



# Family Ties

Regaling audiences with her intriguing family stories, Edna Bolling Jacques uncovers hidden details about life in antebellum America.

Story by Lena Anthony • Photo by Gabe Palacio

For the first 17 years of her life, Edna Bolling Jacques had her own personal portal into the past. No, she didn't have a time machine; she had her great-aunt Olive Rebecca Bolling (1847–1953), who shared vivid memories of growing up black in 19th-century Virginia.

“Practically every Sunday, Daddy and I would go by to visit Auntie,” Mrs. Jacques says. “She would often just talk about the way things were back then. She'd correct common misconceptions. At a young age, I learned that a lot of people were saying and believing things about the antebellum period that simply were not true. There are many people in this country who still view the antebellum South as either *Gone With the Wind* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But between those extremes, there were slivers of lives that were decidedly different.”

Mrs. Jacques says her great-aunt's stories—all of which she has been able to confirm through independent research—have dispelled many myths about slave life and the relationships between slaves and their owners. “Common knowledge tells us that blacks were not taught to read or write back then, but this was absolutely not true,” she says. “Virginia law outlawed teaching by free blacks and prohibited whites from teaching them for pay. But it didn't say anything about slaves teaching anyone—slaves, free blacks or whites—or whites teaching blacks for no pay.”

In recent speaking engagements, Mrs. Jacques has made a point of using her family history to expand people's understanding of the period. “A lot of the history of the antebellum period was denied, destroyed or never written,” she says. “So present-day historians

are now going through and re-examining the written record and trying to put the pieces together.”

She has spoken to numerous groups and has shared family stories with fellow members of the DAR. Last year, Mrs. Jacques spoke at Monticello, where her great-great-grandmother, Betsy Hemmings, was born a slave in 1783. There is speculation that Betsy's father was Thomas Jefferson, but that's an inconsequential detail for Mrs. Jacques. “I stay clear of that discussion,” she says. “Whether he was or wasn't, it made no difference in the life my ancestors lived or in the life I live.”

In contrast, the life of Samuel P. Bolling, her great-grandfather, did make a significant impact on Mrs. Jacques. A descendant of Pocahontas, Samuel Bolling bought his own freedom as well as his wife's, became one of the wealthiest black businessmen in Virginia after the Civil War and was the last black man to serve in the Virginia General Assembly until the latter part of the 20th century.

Mrs. Jacques followed in her great-grandfather's pioneering footsteps when she became the first member of a minority to work for IBM in Philadelphia in 1960. She achieved many firsts for women and minorities at the corporation, including becoming the first woman to serve on the company's corporate marketing staff at IBM's world headquarters in Armonk, N.Y. She retired from IBM in 1993.

Now Regent of the Mohegan Chapter, Ossining, N.Y., Mrs. Jacques has become more aware of the need to record her mnemonic family history. She also encourages her relatives to join the DAR in support of their Patriot, Mary Hemings, who was captured by the British in Richmond in 1781 and was not freed until the Siege at Yorktown later that year. 🍌

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