

An Invented Life

EDWARD V. BROWN, THE CENSUS TAKER, MOVED SLOWLY DOWN North Prince Street, knocking on each and every door in this Flushing neighborhood of Queens, New York. It was June 5, 1900, a mild and sunny day in the first spring of a new century. And as federal census agents had done once a decade for more than a hundred years, he was counting Americans, compiling a mosaic portrait of the nation. Who lives here, he asked at each residence, and what is the occupants' "color of skin," their sex, their marital status, their age? For each of the inhabitants he recorded a birthplace, as well as the birthplaces of their parents, and for the foreign-born he noted when they had emigrated and whether they were citizens of the United States. He wrote down everyone's occupation, asked whether he or she could read and write, and separated the renters and boarders from the home owners. In his careful, neat hand, Brown dutifully recorded the data on the preprinted census sheets that would eventually find their way to Washington, D.C., and become part of the official twelfth census of the United States. Queens, that census would show, was much like the more densely settled community of Brooklyn, just to the west: it was overwhelmingly white, about 98 percent, with close to a quarter of those white residents foreign born.¹

As Brown made his way down North Prince Street, he encountered immigrants from Germany, England, Ireland, and Poland, families supported by men who worked as policemen, machinists, and clerks. At number 50, he

met Mary Chase, a sixty-year-old widow from Rhode Island who ran a small boardinghouse, and took note of her black housekeeper, the widowed Deborah Peterson. He had counted seventy-two white residents on the street thus far, and Peterson, who descended from an African American family long resident in New York, was the first black person he had encountered. But then he walked next door and knocked at the large and comfortable home at 48 North Prince Street. Two black servants lived here. Phoebe Martin was a thirty-three-year-old widow, and Clarine Eldridge, just fourteen, was scarcely older than the children she had been hired to watch. It was afternoon, and Grace, age nine; Ada, age eight; and Sidney, age six, were home from school, perhaps playing with their three-year-old brother, Wallace. Whoever answered the door probably invited the census taker into the parlor; neither the servants nor the children could have answered his long list of personal questions about the family. And so Edward Brown entered the home to talk to Ada Todd, the lady of the house. Her husband, James, was away, she said, so she would answer the census agent's long list of questions herself.

Brown hardly needed to ask her race. With a glance at her dark complexion and wavy black hair, he noted her "color of skin" as "black." Mrs. Todd reported that her parents came from Georgia, and she told Brown that she could read and write. She said that she had been born in Georgia in December 1862. If Brown remembered his history, he might have wondered if Ada Todd had been born a slave. That question was not on his list, though, and he would not have asked.

Mrs. Todd then told Brown about her husband, James. She said that she had married him eighteen years earlier, in 1882. He was a black man, some twenty years her senior. Born in the West Indies, he had come to the United States in 1870, she said. Now a naturalized citizen, he had a job as a traveling steelworker. Perhaps Brown noted that the house seemed proof that Mr. Todd had done pretty well for himself, even if his work often kept him away from his home and his children. Mrs. Todd explained that there had been five: the four still at home and a fifth who had died as a toddler.

Edward Brown took pride in the accuracy of his records, in the neat way in which he filled in the 1,350 blank boxes on each of his census sheets,

recording into being a portrait of the polyglot neighborhood springing up in the sparsely settled borough of Queens. And so, he would have been stunned to learn that almost nothing Mrs. Todd told him was true.

To begin with, she had knocked two years off her age, a gesture of vanity, perhaps. And she and her husband had been married for twelve years, not eighteen, a fact of which Mrs. Todd was surely aware, and a lie that seems hard to fathom, since the children's ages raised no questions about their legitimacy. But the other untruths were more stunning. Her husband was not black. He was not from the West Indies. He was not a steelworker. Even his name, James Todd, was a lie. Ada Todd was in fact married to Clarence King, an acclaimed public figure and the person Secretary of State John Hay once called "the best and brightest man of his generation."²

King was a larger-than-life character: an explorer of the American West, a geologist, an accomplished writer and storyteller. He hobnobbed with presidents and congressmen and counted some of the nation's most distinguished writers and artists among his closest friends. His physical agility and bravery, combined with his keen intellect and wit, commanded near reverence from those who knew him best. With King, the historian Henry Adams wrote, "men worshiped not so much their friend, as the ideal American they all wanted to be."³ But of all this, of her husband's true identity and even his real name, Ada had not a clue.

Not until he lay dying of tuberculosis in Phoenix in late 1901, his last desperate hope of a desert cure gone, did James Todd write a letter to his wife telling her who he really was.⁴

KING SUSTAINED HIS DOUBLE life for thirteen years. He lived as the celebrated Clarence King—a man who traced his English ancestry back to signers of the Magna Carta—in his workplaces, in the homes of his friends, in his Manhattan clubs. But he was James Todd, the black workingman, when he went home to his wife and children in Brooklyn and later in Queens. His well-to-do friends in New York and his family back in Newport, Rhode Island, thought him a bachelor; they never knew about Ada.

And she knew nothing of them. Secrecy bounded his separate worlds. An attentive watchfulness governed his every move. No wonder King found married life fraught and complicated.

Ada, however, found nothing particularly clandestine about her domestic life. She might sometimes find it hard to understand why she never met her husband's family or friends, or difficult to explain to neighbors why he was so often away. But her life as Ada Todd gave her a foothold in a middle-class world she could scarcely have dreamed of as a girl in Civil War and Reconstruction Georgia. She embraced the world her marriage gave her and took pleasure in being Mrs. Todd. When she became a widow, she claimed the name of Ada King and did everything she could to assure that the peculiar circumstances of her married life would not remain a secret or become a source of shame to her children.

James and Ada Todd thus understood their life together in different ways. We know the story they told the world. Ada's report to the census taker conveys the public tale, or at least one of them. But precisely what they said to each other or, indeed, to themselves lies beyond all knowing. Clarence King took care to make sure that scant record of his secret life would survive. No pictures of the two of them together exist. No piece of paper bears both his signature (either one) and hers. The wedding ring he gave to her had no inscription inside the gold band.

OF CLARENCE KING, WE know much; of Ada Copeland, very little.

We can trace King's early life through family genealogies and the writings of various relatives, his own boyhood letters, and the memories of his friends. We can follow his professional career through his books and essays, the correspondence of his associates, and the records of the various government agencies for which he worked as a geologist, an explorer, and an administrator. His race and his social status, his education and his professional career, all let us know far more about King than about most Americans born in 1842. Even so, he left behind no stories to explain his secret marriage or account for his deceptions, no detailed accounts to lay bare the

daily rituals that enabled him to pursue his extraordinary double life as an eminent white scientist and a black workingman. The surviving excerpts from his now-lost letters to his wife, however, reveal a man deeply in love. For that love, it seems, King risked all.

Of Ada Copeland's early life, virtually nothing is known. By virtue of *her* race and social status, she lived the first two and a half decades of her life beyond the reach of the civil officials who might have inscribed her into the historical record. It seems unlikely her immediate family members could even read and write; certainly, no letters from them survive. And because Clarence King was so wary of having any documents that might identify him as James Todd, he destroyed whatever letters Ada wrote to him. What little we know of Ada's childhood comes from indirection, from what we can know about the place where she lived or how other African American people born around the same time recalled their own childhoods in Georgia's cotton country. Our understanding of her experience as a married woman comes largely through spare public records, through the few stories she told many decades later, and through the inferences we can draw from our knowledge of the events that transpired around her. We cannot know, for example, what she thought on a particular day, but we can know that the air on her street hung heavy with the odors of a nearby slaughterhouse, or that her apartment would have felt cold and dark after a blizzard felled the utility lines. What she believed about her husband we can infer only from the slightest of evidence. Her public stories about her marriage—those tales she told the census taker—are more easily known than the private assurances she gave herself.

KING AND COPELAND CAME from different worlds. Because of that, and because King was almost nineteen years older, they experienced the same historical events in different ways. The Civil War, for example, directly shaped every aspect of Ada's earliest years. It drew the local white farmers off to war, produced shortages of clothing and food, and led indirectly to ever more ruthless and restrictive slave codes. For King, the conflict unfolded as a more distant event that attracted friends and relatives to military duty. But

he did not want to fight and he went west, in part, to avoid the killing fields of war. The Civil War thus disrupted their separate lives but created opportunities for the two of them in vastly different ways. The war's end meant emancipation for Ada's family and the start of their new life as freedpeople. For King, it meant an era of renewed government funding for science that made possible his career as a geologist-explorer. Postwar industrialization opened up yet more work opportunities for King as a mining consultant but offered Copeland few new economic opportunities in rural Georgia, where her options remained restricted by race and gender.

Race, more than anything else, played out differently for Ada Copeland and Clarence King. Copeland's dark complexion circumscribed where she could work, how she could travel, how safe she could feel. King professed a lifelong fascination with dark-complected peoples. Their skin tone seemed to him exotic and fascinating, precisely because it hinted of worlds so different from the convention-bound society of Newport in which he was raised. Like many white Americans, he understood race as something that belonged to other people, and he romanticized dark skin color as the mark of a more natural and sensual life. Ada, however, knew race to be more than an abstract cultural idea. For her it had very real social and economic consequences.

Even the city of New York, where they made their home, meant different things to King and Copeland. Clarence saw it as a nexus of economic power and social prestige, a place where he could live on his good name and past achievements and have access to the moneymen who might bankroll his mining ventures. He could live as a celebrity in New York—people would acknowledge him there as the famed leader of the U.S. Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel, the man who mapped the West. They would know him as the "King of Diamonds" who exposed a fraudulent gem mine; recognize him as the first director of the United States Geological Survey; laud him as the author of a popular book on mountaineering and as one of the most charming dinner guests to be found in all Manhattan. Ada, however, embraced New York less as a place that acknowledged her past than as the place that let her leave it behind. In New York no one need know

about her girlhood in slavery, the soul-crushing poverty of her rural life, the limited options available to a black girl of ambition in western Georgia. The city offered her a stage upon which she could reinvent herself.

Eventually, King would reinvent himself there, too. Racial passing itself was not rare. Many Americans with an African American ancestor passed as white, seeking the greater freedom of movement and choice accorded white Americans in the late nineteenth century. They might cross over the color line for good, never looking back. Or they might cross it every day, living in a black world and working in a white one. Their passing might be an act of careful calculation or, for a lighter-skinned person, it could be inadvertent: an onlooker, not detecting any hint of African heritage in someone's light-colored skin, might simply begin to treat him or her as white.

The practice of passing generally involves adopting a particular identity to move *toward* greater legal and social privilege. It might mean taking on a different gender, or ethnic or national identity, but it most often involves the assumption of a different racial identity. And since, in the United States, social privilege has been associated with lighter-colored skin, passing usually entails concealing one's African American heritage to assume a white identity. The entire practice hinges on a peculiar idea. Since one's race could be determined by heritage as well as appearance, very light-colored skin did not necessarily make one a "white" person. In the aftermath of emancipation, a host of laws sprang up throughout the Deep South clarifying just what defined a person as "black" or "Negro," almost always for the purpose of restricting his rights. In 1896 the Supreme Court of the United States upheld these laws in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which affirmed that people with one "black" great-grandparent could, for all intents and purposes, be considered black themselves, no matter what they looked like. This peculiarly American idea came to be known as "hypodescent." "One drop of black blood" trumped seven drops of "white."

Clarence King took advantage of these distinctive American ideas about race to pass the other way across the color line, claiming African ancestry when he had none at all. Grasping that appearance alone did not determine his racial identity, the fair-haired, blue-eyed King presented himself as a

“black” man named James Todd. Rather than moving *toward* legal and social privilege, he moved *away* from it. He glimpsed something he sought in Ada Copeland and her African American world, and he acted to seize the promise of that rich emotional life.

Other Americans have crossed the color line from white to black—to join a family, to evade antimiscegenation laws, to claim some other sort of political or economic advantage. But Clarence King stands out because of his prominence as a public figure. This was a white man who dined at the White House, belonged to Manhattan’s most elite clubs, and parlayed his privileged upbringing and Ivy League education into a career as an eminent scientist, writer, and government official. American history holds no comparable tale of a high-profile white man crossing the color line. In an era in which the insidious “one drop of blood” rules consigned many phenotypically “white” Americans to live on the wrong side of the Jim Crow laws, King harnessed Americans’ most deeply held beliefs about race to pass voluntarily—if only part-time—as a “black” man.

How, one must ask, did he pull it off? And what might we make of it?

At one level, the story of the Todds’ marriage is simply a love story about two people from opposite ends of the American social spectrum who met and married and raised a family. But it also illuminates larger stories about race and class and identity in late-nineteenth-century America, stories that lie at the very core of national thinking about the new social order emerging in the wake of emancipation. That King would *want* to pass in the first place—despite his position of prominence and power—reveals not just his love for Copeland but his awareness that a true interracial marriage would upset both his white world and his wife’s black one. And that he *could* pass across the color line—despite his own visual appearance—illuminates the extraordinary arbitrariness of racial categorization at the end of the nineteenth century. At the very moment that laws sought to make racial categories fixed and unchanging, King showed just how fluid they could be. The laws that pinned racial identities on ancestry rather than appearance paradoxically made it possible for a light-skinned American like King to claim a black identity.

King and Copeland married at a moment when many Americans could not abide a public marriage between a prominent white government scientist and a black woman born into slavery. King's secrecy speaks to his desire to preserve his reputation. But it speaks also to the very real constraints of public opinion. American society offered no way for Clarence King to maintain both his public career and a life lived in the open with an African American wife and their mixed-race children. Even someone with his education, political savvy, and social cachet could not rise above the powerful racial stereotyping that permeated every aspect of American life. King bought into some of those stereotypes himself, even as he struggled to transcend them and fashion a life unbound by the racial assumptions of the day.

Though American society was far less tolerant of interracial marriage in the Gilded Age than it is now, it nonetheless afforded its citizens more privacy in the conduct of their personal lives. News and information circulated in different ways. King and Copeland married in an era when telegraphs were common but residential telephones were rare; radio and television did not exist; and daily newspapers were plentiful but seldom illustrated. They could carve out for themselves a zone of privacy that seems almost unimaginable today, especially for a public figure like King. The particular structure of New York City also helped them to protect the secrecy of their shared life. Then, as now, New York was a collection of neighborhoods, many defined by the residents' class or race or national origin. Horse-drawn trolleys and elevated trains let New Yorkers move about from place to place, but in this presubway era, many city residents lived largely within the bounds of their immediate neighborhoods, rarely venturing into worlds where their social class or physical appearance might make them conspicuous. King lived his secret life for thirteen years, and no one, it seems, ever found him out.

MUCH ABOUT THIS STORY remains unknown and even unknowable. What, for example, did Ada really believe about her husband's identity? How did Clarence justify to himself deceiving his wife and children? The

paucity of historical evidence makes it difficult to track their separate lives and even harder to reconstruct the world they built together or glimpse their innermost thoughts. But most families in late-nineteenth-century New York left behind some traces in the historical records, and this family was no exception. With a careful reading of the surviving evidence and an informed historical imagination, we can at last tell the long-silenced story of Clarence King and Ada Copeland and the world they built together as James and Ada Todd.