

Some of McCain's black relatives support Obama

Contributed by ELGIN JONES

In the rural Teoc community of Carroll County, Miss., where the ancestors of Sen. John McCain owned enslaved Africans on a plantation, black, white and mixed-race family members unite every two years for their Coming Home Reunion, on the land where the plantation operated.

Some of McCain's black family members say they are not sure exactly where they fall on the family tree, but they do know this: They are either descendants of the McCain family slaves, or of children the McCains fathered with their slaves.

White and black members of the McCain family have met on the plantation several times over the last 15 years, but one invited guest has been conspicuously absent: Sen. John Sidney McCain.

"Why he hasn't come is anybody's guess," said Charles McCain Jr., 60, a distant cousin of John McCain who is black. "I think the best I can come up with, is that he doesn't have time, or he has just distanced himself, or it doesn't mean that much to him."

Other relatives are not as generous.

Lillie McCain, 56, another distant cousin of John McCain who is black, said the Republican presidential nominee is trying to hide his past, and refuses to accept the family's history.

"After hearing him in 2000 claim his family never owned slaves, I sent him an email," she recalled. "I told him no matter how much he denies it, it will not make it untrue, and he should accept this and embrace it."

She said the senator never responded to her email.

Although Charles is uncertain who will get his vote for president, several of John McCain's black and white relatives are supporting his Democratic rival, Sen. Barack Obama.

"I am absolutely supporting Obama, and it's not because he's black. It's because he is the best person at this time in our history," said Lillie McCain, a professor of psychology at Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan.

“We simply need to look at the economy, and McCain’s campaign does not take us there,” said Joyce McCain, Lillie’s sister, a retired engineering manager with General Motors who lives in Grand Blanc, Michigan. “He is my cousin, but we are in dire times right now and people are hurting. Sen. Obama is clearly the best choice to be president.”

Charles McCain and his wife, Theresa, who still live in Teoc, started the reunions over a decade ago. Charles is the deacon of Mitchell Springs Baptist Church, the only black house of worship in the area.

When Theresa McCain started the family reunions in the late 1980s or early ‘90s (neither he nor his wife is sure of the exact starting date), only black family members attended. But as word spread about the gatherings, white members of the McCain family got involved. Today, the reunion has expanded to the point where it is becoming a community event.

The reunion’s website, teocfamilyreunion.ning.com, has pictures, postings and other information about the family gatherings. While Sen. McCain’s brother, Joe, and many of his other white relatives attend the reunions, family members say Sen. McCain has never acknowledged them, or even responded to their invitations.

“Well, a lot of the people who had moved away and were living up north, would send money to help us maintain the church,” said Theresa McCain, 62. “Myself and others began inviting them back home for picnics, just to show our appreciation.”

The McCain campaign did not respond to repeated questions about John McCain’s black relatives, or about his relatives of both races who support Obama. Pablo Carrillo, a media liaison with the McCain campaign, said the senator was aware of his African-American relatives, but asked the reporter to put his questions into writing, and that someone would get back to him.

After the reporter sent questions in writing, and made repeated follow-up phone calls, neither Sen. McCain nor anyone else from the campaign responded.

Based on information obtained by the South Florida Times, the senator has numerous black and mixed-raced relatives who were born on, or in, the area of the McCain plantation. The mixed races in the family can be traced back to the rural Teoc community of Carroll County, Miss., where his family owned slaves.

Sen. John McCain’s great, great grandfather, William Alexander McCain (1812-1863), fought for the Confederacy and owned a 2,000-acre plantation named Waverly in Teoc. The family dealt in the slave trade,

and, according to official records, held at least 52 slaves on the family's plantation. The enslaved Africans were likely used as servants, for labor, and for breeding more slaves.

William McCain's son, and Sen. John McCain's great grandfather, John Sidney McCain (1851-1934), eventually assumed the duty of running the family's plantation.

W.A. "Bill" McCain IV, a white McCain cousin, and his wife Edwina, are the current owners of the land. Both told the South Florida Times that they attend the reunions. They also said the McCain campaign had asked them not to speak to the media about the reunions, or about why the senator has never acknowledged the family gatherings.

In addition to distancing himself from his black family members, John McCain has taken several positions on issues that have put him at odds with members of the larger black community.

While running for the Republican Party nomination in 2000, he sided with protesters who were calling for the rebel battle flag to be removed from the South Carolina statehouse, only to alter that position later.

"Some view it as a symbol of slavery. Others view it as a symbol of heritage," John McCain said of the flag. "Personally, I see the battle flag as a symbol of heritage. I have ancestors who have fought for the Confederacy, none of whom owned slaves. I believe they fought honorably."

Novelist Elizabeth Spencer, another white cousin of John McCain, noted the slaves the family owned in the family's memoirs, *Landscapes of the Heart*. Sen. McCain has acknowledged reading the book, but claims to have only glossed over entries about their slaves.

"That's crazy," said Spencer, who also attends the reunions in Teoc. "No one had to tell us, because we all knew about the slaves. I may not vote, because I don't want anyone to think that I have an issue with John, but I don't want to see him become president because I think Obama is entirely adequate, and it's time for a Democrat."

Spencer acknowledged donating money to the Obama campaign and to what she called "Democratic causes."

Sen. John McCain was born in 1936 at the Coco Solo Naval Air Station, a segregated military installation in the Panama Canal, where his father was stationed in the U.S. Navy. His family returned to the states shortly after his birth; where he went on to attend segregated schools

in the Teoc community and elsewhere around the country.

He served in the Navy, where he was a prisoner of war during Vietnam, before being released and eventually running for Congress.

After he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1982, McCain voted against the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday in 1983. When he arrived in the U.S. Senate in 1986, he joined North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms in opposing the holiday again, and voted in 1994 to cut funding to the commission that marketed it.

John McCain also aligned himself with former Arizona Gov. Evan Mecham.

Mecham was the governor in McCain's home state of Arizona from January 1987 to April 1988, when he was impeached and removed from office for campaign finance violations. As a state senator and governor, Mecham publicly used racial slurs against black people and other minorities. He was also a member of the John Birch Society, which opposes civil rights legislation. In 1986, Mecham campaigned for governor on a promise to rescind the state's recognition of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, which he did in 1987.

Earlier this year, during the 40th anniversary recognition of King's assassination, McCain, by this time a presidential candidate, said he was wrong for opposing the national King holiday.

Politics in America has long been steeped in the dynamics of the country's myriad cultures, diverse ethnicities, and varying religious beliefs. Several of Sen. McCain's black relatives say Obama's candidacy represents progress.

"He is denying his black and white relatives in Teoc," said Joyce McCain, 54. "I think he may not want the country to know his family's full history, but times have changed and we need to move on, and that's why I'm supporting Obama."

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Photo: Lillie McCain, left, and her husband, Jack Vickers, right, pose with Joe McCain, center, during this year's family reunion.