

DNA Proves President Harding Fathered Child Out Of Wedlock

BY BRETT ZONGKER

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — DNA testing all but confirmed Thomas Jefferson slept with his slave Sally Hemings. Now it's rewriting another lurid chapter in presidential history, this one from the Roaring '20s.

Genetic analysis has proved that President Warren G. Harding fathered a child with long-rumored mistress Nan Britton, according to AncestryDNA, a DNA-testing division of Ancestry.com.

Britton set off a Jazz Age sex scandal when she went public with her tale of forbidden love in the White House, boldly publishing her story in a 1927 best-selling memoir, "The President's Daughter." But historians long questioned her claims, and Harding defenders vilified her as a liar for nearly 90 years.

Based on DNA from Britton's grandson and descendants of Harding, the results are 99.9 percent certain, Ancestry.com said. The findings were first reported Thursday by The New York Times.

The child born of their union, Elizabeth Ann Blaesing, was the only known offspring of the 29th president. She died in 2005. Britton died in 1991.

James Blaesing, 65, who grew up hearing the story of his grandfather, the president, from Britton, his grandmother, told The Associated Press he long wanted to prove she was telling the

truth. He was delighted by the DNA results.

"You know what this is? It's a love story," he said of his grandparents. "It was true love, especially on her side, and I know he felt the same way. And he got trapped."

Harding was a heartthrob U.S. senator from Ohio when the affair began. Women found him handsome and charming with great magnetism. Britton was younger by 30 years and first developed a crush on Harding as a teenage girl in his hometown. The relationship continued when Harding was president, with Britton later writing of how they made love in a White House coat closet. The secret romance ended with Harding's sudden death during his presidency in 1923.

Harding's family long maintained Britton's book was a lie or a childhood fantasy or was perhaps dreamed up by Democratic opponents of the Republican president. Some maintained that Harding was sterile because he had mumps as a child.

The Library of Congress recently published love letters from an earlier affair between Harding and another woman, Carrie F. Phillips, opening further doubts about the family's denials.

Peter Harding of Big Sur, California, a grandnephew of the former president, wanted to know the truth, along with his cousin, Abigail Harding of Worthington, Ohio, who had already begun studying her family history on Ancestry.com.

com.

But other parts of the family didn't want anyone digging into the potentially salacious details of the past.

"People have a right to know who their parents and grandparents are," said Peter Harding, a retired psychiatrist. "I think that's just a human right. There was a whole family that didn't know for sure who their father and grandfather was. They deserved to know."

Peter Harding and James Blaesing connected and agreed to do a DNA test. When the results came back, Blaesing called Abigail Harding and greeted her by saying, "Hi, cousin." The families plan to hold a reunion and get better acquainted.

But it will take time for other family members to feel comfortable with the discovery.

Historians rank Harding low among the presidents, and he is known mostly for the Teapot Dome scandal that took place during his administration. Family members who researched Harding's history said he was in a sexless marriage and had several mistresses.

Questions over Harding's affairs and out-of-wedlock daughter have circulated for years. Visitors to the Harding home in Marion, Ohio, often ask whether he had a secret daughter. Tour guides have answered with a shrug and said there's evidence it's true.

James Robenalt, a historian who wrote about Harding's affair with Phillips, said Hard-

ing's legacy has been overshadowed by the allegations of affairs. The secrets were much more titillating when they were kept in the closet, he said. But now the family can heal and be reunited.

"Politically on a much, much bigger scale it is, I think, time for people to say 'Ok, this happened, there's no longer a mystery we have to solve,'" Robenalt said. "Let's really look at Harding the politician, Harding the senator, Harding the president and really look at his record and try to assess it fairly."

Blaesing said that if his mother and grandmother were alive today, they would be pleased by the DNA findings.

"My grandmother — right now she has the biggest smile on her face," he said. "She is so happy that this is out there."

AncestryDNA spokesman Stephen Baloglu said the Harding story shows the power of DNA in rewriting history.

"The family connection is definitive," he said. "We were happy to help the Harding family members solve this longstanding family mystery."

In the Jefferson case, a DNA analysis published in 1998 found evidence that a member of the Jefferson family fathered at least one of Hemings' six children.

On the basis of that and documentary evidence — namely, the whereabouts of Jefferson's male relatives at the time — historians have generally agreed that Jefferson and Hemings had a sexual relationship, as had long been rumored.

Lawmakers Quick To Criticize China

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. lawmakers have been quick to condemn the sudden drop in the value of Chinese currency as damaging for American businesses and workers, reviving an issue that was once one of the biggest sources of tension between the two world powers.

Yet the initial response from the Obama administration officials has been mild, even positive. They say Beijing has indicated it is taking steps toward market-determined exchange rate — something that even China's biggest critics in Washington have been demanding for years.

China's territorial ambitions in the seas of East Asia and alleged cyber spying are bigger headaches in the relationship as China's leader prepares to visit the U.S. in September.

But a continued drop in the value of yuan against the dollar could become an issue of growing contention.

Monthly Average Of Jobless Claims Falls

WASHINGTON (AP) — More people sought U.S. unemployment aid last week, but the average for the past month fell to the lowest level in 15 years, a sign that few employers are cutting jobs.

The Labor Department says applications for jobless benefits rose 5,000 to a seasonally adjusted 274,000 last week. Yet the four-week average, a less volatile measure, dropped 1,750 to 266,250, the lowest since April 15, 2000.

The figures indicate that six years after the Great Recession forced 8.5 million layoffs, Americans are enjoying solid job security. Economists note that when adjusted for population growth, the current level of applications is likely at all-time lows.

Applications are a proxy for layoffs. The low readings also suggest that employers are confident about the economy's health and see little need to shed workers.

Kids Director Aims To Get Things Done

WASHINGTON (AP) — There's a new person overseeing Michelle Obama's White House initiative to reduce childhood obesity.

Her name is Deb Eschmeyer (ESH-my-er). She's a 35-year-old child nutrition advocate who grew up on an Ohio dairy farm as the youngest of seven siblings.

Eschmeyer faces two particular challenges in the final months of the Obama administration.

One is keeping intact a federal law that made school foods healthier.

The other is helping the first lady's initiative continue after Mrs. Obama leaves the White House.

Eschmeyer doesn't sound fazed by either task. She says she's used to getting things done.

Citizens Bank To Pay \$34.5 Million

WASHINGTON (AP) — Citizens Bank has been ordered to pay \$34.5 million in refunds and penalties for shortchanging customers on their full deposits.

Federal regulators said Wednesday the Providence, Rhode Island-based bank kept the difference when deposit slips and the actual amount of money transferred didn't match.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, FDIC and Office of the Comptroller of the Currency ordered Citizens Bank to pay \$14 million in refunds to customers and \$20.5 million in penalties.

Regulators say Citizens Bank only looked into discrepancies greater than \$25 or \$50. More than 475,000 business and consumer accounts were affected between January 2008 and November 2013.

Regulators called the bank's actions unfair and deceptive.

Citizens Bank says it has corrected its system for handling mistaken deposit slips and has adequate reserves to cover refunds and fines.

The bank operates in 11 states.

US Mortgage Debt Has Changed Little

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans are buying more homes and at higher prices, yet new data shows that mortgage debt is little changed.

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York says outstanding U.S. mortgage debt slipped 0.7 percent in the April-June quarter to \$8.12 trillion. That is up slightly from a year ago and about the same level as three years ago when the housing market bottomed.

The second quarter's decline occurred even as Americans took out more new mortgages, either to refinance old loans or purchase homes. New mortgages totaled \$466 billion in the second quarter, the most in almost two years.

Those trends suggests Americans are paying down mortgage debt at roughly the same pace as new loans are made, evidence that homeowners remain wary of housing-related debt.

Father Of Billy Hurley III Dies Of Wound

WASHINGTON (AP) — The father of PGA Tour player Billy Hurley III has died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Hurley announced his father's death in a statement from his management company on Thursday. According to the statement, 61-year-old Willard Hurley Jr. killed himself Wednesday in Virginia. A statement from Reston Bible Church in Reston, Virginia, also confirmed Hurley's death.

Billy Hurley announced two weeks ago during a golf tournament that his father was missing. He was later found at a public library in Texas, watching his son play golf on a computer. He told police only that he had been traveling.

Billy Hurley is with his family in Leesburg, Virginia.

FAA: Pilot Reports Of Drone Sightings More Than Double

BY JOAN LOWY

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Pilot reports of drone sightings so far this year are more than double last year, government regulators say, raising concern about the potential for a deadly collision.

There have been more than 650 reports this year by pilots of drones flying near manned aircraft, the Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement Thursday. There were 238 unmanned aircraft sightings in all of 2014.

The reports come from pilots of a variety of aircraft, including many large airliners. The concern is that if a drone collides with an aircraft engine, it could disable the engine much like birds do sometimes when they get chewed up by engines. Also, a high-speed collision with a drone might damage the surface of a plane, changing the airflows in a way that makes the plane difficult to maneuver.

There were 16 drone sightings reported in June 2014, and 36 the following month. This year, there were 138 reports from pilots flying up to 10,000 feet in altitude in June, and 137 reports in July.

Earlier this week, crews on four commercial flights spotted a drone while preparing to land at Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey. None of the pilots were required to make evasive maneuvers as a result of the sightings. The planes were between 2,000 and 3,000 feet in the air and 8 to 13 miles away from the airport.

The FAA generally restricts drone flights to beneath 400 feet and at least 5 miles from an airport.

Flying a drone "anywhere near" an airplane can bring criminal charges and fines up to \$25,000, according to the FAA.

Firefighters battling wildfires in the West have been forced to ground their operations on several occasions after drones were spotted.

Suspected drones interfered with aircraft fighting at least 13 wildfires so far this year, up from four fires last year and only scattered incidents before, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Last month, crews were grounded for 20 minutes as flames spread in a wildfire that closed Interstate 15 in Southern California and destroyed numerous vehicles after five drones were sighted.

Firefighting agencies have introduced public service announcements to warn drone hobbyists, while lawmakers are seeking stiffer penalties for interfering.

The FAA said it is working closely with law enforcement to identify and investigate unauthorized drone operations. The agency has levied civil penalties for several unauthorized flights around the country, and has dozens of open enforcement cases.

"The FAA encourages the public to report unauthorized drone operations to local law enforcement and to help discourage this dangerous, illegal activity," the statement said.

Hobbyists are allowed to fly small drones, which are hardly different from model aircraft, for non-commercial purposes as long as they abide by a few rules, including keeping the aircraft within the line of sight of the operator at all times.

The FAA and the Academy of Model

Aeronautics, an association for hobbyists, as well as other organizations representing the drone industry, have a publicity campaign called "Know Before You Fly" to educate drone operators on the rules.

The FAA recently passed a milestone of 1,000 permits granted to businesses to fly drones for aerial photography, to monitor pipelines and electrical transmission towers, and to inspect smokestacks, crops and the undersides of bridges, among other uses.

Congress has directed the FAA to develop rules that allow drones widespread access to U.S. skies while maintaining safety. The agency proposed rules for small drones earlier this year, and officials are optimistic they may be able to issue final rules before the end of the year.

Brian Wynee, president of the Association of Unmanned Vehicle Systems International, said "the proliferation of irresponsible (drone) flights" underscores the need for the FAA to finalize rules "and more aggressively enforce existing regulations."

But pilot and other unions have urged the agency not to move too quickly to expand drone flights.

"While there hasn't been a serious injury in any reported drone incident, there is little doubt that we should not open the skies to widespread commercial and recreational drone use — oh, and whatever those drones were doing hovering over brush fires — until we understand the challenge and fully implement enforceable safety rules," Ed Wytkind, head of the AFL-CIO's Transportation Trades Department, said in a recent statement.

US Retail Sales Rose In July, Aided By Autos And Restaurants

BY JOSH BOAK
AND ANNE D'INNOCENZO

AP Business Writers

WASHINGTON — Americans bought more cars, restaurant meals and building supplies in July, a rise in spending that points to steady economic growth anchored by an improving job market.

Retail sales climbed 0.6 percent last month after a flat reading in June, the Commerce Department said Thursday.

July's increase suggests that the combination of solid hiring and cheaper gasoline is contributing to rising consumer confidence and spending after a muted start to 2015. Greater retail sales could help boost overall economic growth because consumer spending accounts for the bulk of U.S. economic activity.

"This report looks solid after a run of disappointing numbers," said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics.

Revisions in the report also led economists to project stronger overall economic growth.

A crucial sales category that excludes gasoline, autos, building materials and food services rose 0.3 percent in July, as sales totals were

revised upward for May and June. This increase led several economists to project that the economy grew at an annual pace of roughly 3 percent during the second quarter, as opposed to the 2.3 percent estimate announced last month by the government.

Purchases at auto dealers rose 1.4 percent in July, while restaurants and building materials stores both recorded a 0.7 percent gain. Shopping also improved at furniture stores, sporting goods retailers and clothiers.

Even gas station sales increased in July, although lower prices at the pump have generated a 15.2 percent drop in sales over the past year.

Not all sectors improved last month. Sales waned at electronics and department stores, while spending at grocers was flat.

This reflects a broader change in the economy as shoppers are shifting away from large malls to online retailers, while generally spending less on traditional merchandise like clothing. And when they're at stores, shoppers are increasingly fixated on finding bargains.

Department store chains Macy's and Kohl's both reported shortfalls in profits and sales for the May-July quarter.

That doesn't bode well for the rest of the retailers like J.C. Penney, Wal-Mart and Target Corp., which are set to report in the next few days.

On Wednesday, Macy's Inc. reported a 26 percent drop in profits and a 2.6 percent decline in revenue and said that it no longer expects to see sales growth this year.

"The overall growth in the economy is modest at best and we are seeing customers gravitating to restaurants, recreational services, health care, electronics, rather than to traditional general merchandise, apparel, and furnishing categories," Macy's Chief Financial Officer Karen Hoguet told investors.

To pump up growth, Macy's is looking for new ways to grow outside its main business and is getting ready to open its first group of outlet stores this fall under Macy's BackStage that feeds into shoppers' obsession with discounts.

In the past 12 months, total retail sales have risen 2.4 percent. That increase slightly exceeds average hourly wage growth of 2.1 percent, a sign that consumers are starting to spend their additional earnings after a prolonged period of

caution during the six-year recovery from the Great Recession.

Retail spending has improved as employers have added a solid 2.9 million jobs over the past year. The hiring has driven the unemployment rate down to 5.3 percent from 6.2 percent during that period.

Gasoline prices are averaging \$2.59 a gallon nationwide, a 25 percent drop over the past year, according to AAA.

But the drop in gas prices also weighed on retail sales, which the government measures in dollars. When prices drop and the dollar becomes cheaper relative to other currencies, consumers might be buying the same amount of items even if they're spending less money.

Economists watch the retail sales report closely because it provides the first indication each month of the willingness of Americans to spend. Consumer spending drives 70 percent of the economy. Still, retail sales account for only about one-third of spending, with services such as haircuts and Internet access making up the remaining two-thirds.

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