

## Threads that Tie . . . Threads that Bind . . . Threads that Weave

By Drew Howard, excerpted from an article in the Dartmouth Alumni Newsletter

When I was growing up there were numerous items which belonged to grandparents and great-grandparents in our house, ranging from silverware and quilts to photos and paintings. What caught my eye and gave rise to my imagination most was a shell display case my mother's grandfather had made with shells from the Falkland Islands. He had been shipwrecked on his way to the goldrush and eventually returned to Columbus, OH, with shells and no gold. However, it was not until I was married and more settled down that my mom revealed the most valuable heritage—the “Free Papers” of her grandaunt Martha. A simple piece of paper folded twice to be size of a bookmark with the words “Martha Miller Free Papers” written in blue ink. This allowed her to travel out of Virginia and into Ohio in 1845, when another two dozen of other folks she grew up with were left behind. The significance of this paper has grown with me over time, and I feel a reverence, but I knew very little beyond what was written: “She is a bright mulattoe, strait black hair with a very small scar on her left arm produced by a burn, five feet six inches high about twenty five years of age.”

Our family heritage also included the wedding dress of this same Martha Miller. It had been hanging in a garment bag from the ceiling in the utility room for decades. At one time my mom showed it to me and explained that it had originally been white, but her grandaunt dyed it so she could wear it on other occasions. My mom was interviewed in 1989 by *The San Francisco Chronicle* on the 144th anniversary of the Free Papers and mentions the dress, but I was still left with lingering questions about my great-grand aunt. After my mom died in 2003, there was no one else living to answer the questions, but that was also at a time when genealogy was growing in popularity and, more importantly, sources were becoming more and more abundant.

At that same time, our youngest daughter wore the dress in her 4th-grade class American history presentation, though I don't think that the import of the dress had sunk in. We then donated it to the Society.

Martha Miller was the sister of Sarah Jane Miller Lee, who was my mother's grandmother. There was one bit of history which came from her, and that was a letter from 1850. This was addressed to her in West Milford, Harrison City, VA, and was from, perhaps, a would-be suitor—I say that because the final 10 lines were all asking/imploing her to write back to him. He wrote of traveling through the mountains of Virginia to Baltimore and New York, and that he “made an arrangement by which I can send you some articles 3 or 4 times a year. I made this arrangement while in Philadelphia I have a friend there who sells goods to Clarksburg and you know that I can have them sent there and then you could get them—I bought several fancy articles which I very much wish that you had. I know that they would please you.” There were some names mentioned which I have encountered in other documents. 16

So, I begin to look for the threads which connect these two sisters with Free Papers, a letter, and a dress. Little did I know what I was going to uncover. Using the genealogy websites provides access to censuses, birth and death records; but sometimes it is a side move that opens even more. Having the name Samuel Miller in front of me from the Free Papers, and also having received a copy of the entry of the deed in the Campbell County court record, I decided to search that name in Campbell County.

I stared at the computer screen as I had one of the revealing moments seen often on “Finding your Roots.” The man who had emancipated Martha, and who had the same last name as my great-grandmother, was one of the wealthiest men in ante-bellum Virginia, and maybe the south. Knowing the history of slavery in America, it is not surprising that I have white ancestors. Seeing name and picture is out of the normal, and left me with my mouth ajar.

One of the great sources was the application for the former Samuel Miller home in Lynchburg to be on the National Register of Historic Places. This application from 1992 provided a snapshot of his life, his rags to riches story, his reclusiveness, and his generosity to education— and it hints of something I would later discover. “Two hundred years after his birth, Samuel Miller remained as much an enigma as he was during his lifetime.” “He was a very private citizen who kept a low profile and set a rigid agenda, from which he did not deviate. Concerned that his plans would not be fulfilled if he did not prescribe all details for the disposition of his estate, he did not entrust anyone to pursue his goals with the same intensity of purpose.”

The library of the State of Virginia has a data base of some 1851 Deeds of Emancipation and Manumission between 1751 and 1850. These are the ones recorded in county courthouses. After 1782 Virginia allowed enslavers the opportunity to free their people without going before the state legislature and the acts were recorded in deeds. The deed of manumission has been described as being used to immediately set someone free and the deed of emancipation was written into the will to be executed upon the death of the owner. This database had three deeds entries for Samuel Miller, including Martha in 1845, and upon looking at the microfiche, I saw that one of the witnesses on Martha’s deed, and on an earlier one in 1839, was Edward Butler. That name rang a bell. The letter to Martha from the cloying suitor was Edward B. Butler’s. I saw that one of the witnesses on Martha’s The letter to Martha from the cloying suitor was Edward B. Butler’s. It turns out that this Butler was another tobacco trader and, based on 1870 and 1880 censuses, married a woman about Sarah’s age and 18 years his junior. He later turns up in the last Will and Testament of Miller where he releases him of any debt he currently owes and provides an additional \$5000.

Numerous accounts spoke of the Last Will and Testament, but I was stymied in finding a copy online until I found the 1892 annual report of the Miller Fund in the University of Minnesota library. This is when I really get excited. I had heard mention of this will in the Historic Place application, and through the websites of the Miller Home and the Miller School, which are still beneficiaries. As with many wills, it had been contested by some of the named individuals, and there were news articles following the probate procedures and the different courts in Reconstruction Virginia. I was less concerned with their claims when I saw that the first clause of the handwritten will was about Sarah. A house and lot in Columbus, Ohio, was to be held in trust for “Sarah, formerly my slave, but heretofore emancipated by me, and her children, should she have any, so long as she, the said Sarah, lives.” The first person her refers to in his will is Sarah. Further evidence of Sarah’s importance in his life is the fact that he had travelled to Columbus three months prior to writing the will in April 1859 to buy this property that he was then putting in trust to Sarah. For a man who was described as being reclusive in his house from 1829 until he died and being in ill health most of this time, this was a trip of significance. Later in the will he emancipates Willie Ann “in consideration of her faithful services as a nurse to me in my ill health.” He also states “it is my will that my Executors shall cause her to be removed [to Ohio] at the expense of my estate.” This was necessary because Virginia required that emancipated people had to leave the state. This also led to some people petitioning the state legislature to be re-enslaved in order to reunite with the rest of their family still enslaved. These manuscripts are also on the University of Virginia’s website.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, in the subsequent clause to emancipating Willie Ann, he emancipates “all the rest of my slaves and direct that my Executors shall cause them to be removed, at the expense of my estate, from the State of Virginia, or from such other State as they may reside, into Liberia, in Africa, or some other non-slaveholding State.” Needless to say, this clause of the will was never enacted since Miller survived the Civil War.

The 16th clause gave me shivers because I saw the name Mary Hodge whom he describes as “formerly my slave” and who receives a \$100 lifetime annuity. I had not seen this name in the database of emancipated/manumitted, but I had seen her name on the 1850 census which also located Martha Miller in Columbus where Martha is listed as a 29-year-old in the Hodge family of Mary, husband Robert and three children including a child named Mary who was 6 years old. This further confirmed a migration freed people from pre-Civil War Virginia across the Ohio River into the free state of Ohio.

Then I come to the 21st clause, and here is Martha. He writes “formerly my slave, but now free, and resident of the State of Ohio, One Thousand Dollars of Bonds.” This was also telling me that 14 years after he had emancipated her, he still knew where she was and would provide for her. This will has tied Sarah and Martha together for me, and I only wish my mom had seen this.

I uncovered the Register of Negroes & Free People of Color. C.C.C. This is the Campbell County Courts’s register in compliance with a 1793 Virginia law requiring all free Black and Mulattoes to be registered. I scrolled through quickly and found an entry in May of 1845 for Martha. I went to October 1839 which was the date of an earlier deed of emancipation by Miller of Rose and her two children. There was no entry for them however there were three entries on 14 Oct: Mary Miller “about 23 years old and is 5 feet 6 ½ inches high has a scar on her forehead and one under left eye”, Sarah Miller “about six years old has no scars or marks and is 3 feet 10 inches high”, Edward Miller “about three years old has no scars or marks and is 3 feet 1 ½ inches high. I had not only discovered the future Mary Hodge, my great-great grandmother, but also a great-great granduncle. I think Miller had acknowledged his parenthood in writing the will. That was further bolstered when, after the Civil War has changed the way of life in Virginia, in 1868, less than a year before he died, he eliminated the first clause of the will by deeding that same property to James W Lee, Trustee, for “Ten Dollars good and lawful Money of the United States.” Further on in the deed it states “the said trustee shall permit the said Sarah Jane Lee to occupy, possess and enjoy the said tract or parcel of land, and the rents, issues and profits thereof, to take, for and during the term of her natural life, unto her own proper use and behoof [sic], free and clear of and from all manner of charge and incumbrance of her husband.” It has already been established that James and Sarah are husband and wife (and already have had my grandmother and one grand aunt), but Samuel is making sure that Sarah will be provided for even if the husband acts badly. The property stayed in the family for nearly 40 years before my grandparents sold it about the time my mother was born. She always said that the family once had a piece of downtown Columbus. That piece is now partially covered by I-70 in downtown Columbus.

The document road went cold after the will for Martha. I have uncovered no trace of her in Ohio, where I presume she lived. It was interesting to note that in the 1870 Census, the family of James and Sarah, in addition to my grandmother and grandaunt, is a Mary Hodge aged 26. The circle has turned, and Mary, who was being helped out by Martha in 1850, is now helping Sarah’s children. The entry for Sarah Jane Lee in the 1899 Record Of Deaths for Columbus, Ohio, lists Lynchburg Va as the place of birth, and further lists Samuel Miller and Sarah Miller as father and mother. I have

no portrait or picture of Martha, but I do have two of Sarah, and here's one of them. The comparison is uncanny to the portrait of Samuel Miller which hangs in the Miller Home in Lynchburg.

Although my exercise in finding out more about my great-grandaunt is not done, it appears that the quilt of our family has more threads added. One special benefit was seeing the dress one more time and now with so much more knowledge about Martha and her times. I was also able to clear up a misconception about the dress. While very well boxed, the record of my donation had been lost and museum staff had assumed that it was a Gold Rush dress of Mary Ellen Pleasant, a prominent Black woman who ended up in Gold Rush San Francisco.