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History's grip on humanity

My family, like any other, has been significantly shaped by history.

The history does the shaping, too, and not the other way around. Nobody chooses the time period they are born in or the circumstances they are born into. Instead, the past creates them. The time period and environment in which people are born has everything to do with what their lives will be like, the opportunities they will have, and what they will do for a living.

Likewise, American history has shaped racism. It has given it birth, back to colonial times. The use of slave labor was a staple of that time period and it created a divide between whites and blacks for years to come. I can trace one particular line of my own family back to 17th century America, and I've learned that they too had ties to racism of the time.

Before going on, I must first say I got a bit lucky (or unlucky, depending on how one looks at it) to find this connection. Some records from the time period have been lost. Also, many of my ancestors lived quiet lives, at least in terms of written history. They were born, they married, and they died – most of these records can be uncovered – but sometimes finding matters of substance in between are difficult. I was fortunate to find a will for one particular ancestor, my 10th great-grandfather John Lake, a single document that was extremely telling of the time.

He was a slave owner.

He wasn't just any slave owner either. He was a slave owner in the north. I make the distinction because, I must admit, I didn't realize until recently that slavery, at one time, was

often practiced in the northern part of the United States, just like in the south. Yes, I knew it existed in the north in some capacity, but I didn't think it was common, or that my own ancestor, relatively middle class at that from what I gather, could have been part of such a thing. I had always thought it was reserved for the wealthy, big plantation owners. I had this very different vision of slavery, compared to what I'm now learning was the hard and cold reality.

I must take another step back, as I'm getting ahead of myself in history. The United States did not even exist at the time of John's life, prior to the Revolutionary War. He was born in New Amsterdam (present-day New York City) in 1654 and died in Gravesend (present-day borough of Brooklyn) in 1729.

He was an Englishman, both of his parents were born in England, yet he lived in a mainly Dutch community. He married a Dutch woman named Neeltje Claeszen, he had his children baptized at the Dutch Reformed Church, and was even erroneously referred to as "Jan Leek" in some records, a Dutch version of his name. For these reasons, he was a minority of sorts in his community. Also, from what I gather, he really was not all that special. By that, I mean he didn't appear to be wealthy, and his trade was nothing extraordinary – it seems he was a farmer. Even so, he held one important distinction that allowed him to fit in just fine. He was white.

For precisely that reason, as cruel as it sounds to me, he could – and he did – own a slave. The number of slaves he owned over the course of his life, whether or not his father was involved in the practice before him, or exactly how he treated said individuals, these are some things I'm not sure about. Some of these things I may never know. But I do know that he had a slave, at least at one point. I have proof of it in his will.

I remember when I first read the document, shivers went up and down my spine. So far removed from me, I thought, something I would never consider myself ("owning" a person) and

something I could hardly envision. However, the fact of the matter was clear as could be.

Nothing speaks better in this regard than the text itself:

*“In the name of God, Amen. May 4 1723. I, John Lake, of Gravesend, Kings County. I leave to my son Daniel all my estate, houses, and lands in Gravesend or elsewhere. And he shall pay to my four other children, John, Thomas, and Nicholas, and my daughter Mary, wife of Cornelius Van Sickelen, as follows: To my son John, L110. To my others sons, L100 each, and to Mary Van Sickelen, L70. **I leave to my son Daniel, a negro boy, 3 cows, 2 horses, wagons, ploughs, and Harrow. All the rest to my 5 children.**”*

A negro boy? He left a negro boy to his son? These words alone are troublesome, but the way it is worded appears even worse. First, the clause appears in the middle of the document like it is nothing, almost as if it is just another piece of property like the rest of the items. More cruel than that perhaps, it is listed first in that arrangement pertaining his son Daniel. Before the three cows, before the horses, before the wagons and the ploughs, comes the negro boy. This in a way sounds like not only is this a piece of property, but it’s a valuable piece of property. It has value, just like real estate. How can one put a value on human life though, I thought? It is horrible and cruel. Then again, it is so telling of the time period. It was a matter of fact.

I remember shaking my head in disgust when first reading that. I remember informing my parents about it, and their reactions as well, similar to my own. I was partly in disbelief. How could one of my very own ancestors have been like that?

I later learned that that’s how it was back then. There was labor to be done, likely on the farm in John’s case, and there was this cheap labor called “negros” (excuse my language) that could do it. It was affordable and easy, and a sign of the times – everyone else was doing it too.

How do you get from John Lake to me? Simple. Insert three centuries of history.

So much elapsed during that time period – migration, wars, economic trends, not to mention anything of the formation of an independent American government. The Lake family

changed with all of this. Hand in hand with history, John's five children (John, Thomas, Nicholas, Mary and Daniel) and their many descendants adjusted their lifestyles. Each found a way to adapt to the respective era, to make a living, and in some cases merely to survive. That's how I'm here. That's how the thousands of John's other descendants are here.

Slavery as an act within my direct family was abolished shortly following John, within two generations in fact. Though I can't confirm whether or not John's son Nicholas (about 1692-1773), also my direct ancestor, had any slaves, I do know that the times were very different for Nicholas' son John (about 1719-1795), also my ancestor. He had no need to engage in such an act. He was doing just fine on his own, without the help of any outsiders, as a fur trader.

This John, not to be confused with his predecessor (his grandfather John described earlier), was born in New Jersey, and he moved to eastern New York state in 1761, just after the birth of his son James in Somerset County, New Jersey in 1760.

The land was cheap, the opportunities numerous, and the French and Indian War was near its end (the last major battle on New York soil was in August 1760). Of course, that war was in large part due to fur trading itself, and the fight for land between the British and French.

It was an appropriate place for John to go, and an appropriate new beginning. He settled on a large tract of land with others in his immediate family – his brother-in-law Arent Van Corlaer, and his brothers Nicholas Jr., James, and Thomas. Together, they turned the land into a 'trading post,' which was granted to them by an Indian deed and King's grant.

They actually became quite profitable and were doing quite well. And so, the act of slavery died out in my family. The same can not be said for other members of the Lake family.

Nicholas' brother Daniel, born 1696 in present-day Brooklyn, who inherited the "negro boy" in the aforementioned will, carried on the same practice in his life. In fact, his own will,

dated 1774, carried this clause: “*I leave to my son Daniel my Long Gun and a weaver’s Loom, likewise a corn mill to clean grain with, and a wood sled, before any division, and **two negro children.***” Much later in the will, it says, “*I give to my son Daniel my Fishing Net.*” Is this to say the “negro children” were more important than the fishing net, but not as important as the weaver’s loom? Again, the fact that any human life can have value like this is beyond my realm of thinking. But that’s how it was back then.

I lose track of this second Daniel in records. He likely moved out of the area. I wonder if he too willed slaves to his kin; something tells me he may have. The elder Daniel also had 10 other children, and I’m not sure what happened to them.

I do know what happened to the family of another of the brothers of Daniel and Nicholas: namely, John Jr., born 1688.

While I don’t know much about John Jr. himself, his daughter Joanna married a man named Daniel Bayles. They made the move from the New Jersey/New York area to Tennessee in the 1760s or 1770s – the precise reason, I’m not sure. Daniel, who died in 1800 in Tennessee, was a slaveowner. Their son Reuben Bayles, born 1754 in New Jersey, died 1825 in Tennessee, was a slaveowner, too, per Washington County, Tennessee land records. I could go on, as Reuben had slave-owning descendants as well, but the point is probably established.

Due to the history, the era, and the geography, which also plays at least some role as we move forward in this chronology, the slave trade remained in this particular branch.

I have several points behind my documentation of this particular line. First, it is to prove that acts of racism can be handed down, generation by generation, through a family. Prejudices can be instilled in children at a young age, and the acts of their parents certainly play a role in their mindset. Also, the development of history plays a major role in the prevalence of racism.

Certainly, it isn't the same today as it was back then, it has changed forms, but what's going on around people in a society can contribute toward racist states of mind.

On top of all of that, this particular line has another interesting point behind it. Reuben Bayles, and his wife Margaret Lucas, are the 5th-great-grandparents of John Christopher Depp Jr., better known to today's movie enthusiasts as Johnny Depp. Depp, who was born in Owensboro, Kentucky in 1963, is the great-grandson of Oren Robert Depp, also born in Kentucky, whose maternal great-grandmother (his mother's mother's mother) was Mary Bayles, born in Virginia in 1777, the daughter of Reuben Bayles and Margaret Lucas.

Yes, Johnny Depp has ancestry rooted in racism and in slavery. A modern-day popular American icon, deemed flawless, lovable and sometimes even dreamy by his large contingent of fans (many young, female, and *white*, by the way), has direct links to one of the darker parts of America's past.

Back to my own family, tracing down to me, I'll pick up with John Lake, the fur trader, who went from New Jersey to eastern New York. Did I mention he died in Canada? He did.

The Revolutionary War – a battle for independence between whites here and whites overseas (on land that was originally owned by Native Americans) – had an enormous impact on my Lakes. They were doing just fine for themselves before this disruption to their lives. The war threw them in an entirely different direction.

They remained loyal to the British Crown and the male members of the family were eventually forced into enlisting in the British Army, as some of the battles were literally waged in their backyard (one was in the town of Bennington, Vermont, just a few miles away from their village of White Creek). My ancestor Christopher Lake, one of the sons of John the fur trader, was captured in the Battle of Bennington by American forces in 1777. Shortly after being

released, he fled to Canada, safe-ground for those loyal to the Crown, with many of his relatives, including his father John.

He became an attorney and later fought for compensation from the British government for his previous hardships, as the Lakes lost nearly everything in the war. Other than a piece of land for his settlement in eastern Ontario, he was never adequately paid for his service.

A life like that, I find irony in his death notice in the *Kingston Chronicle* on April 7, 1820, which simply reads: “*DIED: Lake, Christopher. At Loughborough, on the morning of the 6th instant, Mr. Christopher Lake, an old settler - - and age 65 years the day he died.*” An extraordinary life like that, and that’s all the mention he received. It’s one example of how lives can easily get lost in history, and how difficult research can be. As stated before: birth, marriage, and death. Sometimes the things in between for our ancestors get lost over time. But that’s not to say that history didn’t play a role in their lives.

Christopher’s daughter Mary Lake married Peter Friel, and had my ancestor Susannah Friel in 1802. Peter died January 6, 1813 while actively serving in the British military during the War of 1812 – another instance of history directly impacting my family, and another example of white aggression. Shortly after, Mary petitioned the British government for compensation for her husband’s death, repeatedly, but she received nothing. She was left with eight young children, the eldest being Margaret (14 at the time) and the youngest being Jesse (an infant at the time). They struggled for survival, with some of the children dying within the next few years and the daughters being forced to marry early (my ancestor Susannah married in 1819 at age 17).

Susannah married a Scotsman, William Moore, and had Mary Moore in 1820. Mary Moore married an Irish immigrant, Arthur Hart, and had Margaret Hart in 1842. These multiethnic unions (Susannah, for example, was mostly German, English and Dutch) are

important to note, particularly that the unions were between whites. If, for example, it was a white person marrying a black person, then all of a sudden it becomes wrong, or at least controversial. It's another oddity about the way our society works, and further proof of the racial divide, which continues in ways to this day.

Margaret Hart married Edward Short and had Agnes Short. She married Joseph McQuaid and had Mildred McQuaid. Agnes, Joseph, and Mildred, left their native Kingston, where the Lakes had resided more than a century before them, and settled in Buffalo, New York. Leaving behind their rural Canadian roots, they quickly assimilated into the culture of the United States to live the "American Dream." They opened a restaurant at a popular street intersection (it's still a restaurant today, though under different ownership). Joseph and Agnes were cooks, and "Milley" was a waitress. They got through the Great Depression by all pitching in with various odd jobs – Milley's four siblings included – and they carried on the American lifestyle by eventually moving to a nice suburb. They could do all this, and they had no problem doing it, because they were white.

Mildred married Wallace Kanalley, also of Canadian roots, who had also sought a better life in the U.S. (his father died shortly after returning from service in Europe in World War I). "Wally" and Milley had Kenneth in 1932. That's my father's father.

All of this may sound simple in the way it's laid out, but the fact of the matter is it's extremely complex. It's complicated to reach that far back in a genealogy (especially tracing the female lines, maiden names can be hard to find), it's a complicated relationship to understand, it's a complicated story, and it's a long, thought-provoking journey back to the 17th century.

But in all those complexities lies a simple truth. We are what we are because of our history, just as each of the Lakes I described were what they were because of their history.

History itself dictates how we came into this world and in many ways it guides the way we live our life – directly tied to the economics, politics, and wars before us, and the families that precede us. The lives of our descendants will also be marked by history.

Racism too, another complex subject, is interlocked with the past. It also has to do with economics, politics and wars (this last term also meaning “physical battles:” slave uprisings and land disputes of the past, and more recently, violent demonstrations, protests and shootings).

Minorities have been given more rights in recent history, but these rights are nowhere near enough. Discrimination by race still exists and prejudices still exist, some handed down by earlier generations of our own families. Perhaps the most telling part of racism today is isolationism. Primarily characterized by economic, educational, and political opportunities, and a lingering effect of American society centuries earlier, isolationism proves that we haven’t fully integrated whites and blacks. The mere fact that whites have such little interaction with blacks, and vice versa, becomes racism itself, as it widens the gap between the two.

Again, the complexity of all this actually becomes quite simple. Whether you are white or black has an enormous impact on the type of life you might lead – if nothing else, it alters your opportunities. The same was true three hundred years ago, at the time of that first John Lake. The same will also be true three hundred years from now, if nothing is done to change it.

History and our lives are synonymous. Though sometimes complex and ever-changing, history’s impact on our lives is a constant. Currently, the same can be said of American history’s grip on racism – complex and changing, yet at this point a constant.