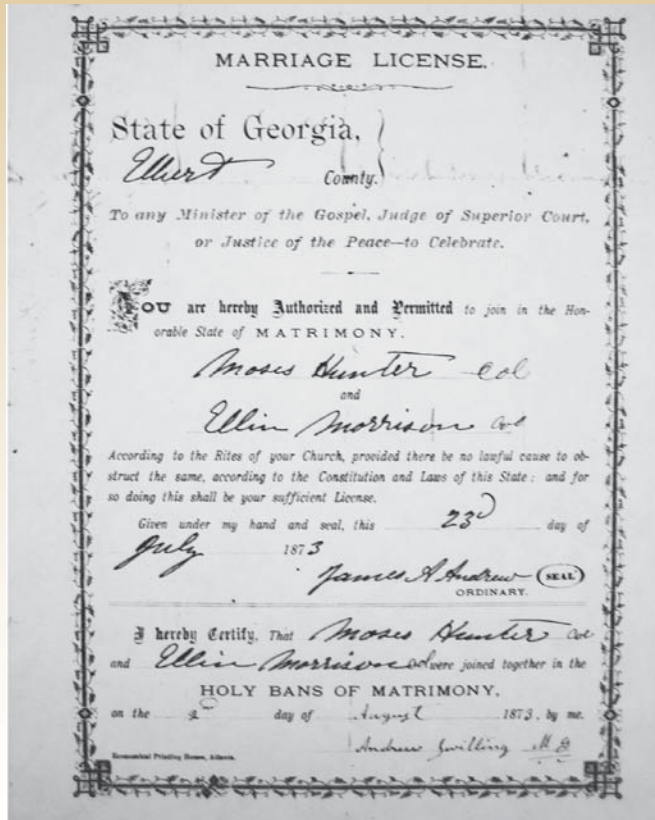


Bound in wedlock

Professor of history explores slavery's shackles on black families

By Tera Hunter

ELBERT COUNTY MARRIAGE BOOK, IMAGE COURTESY OF BRUCE HUNTER



Marriage certificate of the great-great-grandparents of Tera Hunter, professor of history and African American studies.

For her new book, **Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century** (Harvard University Press, 2017), Tera Hunter, a professor of history and African American studies, meticulously researched court records, legal documents and personal diaries to illustrate the constraints that slavery placed on intimate relationships. In this article she talks about the very personal side of her research and the importance of this chapter of history in understanding American society today.

I HAVE A COPY OF THE MARRIAGE

certificate of my great-great-grandparents, Ellen and Moses Hunter, from 1873. They were both enslaved, freed and then married during Reconstruction. I posted the document on my bulletin board, which served as a source of inspiration as I researched slave and free black marriage in the years before and after the Civil War. Their marriage was the first among my direct paternal ancestors, and they were the first non-interracial couple in my paternal lineage after arriving in the New World. It became increasingly clear how much my own family history was evocative of the larger history that I was researching.

I was especially drawn to documents that I found from the period of Reconstruction, which demonstrated the depth of feelings and the challenges that former slaves faced in reconstituting their family ties after slavery ended. These records are tremendously rich, and they raised a lot of interesting questions that could not be easily answered by focusing on the period following emancipation alone. To fully understand post-slavery marriage and family, I needed to trace these relations over the entire 19th century.

One of the topics I explored was how marriage was not an inviolable union between two people but an institution defined and controlled by the superior relationship of master to slave. Women have literally borne many of slavery's burdens not just as laborers but also as the literal reproducers of capital that enriched slave owners, making them among the wealthiest people on the planet. Exploiting women's sexuality and denying legal rights to marriage, maternity and paternity were inextricably linked to preserving slavery as a profitable, permanent, inheritable system of labor.

Christianity was closely tied to supporting and rationalizing this system of labor, with little dissent from mainstream clergy or laypersons. Despite the fact that marriage was held as one of the most important sacraments of Christianity, in the United States the Church supported the property rights of masters above all else. Readers are often shocked to learn such facts about the complicity of their own faith traditions.

My research on free blacks produced some surprises. I do not think historians have fully captured the extremity of the constraints faced by African Americans who were either born free or born into slavery and later freed. We certainly have not paid adequate attention to the repercussions that they faced in building and sustaining their marriages and families. Slaves could not marry legally in the South, but neither was legal marriage guaranteed to free blacks. Their relationships were even more compromised when they were married to slaves because they were reduced to their enslaved spouse's lack of standing in society and the law. In some cases, they even voluntarily submitted to (re)enslavement just to keep their families together, as laws were passed to evict newly manumitted free people in the South.

Free black couples faced constraints above the Mason-Dixon Line as well, which is probably more surprising to people who are less familiar with slavery in the North. For example, New York state passed a law that supported slave marriage. But slaves were required to get the consent of owners first, and, in practice, the law did not guarantee that their relationships were respected as legally inviolable.

My research on marriage allowed me to examine the internal lives of African Americans. The existing scholarship on black families was preoccupied with whether or not they conformed to the nuclear structure and gender norms of male-headed households. This led to a very limited view of both the internal values and meaning of marriage to African Americans and also the external constraints that they faced in creating and sustaining these relationships.

Debates about the status of black families in the 21st century have often invoked the legacy of slavery. In the epilogue to the book, I scrutinize and challenge the misinformed assumptions articulated by both liberal and conservative scholars, commentators and political pundits regarding the impact of slavery on marriage and family today. Despite centuries of degradation, adult African Americans were nearly universally married by the turn of the 20th century, only decades after legalization. That pattern would begin to change post-World War II, and marriage rates began a downward slope to the point now that most African Americans are not

married. There are many factors that explain this, but slavery is not one of them. We need to look to factors in the 20th and 21st centuries.

I hope that my work contributes to deepening the knowledge of the history of slavery and its consequences for American society and for African American lives. We cannot fully appreciate how the nation has come to be what it is without the knowledge of how slavery and freedom were intertwined. We cannot fully understand the harms done to African Americans without accounting for how they impacted marriages and family.

African Americans have always been creative, resourceful and practical in building meaningful relationships. There is "a great black river" along an enduring freedom struggle, as historian Vincent Harding wrote. We keep going back to the future.

And yet, despite the distinct disabilities that black families suffered under, there is a long legacy of stigmatizing the bonds they created, of using the failure to meet dominant societal norms as a barometer to judge black fitness for civilization and citizenship negatively. No matter what period of history, black families are always judged to be deficient as compared to whites, with little regard for the systems that structure those inequities.

We need to understand those patterns and the

legacies that are continually replicated with each iteration of the seemingly forward movement toward greater freedom and justice. **D**

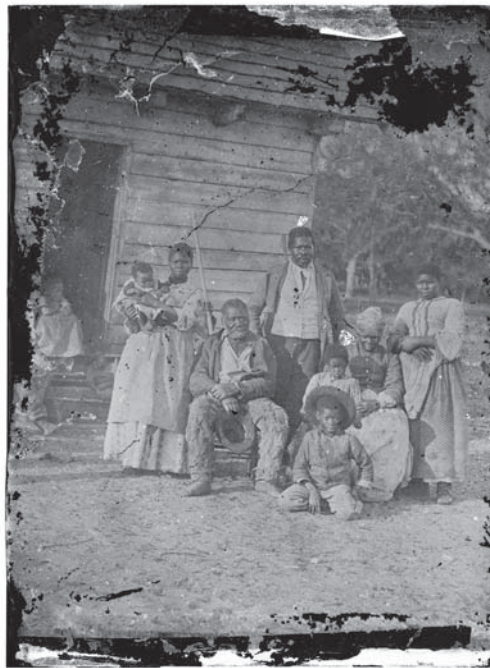


PHOTO BY TIMOTHY H. O'SULLIVAN, COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Marriage between slaves was discouraged or illegal; individuals could be sold away from their spouses at any time. This photo, taken in 1862, is of an extended family of slaves on a plantation in Beaufort, South Carolina.