

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE FLAVOR?

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Like ice cream, ancestors come in a variety of flavors. Generally speaking, though, most of them seem to be chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry.

CHOCOLATE

It is easy to say laughingly “My ancestors were probably all horse thieves.” It is much more difficult to accept that those horse thieves are part of your genetic make-up. Occasionally we even find forebears whose behavior is repugnant to us.

I have a few chocolate ancestors. This includes those who are clearly black sheep, plus those whose values are not consistent with my own. I must learn to forgive the black sheep and to understand the rest. It isn't always easy.

Modern-day descendants of accused witches find that the witches are now considered innocent victims. Those of us who descend from accusers must dig deeply to understand the theology, social circumstances, and politics of the time to achieve a balanced view.

Researchers may have difficulty dealing with the calmly factual marks on a census or tax list that indicate slave-owning ancestors. My ancestors were generally too poor to have owned slaves (although I cannot know what their thoughts were on the subject), but I am one hundred percent positive that I could not brag, as I have heard researchers do, about the number of slaves their ancestor owned before the Civil War. My conflict would be, instead, in not sweeping those ancestors under the carpet. I would be tempted to hide them, never to admit they existed. That isn't honest. This is one common example of saying that we need to accept the ancestors we find—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The financial misdeeds of my great-grandfather and subsequent abandonment of his family make him truly a black sheep. My mother and aunts have made excuses for him, but he generated a thick court file. As a genealogist I can't ignore it, but I still haven't quite come to grips with my personal understanding of Ferdinand.

And what about Rachell, wife of Norton Claypoole? She didn't commit any illegal or immoral act. She simply wasn't a nice woman. Her brother-in-law said of her “my brother is to be pitied that has such a yoke-fellow, and if he has not the art of taming a shrew, he is like to live a miserable life with her.” OK, so maybe my ex-husbands might suggest this is a hereditary trait, but I'm pretty sure that eleven generations have diluted it considerably.

STRAWBERRY

Strawberry ancestors have color and flavor. They are royalty, nobility, military leaders, office holders, ministers. These prestigious ancestors are easy to research and easy to be proud of.

Many researchers brag about their strawberry ancestors. I find them a bit boring (both the researchers and the ancestors!). I have a very nice English royal line, but when I was in England last year, I stood before a tomb, trying to decide if the occupant was an ancestor or not. I hadn't even bothered to make a list of ancestral kings and queens before the trip.

VANILLA

Almost all of my ancestors are vanilla. The clichés we hear are “the common man” (and woman, I wish to add), “salt of the earth,” and “ordinary people.” There aren't many bursts of color or flavor to enliven them for us. Perhaps there weren't many bursts of color or flavor to enliven their own lives either, although we can't be sure. No matter whether they lived in the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth centuries, their focus seemed to be on normal activities, which in most cases included farming.

Yet, unlike my preference in ice cream (chocolate, mint, and coffee), I prefer my vanilla ancestors. Why? The challenge. Just as most crossword-puzzle aficionados prefer the New York Times crossword puzzle over that in TV Guide, I prefer plain-vanilla ancestors over prestigious strawberry ones.

Most of my family cares nothing about my genealogical research. I don't do research to leave a legacy. I do it because I love the challenge and the satisfaction of digging out information about my ancestors. Quite frankly, I prefer my vanilla ancestors for egotistical reasons. Researching them is challenging, making the discoveries ever so much sweeter.

The satisfaction I feel from uncovering a tax record telling me that my ancestor owned one mule, no horses, and two cows is rather astounding to anyone who is not truly captivated by genealogy. I am transported with joy to discover after hours of reading microfilm that my fourth-great-grandfather and his family lived in a one-and-a-half-story log house that was 20 feet by 10 feet and had three windows. Pinpointing and then seeing the land owned by my farming ancestors is fulfilling.

What's your favorite flavor?