colored" patriots puts them off-limits to prospective black DAR members who might otherwise make the connection.

Yielding to pressure, in 2001, the DAR published "African-American and American Indian Patriots of the Revolutionary War." The number of names grew to 2,400 from 1,656, including an additional 744 previously assumed to be "white." But there are still many more African-American soldiers to be identified, and the DAR still holds to a narrow definition of an African-American.

This may give a clue to the DAR's resistance: When confronted with 64 "brown" soldiers who could have sired members, the organization conceded that as many as 57 may be listed in its index of proven Revolutionary War soldiers (patriots whose descendants became DAR members). Yet, for generations, descendants of "brown" patriots married "light" or "white" mates, thus increasing the chances that white society, including organizations like the DAR, would be a safe harbor for their offspring. When the lists are complete, many people whose families assimilated into white society may learn for the first time of their ancestry.

And in the black community, many people are unaware of their Revolutionary War heritage or reluctant to embrace it - whether their ancestors were white or black. They may fear ostracism from other blacks who may view white ancestry as a source of shame and a reminder of slavery. The Daughters of the American Revolution's efforts to hide the complicated realities of the past have fueled these types of feelings. But every American, regardless of color, must realize that the past is not pretty, linear or easily explained.

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