

How I Found My Mom's Long-Lost Kingdom!

By Yokota D. Strong

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In 2021, as a family historian and genealogist, after I had lost my mother to her third battle with cancer a year earlier, I decided it was time to do something that would help my family and I build a deeper connection to my mother and her maternal roots.



(Girther Davis-Strong 1945 – 2020)

My lovely mother, Mrs. Girther Davis-Strong was born to Elvira Helaire-Davis and Lawrence Davis, sharecroppers in Natchitoches, Parish, Cane River, Louisiana. More specifically, my mom and her family were all born and raised on and around Oakland Plantation (also known as Bermuda Plantation). Sometimes called “Sue” or “Girther Sue” she was the first to attain a college degree in her family and was also a Zeta Phi Beta sorority member. She was a God-fearing woman who believed in helping others and led a very honorable life. She married my father Andrew Lee Strong Sr. and together they had three children: me – Yokota - and Yolanda (twins) and Andrew Strong, Jr.



(Mrs. Girther Davis-Strong)



The Davis Family

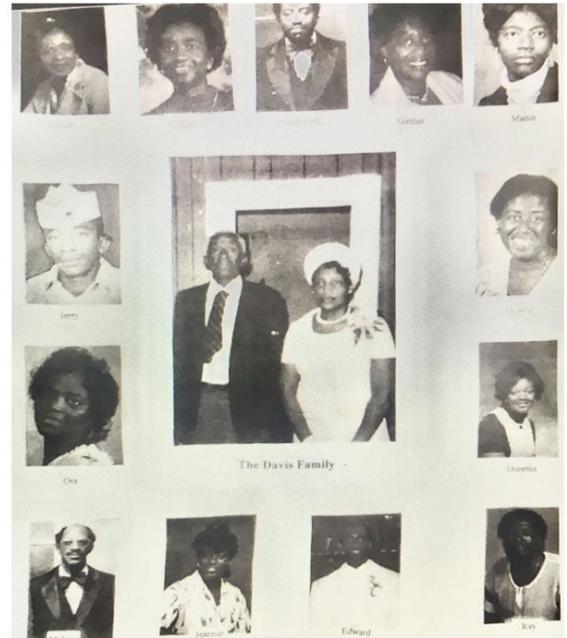
Descendants of the formerly enslaved **Bush Davis** (b. 1809, VA) and sharecropper on the Cane River creole plantation known as **Melrose Plantation**, owned by the creole Metoyer Family.

Lawrence Davis & Elvira Helaire-Davis

These two former sharecroppers were born to formerly enslaved parents in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana on neighboring plantations (**Melrose Plantation and Oakland Plantation**)

Together they had 14 children, 30 grandchildren, 46 great-grandchildren, and 36 great-great grandchildren. Mrs. Elvira Helaire Davis (widowed) is 106 years old today. Her own lineage on Oakland Plantation can be traced back to the late 1700s.

Photo Taken in 1964 after the family relocated to Shreveport, LA.



My mom, Girther, was the eighth of fourteen children and came from a large family. Her mother, Mrs. Elvira-Helaire Davis, is 106 years young as of the date of this article.

1870 United States Federal Census for Charlotte Johnson									
Louisiana > Natchitoches > Ward 11									
16	1845	James	18	M	3	Missouri			
17		Benilda	27	F	3	Missouri			
18	1845	James	25	M	3	Laborer			
19		Bonnie	21	F	3	Missouri			
20		James	18	M	3	Laborer			
21		John	15	M	3	Laborer			
22	1847	James	24	M	3	Laborer	1870	Miss. Hunter	
23		Willie	11	F	3	Missouri			
24	1848	James	23	M	3	Laborer			
25		Madeline	12	F	3	Missouri			
26	1849	James	22	M	3	Laborer			
27		Sarah	19	F	3	Missouri			
28		John	16	M	3	Laborer			
29		John	13	M	3	Laborer			
30	1848	James	23	M	3	Laborer			
31		John	18	M	3	Laborer			

1870 U.S. Census Record for Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana – Sam Johnson (b. 1802, Virginia) and Charlotte Johnson (b. 1808, Washington, District of Columbia)

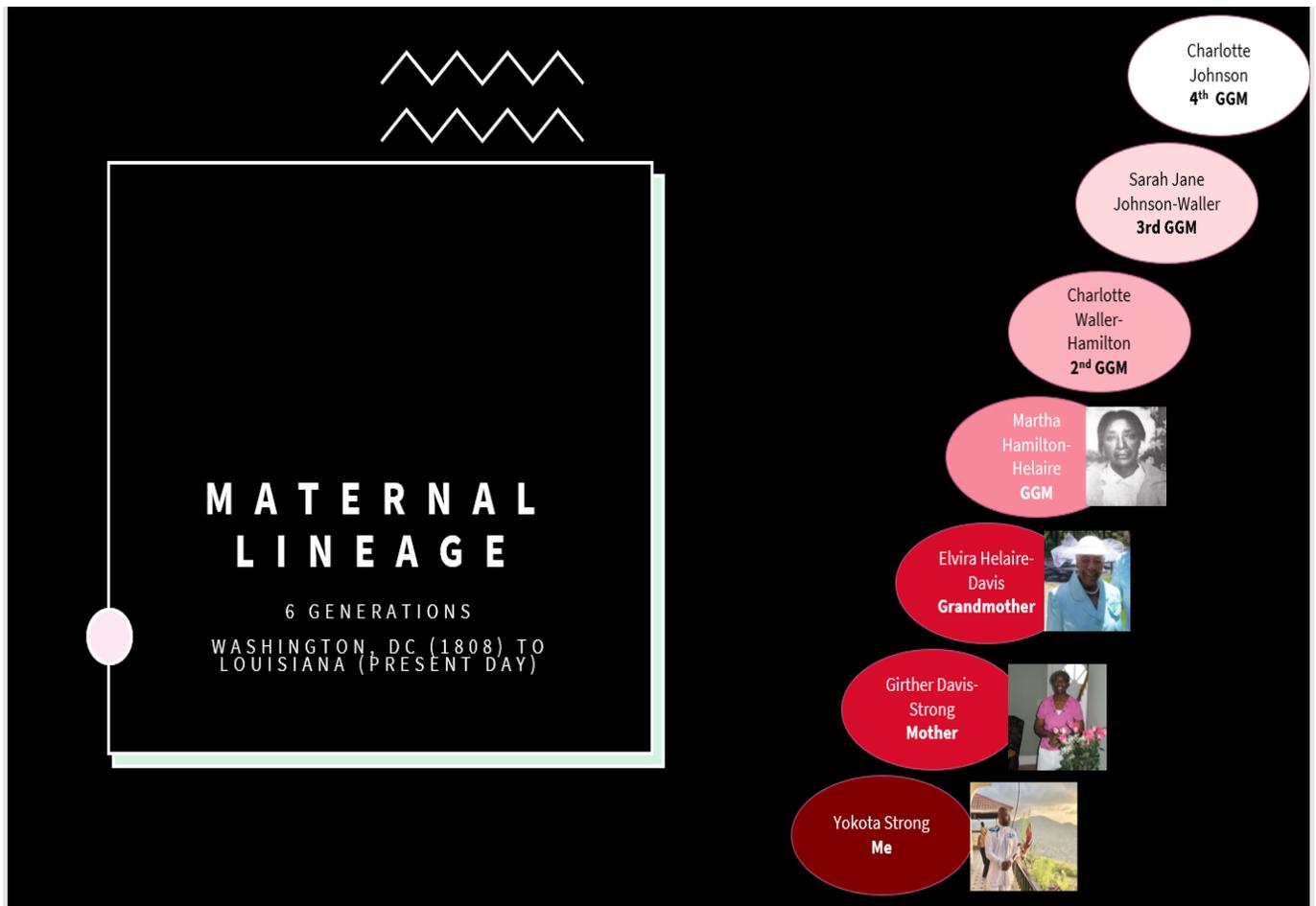
3rd Great Grandmother

- 1832 – Birth of Sarah Jane Johnson, Louisiana.
- 1867 – Sarah Jane Johnson is listed as a sharecropper on Isle De Braville Plantation, owned by Lestan Prudhomme, a descendant of the creole Metoyer family.

When Ancestry.com announced that they had recently digitized and made the Freedmen’s Bureau records searchable, I immediately accessed these records and was able to locate my third great-grandparents Richard “Dick” Waller and Sarah Jane (Jaine) Johnson-Waller on an 1867 Freedman’s Labor Agreement with their employer Lestan Prudhomme for Isle De Braville Plantation.

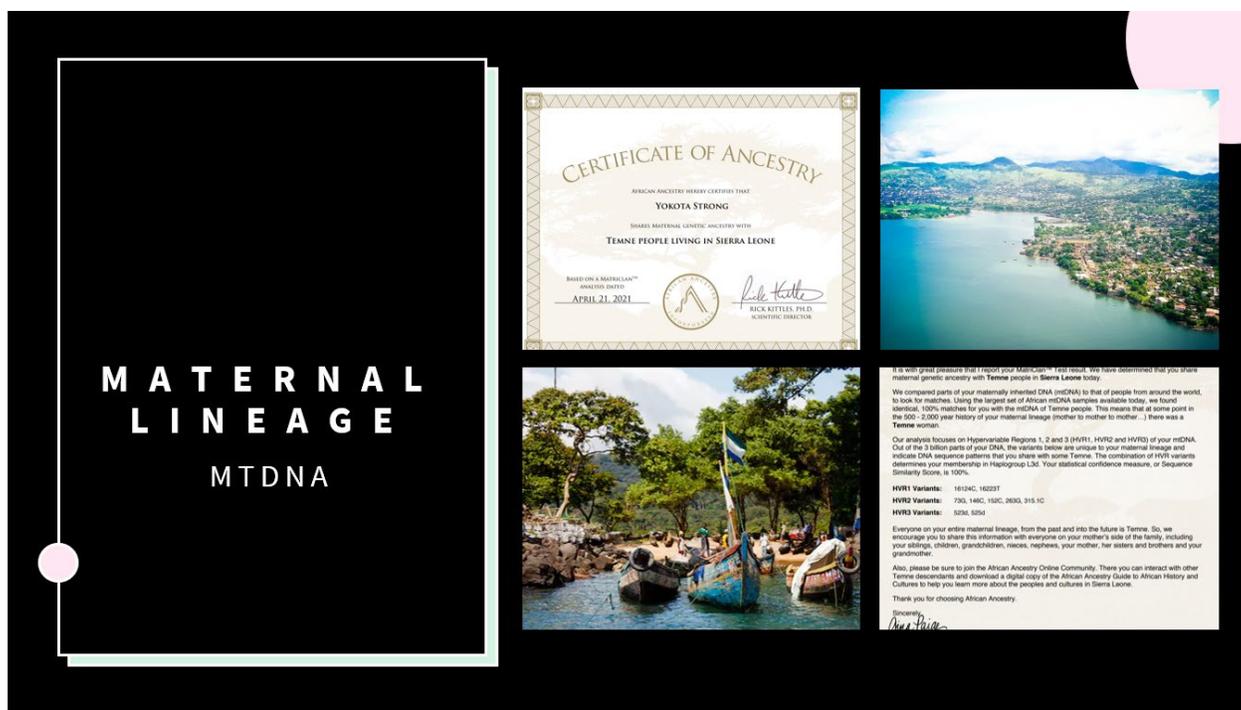
Isle de Braville Plantation along with, and akin to, the Melrose Plantation were owned and operated by the Metoyer family and their descendants, namely the descendants of Marie Therese Coin Coin. Marie Therese Coin Coin was a former enslaved African woman who had relations with a Frenchman, with the last name Metoyer. They had several children together. Their children and descendants eventually gained their freedom yet continued to enslave other Africans and became one of the wealthiest plantation owners in Cane River region.

My maternal ancestor Sarah Jane (Jaine) “Mary” Johnson-Waller is listed as one of the sharecroppers in this 1867 Freedman’s Labor contract. This creole family likely enslaved her. However, it is unlikely that this was her only slaveholder, given that her parents and sisters were born in Virginia and Washington, D.C. and some records imply that she herself may have been born on the east coast as well.



In April 2021, a year after the passing of my mother, I received the MtDNA (Mitochondrial DNA) test results that I took with African Ancestry. This Matriclan test provided the results of my mother's, mother's, mother's line all the way back - 500 to 2000 years. I eagerly awaited the results and, when I received them, not only learned the present-day country of my family's origins, but also the ethnic group and African kingdom from which my stolen maternal ancestor descended.

On April 21, 2021, I learned that my mother, grandmother and all the women and descendants of my fourth great grandmother's maternal line of Charlotte Johnson descend from people living in present-day Sierra Leone. We also discovered that they descend from the kingdom of the Temne people!



Admittedly, I had never heard of the country of Sierra Leone. Quite frankly, I was not sure if this was even in Africa. I did a quick google search and stumbled upon a few cool photos including a picture of a city surrounded by water on the Atlantic Ocean called “Freetown, Sierra Leone.” It seemed to be beautifully nestled behind a set of large mountains that I later learned were referred to as the “Lion” mountains of Sierra Leone.

From there, my curiosity peaked, and I started imagining what type of culture my unknown fifth great grandmother and her maternal ancestors came from in Africa. What was their language, kingdom, or tribe? I realized that I had an opportunity to see for myself with African Ancestry. After reading about Sierra Leone’s natural resources, including amazing cultures, ethnic groups, diamonds, gold, water, beaches, and soil, I was even more eager to take my first ever trip to Africa. This turned out to be a trip that I would never forget!

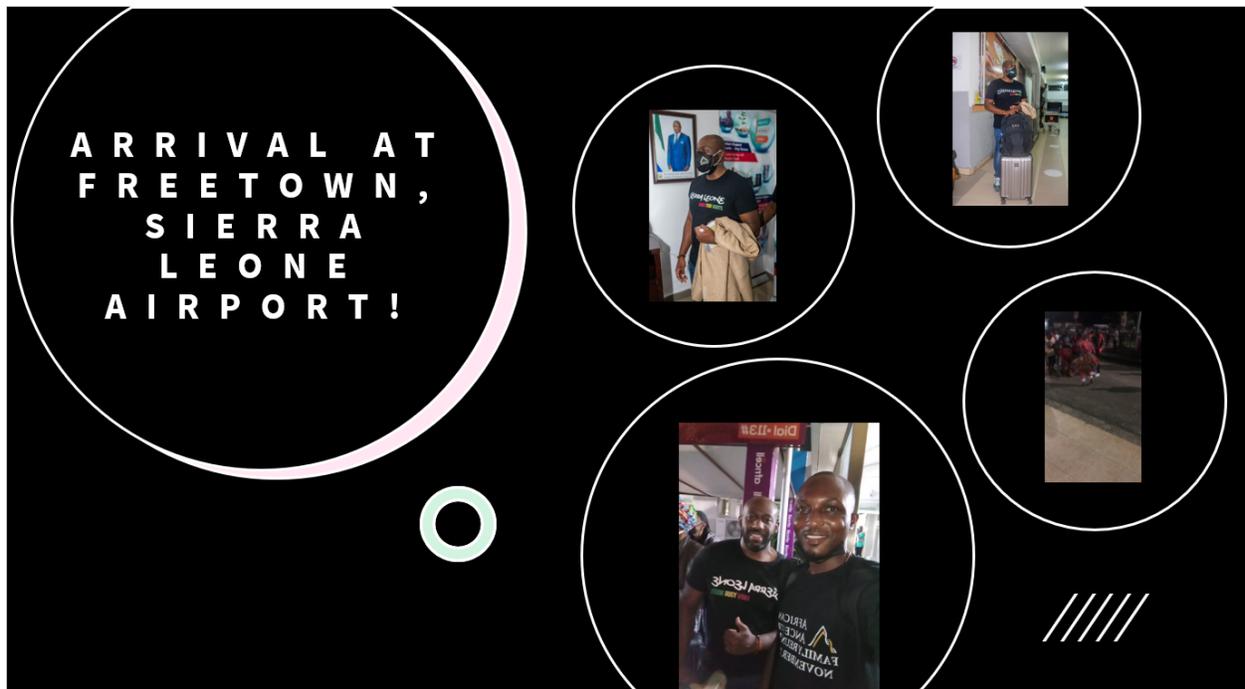
I searched for documentaries and YouTube videos about Sierra Leone and learned so much about the connection between the Gullah Geechee people of South Carolina and Sierra Leone. Of note, the CEO of Fambul Tik, Amadu Massally, has been a great resource for helping me make the connection. Also, I learned about the capital of Sierra Leone, Freetown, and how it was founded by ex-slaves from Nova Scotia, Canada, and some of the Maroons from Jamaica. I also stumbled upon a documentary of Fambul Tik and the evidentiary connections between South Carolina and Sierra Leone. I began chatting with a young man named Ibrahim Jabbie who was not only in the Fambul Tik documentary but also assisted with African Ancestry Family Reunion Tours and was willing to help me learn the basics of the culture and the Krio language, which is spoken by the descendants of formerly enslaved North Americans from Nova Scotia and Jamaica who are present today in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

On November 21st, 2021, I met up with about thirty other African Americans at Baltimore-Washington Airport (BWI) and we embarked on the journey to discover our Sierra Leonean roots. This was the first time I had ever been to Africa, and this was the first time I had ever seen an all-Black airline with Black faces (crew, pilot, first officer etc.). We flew on Senegal Airlines from BWI to JFK, but the crew operating the domestic leg of the flight were not from Senegal Airlines. From JFK to Senegal, however, the flight experience and crew were 100% Senegalese, and the experience was amazing. I flew Business-Class and began to feel that I was on a spiritual journey for the first time in my life.

Off To Sierra Leone Africa!



Upon arrival in Freetown, Sierra Leone Airport, I was so overjoyed with the intense welcome and from the locals and my new friend and Krio language coach, Ibrahim Jabbe, that I could hardly contain myself. I felt like I was home, and my heart was crying inside, and I could not stop hugging my friend and celebrating with my new friends who were on this journey with me. The adventure that awaited was too much at times and I had to constantly remind myself to take each moment as it comes. I was doing this for my mom, my ancestors who were denied access to their heritage, and most of all for my living relatives who had yet to reconnect with the continent.



After arriving in Sierra Leone, I experienced an unimaginable time. Every assumption and stereotype that I had prior to arriving in Africa was shattered from the moment we touched down in Senegal for our layover, to all the various towns and interactions I had with the good people of Sierra Leone.

I was able to meet my Temne village and kingdom, specifically, the Temne people of Mile 91, Yonibana, Sierra Leone. They welcomed us in a way that touched my soul. When I first stepped off the bus, it was like I truly was being welcomed home. The sounds of fierce, majestic, and celebratory drums washed over us, led, and played by women with their loud, masterfully orchestrated songs in unison with melodies that sounded vaguely akin to my elder African American ancestors. The beat alone was enough for us to become familiar with the songs so we could join in and acclimate to the festivities.



After a few minutes of ceremonial song and dance as an informal welcome, our translator ushered the men who traced our ancestry back to the Temne people via paternal ancestry back to a grassy area, surrounded by beautiful greenery which signaled to my body that we were about to be a part of some sort of ceremony. To my surprise, I along with my other 3 African American brothers were given new Temne names and inducted as Chiefs of the village.

My new Temne name is “Pa Kapri O’Loya,” which means “Defender of the Chiefs and Chiefdom, village spokesman, and lawyer; he who resolves conflict.” I was so proud, and then just when I was settling in with learning my new name and listening to all the sounds of the music, I was told that I was also made a ceremonial Chief of the village just like my other 3 African American brothers. I knew at that moment that this was real, and I had better soak up every precious moment.

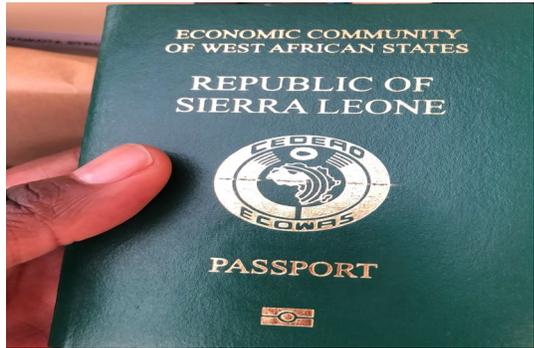
We continued to march on beyond the men’s ceremony to a join the others and gather at the center gazebo where the Temne women and all our remaining African American tourist spectators watched the remaining ceremonies and fellowship. All of those of Temne descent then sat on a stage where we could receive all the formalities of the village. It was breathtaking, overwhelming, and healing all at the same time.



After this glorious naming ceremony and being inducted as a Chief of the Temne Kingdom, I was invited with a few other new Temne brothers and sisters to see where we would be offered land by our Chiefdom. This really reinforced to me that this was not just ceremonial but the most real and complete welcome home that I could have imagined.

Within the next few days, I was made aware that we would meet with the President of Sierra Leone to receive our passports and dual citizenship; and that is exactly what happened. It was not lost on me that I had never in my life met a President of the United States, nor a leader of any other country, yet, I was going to be introduced to the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Julius Maada Bio.

On December 3, 2021, I am proud to say that that day came, and it completely changed my life. On behalf of my late mother, Girther Davis-Strong, my twin sister Yolanda Strong, my brother Andrew Strong Jr., my grandmother Elvira Helaire-Davis, my aunt Jeannie Davis, my cousins Sandra Lister, Erica Davis, Carl Terrance Jackson, and all my relatives who are also the descendants of Charlotte Johnson, this is for you! I look forward to connecting more with my Temne people and collaborating my relatives on how we can build a different and better legacy from the one that unites us.



About the Author



Yokota D. Strong

Yokota is a banking executive, specializing in compliance, risk, and anti-money laundering. Yokota has 20 years of combined experience in financial services and has served as a forensic auditor and adjunct professor of Business Ethics, Compliance, and Fraud Prevention.

Yokota uses his specialized skills of investigation, forensics, and detailed research, to provide successful resolution in traditional and forensic genealogy cases.

Through his own family's history and heritage, Yokota has developed a passion for assisting with African American and enslaved research. He uses traditional genealogy combined with genetic genealogy to solve cases and break through brick walls.

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