

# 600 'COUSINS' MEET TO CELEBRATE ROOTS

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For Roland J. Hill the scene seems like a memory or a slightly faded picture of the day his great-great-great-grandfather arrived in America. "I can see his hands and legs shackled," he said. "The sun's hot. The plantation owners, in panama hats, stand around the auction block appraising him - like they are bidding for a horse."

So begins the story of Mr. Hill's family and of the Cousins, an organization of more than 3,000 black people in 23 states who have in recent years identified their common ancestry and distant family ties. On Friday, Mr. Hill, a 72-year-old Brooklyn restaurant owner and the coordinator of the group for New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, welcomed 600 Cousins to the Vista Hotel at the World Trade Center, for the family organization's 12th annual reunion.

"We know where we came from and what we went through," Mr. Hill said. "It brings us a great deal of pride, and some anger too. But most important, we know we have a heritage."

The organization began in August, 1970, when a dozen family members gathered around a table in Pittsburgh and agreed to arrange an annual reunion of all their known relatives. They read the research of a deceased family member, Aida Arabella Stradford, a South Carolina schoolteacher, and studied census figures, family Bible records and other documents. Distant Relations Contacted

The first handful of Cousins were able to piece together a detailed family history and began to contact distant relations, both in the United States and Africa. In the mid- and late 1970's, publicity and the fascination with genealogy sparked by Alex Haley's "Roots," helped the organization grow at an exponential rate.

"We were two steps ahead of Alex Haley," said Stacy Davis, 26, an occupational therapist from Washington. "When I was in college and everybody was talking about "Roots," I showed people an article about our family in Ebony magazine. They were all so impressed."

All members of the organization, its leadership says, can in one way or another trace their roots back to that day in 1805 when a young member of the Yoruba tribe from what is now Nigeria, was auctioned to a Camden, S.C., planter. The slave took the name Scipio Vaughan.

The slave established a reputation in the area as a talented artisan for his work in fashioning iron gates and fences, according to the organization. He married a Cherokee woman, who gave birth to 11 daughters and two sons, both of whom followed their father's advice and returned to Africa.

The descendants and relatives of Scipio Vaughan included several state legislators during the Reconstruction period, and a high proportion of teachers, doctors and lawyers, Mr. Hill said. James Churchill Vaughan, one of Scipio's sons who returned to Africa, became rich selling ivory, palm oil and other products before his death in 1893. From the daughters, who remained in the United States, the Cousins has traced the eight main family lines - Barnes, Brevard, Bufford, Cauthen, McGriff, Peay, Truesdale and Vaughn. The organization, Mr. Hill said, also maintains contact with relatives in Nigeria, Tanzania, Liberia, Jamaica and Barbados. Source of Information

"When we contact people and tell them that they are related to us, they are usually amazed," said Oscar Vaughn, the organization's national chairman. "We check people who come to us to make sure they are really related. Often they bring us more information about our history."

Throughout the weekend the Cousins, ranging in age from five weeks to 80 years old, ate, drank and took in the New York City sights together. Often the conversation between members was devoted to untangling the long branches and twisted vines on the family tree. With the help of name tags that also noted the family line from which the member was descended, Buffords and Brevards, Mcgriffs and Truesdales could exchange tidbits of family lore.

"At my first reunion I met one lady who was 90 years old," said Dorene Forbes, a draftsman from Buffalo who first learned about the organization from reading a small story in a local newspaper. "I had only heard about her in stories my grandfather used to tell."