

Census' greatest value is as keeper of historical records

With all the hype surrounding Census 2000, I was anxious to complete the form that arrived in my household's mailbox. I don't — at least in my lifetime — remember this much emphasis being placed on filling out census forms. I sure didn't want to miss the opportunity take a part in this painless process being pitched as a means to bring more money to neighborhoods, determine school and job needs, and generate other benefits.

The most exciting benefit to me is being a part of a historical survey that documents my being and, for future generations of Grants, will shed some light on the evolution of the Grant family on Hilton Head Island. I don't need the census to validate my existence, but in years past it has played a significant role in validating that of my ancestors.

In censuses before 1870, African-



Opinion

CAROLYN
GRANT

Americans were recorded as slaves. African-Americans who were free simply were not counted. Clues to my ancestors are sketchy and practically nonexistent when it comes down to census data recorded before that year.

For those of us who seek our roots, the 1870 census offers useful data because it was the first census in which African-Americans were included as citizens. When I searched through some of the early census records that recorded names, I was amazed to find that several families

with the surname Grant lived on Hilton Head in 1870. However, none of the names matched the ones I heard in stories told by elder family members.

When I checked the 1920 census record, I discovered the set of Grants I knew more intimately. Listed among these records were my grandmother, her parents and siblings. I learned some interesting facts about the family. The age of children spanned nearly 20 years, between my great-aunt, Beulah Kellerson, who was 20 years old at the time; and her younger brother, Edward, who was 1 when the census taker visited their farm-based home.

I discovered that another great-aunt, Charlotte, who now is in her mid-80s, has never used her birth name. She didn't like the name Charlotte and insisted that people call her Blossom. Had it not been for my research into

the census record, neither I nor many other relatives would ever have known her birth name.

My great-grandfather, Abraham Grant, was a farmer. His wife, Peggy, and four of the children, ages 15 to 20, were farm laborers. The remaining five children, between the ages of 1 and 8, stayed at home. Many of the other families listed on the census record of that year also lived and worked on farms and owned their homes. The enumerator also noted that many people could read and write.

My peek into the census records provided small but revealing and interesting details about family members that I will treasure for years to come. Fortunately, the government realized some value in recording African-Americans by name. In the effort to piece together intricate details about family members and family lifestyle,

the census provides clues that may not be found elsewhere. They can be used to trace family occupation, size, gender makeup and abilities.

Knowing census records could help to preserve heritage and provide links to the past, I eagerly completed the task of recording the names, birth dates and relationships of each person in the household on the short census form I received.

I know there have been many questions from the public regarding confidentiality and the information sought — from the number of bathrooms to annual income. I put those issues aside. Many of us quickly share some of those same details when we fill out entry forms for sweepstakes, home equity loans, student loans, charge cards and grocery shopping cards. Had it not been for all the newspaper ads, posters, television and radio commercials and other gimmicks to

encourage people to fill out the census forms, most of us probably would fill out the forms just as willingly as we do other surveys.

Also, without the constant reminders, many of us would not have anticipated the arrival of the census envelope in the mail. I'm glad I expected it and took a few minutes to answer the questions. This will help future generations with longstanding roots on Hilton Head to link their history to the island, from the late 1800s when it was just acres of forestry and farmland to a now-bustling community of constant development and population surge. Even more important, they will see how a community of agrarians evolved into expansive families of educators, business owners, writers, singers, attorneys, artists, ministers and other professionals.

Carolyn Grant is a native Hilton Head Islander and a free-lance writer.

6/2002