

I'm White and Curious About My 'Free Colored' Ancestor

Tracing Your Roots: A DNA test and a census record suggest that a 19th-century ancestor changed his racial identity.

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Dear Professor Gates:

My family has lived all of our lives as “white” people, but recently we were pretty surprised to learn through DNA testing that my father and I both have non-European DNA; my dad has more than 3 percent sub-Saharan-African DNA. While researching my father’s paternal line, I was able to connect my second great-grandfather back to his parents, Obediah Copeland and Catherine Allen, who were married in 1820 in Gallatin County, Ill. It turns out that in 1830, Obediah Copeland was listed as a “free colored person” on the U.S. federal census for Gallatin County, along with my second great-grandfather, who was not enumerated by name but was listed as one of two “free colored” males under 5 years of age. However, on all subsequent census records, everyone is listed as “white.”

Obediah’s father, Thomas Copeland, and his mother, Ann Hood, were married on Oct. 23, 1802, in Campbell County, Va. Thomas’ parentage is unknown, but Ann was the daughter of James Hood, probably of Prince Edward County, Va. I believe that my James Hood is the same James Hood who is connected to the Absolem Fears family via marriages between their respective children. What I can see from the few records I have is that the family traveled from Virginia through Grainger County, Tenn. (appearing on a tax record there in 1805), to Limestone County, Ala. (listed on an 1809 Elks River Intruders List), up through Kentucky, and finally settling in Gallatin County by about 1815.

None of these records indicated that anyone in the family was a person of color. I would love to know more about this part of my family history—who contributed to my African DNA—but I don’t know where to look next. —Kelli Copeland Wilson

First of all, we’d like to say that you’ve done a phenomenal job of researching your family background thus far! Many readers come to us simply to get as far as you’ve already gotten: finding documented proof of a black ancestor before the 1870 U.S. census, the first census that recorded all African Americans by name.

Why Obediah Copeland Might Go From ‘Free Colored’ to ‘White’

We’re impressed that you were able to find Obediah Copeland listed as a “free colored person” in the 1830 U.S. census for Gallatin County, Ill. However, we are not surprised that in subsequent census records you pulled up, all family members were listed as white. You may well be familiar with the practice of “passing as white,” in which individuals whose African ancestry isn’t visibly obvious to those around them choose to identify as white, and leave behind the stigma that blackness holds in the U.S. In antebellum America, it was a survival tactic that often meant the difference between enslavement and freedom. Even “free colored persons” faced limitations on their rights and freedoms. It is likely that your ancestor “passed” as white to escape such strictures.

Your family history is more common than most suspect. You reported having between 1 and 2 percent sub-Saharan-African ancestry, and as you indicated above, your father has 3 percent sub-Saharan-African ancestry. As Professor Gates has reported on *The Root*, about 4 percent of self-identified whites in the U.S. [have at least 1 percent African ancestry](#). Earlier this year he even compiled some statistics about our country's surprisingly mixed heritage into a quiz titled "[Can You Guess How Many White Americans Have African Ancestry?](#)" We invite you to check it out for more context about your family background.

All of that being said, we did not find any additional mentions of Obediah Copeland, Thomas Copeland or James Hood in the historical records and archives that we searched. However, we do have some suggestions for places that you can check next in your own investigation. Many of these sources would also be helpful to anyone who is researching black ancestors in Virginia during the 18th and 19th centuries, or black forebears in Illinois during the 19th century.

There's a Wealth of County and Local Records

County sources may help you shed more light on the Copeland and Hood families. You note that your fourth great-grandmother Ann (Hood) Copeland was the daughter of James Hood, who may have been from Prince Edward County, Va. The Library of Virginia has among its holdings various tithable, or taxation, lists, including those for [Prince Edward County](#), covering circa 1750 through 1787.

In 1793 a law was passed in Virginia that required free persons of color to register with the clerk of court in the county where they resided, as well as have on their possession at all times documentation stating that they were free individuals. Another collection of interest at the Library of Virginia is [Prince Edward County \(Va.\) Free Negro and Slave Records, 1783-1865](#). It includes documents such as the registration entries of free persons of color, as well as certificates proving that they were free individuals.

The Library of Virginia has a similar collection for Campbell County, the location where Thomas Copeland and Ann Hood were married. This collection is titled [Campbell County \(Va.\) Free Negro and Slave Records, 1784-1867](#).

Another valuable resource for your Hood and Copeland research is the Virginia Historical Society, which has a substantial [collection of African-American manuscripts](#). The collection includes local and church histories, as well as various African-American family records. It is noted on the society's website that a number of family records include Bibles owned by slaveholders but that some documents were also compiled by African Americans. We located in the catalog a family collection titled "Copeland, Benjamin (1787-1837), family, 1787-1974: Mss6:4C7905:1," which could be of interest as part of your research of the Copeland family.

In addition to state libraries and historical societies, it is beneficial to check the collections of various college and university libraries. For instance, the Earl Gregg Swem Library at the College of William and Mary has a number of manuscripts in its collection pertaining to [African-American research](#), as does [Virginia Commonwealth University](#).

Many genealogical websites pertaining to specific counties and states provide a number of online sources that will aid you in your research. The Prince Edward County [GenWeb site](#) includes links to a mailing list, as well as various transcribed Bible, cemetery and vital records. Similar websites are available for [Campbell County](#) and [Gallatin County](#).

History Books Can Provide Context and Leads

Your family relocated several times in the early 1800s, and learning more about the towns and counties where they settled may help you understand why. To aid your search for information about the Hood family of Prince Edward County, it is worth consulting books such as *History of Prince Edward County, Virginia, From Its Earliest Settlements Through Its Establishment in 1754 to Its Bicentennial Year*, by Herbert Clarence Bradshaw. It may include information about the families who resided in the area during the same time frame as the Hood family and may provide clues about their reasons for leaving the area.

Another book that may be of interest to you is *Handbook of Old Gallatin County and Southeastern Illinois*, edited by Jon Musgrave.

Good luck with your search!

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Send your questions about tracing your own roots to TracingYourRoots@theroot.com.

This answer was provided in consultation with Eileen Pironti, a researcher from the New England Historic Genealogical Society. Founded in 1845, NEHGS is the country's leading nonprofit resource for family history research. Its website, AmericanAncestors.org, contains more than 300 million searchable records for research in New England, New York and beyond. With the leading experts in the field, NEHGS staff can provide assistance and guidance for questions in most research areas. They can also be hired to conduct research on your family. [Learn more today](#).

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