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Jimmy Carter and Motown Founder Berry Gordy's Surprising Connection

According to a detailed family history compiled by one of the former president's sons, the two men shared a common ancestor in 19th-century Georgia.

By Ben Sisario | Dec. 30, 2024 | [Listen to this Article](#) · 6:06 min

Former President Jimmy Carter could trace his family history back centuries, through an ancestral line that included cotton planters, Quakers, a spy for George Washington at Valley Forge and, of course, Georgia peanut farmers.

But perhaps the most surprising relation in Mr. Carter's extended family tree is Berry Gordy, the founder of Motown — the Detroit musical empire that blossomed in the 1960s and '70s with Black pop superstars like Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, the Supremes, Smokey Robinson and the Jackson 5.

According to a detailed family history compiled by Jeff Carter, one of the president's sons, the two men were connected through a common ancestor in 19th-century Georgia: a white plantation owner named James Thomas Gordy, who fathered a child with a woman he held in slavery.

That child, born around 1854, was named Berry Gordy; the Detroit music impresario, whose full name is Berry Gordy Jr., is his grandson. Through the children he had with his wife, James Thomas Gordy was also the grandfather of President Carter's mother, who was born Lillian Gordy.

Readily available documentation from the 19th century, including census records and slave schedules, do not prove a blood relation conclusively, according to genealogists. But the connection is accepted by both families. Mr. Gordy, now 95, said he discussed it with the former president — who died on Sunday at age 100 — while Mr. Carter was campaigning for re-election.

"In 1978, my sister Esther commissioned a research institute to verify the Gordy family tree," Mr. Gordy said in a statement to The New York Times. "You can imagine the shock and pride I felt when I discovered that President Jimmy Carter and I were actually third cousins. We had such fun discussing this in 1980 at a Democratic fund-raiser in Los Angeles. From that point on, we started calling each other 'cuz."

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That a blood relation exists between a white president, whose ancestors held people in slavery, and a Black man who was one of the prime movers of 20th-century popular culture is a striking detail in Mr. Carter's biography. And in some ways it is also a familiar American tale of mixed racial lines.

"The fact that an ancestor of Carter had a relationship with a Black woman in his employ is just another familiar detail from our fraught history," said Jonathan Alter, whose biography, "His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, a Life" (2020), makes brief mention of the connection.

Yet the connection between the two men is unknown to most Americans. Neither Mr. Carter nor Mr. Berry seem to have made much public comment about it, and it is unclear how long the two families knew about it.

Jeff Carter devoted just one paragraph to the link in his 216-page "Ancestors of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter" (2012), which he said he had researched in part at the Georgia state archives. When asked by phone whether his father had known about the connection to Mr. Gordy before he conducted his research, Jeff Carter said, "When I found out about it, I asked Dad. He said, 'Yeah, they all knew about it.' It wasn't a secret."

It is not the only surprising musical connection documented in Jeff Carter's genealogy. One footnote states that Elvis Presley was the president's "sixth cousin once removed."

Mr. Gordy, who served in the Korean War and started his songwriting career in the mid-1950s, founded what became Motown in 1959 with an \$800 loan from his family. That company — and Mr. Gordy — went on to become American icons, though until the 1960s, when Motown songs dominated the pop charts, the Detroit Gordys may well have been unknown to the Carters.

One early clue to their connection may have come from the family memoirs of Mr. Gordy's father, Berry Gordy Sr., who was known to Motown musicians as Pop.

Before his death in 1978, Pop Gordy dictated recollections of his life, including growing up in rural Georgia and moving to Detroit in the early 1920s. Those taped comments were collected into a book, "Movin' Up: Pop Gordy Tells His Story," published in 1979, with an introduction by Alex Haley, the author of the book that was the basis of the 1977 TV mini-series "Roots."

In "Movin' Up," the elder Gordy states his ancestry bluntly: "My father's mother was named Esther Johnson, who was probably a slave. Esther Johnson and my grandfather, Jim Gordy, didn't get married. He was a white man, a plantation and slave owner."

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Jeff Carter's book states only that James Thomas Gordy, in addition to the nine children he had with his wife, "had another son, Berry Gordy, the child of a relationship he had with one of his slaves." The book does not mention Esther Johnson.

At the request of The New York Times, several genealogical researchers examined the available records of Mr. Carter's and Mr. Gordy's ancestry. Their connection is possible, they said, but definitive proof was elusive on several points, including whether Esther Johnson was enslaved, or by whom.

Chris Child, a senior genealogist at American Ancestors, a national genealogical center in Boston, said this lack of conclusive documentation about the parentage of children between white and Black people in the pre-Civil War period is not uncommon.

"Paternity was rarely recorded when an enslaved person had a white father, at least in the southeastern United States," Mr. Child said. "The parentage of enslaved individuals was not recorded by local governments, and it was often up to the enslaver to record statistics on their human property. When such records do survive, they rarely list a white father."

When asked about the Carter-Gordy connection, Annette Gordon-Reed, the Harvard scholar who wrote about Thomas Jefferson's relationship with his slave Sally Hemings, said: "There is not much to say except these kinds of things happened during slavery. It only seems surprising because famous people are involved."

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