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POLITICS | WHITE HOUSE MEMO

DNA Shows Warren Harding Wasn't America's First Black President

By **PETER BAKER** AUG. 18, 2015

WASHINGTON — Bill Clinton was called the first black president because he crossed racial lines so easily, a distinction he lost when Barack Obama became the first actual black president. But for decades, some Americans claimed that the nation's first black president was really Warren G. Harding.

It turns out that he wasn't, really. At least that is the result of new DNA testing that according to scientists showed for the first time that Harding almost certainly had no recent ancestors with African blood, despite assertions that were spread far and wide a century ago in efforts to sabotage everything from his marriage to his political career.

The finding was overshadowed last week by the determination through the same testing that Harding did father a child with a mistress, Nan Britton. But the conclusion about Harding's racial ancestry likewise addresses a mystery that had puzzled historians for many years and provides a seemingly definitive resolution of a subplot that played out during his lifetime.

For Mr. Clinton, of course, the sobriquet of first black president was meant as a compliment, and for Mr. Obama a historical accomplishment. But for Harding, raised in a vastly different era, when Jim Crow governed much of the country and the Ku Klux Klan was making a comeback, it was a weapon wielded against him. Operating under the so-called one-drop rule that any "black blood" at all made someone black, racists used genealogy to try to discredit opponents.

With Harding, it stuck for decades. Abigail Harding, his grandniece, said last week that her family told her that when she was a baby in the 1940s, a woman came up to her carriage on the street and said, “Just wanted to see if she was black.”

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the story was cited by black authors in pamphlets and books like “The Five Negro Presidents” and “The Six Black Presidents” to argue that several presidents had mixed heritage. More recently, the question was revived with Mr. Obama’s election in 2008.

The historian Francis Russell, in his 1968 biography of Harding, traced the story back to Harding’s great-great-grandfather Amos, who supposedly told descendants that a man spread the rumor that he was black to avenge being exposed as a thief. Another Harding biographer, Robert K. Murray, had a different explanation, writing that when the future president’s abolitionist family moved to Ohio, it lived in the same area with black residents and there was mingling.

The story gained traction with some when Amos Kling, a tycoon in Marion, Ohio, angry that his daughter, Florence, was marrying Harding, spread the rumor that he was black and tried to force businessmen in town not to do business with him.

As John W. Dean and other biographers wrote, years later Mr. Kling came to a peace of sorts with Harding, who by then had made a name in politics. “My daughter,” Mr. Kling told an acquaintance, “married a” — and here he used a term not acceptable today — “but he’s a smart” one.

By 1920, when Harding was running for president as the Republican nominee, William Estabrook Chancellor, a professor at the College of Wooster and a racist supporter of the Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, collected unsubstantiated statements from various Ohio residents asserting that Harding had black ancestors. The research was then published in pamphlets that were distributed to voters.

Harding stayed away from the matter, although he told a reporter that he did not know the truth. “One of my ancestors may have jumped the fence,” he said. His supporters responded aggressively lest the issue hurt his chances. His campaign adviser boasted that the Hardings were from “a blue-eyed stock,” and federal agents

seized the pamphlets. In the end, they did nothing to stop Harding from winning a landslide victory, and Professor Chancellor was fired from his college job.

While in office, Harding was more outspoken on civil rights for blacks than perhaps any other president since Ulysses S. Grant. In his first address to Congress, he called for an anti-lynching law. He later traveled to the Deep South to call for equal political and economic rights for blacks in a speech in Birmingham, Ala. “Whether you like it or not,” he told white audience members, “unless our democracy is a lie, you must stand for that equality.”

Still, in his two years as president before dying in office in 1923, Harding made little progress toward achieving those lofty goals or even reversing Wilson’s segregation of federal departments. The anti-lynching law passed the House but not the Senate.

The story of Harding’s supposedly mixed ancestry has persisted into modern times. Just 10 years ago, Marsha Stewart, an African-American schoolteacher claiming to be a fifth cousin of Harding’s, published a book, “Warren G. Harding U.S. President 29: Death by Blackness.”

But when Abigail Harding and her cousin, Peter Harding, decided to be tested through AncestryDNA, a service of Ancestry.com, the genealogical site, their results told a different story.

While humankind is generally traced to sub-Saharan Africa, the AncestryDNA test measures for more recent regional origin going back hundreds or thousands of years. By testing Harding’s grandnephew and grandniece, as well as a grandson of Ms. Britton, the scientists said, they could extrapolate Harding’s own ancestry.

The tests found “no detectable genetic signatures of sub-Saharan African heritage in any of the three cousins,” said Julie Granka, a population geneticist at AncestryDNA. As a result, she said, “it is very unlikely,” meaning less than a 5 percent chance, that Harding had a black ancestor within four generations, meaning great-great-grandparents.

“However,” she added, “the analysis does not rule out the possibility that

Harding still could have a more distant ancestor from sub-Saharan Africa.”

While such a finding would have once been politically expedient for his great-uncle, today Peter Harding confessed to a little disappointment. “I was hoping for black blood,” he said.

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Warren G. Harding was a politician and the 29th president of the United States. Harding's campaign for the presidency promised a "return to normalcy." He was elected president on his birthday and inaugurated in 1921, following World War I. After serving as president for less than three years, on August 2, 1923, Harding died unexpectedly of a heart attack while traveling in California. Early Life. Warren G. Harding was born on November 2, 1865, in Corsica, Ohio (now known as Blooming Grove). He frequently confided to friends that he wasn't prepared for the presidency. He worked hard and tried to keep his campaign promise of "naming the best man for the job." By awarding high-level positions to political supporters, the results were mixed at best. VOA Learning English presents America's Presidents. Today we are talking about Warren Harding. He was the 29th president of the United States. President Warren Harding. Harding was very different from the 28th president, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson supported change; Harding promised a return to normalcy. Florence Harding, pictured here with the president, was married briefly before and had a son. She and Warren Harding did not have any children together. In time, Warren Harding became a state senator, a lieutenant governor of Ohio, and then a member of the U.S. Senate. He especially liked being a senator and many of the other lawmakers liked him. One reason is because Harding rarely took a controversial position on any issue. Nan Britton first claimed that Harding had fathered her daughter, Elizabeth, in 1927, a few years after the 57-year-old president died of a heart attack and left nothing for his only child. Her book, *The President's Daughter*, provoked outrage and denunciations of Britton, who was accused of inventing a scandal to profit off a tainted administration. The DNA test should put historians finally at ease about questions on Harding's personal life, ending the division wrought by *The President's Daughter* in the 87 years since its publication. Biographer John W Dean, who expressed skepticism in his 2001 account of the president's life, tweeted "At last!" on learning of the new DNA test.