

# Slaves' road to freedom paved with dangers

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Butler discovered Claiborne five years into a heart-wrenching, ultimately inspiring journey through the family tree. Light research in his Solon home mushroomed into public records requests, road trips and dramas of the imagination.

He walked on a Virginia farm where his kin labored as slaves, struck up relationships with ancestors of his ancestors' owners, and pieced together a family history.

Now he can say things like, "Slaves were taxable property" and "So that's how my people got to Mississippi" and "I tell my kids, 'You're living now, you're breathing now, because he ran away and he got away.'"

In an age when genealogy is high science, and Oprah Winfrey has her DNA analyzed to trace her African roots for television specials, Butler embodies old school sleuthing.

He may yet turn to genetic testing to confirm the family's oral history, that his ancestors hail from Guinea, West Africa. But science and Internet searches provide only hints at the human tale. To reveal the story between the genetic markers, Butler cracked open deed books in court-houses throughout the South, met distant kin and

read tombstones in forgotten cemeteries.

Often, on a hunch, he turned up an unexpected path or tangent, suspecting something amazing ahead. Eventually, he traced 238 years of a Claiborne in the family.

"You can't really appreciate it until you get into it," he said. "This has taken me on a phenomenal adventure."

Butler, 47, has no training as an historian. His masters degree from Kent State University is in international business. But he does possess qualities of the explorer.

He's a trim, athletic-looking man who exhibits frequent bursts of energetic curiosity. Describing an episode from the family odyssey, he will leap from his chair to fetch a map, or a tax bill, or a diary entry that may illuminate a detail.

He was a marketing manager for Johnson & Johnson when he quit to launch Butler Transportation, a van service he first envisioned as an undergraduate at the University of Cincinnati. It made him enough money to pursue a time-consuming hobby.

On that drive across the Virginia piedmont two summers ago, Butler already knew a lot about the first African American in the family.

Claiborne came on a slave

ship in the late 1760s, about the time of Kunta Kinte, Alex Haley's slave ancestor immortalized in "Roots." He was maybe 13.

He escaped from Brett Randolph's plantation in Cumberland County on New Years Day 1771, probably making for Richmond, 60 miles east. For when Butler found him 11 years later, he was living north of Richmond with an Englishman and his house-servant, a slave named Violet. The slave who ran with Claiborne was caught and killed.

Butler speculates that the Englishman took in his ancestor and agreed not to expose him in exchange for his servitude.

He also believes there was something special about the name Claiborne, a connection to Africa, for it never died. Claiborne and Violet named their firstborn Claiborne. He was sold as a young man to a neighbor, Thomas Tinsley.

In 2004, Butler drove down to the former Tinsley plantation, now a prosperous farm, and met the great-great-great-granddaughter of his ancestor's owner in her 1810 house. Maria Rippe, 65, was chilly at first, skeptical of his motives. But over time, she began to talk to him and to help him.

"She was as curious about the history as I was," Butler said.

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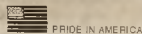
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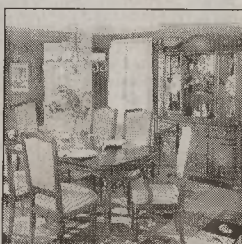
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