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"The Peay family was exceptionally nice," she said. In fact, white members of the Peay family were invited to a reunion of black members of the Peay family about six years ago. And they gratefully accepted. Relationships remain cordial.

Sulton and her sister, Ophelia Owens, a retired schoolteacher, made a few trips to Fairfield to listen to Peay family history unfold. The sisters became anxious for an older white woman to wrap up the white history of the family. "Hurry! Hurry!" Sulton thought.

But the white history was inseparable from the black. When Peay daughter married a Belton, 50 slaves were part of her dowry. When a Peay male died he left provisions in his will for "hisench and their children." When the plantation graveyard was explored slaveowners and slaves were buried together. The whites had bigger tombstones at the front of the cemetery but the graves of their slaves also could

be found.

"Our histories are interwoven," Sulton explained. "Sometimes we are related to the slavemaster by blood."

Sulton, who also expresses pride in her Native-American heritage, remarked on the incredible beauty and sweetness of her Indian grandmother. And so light-skinned are many members of the Chavis branch of her family they have been known to turn a few heads at family reunions.

The shuffle of surnames and newly discovered relationships led to Sulton's observation: "Someone told you who you are. But you may not be who you think you are because your parents and grandparents weren't who they thought they were."

The same sorts of revelations await anyone doing genealogical research, Helsley said. Archivists and historians know how elusive truth can be. "There are no certainties. We have a saying, 'You can't trust a gravestone,'" Helsley said. Instead "the preponderance of the evidence" must do.

Wanting to expand the basis of their evidence, Sulton and Owens did not stop research with their Peay and Chavis roots. The Dreheres of Lexington County and the Fords in Ridgeway completed work on their mother's and father's side of the family.

Sulton also marveled at the post-Civil War survival of her family. The freed slaves had nowhere to go so they fled to the countryside where they built primitive

shelters and lived off the land. These enclaves were known as bush arbor houses built around arbor churches. Her great grandfather had settled in one in Lancaster. "He had a wife and children, no money and no food. But he lived as a free man for the first time."

When Sulton began her quest with her sister she felt "my ancestors cheering me on." When she finished she "could look in the mirror and see back in time to my ancestors who made me what I am today."

And she could give her family history to her son for him to pass on to her granddaughter.

Pat Berman covers family and kinship issues. She can be reached at 771-8417 or by fax at 771-8430.

Nancy D. Sulton is excited about tracing her African-American roots.

Woman finds family tree blossoms with rich history

By PAT BERMAN
Staff Writer

In a South Carolina bill of sale recorded in the early 1800s, a mule fetched \$200 while in the same transaction, a young male slave brought \$5. In a petition written around the same time, a freed slave was "killed by the fate of a tree" while his white guardian conveniently collected the \$110 military pension owed to the freed slave.

Nancy D. Sulton knows about "the fate of the tree" expression that appeared in the post-Revolutionary War document. "It means he was hanged by the neck 'til he died," she says of her ancestor John Chavis. No cause was given. And she knows about the mule. Her son was so angered by that injustice, he stopped helping research their family history.

Sulton, 62, has become the unofficial South Carolina consultant for African-Americans who want to trace their family's roots. She shares

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her own experiences at African-American genealogy workshops held in the South Carolina Archives & History Department. Sulton combined her research ability as a retired school librarian with great personal warmth and charm to not only get what she needed on her family history but also made people pleased to be included in her efforts.

For many African-Americans nationwide, their research often leads to South Carolina and then to Sulton.

The port of Charleston was for African-Americans what Ellis Island in New York was for European-Americans, said S.C. Archives historian Alexia J. Helsley. In fact, African-Americans outnumbered whites in South Carolina until 1923 when hardships created by the boll weevil and Jim Crow laws caused

FAMILY TREE

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blacks to seek their livelihoods and survival elsewhere.

But the process of tracing one's family tree is very similar regardless of race or ethnicity: start with a surname and work backwards through legal documents, court records, government census and personal papers, such as family Bibles.

The one profound and often too-painful demarcation of white and black history is slavery. Black history of the late-18th to mid-19th Century is often recorded in bills of sale and deeds of transfer because slaves were personal property.

Sulton said many African-Americans, like her son, cannot bear to continue research when they come face-to-face with often hard and cruel details of their history. "You can't change the past. And I want to know my true history," Sulton said of her four years of research. "You don't get angry. You get busy."

Sulton also sees her work as adding to the scant written history of African-Americans. She urges those who follow her example to make copies of their research for the South Caroliniana Library so "that in (the year) 2050 your descendants can find their history. You do this and I guarantee you will look differently at South Carolina history. We live today because our ancestors survived yesterday. So we need a record." An outgoing woman with a disarming sense of humor, it didn't take long for Sulton to be on an affectionate, first-name basis with staffers at the S.C. Archives.

She jokes that they hate to see her coming. They mostly welcome Sulton who enlivens the otherwise still, hushed atmosphere of their reading rooms. Archivists such as Paul Begley and historian Ben Hornsby often pull material for her unasked. Helsley works closely with Sulton when the S.C. Archives offers workshops on researching African-American genealogy. They invariably play to sold out crowds who troop into a book-lined, dark-paneled room at the Archives to launch a quest that can last a year or a lifetime.

Sulton sees her role as making family research easier to do for other African-Americans. Her inspiration was the late Alex Haley, the author of "Roots." She saw him speak at S.C. State Uni-

so it, I can do it.

By sharing her experiences, Sulton thought she could help others come to terms with the emotional impact of slavery. "I am the African-American here," she jokes while still making a point.

So when one of the first things she told African-American workshop participants was that they would need to find their slavemasters, they did not cringe or protest. Instead they dutifully wrote down this pronouncement as if the task meant no more than obtaining birth, marriage and death certificates.

Slaves were usually given the same surname as their slaveowner. And if they were sold or given as property to another slaveowner, their names were changed.

Sulton described the importance of being prepared for the initial encounters with descendants of her family's slavemasters to workshop participants. First, she said, tell them something about their own family history that you've learned in your research. Then, disarmed by these facts and Sulton's considerable warmth and charm, they often enthusiastically share what information they have.

The Peays of Fairfield County were wealthy landowners and kept

thorough records passed down to their descendants. Sulton's discovered slave ancestors in the Peay family bills of sales, bequeathments and the graveyard of the long-vanished plantation.

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