

# *Surname Ganges can be traced to warship*

By Mark Roth  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Tendaji Ganges has always known he had an unusual name.

Tendaji is a Swahili word meaning “hardworking.” But for many years, Mr. Ganges

didn't have any idea where his last name came from. Traveling around the

country and checking phone books, he knew only that there weren't many other African-American families with that name.

Then, a few years ago, he

**BLACK  
HISTORY  
MONTH**

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PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE ■ SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2014 ■ WWW.POST-GAZETTE.COM

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BLACK HISTORY MONTH

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and his younger twin brothers, Kelly and Larry, were contacted by University of Pennsylvania historian David Barnes. That's when they learned that they are likely descended from slaves who were captured off the coast of Cuba in 1800 by a Navy warship, the USS Ganges.

The 138 slaves, from Guinea in west Africa, were found aboard ships known as the Prudent and Phoebe. Under a 2-year-old law that barred American ships from transporting slaves, the captain of the Ganges, John Malloway, put crews on them to sail them to Philadelphia, well known for its anti-slavery attitudes.

Once there, a federal judge declared slaves had been illegally captured, and turned them over to the Pennsylvania Abolition Society to be placed with families, many of them Quakers, to work as indentured servants for various lengths of time. All the slaves were given the last name of Ganges, and to this day, there are families in the Philadelphia area and elsewhere that can trace their lineage to the capture of those ships.

Under the order of U.S. District Judge Richard Peters, the former slaves became "indentured servants, just like many German immigrants came over as indentured servants. They were neither slave nor free," Mr. Barnes said.

But the contracts weren't intended just to make them slaves by another name, he said. "My sense is that it was probably a logistical dilemma. They had to go somewhere. I guess they could have shipped them to the almshouse, but I know the abolition society was dedicated to teaching free blacks reading and writing, and clothing and education were spelled out in the terms of the indentures."

The very fact that the slaves were taken to Philadelphia was highly unusual, said Marcus Rediker, a distinguished professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh and the author of a 2013 book about the Amistad, a ship captured by rebellious slaves in 1819.

Most naval captains who captured slave ships would take them to ports such as Charleston, S.C., where they could make a handsome sum from selling



Courtesy of Tendaji Ganges

From left: Brothers Tendaji, Kelly and Larry Ganges found out within the past few years that they may be descended from slaves captured in 1800 by the federal warship USS Ganges, which intercepted two ships — the Prudent and the Phoebe — carrying slaves off the coast of Cuba.



At Chestnut Grove Cemetery in Chester County, one gravestone marks the death of civil war veteran Torbout Ganges, probably descended from slaves on ships captured by the USS Ganges in 1800.

the slaves as "salvage," he said. "I just can't see a naval captain passing up the money he personally would make for salvage to bypass southern ports and go to Philadelphia, which had the strongest abolition movement in the nation, unless he was a committed abolitionist," Mr. Rediker said.

Early reports indicate about



Another tombstone at Chestnut Grove Cemetery marks the death of baby Barton Ganges in 1873.

20 of the slaves had died by the time they reached Philadelphia, and that residents were asked to provide clothing. One newspaper notice said, "Arrived ... yesterday, 138 black people without the least clothing, being taken on board the schooner Phoebe, prize to the United States ship Ganges. The humane citizens are requested to send to the Health Office at the State House, any kind of linen cloths for their accommodation, as well as to prevent the shock their decency will be exposed to by so many of both sexes being thus exposed naked."

While the indenture contracts covering the former slaves often required that they be educated or trained, it also put consider-

able restrictions on their freedom.

One housed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania for Mary Ann Ganges stipulated that "of her own free will and accord, [she] put herself apprentice to Thomas Egger of the City of Philadelphia, quarantine master, to learn the Art, Trade, and Mystery of Housekeeping ... to serve him, his heirs and assigns ... to the full ... term of nine years next ensuing."

During her time with Eggers, the document said, "she shall not waste her Master's goods, nor lend them unlawfully to any. She shall not commit fornication, nor contract matrimony within the said term. She shall not play at cards, dice, or any other unlawful game, whereby her Master may have damage ... She shall not absent herself day nor night from her said Master's service without his leave, nor haunt ale-houses, taverns, or play-houses; but in all things behave herself as a faithful apprentice ought to do."

Tendaji Ganges, 66, executive director of the Office of Educational Opportunities Initiatives of the University of Michigan-Flint, said he is not angered by the indenture contracts, considering the alternative that would have faced his ancestors.

"From what I gathered and given the times," he said, "it's apparent that they were first taken to the hospital to make sure they were free of disease but then [the abolition society] had to overcome the issue of acculturating them to the new society. They were less indentured than they were assigned to families. They were educated and allowed to hold jobs."

Mr. Ganges and his brothers found out decades ago that there were Ganges men who had fought in the Civil War.

But it wasn't until Mr. Barnes contacted them that they realized they might be connected to a single pair of slave ships, and that their U.S. roots stretch back more than 200 years.

Kelly Ganges, 60, chief of staff for the Mercer County, N.J., executive's office, said his possible links to the USS Ganges incident give him a great deal of pride. "This is another example that demonstrates that black history is American history. The history of African-descended people cuts across all the land-

scapes of American life. I believe someone whose blood I shared came to this nation and helped this nation become what it is."

"For a lot of African-Americans," added his brother Tendaji, "you had this vague notion that our history began with slavery, and it didn't always, and that coming out of slavery everyone was dirt poor and didn't have any money until the 1900s, and that's not true either." The Ganges legacy "speaks to the clear issue of one being a legitimate, credentialized part of society. That's something that is earned by right of being a contributor."

After Mr. Barnes contacted them, the Ganges brothers made a pilgrimage to Philadelphia, visited the site where the slaves were brought ashore, looked at records and even found grave-

scapes of Ganges families in Chestnut Grove Cemetery in Chester County.

Tendaji Ganges, who works to find college opportunities for poor, minority students in Michigan, said his links to the Ganges slaves also reinforce another lesson about America.

"America's industry was built on slave labor, cheap labor, the rich exploiting the poor," he said. "We have to be more honest in looking at how America's economic strength came to be. I think we have taken far too much for granted about what we have by right and not taken into account what has come to us through no effort of our own."

Mark Roth: [markroth@post-gazette.com](mailto:markroth@post-gazette.com), 412-262-1130 and on Twitter: @markroth

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