

Biographical/Historical note

The story of the Stevens-Cogdell-Sanders-Venning family, which eventually developed into a prominent middle class African American family in Philadelphia, began in the 1760s, when John Stevens emigrated from England and settled in Georgia. He began as a Georgia planter, owning a plantation until a slave rebellion ended his plantation career. After this setback, he settled in Charleston, South Carolina. There he established the Carolina Coffee House, which became an important establishment and meeting point in the community. He later received a postal appointment, which added to his success. He had a daughter, Mary Ann Elizabeth Stevens, and a son, John (Jack) Stevens. His son John (Jack) Stevens left Charleston, South Carolina and moved to Jamaica, against his father's wishes. His daughter, Mary Ann Elizabeth Stevens, married George Cogdell.

Mary Ann Elizabeth Stevens and George Cogdell had three known sons, John Stephano Cogdell, Clements Stevens Cogdell, and Richard Walpole Cogdell. Their son, Richard Walpole Cogdell (1787-1866) married a woman named Cecilia, and they had three sons, James Gordon Cogdell, George Burgess Cogdell, and John Walpole Cogdell. Although he was married with a family, Richard Walpole Cogdell had a relationship with an enslaved woman, Sarah Martha Sanders (d. 1850). This relationship existed despite the feelings and emotions of his family, particularly his mother, about intimacies between the races. His mother, Mary Elizabeth Stevens wrote in her diary, "the laws of country are imperfect allowing such familiarity [physical intimacy between white men and black women] with impurity, every white man having such connection should be compelled by the laws of humanity to marry the person, black or mulatto, with whom such familiarities have existed, and to have no intercourse with genteel society or to appear in any public place of amusement on an equality with other citizens," (*Library Company of Philadelphia Annual Report*, p. 27). Mary Elizabeth Stevens passed before her son Richard Walpole Cogdell fathered children with Sarah Martha Sanders.

Richard Walpole Cogdell (1787-1866) would father no less than ten children with the enslaved woman Sarah Martha Sanders (Robert, Jacob, Julia E., Sarah Ann, Cordelia, John, Sophia Elizabeth, Miranda, Florence, and Martha J.). Though Richard Walpole Cogdell did not marry Sarah Martha Sanders (he was already married to Cecilia), he appeared to maintain an affectionate relationship with her and their children. He supported them financially and made provisions for them in his will. In the 1850s, Cogdell bought a house in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and arranged for his children by Sanders to move there in order flee the slave state of South Carolina. Eventually, Richard Walpole Cogdell's estate languished due to poor fiscal management. He died in Philadelphia in 1866.

Despite Richard Walpole Cogdell's financial misfortunes, Richard Walpole Cogdell and Sarah Martha Sanders' children and their children's offspring went on to join Philadelphia's middle class black citizenry. The children became tradesmen, businessmen, educators, and business professionals. The Sanders were "...dedicated to providing their children with opportunities for education, culture and economically secure professional status," (*Library Company of Philadelphia Annual Report*, p. 28). The Sanders family was involved in several prominent local African American institutions, including the St. Thomas P.E. Church, Church of the Crucifixion, Central Presbyterian Church, the Colored Institute of Youth, and the Citizens Republic Club.