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Correspondence to coatofarms@theheraldrysociety.com

www.theheraldrysociety.com

A NEW ARISTOCRACY? THE REVOLUTIONARY BEGINNINGS OF LINEAGE SOCIETIES IN THE UNITED STATES

SHANNON COMBS-BENNETT, Q.G., M.Sc.

Abstract

The study of genealogy has shifted focus in the United States from purely antiquarian studies to mainstream media. Americans have suffered from a love-hate relationship with the field, particularly when it comes to the subject of lineage societies. These organizations, whose membership is based on genealogical proof of descent from an applicable ancestor, have thrived and multiplied even when the public media were calling them elitist and classist. This presentation focuses on the birth of lineage societies at the end of the American Revolution through to the 21st century, discussing public perceptions, how many of them have shaped the field of genealogy in the United States, and the preliminary results of a Ph.D. study analyzing their history and impact on society.

Introduction

A person may want to join a lineage society because of family tradition, the organization's representation, and / or to honor an ancestor. I joined my first society as a way to prove my grandmother's stories were correct. Later, as people reached out to me for help with applications, I gained a new perspective on the types of genealogical information these organizations stored. Coupled with the historic preservation that many of these groups take on, I feel they are an underused resource by many researchers.

For this paper, I will focus on lineage societies, defined as a group of people descended from an individual who played an instrumental role during a specific period in history. In the United States, two types of organizations can fall under this categorization: hereditary lineage societies, and family associations. Here the focus is on the former. The role of the ancestor on whom the group is focused may have been associated with the military, employment, a colony, a specific religion, or many other possibilities. Each organization has specific guidelines defining who is eligible for application, varying from group to group. A commonly expressed perception of such organizations amongst professional genealogists is a tendency to be lax in lineage requirements, which are not in accordance with currently acceptable genealogical standards.

A Brief History

Without the institutions of the aristocracy, genealogy in the United States departed quickly from European norms. After the American Revolution, there was a near shunning of any semblance of elitism and usage of titles, of which genealogy was considered a part. Even President George Washington, who was also the president of the first hereditary society in the United States (the Order of the Cincinnati, **Figure 1**), stated that "showing interest in your ancestry could be seen as elitism," and attempted to dissuade those of the upper class of the new American states from actively pursuing interest into their past.¹



Left: *Figure 1*: George Washington as President General of the Society of the Cincinnati, 1790, by Edward Savage, Harvard Art Museums; Right: Badge of the Order of the Cincinnati drawn by George Turner, 1784. Society of the Cincinnati Archives.

As the popularity of genealogy and family history research spread through the United States, many people discovered distant cousins they previously never knew, and groups of descendants drew together to celebrate their belonging to this shared heritage.² Lineage societies quickly formed, celebrating descendants' shared pasts, ideals, and pride in their lineage.³ Scarcely could Washington have predicted (nor indeed could later antiquarians, or the new gentry class) the expansion and development of a national interest in family history over the next two centuries. By the end of the nineteenth century Americans came to rely more and more on genealogical research to define who they were. In doing so, they often showed how their lineage deserved to be in the United States, while other lineages did not.⁴ By the twentieth century, genealogy had become a popular vehicle utilised by groups and individuals alike to promote their beliefs of nationalism, racism, and classism.⁵

Fraternal organizations such as the Masons were more palatable to the masses due to their nature of being more like a social club, which people of different backgrounds could join. Many organizations accepted both men and women, while others were gender segregated. Lineage societies differed in that their appeal was often based on patriotism, and in particular on descent from the founders of the United States.⁶ Some, however, looked upon these groups as a veiled attempt by the growing wealthy class of Americans to secure an aristocratic type of social standing over others.⁷ Criticism was voiced from the very beginning following the inception of The Society of the Cincinnati in 1783. One

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critic from South Carolina, Aedanus Burke, declared that this society was creating “a race of hereditary patricians or nobility.”⁸

The American Civil War (1861–1865) impacted the practice of genealogy in the United States in several ways. Social changes consequent upon the war included new patterns of urbanization and migration. During this tumultuous period, many citizens turned to researching their roots to stabilize their situation and, in some instances, to give themselves a sense of superiority over others. These developments led to the eventual outcome of using genealogy to show nationalism and racial purity as the primary objective for many researchers.⁹

For example, researching common ancestors through family histories united many white northerners and white southerners after the Civil War. Many could reconcile their differences by showing descent from common ancestors, usually from the revolutionary and colonial periods. This reconciliation frequently came at the expense of minorities within the United States. Specifically, formerly enslaved persons, including those who were freed before the Civil War.¹⁰

Like other Americans, African Americans also wanted to connect to their past. Unfortunately, this caused classism within their communities as well. While formerly enslaved persons searched for family members to reunite with during the reconstruction period, those freed before the Civil War engaged in genealogical research to demonstrate they were above those whose heritage was from more recent enslavement.¹¹

While it may seem contrary to common knowledge, by the end of the 1800s northern cities had an upper class similar to southern elites, who wanted to set themselves apart from the lower classes. For example, the genealogical pursuits of the upper classes in New York City became a way to legitimize their position in society. Those with the ‘right’ lineage gained and kept positions of power within social circles and politics.¹² Journalists of the 1890s picked up on these feelings, often pointing out the situation’s irony. An article from the *Washington Post* dated 19 August 1897 (**Figure 2**) stated:

“It is to be hoped that the social and aristocratic side of these [patriotic or lineage] societies will not become too prominent, for the [mere] fact of American descent should be the controlling condition, and putting in permanent form American local history the main object in view.”¹³

With the centennial of the United States in 1876, the zeal of national pride and celebration brought about a push to link oneself to the country’s founders. This manifested as romanticized narratives around the country’s founding, and what might be characterized as a type of group amnesia about what occurred historically. People became obsessed with stories of their ancestors, and the national pride they felt, and often overlooked the more unsavoury aspects.¹⁴ Lineage societies formed in droves at this time, all touting their members as ‘real’ Americans. That they were not recent immigrants or the formerly enslaved, gave them a sense of ownership or pride over the areas where they lived and settled, when in fact, everyone in the United States (including those with first nation descents) had ancestors who were immigrants and/or had been enslaved persons brought here against their will.

Organizations such as the National Society Sons of the American Revolution, Daughters of the American Colonists, Daughters of Union Veterans, and Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War were the first societies whose membership was based solely

Patriotic Societies.

From the Hartford Courant.

There are now twenty-seven societies in the United States, membership in which depends on descent from ancestors who distinguished themselves by coming over to America at an early date or by being officers in American wars prior to 1861. Most of them are in a flourishing condition. The old aristocratic Cincinnati leads them in age and dignity. Some of them are restrictive, not only to descendants of a certain line of ancestors, but still further to those of the descendants who may be agreeable to the corporators. This brings in a social element and keeps the society select. Generally, however, the historic claim is recognized as paramount without regard to the wealth or social standing of the applicant. But, as a rule, all persons who can trace their blood to a pre-revolutionary ancestry are desirable people. It is to be hoped that the social and aristocratic side of these societies will not become too prominent, for the fact of American descent should be the controlling condition, and putting in permanent form American local history the main object in view.



Left: *Figure 2*: article on Lineage Societies from *The Washington Post* 19 August 1897; right: *Figure 3*: Alice Paul (1885–1977), leader of the *National American Woman Suffrage Association*, in 1918. U.S. Library of Congress.

on lineage. Americans clamoured to join these groups and show their national pride, but were often deterred due to the difficulties of genealogical research. In pursuit of such, wealthy Americans turned to antiquarian and historical organizations, or hired professional genealogists, to make their lineage dreams a reality.

Publications of family lineage books during the nineteenth century and later became the primary resource for many wishing to join the ever-growing list of lineage societies. These histories were written and / or commissioned by wealthy, often white, Americans. Many of these publications were frequently used by prospective members of societies, further perpetuating the stereotype of wealthy white persons as members of these organizations. Commissioned genealogies were often seen to suppress lower classes of individuals and promote ultra-nationalistic and racist ideas.

The many lineage societies founded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mirrored in terms of racial, class, and social stratification what was occurring in the general population. These organizations often excluded unwanted members who might otherwise have qualified based on lineage, by requiring the chapter to vote on the prospective member.¹⁵ These votes allowed chapter members to decline membership to anyone considered as being the wrong type of person.

Regardless of race the upper classes had by the end of the nineteenth century turned to genealogy to distinguish themselves.¹⁶ Genealogy bound wealthy people together, making them different from others. Persons of higher status, who also tended to have ancestors of a higher status, found genealogical research easier to perform. This was because ancestors who were wealthy, influential, or famous were more frequently

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found in records, unlike poorer, impoverished, or transient ancestors who left few to no records.¹⁷

One of the most popular types of lineage society is those whose ancestors were the ‘first’ to a new location. Often called first family societies, they are dedicated to settlers of an area, or the first arrival on ships. In the past, they were often seen to further divide communities into those who founded an area, and the outsiders who immigrated to the location later.¹⁸ In response to the overly selective Anglo-Saxon-oriented societies, other ethnic groups formed based on their particular heritage and lineage across the United States. Through the early twentieth century, organizations were formed for descendants of Huguenots, German, Irish, Jewish, and others.¹⁹

Women’s lineage organizations and volunteer clubs thrived in the United States during the early twentieth century. Women from all walks of life became ‘sisters’ in these organizations. For example, Alice Paul (**Figure 3**) was the leader of the *National American Woman Suffrage Association*, and a member of the *Daughters of the American Revolution*. When she organized the national suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., on 3 March 1913, the parade ended at the *Daughters of the American Revolution* headquarters. Instead of the planned reception, the *Daughters* took statements from marchers about the atrocities that they had endured from the crowd and police.²⁰

By the middle of the twentieth century, leaders at the national level in many lineage societies found themselves again in a precarious position. Segregation was ceasing to be socially acceptable and it was time for people of ‘other’ backgrounds to be accepted as legitimate members. Membership at the chapter level, however, often reflected the communities where members lived. If exclusivity and segregation were found in their home or town, those traits tended to persist in the chapters to which they belonged.²¹ When national organizations attempted to change policy to reflect how the nation was changing, they discovered members were often more loyal to their chapter’s wants than to the directives of the national organization.²² Many organizations could not forcibly change chapters that would not integrate, or continued to exclude people due to their ‘acceptability’ to that chapter.²³ For example, many white women refused to work on mutual problems with African-American women.²⁴

Beginning in the 1960s, a wider variety of people were becoming interested in learning about their heritage, and the nature of genealogical research also began changing. Instead of focusing on a single line, typically the direct paternal line, researchers started researching their whole genealogy, including maternal lines and collateral relatives.²⁵ By the 1970s, Americans researching their family histories began to turn away from documenting specific lines that would elevate their status. Instead, they looked for stories showing diversity with unusual stories or immigrant heritages.²⁶

In the 1970s and 1980s, new researchers to the field of genealogy began to look more for what is coined ‘black sheep’ ancestry. They wanted to know about ancestors who fell outside the boundaries of polite society: those who were more infamous than famous. This trend in genealogical research has continued until today.²⁷

As the interest in genealogy increased in the general population, so did the interest in lineage societies. While there was a decline in interest and membership in the years after World War II, with only seven lineage societies formed in the 1950s and 1960s, 39 organizations were formed between 1976 and 1996. The release of the book and television series *Roots* stimulated great interest, with a subsequent surge of membership

applications to lineage societies, especially from African-Americans, many of whom were introduced for the first time to the awareness that they too had a family story to share.²⁸

Articles covering genealogical topics and the many lineage societies have been abundant since the 1970s in popular cultural magazines and mainstream newspapers. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, dated 13 December 1976, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) local history and genealogy specialist James D. Walker believed “genealogical research [was] the third largest avocation in the United States behind stamp and coin collecting.”²⁹

Access to digital records and online research has levelled the playing field, drawing various ages to genealogy, and lineage societies into the 21st century.³⁰ In the early days of online research and digitization, the internet was simply a series of signposts directing researchers to documents.³¹ Today this is not the case. Repositories are placing digitized documents online for research in large numbers, giving researchers access to primary documents without a need to leave their homes or pay someone to research for them.

In 1999 Stephen Kyner, former editor of *Computer Genealogist Magazine*, stated, “the internet has helped democratize genealogy.”³² During the last two decades, younger generations have interacted and engaged with genealogical research more easily through advancing technology.³³ This has facilitated younger members joining lineage societies since it is no longer necessary to have quite so much free time for, or to spend as much money on, the research required to join these organizations.

While American genealogy in general has changed significantly in the past 200 years, lineage societies have often failed to keep pace with developments, although they have moved from the realm of elites to the everyday man, and from a white-dominated endeavour to one for all ethnicities.

Preliminary Survey Results

This study aims to inform a Ph.D. project on how lineage organisations are perceived, whether they contribute to historical preservation or knowledge, and the reliability of genealogical research used to apply for membership. As part of this research, I conducted a written survey and began conducting interviews with volunteers. Volunteers for the survey and interviews included members and non-members of lineage societies, and professionals who interacted with genealogical researchers.

The survey was conducted online from October 2021 through February 2022 using the *Qualtrics* computer platform.³⁴ In total, 1,163 persons took the survey, broken into several parts. Data processing is ongoing using a program called *Elasticsearch*, a machine learning software for analytics, and will be presented later.³⁵ As of 2 August 2022, the first 40 participant interviews had been conducted. The gender breakdown showed most respondents, 86.6%, identified themselves as female, 12.7% male, and 0.69% non-binary/other. Ethnicities were determined using the United States National Institutes of Health guidelines on their website.³⁶ These were used as the guidelines because most people taking this survey would be from the United States, and these are the typical descriptions used for demographics in this country. Overwhelmingly, participants identified as Caucasian (95%), with the second highest category as mixed race at 2%. While not an overwhelming cross-section of the American population, the responses will be broken down by gender and ethnicity to look for trends.

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On questioning participants whether they believed themselves to be eligible for membership of a lineage society, or knew of a family who belonged to such, the responses were nearly even, with 59% stating they believed they might qualify for membership, and 54% stating they had a family member who was a member of such an organization.

When those who already belonged to a lineage society were asked why they had joined, 29% stated they had joined out of a sense of family pride. This was closely followed by 23% who wanted to verify a lineage, 18% who had come from an organization with similar goals, and 13% who wished to prove a family story. Only 6% stated they joined because of a family member or a friend. Those who identified as not a member of a lineage or heritage organization were asked why they chose not to join one. The largest group of respondents, some 30% did not feel that they had sufficient knowledge about these organizations. Next, 22% stated they were too busy to join. Importantly, 17% stated they had an unfavorable opinion of these groups, or they saw them as too expensive. Only 10% considered they did not qualify to join, with 5% stating they might do so following retirement.

Another question asked if respondents felt that lineage societies should open their archives and allow access to their historical applications for genealogical research. Most respondents (80%) felt lineage society applications are important for this type of genealogical research. While 15% expressed the view that such resources ought to be publicly available, and a further 5% stated that historical applications for membership are under-utilized as a resource in research by most genealogical researchers.

In general, historical applications for membership of lineage societies do not often hold up to current standards of genealogical research methodology, particularly those made more than 40 years ago, in which more often contain erroneous information. Tellingly 39% of respondents felt that historical applications to lineage societies could not be considered as proof of lineage, with only 27% stating that yes, they were proof.

Unfortunately the rigors of appropriate genealogical research appear too much for some of the respondents, as 40% felt that some of the organization's requirements for proof of lineage were too strict, and 27% felt the entire application process was too strict. An option now being considered is to make DNA analysis part of the application process, but there are as yet no standardized guidelines for accepting applications with DNA, just as there are no standard genealogical requirements for lineage societies.

All participants were asked their opinions on using DNA as proof of lineage. This is a topic that brings out definite opinions in people. However, in this survey, 16% of respondents replied that they did not know enough about DNA testing for genealogy to make an informed opinion about using it in lineage applications. Conversely, 49% stated that DNA should only be used in accordance with strict guidelines from the organization, with only 3% feeling DNA testing should not be used. Further, 12% of respondents felt DNA should be allowed at any time without strict guidance from an organization. Finally, 15% responded that DNA should never be used for lineage applications.

Data collected so far has been insightful for this project. Going forward with the analysis will take several months, and I do plan to publish those results in the future. I look forward to comparing the data from the survey to the stated opinions and thoughts of those interviewed. Connecting relayed stories and personal examples to the data will make the information more meaningful to those interested in the longevity of lineage societies and those using their gathered genealogical data for research.

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