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Stitching Race

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Stitching Race

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Figure 1 Female Negro, 9" x 34", 2000.
©Karen Hampton. Photo by Sibila Savage.

As much as the written word leaves an indelible mark in history it so often has left out the voices of the underrepresented, specifically women and people of color. After much soul searching I have chosen to tell a very little known story that encompasses the lives of one branch of my ancestry, the Clarke-Garvin family and how some 200 years later I became acquainted with their history and committed it to fabric using embroidery. (Figure 1.)

Set among the palmettos and palms of Colonial Northeast Florida during the mid-18th to mid-19th centuries, lies the story of how George John Fredrick Clarke, a British Floridian and Flora, a slave on the Leslie Plantation met and began a family when their first daughter, Philis- later Felicia was born. Included within their family story is the parallel story of how a community of mixed race people survived during a time when only a few miles away, people of African descent endured the harsh treatment of American slavery. While they were not enslaved their communities were no without duress. The governing power of the northeastern Florida territories shifted frequently, from Spanish – British – Spanish – US territory and finally US statehood and the security of their living status was in constant threat following Spain's second secession in 1819. The mixed race communities I am describing in this paper were friends and lived in neighborhoods composed of Spanish, Scottish, African, African descent, Majorcan, Cree – Seminole and Hugernot. The predominant spoken languages were Spanish and English with Catholicism and Protestantism shifting as the dominant religion.



*Figure 2. St. Augustine 1750, 56" x 70".
©Karen Hampton. Photo by the artist.*

1763-1784

The new British population that ventured into St. Augustine was an adventurous lot of single men and families that received land grants to establish the new frontier. During this period, the British form of slavery was introduced to Florida. Families brought their slaves with them or purchased young slaves from the Carolinas to help establish their homes and plantations. Among these new settlers were the Clarke family, including Thomas from Worchester, England, his wife Honoria, from Ireland, and their four children. Shortly after their arrival in Florida, their fifth child, George John Fredrick Clarke, was born. (Figure 2.)

In 1784, following the defeat of Britain in the American Revolution, the Florida population was again to change and transition. Most of the British fled to England or to British colonies in the Caribbean. But, twelve years after arriving in Florida, Honoria Clarke, now a widow and single parent, made the decision to have her youngest child, George, apprentice with the Pantan Leslie Company until he turned 18 years of age¹. George took up residence at John Leslie's home and it was during those years that he met Flora. While not much is known of Flora's history except that she was born of a slave in the Leslie house who was from North Carolina. Speculation leads me to believe that she was of mixed race heritage.

This is the point where Florida's history diverges from that of the United States of America to the north. The Spanish cities of St. Augustine, and Fernandina (later Jacksonville) became the hub for a mixed race society. The social conditions that promoted this were the Spanish slavery laws, the limited number of white single women on the Florida frontier and -- as I want to believe -- the social conditioning known as "God-Parentage" which provided the bridge allowing a transitory period between slavery and freedom.

¹ Flora's sale Escrituras 1797-1798, Mar. 10, 1797, Vol. 371 (part 1), pp.40-41) (verso-467)

Honoria Clarke apprencies son Jorge Escrituras 1785-1787, Mar. 4, 1786, Vol. 366 (part 2), pp.465 (verso-467)



Figure 3. *Flora's Daughters*, 93" x 36", 2002.
 ©Karen Hampton. Photo by the artist.

Flora Purchase and Manumission by George J. F. Clarke

In her manumission² papers, George granted Flora her freedom because of the care and devotion she showed him³. Fast forward to 1808 and we see that Flora is a landowner. In 1811 we see her with a house of her own in the town of Fernandina on Amelia Island.

Clarke states that he purchased the negress Flora from Don Juan Leslie four years previously. *He emancipated Flora "because of the fidelity and love with which she has served" him, leaving her free that she may "treat, contract, sell, buy, declare writings, testaments, codicil, appear in judgement."* (St. Augustin of Florida, March 16, 1797) (Figure 3.)

² As Iberian (Spain and Portugal) imperial law did not guarantee slaves access to manumission, it is best understood as a customary right. Although the *Siete Partidas* (1348), the basis for colonial Iberian slave law, stipulated that "all laws of the world should lead towards freedom," this body of law only outlined the processes by which slave owners could free their chattel, stopping short of guaranteeing the right to emancipation for slaves. Nor did subsequent slave legislation for Spanish America—including the *Recopilación de Leyes de Indias* and the Royal Cedula of 1789—codify a slave's right to manumission.

³ Flora's manumission: *Escrituras* 1797-1798, Mar. 16, 1786, Vol. 371 (part 1), pp.44 (verso-46)

Meeting my ancestors

My interest in this story began in early 2001. I had just finished my MFA some 6 months earlier where my research had focused on African American women and Plantation Textiles in the low country of the Carolinas and Virginia. I received a phone call from my father telling me that a cousin he had not seen in 40 years had phoned and invited him to view some family documents that dated back to the early 18th century in Florida. My curiosity was aroused and I began to poke around. Mind you, I was raised in Los Angeles and knew nothing of my father's lineage prior to the depression in the Bronx. All of a sudden my world transformed, my interest in early African American life and textile production now was now producing roots within my own family and my journey into Stitching Race was to begin.

Flora's Daughters

Originally my approach to this subject was to follow one family member, Flora Leslie and draw my lineage from her. I created the piece, Flora's Daughter's thinking that this historical work would continue for maybe a year or so but to my surprise it grew both as a body of research and artwork, holding my focus for 11 years. Flora's Daughters addresses the matrilineal lineage between Flora's life and mine.

Materials

I worked with a limited palette, sourcing materials that would have been available during the Second Spanish era in Florida. The style of embroidery I chose was a simple running stitch that I could use for text as well as creating design and depth of field images. I conceptually drew my stories from historical fact or based them on historical fiction. My fabric choices became more refined as the central characters grew in status. In the case of Flora Leslie, a woman who lived as a slave until her late 20's but then transitioned into a landholder with 500 acres⁴, I chose to dress her in silk organza layered over muslin. The dyes I chose were nut, tea and indigo. I also chose to do all of my drawings with indigo except in the Patriots War where I used fabric pigments to write George Clarke's description of the invasion of Fernandina.

Women's work and the choice of Embroidery

There generations of women examined in this paper were refined educated readers, writers and teachers within their community⁵. Though I used new fabric for the larger works, I found aged linens provided the perfect canvas for the stitched fragmented stories used in most of the artworks. My goal was to transport the viewer back in time and provide little glimpse into the world of Eastern Florida and how these communities of many different nationalities worked together. Streaming through these works are language and the interpretation of voice. I have found that working with historical narratives provides me with a vehicle to bring silenced voices in to the American landscape. I am a firm believer that each time my weft crosses the warp or my needle pierces the cloth, I reach through another layer of the

⁴ Jane G. Landers, "*BLACK SOCIETY IN SPANISH FLORIDA*" University of Illinois 1999 pages 238-243

⁵ Frank Marotti Jr., "Negotiation Freedom in St. Johns County, Florida, 1812-1862"(PH.D. diss University of Hawaii Library, 2003) pages 108-109

scorched earth that slavery has left behind and I attempt to reframe the issues of race that haunt our modern lives.



Figure 4, left. *Old Towne*, 33" x 20", 2007.
 Figure 5, right. *Patriots War*, 61" x 88", 2008.
 ©Karen Hampton. Photos by the artist.

Fernandina, Florida

In the years following George Clarke platted the town of Fernandina, Florida in 1808, the town flourished with businesses booming for both men and women. Many families of color were found living in houses in Old Towne⁶. The women were strong, rugged and enterprising with the skills needed to build their new community⁷. From 1808 to 1812, Fernandina prospered as one of the leading port communities on the East Coast. It was the gateway to the St. Mary's river, the southern most port into the United States. (Figure 4.)

The Patriots War as described in a letter written by George Clarke to the Governor of Florida, Mauricio de Zuniga

Patriots War – The Other War of 1812 (Figure 5)

*You all must be anxious to know our situation, and we as much so to know yours.
 The passes between this and St. Augustine being all stopped, a silence has reigned
 on both sides.....*

⁶ Dr. Joe Knetsch, *The Development of Amelia Island in the Second Spanish Period: The Impact of George J. F. Clarke* Bureau of Survey and mapping for the Amelia Island Museum of History, Fernandina Beach, Florida, March 26, 1999

⁷ Frank Marotti *"The Cana Sanctuary"* University of Alabama Press 2012

Amelia, alas my friend: is no longer ours---The forces of the United States have compelled us to surrender it to those that we owe allegiance to our Government; and they have delivered it into the possession of the United States---The Stars and Stripes now flies triumphant over our feelings, and publishing their disgrace---

Great god: view our situation --- the cannon of five Gun Boats staring us in the face; their men at quarters, and matches lit; two more laying below in reserve; and the Commodore sailing up and down our harbor throwing out his signals; the Rebel flag attending by 276 effective men with fixed bayonets procured from the stores of the United States; now full in view – only an occasional signal gun, and the shrill whistles piping orders, are heard through the awful gloom---no alternative left ---we must submit or die and that immediately – the American Authorities would not relieve our feelings.

*Our forces consisted at the last moment of time of about fifty fire-locks of various kinds and a few pistols and swords (these kept continually decreasing, as they had friends among us that were employed in stealing off or secreting our arms) two six, and four four pounders a swivel and two blunderbusses, all of which excepting the arms of 14 soldiers, were borrowed from the shipping.
Show this to our Governor, a letter directed to His Excellency will be sure to be stopped⁸.*



**Figure 6. Felicia Garvin, 21" x 15 1/2", 2006.
©Karen Hampton. Photo by Sibila Savage.**

⁸ Clarke, G.I F. *The surrender of Amelia, Fernandina, 19th March, 1812*
Florida Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. 4, July 1925 –Apr. 1926 pages 90-95 inclusive. Lib. Ref. # 651-F667

Felicia Clarke Garvin

Felicia, George Clarke and Flora Leslie's daughter was born into slavery in St. Augustine, Florida. She was bought, freed and educated by her father⁹. She was a strong independent woman who became the family matriarch, and defender of her family's land rights throughout her lifetime. According to the purchase documents (Figure 6):

Jorge [George] Clarke Purchases a slave, Philis [Felicia], age 18 months, May 5, 1794 for 60 pesos from Don Juan Leslie, a merchant of San Agustin, born in Leslie's home of a slave named Flora, for 60 pesos in cash.

Clarke declares receipt in form in San Agustin, May 5, 1794. Signed by Juan Leslie and George J. F. Clarke.



Figure 7, left. *Lady With Watches*, 23" x 13", 2012.

Figure 8, right. *Innocence*, 8" x 17", 2012.

©Karen Hampton. Photos by the artist.

In 1819 in Camden, Georgia, the young octoroon daughter of George and Flora, Felicia Rose Clarke married William Garvin, a Scottish national and her father's business partner in a lumber business on Fernandina¹⁰. After William Garvin's death, Felicia, a teacher, became the matriarch of the family,

⁹ Escrituras 1793-1794, Mar. 5, 1793, Vol. 359 (pp.258) (verso)-260.)

¹⁰ <http://www.usgwarchives.net>

Marriages: From 1819 to 1865: Camden County, Georgia (A-Me)

Contributed for use in USGenWeb Archives by Nancy Gay Crawford

respected and protected by her father and brother. Her role as matriarch became even more important following George Clarke's death in 1836 when she rallied her children to leave Florida for the Caribbean where they lived until the Civil War. During her time in the Caribbean Felicia was known to travel back and forth to Florida to attend to her family's interests in the courts. As the Civil War began to recruit Colored Troops, a large portion of Felicia's children and their families relocated to Brooklyn, NY, so as they could join the war effort¹¹. (Figures 7 & 8.)



Figure 9. Doña Nansi, 30" x 18", 2005.
©Karen Hampton. Photo by Sibila Savage

Nansi Wiggins

Another example of race mixing is found in the story of Nansi Wiggins, mother-in-law to Charles Clarke, George J. F. Clarke's brother. Nansi was married to a white planter, Joseph (Job) Wiggins. When Job died in 1797, the authorities, while surveying Job's property, found Nansi in the field, working with her slaves. The authorities, not believing that Nansi was Job's wife, forced her to spend almost 40 years defending her right to her land. It was during these trials that Nansi's identity was

¹¹ Notes on Eliza Darley, James W. Curtis *Descendants of Flora Leslie*

reduced to being a Negra, Morena, and finally acknowledged to be a Senora and identified as Doña Nansi. (Figure 9.)

Research methodology

My first interest in this story was as a teenager when a letter that my great-grandmother, wrote in 1949 surfaced. She described how her grandfather on her father's side, William T. Garvin, was born on the island of Santa Domingo, moved to New York, fought with the colored troops and built guns at Fort Sumter. The letter also described how he was a school principle and a mailman in Jacksonville, Florida. My father, only after hearing of my findings began to remember the stories told at his great grandmother's birthday celebrations about how they once owned Florida. These stories seemed quite strange stories to him as a poor black child growing up in the Bronx. The cousin, Agnes Garvin had written to was Edward Gourdin. Gourdin, born in Florida in 1897, graduated from Harvard Law School in 1922 and later became the first Superior Court Justice of African American descent in *Massachusetts*¹². Most important to me was that he was the link to how the memory of this family's story would be remembered and retold over 200 years. It was his memories of life in Jacksonville and the fight his mother continued to wage following the death of her aunt, Eliza Garvin Whitwell, George and Flora's granddaughter, which inspired me.

During Florida's Territorial years (1819-1845) laws gradually became harsher and harsher for free African Americans and mixed race families. During these years they were subject to the stricter taxation laws found in Georgia. (Figure 10.)

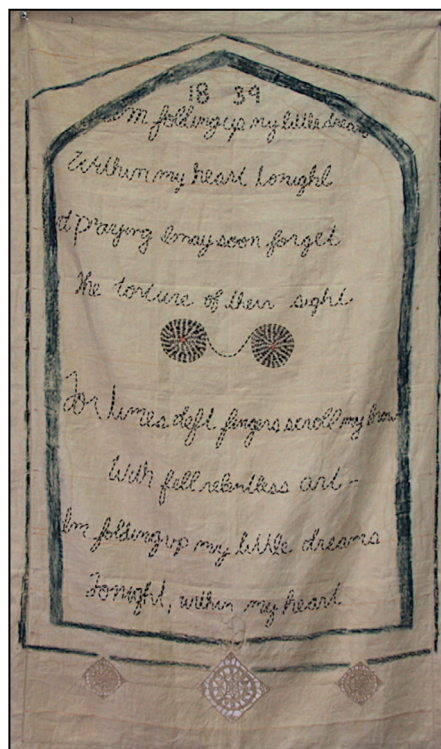


Figure 10. Little Dreams, 45 1/2" x 27", 2008.
©Karen Hampton. Photo by the artist.

¹² <http://www.masshist.org/longroad/03participation/profiles/gourdin.htm>

Memorial To Congress By Citizens Of The Territory

[NA:HF, 22 Cong., 1 sess.:DS] [Referred January 28, 1833]

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives of the United States.

The Petition of the undersigned Citizens of the Territory of Florida respectfully sheweth, that for several years past the legislation of the said Territory has been calculated materially to disturb the peace and happiness and to injure the property of the ceded inhabitants of the late provinces of Spain who are by the Treaty now Citizens of the United States. Your Petitioners are aware that the evils of which they complain have not arisen from any thing inherent in the institutions and Laws of the United States, but have their origin in the illiberal prejudices of a local government totally at variance with the liberal spirit and generous policy of the nation and age in which we live: it will not be necessary for us in appealing to so intelligent a body as the one we address, to say that every nation and people have particular customs and habits which if not at War with the institutions of other countries are universally viewed with great toleration and indulgence. The principle has been carried so far in other countries where there was an established religion that the ceded inhabitants were permitted to retain theirs. There are doubtless some practices in all countries tolerated by National indulgencies that may not be approved by all the people of the United States; but those are diseases of the body politic to be changed by example and public sentiment and not by the nostrums of political quackery which will nauseate and disgust every one whose misfortune it has been to be transferred to the United States.

The laws to which your Memorializes chiefly object as coming under the designation above mentioned are mostly those of the last Session of Council relating to free people of color: it cannot have escaped the observation of your honorable body that in all slave-holding countries some portion of the population and not a very inconsiderable part have without the formalities of Marriage ceremonies, children by colored women. in all Spanish countries they were free and admitted to most of the rights of Spanish subjects especially to the natural and inherent right of legal protection from which they are now excluded: however these practices may be at variance with the national prejudices of a portion of the United States they existed in the recently acquired country and are not to be extinguished at once by intolerance and persecution or any other moral or political fanaticism: These evils are not to be rooted out by legal penalties any more than faith is to be controlled by the terrors of the Inquisition and a resort to one is no more to be justified than to the other. The Legislative Council of Florida however acting upon the idea of bringing every thing to their own standard of moral perfection: as the Tyrant of antiquity did to His bed, have denounced penalties and imposed taxes on this class of population only on account of their color: These unfortunate people are not only requited to pay the usual taxes which other citizens pay but they are required to pay from five to ten dollars each on both sexes over fifteen years of age because of their color, in addition, and to be sold as slaves for life if they should be

too poor to pay these odious and unequal taxes; besides being outlawed and excluded from all legal redress for injuries done either to their persons or properties: connected with this also is a law to break up all those paternal obligations and ties of natural affection which have existed for years past by imposing a fine of one thousand dollars with the penalty of disenfranchisement upon every White person who is suspected of having a connection with a colored woman and the like penalty for inter-marrying with any person suspected to be of colored origin or for performing such ceremony.

The Legislative Acts of Florida are now replete with many cruel and unjust laws but those of mental persecution and proscription for the virtuous and sacred ties of domestic life and parental affection are certainly the most tyrannical and the most repugnant to the free institutions of our republican government and perfect novelties in modern legislation.

It is believed that George John Fredrick Clarke died in 1836. In his will, dated St. Augustine, August 28th, 1834, George left 33,000 acres to his children.¹³



**Figure 11. *The Patriarch*, 20 " x 15", 2009.
©Karen Hampton. Photo by Sibila Savage.**

¹³ J. Leitch Wright, Jr. *blacks in Saint Augustine, 1763-1845* British St. Augustine (St. Augustine: Historic St. Augustine Preservation Board, Florida Department of State, 1975), p. 2. 31.

George John Fredrick Clarke's Will (Figure11)

I never have been married, but I have eight natural children by a free black woman named Flora, now dead. These children, all of adult age are, Felicia Garvin, widow of William Garvin; James F Clarke; Thomas L Clarke; Daniel L. A. Clarke; Joseph L. Clarke; George P. Clarke; John D. Clarke; and William R. Clarke, all of whom I always acknowledged, freed, raised and educated as my children; and bestowed on them my sir name [sic], Clarke. The four children born to a black woman named Hannah or Anna, belonging to Mrs. Catalina Benet, being minors, and not free, I will provide for them and their mother by legacy apart. The others above named, I declare to be equal, full absolute and general heirs. And as such, and after my just debts, and the two following legacies are provided for, I bequeath, grant and transfer, to them my said eight children by Flora all my property of every description and denomination each to have one-eighth part, or equal share thereof, to their good in their own right forever¹⁴.



Figure 12. Under a Shade Tree, 24" x 28", 2010.

©Karen Hampton. Photo by the artist.

¹⁴ Louise Biles Hill, "George J.F. Clarke, 1774-1836." Florida Historical Quarterly 21 (January 1943): 197-253.

The following years

Following George Clarke's death, his children and their heirs no longer felt safe in Florida. By 1850, only one of his sons remained in East Florida. The rest of his descendants headed south to the Florida Keys, the Caribbean and to settle the frontier on the West Coast. Most kept their identity as people of color, except those that went west, who began to pass for white. This intriguing story of one family's journey and personal Diaspora, contains universal themes about family, race and American history, which are the inspiration for my artwork. This is where the snake meets his tail, about how the story is preserved and how a letter written by my great-grandmother in 1949 provided the vessel for containing the threads of "Stitching Race." (Figure 12.)

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