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HIST 4301
4 May 2021

The Shields Family: A Dichotomy of Race in US Society through Two Family Lines

Introduction

The history of the Shields families of North and South Carolina, beginning with William Bryant Shields Sr. and Moses Shields respectively, offer dichotomous responses to American racial hierarchies over the decades. Generations of race mixing within the Shields family has its roots in the sons of Irish immigrants pursuing relationships with enslaved women. The one-sided nature of the power dynamic in these relationships takes on different dimensions in the lives of the mixed-race children of William Bryant Shields Sr. and the lives of Moses' son, Henry Wells Shields, Henry's slave Melvinia Shields, and her children. Both family lines take efforts to repress their black ancestry, one primarily through dilution through marriage and the other through a refusal of formal acknowledgement, which ironically enabled some of their children to flourish in African American society. The permeability of race can be gleaned through these two Shields family lines both in how they went about repressing their ties to enslaved black women and how these culminated in the present-day Shields descendants, Roseanne Cash and Michelle Obama.¹ Roseanne Cash is a 6th generation descendant of W. B. Shields Sr. through his eldest

¹ William Bryant Shields Sr. and Moses Shields are likely not siblings. Their parents are likely Ruben Shields and Andrew Shields, both of whom are Irish immigrants from before the colonies gained independence. Confirming their link would require research of the Shields clan back in Ireland, documents to which I do not have access.

daughter, and Michelle Obama descends from Melvinia's first child, Dolphus, who is her great-great-grandfather.

This analysis will place a few key points in these two families in a broader historical context. One side follows W. B. Shields Sr., his eldest daughter Sarah A. Shields and her eldest son, Lafayette C. Robinson, across a timeline spanning early 1800s southwestern expansion into Alabama and Texas, the fleeing of Unionists in Texas to Mexico during the American Civil War, and the days of San Antonio's status as Texas' largest city in the 1910s and 20s. The other side follows Moses Shields, his son Henry Wells Shields, and the slave Melvinia who bore a son of mixed race that was ultimately left out of the white side of the conventional family history, but is later reclaimed through efforts surrounding her descendant, former First Lady Michelle Obama. These particular points also demonstrate how anti-miscegenation laws throughout the United States prompted two wholly different responses to a mixed-race lineage—repression and manipulation—highlighting dichotomous responses to the social construct of race in American history.

William Bryant Shields Sr.: Plantation Owner from North Carolina, Emigration to Alabama and his Eight Children with an Enslaved Woman.

William Bryant Shields Sr. was, first and foremost, a wealthy land and slave owner from North Carolina. He spent many of his early years working for a Richard Singleton in South Carolina before he moved to Perry County, Alabama sometime in the 1830s. His move to Alabama is consistent with a general pattern of migration from the Old South of Virginia and the Carolinas westward to Tennessee, Alabama, and later Texas. It seems W.B. Shields did well for himself in Alabama. According to an 1844 letter penned to Singleton, in Alabama he had enough

land to work “23 people of different sizes and have in all 35 slaves.”² Of these slaves we do not know if this includes his children, but it would have included the enslaved woman who bore them.³

These nine children, Sarah, Hamilton, Benjamin, Archibald, William, Martha, John Gorrell, Delaware and Missouri were freed by their father through an act of legislature in Alabama in March of 1848.⁴ However, as the legislation states, that freedom was “confined as to residence to the counties of Perry, Dallas and Wilcox,” and did not give them the right to inherit land. Even this limited freedom came only after paying the significant sum of \$2000 to the Alabama governor and agreeing to take financial responsibility for them.⁵ W. B. Shields also had to set up a trustee, Henry Chambers, just to ensure that they could retain ties to their property if he passed on.⁶ It is telling that despite going through all of this trouble of getting legislation passed, paying \$2000, and setting up a trustee to ensure their financial stability and continued living arrangements, the enslaved mother of these children remains unnamed.

Life of Sarah Shields, the Escape to Mexico during the Civil War, Vidaurri, her Children and the Return to Texas

Sarah Shields, W. B. Shields Sr.’s eldest daughter, was married to her first husband Anderson Robinson at the age of 13 in 1838.⁷ Married to a white man a full decade before she

² Shields, William B. *William B. Shields to Richard Singleton*. Transcribed Letter. From Mamie Ballard, *Progenitor William B. Shields (1786) and His Descendants From North Carolina to Oakley/Positos, Texas*. 1844.

³ Based on Family trees from the Mamie Ballard’s *Progenitor William B. Shields (1786) and His Descendants From North Carolina to Oakley/Positos, Texas* and federal census records, five of his children were born in South Carolina and the rest in Perry County, Alabama.

⁴ General Assembly of the State of Alabama. *An act to authorize William B. Shields to emancipate certain slaves therein named*. No. 333. Approved 4 March 1848. Archive.org, Accessed April 9, 2021.

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ Ballard, Mamie. *Progenitor William B. Shields (1786) and His Descendants From North Carolina to Oakley/Positos Texas*. (Self-Published: Texas, 2010) 7.

⁷ Shields, Sarah A. Alabama, U.S., Marriage Indexes, 1814-1935 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015. <https://tinyurl.com/yejqlkoo>. (Accessed 16

had been officially freed, Sarah Shields was the first mixed race child born to an unnamed, enslaved mother. What we retain of that woman's legacy is in her mixed-race children. Her children, however, whether instructed by their father or pragmatic enough to recognize the dangers that came with acknowledging their mixed race in the deep South, all chose to marry white. Sarah was the first example of this trend with her marriage to Anderson Robinson, and all her siblings followed suit,

This trend of marrying white spouses continues through the lead up to and during the Civil War. Much of the extended Shields family with their mixed-race heritage bound themselves for Mexico preemptively, as early as 1855.⁸ They remained in Mexico for nearly a decade, where they also finalized the sale of W. B. Shields Sr.'s Alabama plantation that had been their childhood home.⁹ Their flight to Mexico implies certain tensions in Alabama and Texas, likely related to their mixed race that would be exacerbated in the years leading up to the Civil War. Certainly, having several mixed-race children may have raised a few eyebrows in the South, whereas Mexico may have been a more ideal an environment, as mixed racial identities were far more common and less scrutinized. What scrutiny they managed to avoid in Mexico reemerges on their return to Texas in 1867. By 1870, we see the spouses of Sarah Shields' (by this time Sarah McGraw) siblings all listed as white, while their children are listed as "mulatto."¹⁰

March 2021). There are conflicting records on the year of her birth. The 1870 US Federal Census lists her as 40 years old, putting her birth in 1830, but her gravestone lists her birth in 1825. I have gone with the gravestone birthdate as the alternative would mean she was married at 8 years old, which seems unlikely.

⁸ Ballard, *Progenitor William B. Shields (1786) and His Descendants*, 38. Mamie Ballard's work on the Shields family notes Anderson Robinson's death in Mexico as somewhere between 1857-1858. She also states that a few of the children of the extended Shields families that fled had gotten married or given birth in Mexico, such as Annjeli Robinson, who gave birth to Alfred Cox in Mexico in 1860.

⁹ Ballard, *Progenitor William B. Shields (1786) and His Descendants*, 41.

¹⁰ 1870 U.S. Census, Atascosa County, Texas, population schedule, Positos, p. 1, dwelling 351, family 351, Fayette Robinson, digital image, ancestry.com, accessed March 13, 2021.

Generally, all who fled to Texas from Mexico were Unionists looking to avoid the war and later service drafts by the Confederacy. Leander Hooker, the first husband of Missouri Shields, opted to volunteer in the hopes of getting a less dangerous position, though this logic did not save him. as his service and subsequent death in the 4th Texas Cavalry Regiment of Confederate General Sibley's Brigade suggests.¹¹ Nor was Hooker the only husband to die, as Sarah Shields' husband Anderson Robinson died shortly into their life in Mexico, leaving her to marry another white man, Irwin McGraw. Had they all stayed in the South, the issue of W.B. Shields Sr.'s mixed race children may well have made them a target. In Mexico they would have no such problems surrounding the race of the families. It is here, under the governor of Nuevo Leon and Coahuila, Santiago Vidaurri, that a blind eye was turned to Americans fleeing Texas (including the Shields). Vidaurri was unwilling to commit to diplomatic pressures from the Confederacy to turn them in as deserters or from the Union to give them passage to the New England coast.¹²

Whatever the reason for their flight to Mexico and whatever Vidaurri's position on their presence, they remained in Mexico for three years after the end of the Civil War. Some of them bore children, such as Missouri Hooker's last child with Leander, who we find with Missouri's second husband William Priest next to the McGraws and Lafayette Robinson in 1870.¹³ Others married their wives there, such as Benjamin Franklin Shields and Archibald R. Shields (married to Sarah Sansom and Rosella Kibbitz, respectively).¹⁴ They all ended up in Oakley in Atascosa

¹¹ Hooker, Leander. *U.S., Confederate Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011. U.S., Confederate Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865.

¹² William Kiser, Email to author, 1 April 2021.

¹³ Lafayette, *1870 United States Federal Census*.

¹⁴ Ballard, *Progenitor William B. Shields (1786) and His Descendants*, 242.

County three years after the end of the Civil War, making up the ancestors of many of the families who live there now.

Lafayette Carberon Robinson’s “passing” in San Antonio, his legacy to his children and generational repression.

One particular example of the Shields descendants’ attempts to suppress the black side of their family’s mixed-race lineage comes with Lafayette Carberon Robinson. The eldest son to Sarah Shields and Anderson Robinson, he was born in Alabama just two years before the onset of the Mexican American War, and we know based on census records that he remained with the extended family through their flight to Mexico during the Civil War and their subsequent return and settling in Atascosa County, TX. It is here in the 1870 census that he was listed as “M” for “mulatto,” just like his mother and all his siblings from Sarah’s second marriage to Irving McGraw. Just six years later he is married in Atascosa to his second wife, Zerilda Ewers.¹⁵

Lafayette, later appearing as Louis Robinson, eventually moved to San Antonio with his new wife sometime before 1880. Census records indicate he had moved to Bexar County but, as evidenced by his “mulatto” designation in the 1880 census, his marriage and move to Bexar County did not mark his transition to whiteness.¹⁶ We are not sure exactly what the turning point was when he started referring to himself as white on public documents, but by at least 1910 all records indicate his new identity as a white man in San Antonio. It indicates a capacity to pass for white in official documentation in San Antonio that he could not have attempted while close to his extended family in Atascosa. Perhaps it was the city, which by 1910 was sitting at over

¹⁵ Ewers, Zerilda A. *Texas, U.S., Select County Marriage Index, 1837-1965* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014, accessed April 9, 2021.

¹⁶ 1880 U.S. Census, Bexar County, Texas, population schedule, Positos, p. 17, dwelling 147, family 157, Louis Robinson, digital image, ancestry.com, accessed April 9, 2021.

95,000 inhabitants and the largest city in Texas, that enabled him enough anonymity.¹⁷ San Antonio especially would have been easier to pass as white, if not at least Mexican, given the steady influx of immigrants from Mexico over the course of the Mexican Revolution and the blurring of racial classifications brought about by the status of Mexicans in the United States guaranteed by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.¹⁸

In his final years, Lafayette Robinson would have lived to see the increase in Mexican immigration during the years of the 1910 Mexican Revolution and the introduction of public radio stations like WOAI in 1922. From his 1920 home on Stonecase Street in Justice Precinct 6 on the Southwest side of Bexar County, he would have been situated close to the rise of military aviation at Kelley Field, later Kelley Air Force Base.¹⁹ His neighbors were mostly Mexican immigrants themselves or 1st generation Mexican Americans, an environment conducive to Lafayette passing as one of them.²⁰

As history was being made and San Antonio was growing, Lafayette's children were obscured from his past. By 1920, his daughter Dora Minni Robinson had moved out with her husband Edgar to Delaware Street in Ward 7 of San Antonio, where both her and her children were listed as white.²¹ Additionally, in 1920 her father's birthplace was listed as Texas, not Alabama as they correctly put in the previous 1910 census, and this persists into 1930 under her

⁷ Jasinski, Laurie E., "San Antonio, TX," Handbook of Texas Online <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/san-antonio-tx>. Published by the Texas State Historical Association. Accessed March 31, 2021.

¹⁸ Jacoby, Karl. *The Strange Career of William Ellis the Texas Slave who Became a Mexican Millionaire*. (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2017), xxii.

¹⁹ Jasinski, "San Antonio, TX."

²⁰ 1920 U.S. Census, Bexar County, Texas, population schedule, Justice Precinct 6, San Antonio, p. 6, dwelling 74, family 75, L.C. Robinson, digital image, ancestry.com, accessed May 3, 2021.

²¹ 1920 U.S. Census, Bexar County, Texas, population schedule, San Antonio, p. 16, dwelling 172, family 186, Dora M Robinson; digital image, ancestry.com, accessed 14 March, 2021.

second husband, William Scheide.²² Whether this was imperfect knowledge at the time of the census, Dora's father listed both of his parents' birthplaces as "Unknown" in 1910, which is undoubtedly false. Lafayette Robinson grew up in Alabama, Mexico, and Texas with his parents until his 30s. What makes this appear more intentional is Lafayette's 1929 death record. His father's death came when he was in his teens, and yet his birthplace was given as Alabama, while his mother who passed only 30 years previous had "no record" of her birthplace.²³

L. C. Robinson may not have had 'no record' of his mother on his deathbed had he stayed in Atascosa, near his extended family who would still have remembered him and his mother, some of whom as far back as their time in Mexico. The records of Lafayette Carberon Robinson and his children illustrate the growing capability of a mixed-race family to suppress knowledge of their black ancestry as time and generations pass by and families move away and find themselves in different settings. This suppression manifests even into the twenty-first century, where Jana Friesenhahn, a descendant of Missouri Priest (Lafayette's aunt), found that "no one talks about it, not on my mother's side," when she was going through the process of discovering her ancestry.²⁴

What undoubtedly remained the same through these generations was the social stigma that came with being "black" or "mulatto" that made them vulnerable to scrutiny, racial violence, and fewer opportunities. We see a resurfacing of this stigma in the outcry over Johnny Cash's first wife, Vivian Liberto. The granddaughter to Dora Minni Robinson, Vivian Liberto became the target of a hate piece by *The Thunderbolt* newspaper in 1966 over the suspicion that she was

²² 1930 U.S. Census, Bexar County, Texas, population schedule, San Antonio, p. 5, dwelling 48, family 55, Dora M. Scheide; digital image, ancestry.com, accessed April 9, 2021.

²³ Texas Department of State Health Services, Standard Certificate of Death for Lafayette C. Robinson. 9 November 1929. <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/21906340:2272>. Accessed 16 March 2021.

²⁴ Jana Friesenhahn, in conversation with the author, April 2021.

black.²⁵ *The Thunderbolt* is described by Chris Preitauer from the Civil Rights Heritage Museum Online as “among the most severe of the racist material in this collection,” and was referenced as a motivator in the “infamous trial of Ku Klux Klansmen Tommy Blanton, who had been convicted of killing four little girls.”²⁶ Their claims were heavily disputed at the time by Johnny Cash, who even levied a \$25 million lawsuit against them.²⁷ It is another painstaking reminder of the surprising constancy of the racialized social environment through which Liberto and all of her descendants lived.

Moses Shield’s son, Henry Wells, and shifts in economic status

The second Shields family line begins with Melvinia, but to understand the differences in how these two lines approached their interracial ties, it helps to explore the contrasting situations between W. B. Shields Sr. and his children with Moses Shields and his son Henry Wells, Melvinia’s owner. Moses Shields did not start out as a slaveowner, nor was he under the auspices of a wealthy plantation owner. Census records show him as living in an 8-person household (9 in 1820) from 1810 to at least 1820 without any slaves.²⁸ He did not inherit his first slave until his marriage in 1838, recorded in the 1840 census when the household number of total slaves went

²⁵ Fields, Edward R., “Johnny Cash Arrest Exposes Johnny Cash’s Negro Wife.” *Thunderbolt*. (Augusta, GA). Jan 1966.

²⁶ Preitauer, Chris. “1965 & 1966 THUNDERBOLT NEWSPAPERS (National States Rights Party).” blackhistorycollection.org, 15 April 2018.
<https://blackhistorycollection.org/2018/04/15/1965-1966-thunderbolt-newspapers-national-states-rights-party/>. Accessed 10 April 2021.

²⁷ Palace, Steve. “When Johnny Cash was targeted by racists.” *Vintage News*. 22 Jun 2018.
<https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/06/22/johnny-cash-first-wife/>. Accessed 10 April 2021.

²⁸ 1820 U.S. Census, Spartanburg County, South Carolina, population schedule, Spartanburg, p. 11, Moses Shields digital image, ancestry.com, accessed April 9, 2021, 2016.

from 0 to 1.²⁹ Ultimately, he died in debt, leaving his children without property or slaves to inherit.³⁰

This included Henry Wells Shields. He was a yeoman farmer in Spartanburg, SC, where he married Christianna Patterson, the daughter of wealthy South Carolina plantation owner David Patterson. It is through this marriage that Henry Wells Shields inherited slaves, one of whom was named Melvinia. It is pertinent to know that Melvinia was exceptionally young under the Patterson household, and Henry Wells' lack of capital rendered the possibility of Melvinia's early emancipation while she grew up with them all but impossible. Where William Bryant Shields had the financial capacity to free his enslaved children, Henry Wells and his children would never be so wealthy, and this lack of economic freedom also placed Henry Wells and his children under the social expectations of a southern slaveowning society with regards to interracial affairs in a way that W. B. Shields seemed to have avoided.

Melvinia and her child Dolphus

Melvinia was a slave of note in the Patterson household, having been important enough to have been given a name. She was intended to be given to the wife upon David Patterson's death, but a change in circumstances saw her given to Christianna, along with three other slaves, when she got married.³¹ Aside from propelling Henry Wells into the slave-owning elite, Melvinia's life changed almost entirely around her. Lacking freedom of movement inherent to

²⁹ 1840 U.S. Census, Spartanburg County, South Carolina, population schedule, Spartanburg, p. 125, Moses Shields; digital image, ancestry.com, accessed April 9, 2021.

³⁰ Swarns, Rachel L., *American Tapestry the Story of the Black, White, and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 223.

³¹ Swarns, *American Tapestry*, 223.

being enslaved, she had to move with her master to Georgia, where Henry Wells would spend the rest of his life until his death in 1895.³²

It is here in Georgia where Melvinia ended up pregnant with her first son, Dolphus Shields. She gave birth to at least three other children by 1870. According to the federal census, she lived alone with her children, and all except her daughter Talley Shields and herself were listed as “mulatto.”³³ It is also here where she still lived close to a married Charles Marion Shields in Clayton County, GA. Given the proximity of Melvinia to Henry Wells’ children all her life, including during and after the Civil War (Charles Marion specifically), and DNA testing facilitated by *New York Times* reporter Rachel Swarn and the descendants of the Georgian Shields family, it is strongly implied that Charles Marion Shields was the father of all of Melvinia’s biracial children.³⁴

Despite current evidence, Dolphus would not have initially been tied to the Shields. Rachel L. Swarn, author of *American Tapestry: The Story of the Black, White, and Multiracial Ancestors of Michelle Obama*, said of the Shields from South Carolina:

Whatever the family believed, whomever they suspected or knew to be the boy’s father, they made it clear that they did not want to accept the baby as a member of the Shields clan. The family did not keep journals or save letters. But they

³² Shields, Henry W., *U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600s-Current* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/23313104/henry-wells-shields>. Accessed 4 April 2021.

³³ 1870 U.S. Census, Clayton County, Georgia, population schedule, Jonesboro, p. 50, dwelling 361, family 363, Melvinia Shields; digital image, ancestry.com, accessed April 9, 2021.

³⁴ Swarns, *American Tapestry*, 299.

painstakingly recorded every birth, every marriage, and every death in the family.

Melvinia's son never appeared in that official history of the Shieldses.³⁵

This outright refusal to recognize Dolphus as the son of the Shields also repeats in the birth of her other children. None of them were officially Shieldses as far as the white Shields family were concerned. This rejection of their biracial descendants comes with certain freedoms and restrictions of its own. On one hand, the social pressure that the Shields in Alabama and Texas experienced to marry white simply does not occur here. The white Shields members chose not to recognize the offspring of Melvinia, though she would adopt their last name after her freedom. The Find a Grave website entry of the memorial dedicated to her as the descendant of Michelle Obama in Kingston City Cemetery also asserts her connection to her white slaveowners.³⁶ To the contrary, the social pressure they would have experienced probably came in the legalized context of anti-miscegenation laws, which persisted in most states to punish interracial marriages and kept most of these interracial interactions in the shadows.

Miscegenation as legalized social pressure

Anti-miscegenation laws have been around in the United States since before its independence, and they became more widespread after the Civil War, with 41 states banning interracial marriages by 1914.³⁷ These laws would have created real barriers for interracial couples seeking to legitimize their unions, and punishments meted out likely served as an added

³⁵ Swarns, *American Tapestry*, 249-50.

³⁶ Shields, Melvinia. U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600s-Current [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/42859645/melvinia-shields>. Accessed April 9, 2021.

³⁷ Reddick, Gavin J. "Miscegenation Laws." uscivilliberties.org, 8 May 2012. <https://uscivilliberties.org/historical-overview/4158-miscegenation-laws.html>. Accessed 9 April 2021.

deterrent for interracial interactions that would have undoubtedly left its mark on Melvinia in Georgia and the far away W.B. Shields descendants.

Regarding the W. B. Shields descendants specifically, there is an explicit example of the troubles these laws could cause for a family caught in the midst of suppressing their black racial makeup through intermarriage. Upon the return of the Shields descendants to Texas, many of them settled in Oakley, Atascosa County, Texas. By 1886, the families of William Priest, Irwin McGraw, Archibald and Benjamin F. Shields, and the Browns and Campbells had settled in Oakley.³⁸ Just three years earlier, however, another set of Shields, Ben and Mary, were arrested for miscegenation. According to the *San Antonio Light*, they and two others “were each placed under \$500 bond,” for their scandalous union and needed to go to court on April 11 to defend themselves.³⁹ No doubt that news like this eventually reached the other Shieldses in Atascosa County just south of San Antonio. All the more reason to reinforce their claim to whiteness in a country trying to define and enforce racial boundaries by regulating sexual interactions.

Their arrests were not unique in Texas. Historian Charles F. Robinson II details several accounts of changing Texas miscegenation laws and the effects it had on interracial couples. The first account offered of Katie and Calvin Bell sums up the effects of miscegenation laws. Katie ultimately served two years imprisonment and after they eventually “separated, probably out of fear that Calvin might be arrested and tried again for violating the state’s antimarriage law.”⁴⁰ Still, the revised anti miscegenation laws in 1858 in Texas would have presented troubles for the mixed-race children of William Bryant Shields Sr., and while it appears that Ben and Mary

³⁸Map of Atascosa County, 1886. Map. From Ballard, Mamie. *Progenitor William B. Shields (1786) and His Descendants From North Carolina to Oakley/Positos Texas*. 2010.

³⁹Newcomb, James, “The Sheriff at Work.” *San Antonio Light*. (San Antonio, TX), April 3 1883

⁴⁰Robinson, Charles F., “Legislated Love in the Lone Star State: Texas and Miscegenation.” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 108, no. 1 (2004): 66.

Shields were the only ones to have been arrested in the family for it, those laws likely put pressure on the rest of them to emphasize their whiteness.⁴¹

Conclusions on Black Repression in United States History

Despite living, migrating, and settling down in very different places in the United States, these two lines of the Shields family offer an insight into the breadth of complexities that come with racial identity construction in the United States and the social pressures that pushed these people to make the decisions they did. While we have no records of what William Bryant Shields Sr. told his children as he freed them, we know he chose to free only them, and not their mother. The mother, tying all of her children to the legacy of slavery and a black racial identity, is left nameless, while we see from the lens of the present all of her children and her children's children marry as white as possible. One of the white men one of the daughters married was even an Englishman, Waldpole Nockolds, who took it upon himself as their region's census taker to ensure his family remains white in official documentation.⁴²

The fact that the descendants of William Bryant Shields Sr. engaged in this repression and revision (and at least one got punished when they did not) can be viewed as a multigenerational, conscious recognition of the benefits of being "white", and conversely, the complications that come from having crossed the color line in the pre-Civil War United States. Emphasizing their whiteness was important enough for Nockolds to alter his family's census information, important enough for Lafayette Robinson to list himself as white in San Antonio and leave his descendants with little knowledge of his mother or his mother's mother on his

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴² 1910 U.S. Census, Bexar County, Texas, population schedule, Oakley, p. 1, dwelling 1, family 1, Walpole Nockolds; digital image, ancestry.com, accessed April 30, 2021. Nockolds is also the enumerator for this census, which meant he was responsible for recording the information for his district.

deathbed, and important enough for every child of William Bryant Shields and their children to take white spouses at every opportunity.

Melvinia Shields' line, however, is the opposite end of the dichotomy of race and social expectations. Unable to claim whiteness for her son, she lived close the white man who likely gave her the biracial children she cared for, until he left with his third wife. Eventually, she moved too, closer to friends and people she knew. Her son, Dolphus, unrecognized by the white Shields family in Georgia, instead did not have the burden of needing to emphasize his white heritage, like the Shieldses in Texas. Instead, Dolphus is recorded as black in the 1930 census in Birmingham, AL (instead of "mulatto" like in the 1870 census in Georgia), where he enjoyed a life as a married carpenter wealthy enough to have a live-in maid to take care of them in their older years.⁴³ It is fitting then, that this freedom from pursuing whiteness within the bounds of a repressive, racially based social hierarchy, eventually culminated into an integral part of a rich family history of the first and only African American First Lady of the United States of America.

In the background of both of these family lines are social hierarchies defined by race and partially, if unevenly, regulated by the states after the Civil War through anti-miscegenation laws that exacerbated pre-existing social pressures. If these lines are evidence of the dichotomy of racially based societal pressures and the myriad reactions of the generations of people dealing with interracial relationships in their past, then the anti-miscegenation laws are evidence of the broader effort to legally enforce these hierarchies and exert pressure throughout a nation that no longer has the institution of slavery to enforce the racial hierarchy. This desire to enforce a racial hierarchy and regulate interracial affairs in the public space manifests again in the racial attacks

⁴³ 1930 U.S. Census, Jefferson County, Alabama, population schedule, Birmingham, p. 17, dwelling 125, family 129, Dolphus T Shields; digital image, ancestry.com, accessed April 10, 2021.

pushed by *The Thunderbolt* over Vivian Liberto's mixed-race ancestry. Despite the marriages of Sarah Shields, L. C. Robinson, his daughter Dora Minni Robinson, and onwards to Vivian, none of it was enough to avoid the racist attacks on her and Johnny Cash in 1966. These family histories detail the decisions to repress, reject, or embrace their racial identities that generations of families made throughout US history in the face of ever-changing legal and societal pressures.

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