

Antebellum records hold answers

By FRAN H. ZUPAN
Staff Writer

Nancy D. Sulton's greatest genealogical pleasure came two years ago, when she met descendants of Nicholas Peay, slave master of her ancestors.

Sulton and her sister, Ophelia D. Owens, both of Columbia, were researching family history for a reunion when a South Carolina Department of Archives and History employee said he knew the Peay family.

Sulton and Owens went immediately to Ridgeway, where they located Elizabeth Peay, whose ancestor had owned 19,000 acres, more than 2,000 slaves and six plantations in the Piedmont.

"They accepted us and were so nice," Sulton said. "They could have just slammed the door."

Peay told Sulton and Owens where to find the site of the magnificent plantation house, Melrose Mansion, burned by Union soldiers when Sherman marched through

South Carolina. Peay's sister, Talulah McMillan of Columbia, later pulled out family albums and family pictures, some of which showed slaves from antebellum times.

"They had perfect records," Sulton, former head librarian at Eau Claire High School, said. "We had to listen to it from the white side and pull the black side out of it."

Genealogical research is no different for blacks and whites until they reach 1865, said archivist Paul R. Begley, who wrote a booklet, "African-American Genealogical Research," distributed by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, where he works.

"When you get into antebellum years, in effect what you research is the family you think owned your ancestors if they were slaves, and, of course, most of them were," he said. The best source for finding slave ancestors is the slave owner's will, which listed the slaves by name and often by age, he said.

Slaves took the slave owner's last name, and when they were sold or bequeathed to someone with a different name, their names changed.

Begley said most blacks researching their families go back to emancipation and then stop. When the slaves were freed, there were more than 400,000 slaves in South Carolina and 3.5 million in the Confederacy.

Sulton became interested in re-

searching her family after hearing "Roots" author Alex Haley speak at South Carolina State College. Haley said black families had been separated by slavery but had started new family units and should preserve what they have by writing it down.

"He said it is important to know who your grandfather was," Sulton said. "I said, 'By golly, I'm going to do that for my family.'"

Sulton researched two branches of her family tree before she got to the Peays.

Her father's father was descended from slaves owned by Godfrey Dreher, for whom Dreher High School and Dreher Island are named. Through records at the South Carolina Library, Sulton found the Dreher plantation house in Lexington County and some Dreher descendants, black and white.

Her father's mother was descended from John Chavis of North Carolina, sent by whites to Princeton to see if blacks could learn as well as

whites. Chavis, who died in 1838, established a school that "taught whites by day and blacks by night," Sulton said.

But the Peay family research was the highlight. White members of the Peay family attended the reunion, and more than 300 blacks and about 25 whites joined hands in a huge circle near where the blacks' ancestors had been bought as slaves centuries before.

Sulton urges blacks older than 50 to pursue their genealogies. The younger generation, she said, is offended by the truth of slavery and doesn't have the stomach for it.

"They are not going back in those history books," she said.

Looking back at her roots, Sulton sees the hand of God. Unlike some slave owners, Peay treated his slaves well, keeping black families together and stipulating in his will that descendants keep slave families together.

Laws prevented slaves from congregating, reading, writing or owning property, but they survived without hostility, without passing bitterness to her generation, Sulton said.

"Even though the blacks had a long way to go, God was on their side all along," she said.

Nancy Sulton learned her family history by listening to the descendants of her ancestors' slave owner. 'We had to listen to it from the white side and pull the black side out of it,' she said.

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