

For Our Longer Lives

By Kathy Werle

Genealogy 101—on a trail of discovery

Curiosity may not kill the cat after all. It is more likely to lead to great discoveries. During the June age-friendly forum, Juanita Paull and Dee Lewis, research volunteers with the Carteret County Historical Society, urged attendees to be curious and pursue their personal history through a search of their genealogy.

While Ms. Paull and Mr. Lewis work out of the History Museum of Carteret County and focus their exploration on Carteret County's history—which has roots reaching back to European exploration—they shared tools with attendees to enable each of us to begin our own journey. The ancestor charts they passed out began lively chatter and a sharing of what some attendees had already discovered in their own prior searches and what can be learned by working through the countless branches in the family tree. Ms. Paull asked how far back any of us had searched. One attendee had gone back to the 700s; two others had traced family history to the *Mayflower*.

In past years, a family search was accomplished by tediously going through family Bibles and records in county offices and churches. Today, as in so much of our lives, technology has taken over and the new level of search is accomplished through providing DNA to a website. Ms. Paull cautioned that some of the companies are more reliable than others in providing thorough and accurate insights into a family's history. I asked whether there was any risk in putting your DNA out there, especially when we hear so often about scams perpetrated on the unsuspecting. Ms. Paull was unaware of anything of that nature. As we always encourage during our forums, do your homework before making the decision to move forward on this most exciting endeavor.

My sister texted me a few weeks ago that she had sent in her DNA to one of the often-used companies. She was excited to tell me that results showed she was 97% Finnish and 3% Scottish. I immediately assumed I didn't need to bother checking mine—after all, wouldn't all siblings share the same result? Ms. Paull said no, not even twins. That would make sense since no two people have identical fingerprints either. I haven't made the decision yet to send my DNA anywhere. All my grandparents going back to the beginning were born in Finland. Or were they? Do I really want to run the risk of learning conflicting information? A pure-bred Finn is who I feel I am; I don't mind being 3% Scottish. We need to be prepared when we begin our search to embrace all findings. Although it will be a fascinating journey, we may uncover family secrets that will make us sad as well as those secrets that will make us proud and content.

As Ms. Paull and Mr. Lewis explained, genealogy is not a cold gathering of facts, but a breath of life into all who have gone before us. We need to feel proud of what our ancestors accomplished and how they contributed to what and who we are today. Is this another item you need to add to your bucket list? It would be a different type of journey with an unknown destiny. If you want hands-on guidance to get started, Ms. Paull and Mr. Lewis welcome you to stop by the History Museum and talk with them, call 347-7533 or visit carterethistory.org.

The Age-Friendly Advisory Committee is grateful for the speakers who have given generously of their time and talent to bring topics of interest and critical importance to our citizens and for the many OPALS (older people with active lifestyles) who continue to support our forums through their attendance.

Suggestions for future forums may be submitted to Sarah Williams at town hall at SWilliams@townofpks.com, or by calling 247-4353, ext. 13. As always, we are searching for topics of interest to our citizens for future forums and welcome your suggestions as we all continue growing healthier, smarter and more informed together.

Book Talk

Varina by Charles Frazier
HarperCollins, 2018

Reviewed by Ken Wilkins

The wrong side of history

This is not an article about today's political situation, so don't worry. North Carolina's own Charles Frazier, whose best-selling *Cold Mountain* surprised everyone 20 years ago, has revisited the Civil War in his latest novel, *Varina*. The book centers on the life of Varina Davis, the second wife of Jefferson Davis, who was the only president of the Confederate States of America. Frazier's fine prose and knack for story-telling come through loud and clear here. *Varina* is a fine novel, but one has to really think to understand its underlying meanings.

Varina Davis, widowed and addicted to opiates (I promise again, this is not a book about today.), is at a spa called The Retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York, for treatments. She is near the end of her life. A black man called James Blake comes to visit, carrying a blue book he found by accident. He believes he has found himself in the tale, making him a character in Varina's life from before the war.

Thus we are introduced to the memories of Varina Davis, beginning with her flight from Richmond as the war comes to its conclusion. She fled south, hoping for Florida and eventual passage to Cuba, in a "band comprised [of] a white woman, a black woman, five children, and a dwindling supply of white men." One of the children was Jimmie Limber, a black boy taken in by Varina when she saw him being beaten by a woman on the street. Though we are never certain, and neither is Varina or James himself, James is likely Jimmie Limber, come to learn about his past.

The novel segues between James talking with Varina and Varina's memories. Those begin with the flight from Richmond, describing a South that has been devastated by war and is in a state of near anarchy. We also get the story of Varina's youth and being sent from her home in Natchez, Mississippi, to Hurricane Plantation, ruled by Joseph Davis, the older brother of Jefferson. Varina and Jefferson married the next year, although he never recovered from the unexpected death of his first wife very shortly after their marriage.

Varina Davis was clearly on the wrong side of history, serving as the First Lady of a "country" that came into being solely to protect the institution of slavery, the owning of other human beings. Here is Frazier's universal theme, one that resonates today more strongly than ever: how do we come to terms with the fact of slavery, and how does our country overcome the racial differences that have divided us (even more than the partisan divides of today) for over 200 years?

Varina is a novel that reaches the reader on many levels. The story itself is fascinating, and I, for one, had never heard of Varina Davis, much less knew anything about her. Frazier's prose is elegiac, lamenting the fact of slavery and our inability to resolve our differences even more than 150 years after its official end. Perhaps I was wrong then, and this really is about the United States today.

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