

## Newspaper articles from the Queen Charlotte statue controversy in Charlotte, North Carolina (1989) and another article from 1997

The Jan. 27, 1989 *The Charlotte Observer* has a front page photo of a sculpture of Queen Charlotte by B. Graham Weathers under the title "The Queen, In Bronze," and an article by John Wildman entitled "Statue of Queen Takes Its Bows."



Several days later, on the Feb. 3, 1989 *The Charlotte Observer* published a letter to the editor from Rev. Motlalepula Chabaku titled "Queen's Features Altered", in which Rev. Chabaku, a Black woman from South African who was a civil rights activist and local Methodist minister, stated "She was a black woman even though she was the consort of King George III."

### Queen's Features Altered

*The writer is minister, United Methodist Church.*

I am concerned that The Observer has given prominent display (Jan. 27, "The Queen, In Bronze") to the statue of Queen Charlotte, whose African features have been replaced by European or Caucasian appearance.

It is a fact that Queen Charlotte Sophia had mixed ancestry of African and European blood and was the grandmother of Queen Victoria. She was a black woman even though she was the consort of King George III. Why can't we have her as naturally as she was? Why be ashamed of her African features?

Rev. MOTLALEPULA CHABAKU  
Newton

Weather's reply "Not Ashamed of Queen's Features" from Feb 20, 1989.

SEE CORRECTION  
2/20/89 E.A.

## Not Ashamed Of Queen's Features

I was somewhat aghast at the Rev. Motlalepula Chabaku's letter (Feb. 3, "Queen's Features Altered"). If I properly understood his letter, he felt that I had altered the features of Queen Charlotte intentionally to avoid showing her African features and that I was ashamed of her physical characteristics.

Portrait sculpture is an art form that enjoys permanently stating the features of a subject as the sculptor sees them.

In the case of Queen Charlotte Sophia, I was forced to rely on the paintings that were done during her lifetime by those who were fortunate enough to have her pose for them.

There were more than 200 portraits painted of the delightfully elegant lady. My artistic process in this particular study was to attempt to see as many paintings as I could and as many photographs of paintings as possible.

After studying what was in the regional library and museum sources, I spent time in London at the Victoria and Albert Museum, National Portrait Gallery, the National Museum, the Tate Gallery, The British Museum and Kew Gardens.

Kew Gardens is the lovely palace where her majesty died. It contains dozens of paintings of her, King George III and their 15 children. It also holds many delightful items that were reported to have belonged to the Queen and her family.

As I stood there looking out her window at the beautiful gardens that are similar to the ones she might have seen 200 years ago; saw the chair in which she was sitting when she died; and walked to the gardens that she walked, she became a living, vital person to me. I could almost feel the beauty of her presence.

After studying the many paintings and photographs of paintings, and on the basis of the anatomical composition of the face, mandible, lips, hair, nose, eyes, length of neck, height of forehead, head-to-body relationship and apparent personality, I attempted to sculpt a composite.

Some of the painters, ordinarily considered to be some of the best of the period, were Gainsborough, Ramsey, Zoffany, Beechey, West, Lawrence, Reynolds and others. It is true that none of the paintings looked exactly alike, for they were painted by many different artists over many years. Yet, the bone structure and basic anatomy of the face were consistent.

Mr. Chabaku, I regret my sculpture does not have the physical features you might wish to see, but I sculpted what I saw and believe to be true and consistent.

Perhaps you would be able to let me see the paintings on which you have based your criticism in order that I might understand your sources.

It was not my intent to offend anyone, but I will stand behind my researched portrait of Queen Charlotte Sophia, for I think I have captured her as a living, elegant queen who needs no excuses made for her appearance.

B. GRAHAM WEATHERS  
Stanley

Correction from Feb 20, 1989. It is interesting that Weathers assumed Chabaku was a man, or at least didn't think to clarify, and he didn't address her using the honorific "Rev." that she used in her letter.

### Clarification

In "Not Ashamed Of Queen's Features" (Feb. 16), the writer referred to Mr. Motlalepula Chabaku. The Rev. Chabaku is a woman.

"Some Say Queen Charlotte Can Claim African Ancestry" by Ed Martin, Charlotte Observer, Feb 22 1989

## Some Say Queen Charlotte Can Claim African Ancestry

By ED MARTIN  
Staff Writer

Was Queen Charlotte black?

Charlotte's namesake has been dead for 171 years, but a new statue of her is raising the question among some blacks and historians of whether German-born Charlotte Sophia, wife of King George III, had black ancestors.

The statue, by sculptor B. Grant Weathers, was unveiled Jan. 26 at the new Charlotte Apparel Center.

Historians say Charlotte's racial lineage will never be known for sure.

She was born Princess Charlotte Sophia on May 19, 1744, in the duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz in Germany. She married England's King George III in

1761, had 15 children and died in 1818. But some believe, based on a number of portraits by painters of her time and at least one black historical reference work, that Queen Charlotte was partly black. And they say the new statue doesn't show that.

"I was surprised when I saw the statue," says banker Ronald Harrill, a Charlotte authority on black history. "She's depicted as full European, although she definitely had African ancestry."

"There is no pure black, no pure white," said the Rev. Motlalepula Chabaku, who grew up in South Africa and is now minister of three Methodist

See SOME Page 16B



Queen Charlotte in the portrait by Allan Ramsay at the Mint Museum.

## Some Say Queen Charlotte Can Claim African Ancestry

Continued From Page 1B

churches in Catawba County. "Why be ashamed of her African features?"

The question of the queen's race came to light in an exchange of letters to The Charlotte Observer between Chabaku and sculptor Weathers.

Chabaku charged that Weathers replaced the queen's African features with "European or Caucasian appearance."

Weathers, a family doctor and sculptor in the Gaston County town of Stanley, says he is stung by the insinuations. "I sculpt what I see," he says.

What he saw in most of several hundred portraits he studied, says Weathers, "was no suggestion in skin color, width of nose, thickness of lips, that might suggest Negroid descent."

Artists have depicted her with differing looks. A painted cup from about 1880 shows a woman with thin lips, arrow-straight, thin nose and receding chin.

Gilbert Stuart, in a portrait in the N.C. Museum of Art in Raleigh, painted her in powdered wig bearing a striking resemblance to his more famous portrait — George Washington.

In D.A. Tompkins's 1903 "History of Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte," she has blond hair, a tiny mouth, small, sharp nose and light eyes.

The Mint Museum's painting by Queen Charlotte's contemporary, Allan Ramsay, is of a heavy woman with broad nose, full lips and chestnut eyes.

It was Ramsay's painting and eyewitness descriptions of the queen that led historian J.A. Rogers

"To me it doesn't matter if she was black or not."

— Sculptor B. Grant Weathers

ers, in his three-volume "Sex and Race," to pronounce her black.

Rogers wrote that she "had the broad nostrils and heavy lips," characterized by another historian, Brunold Springer, as of "the blond Negroid type."

Rogers, who wrote in the 1930s and 1940s, also quoted an eyewitness description by Englishman Horace Walpole: "It would have been possible to reproduce several pictures of Negroes who resemble this English queen."

Harrill, an assistant vice president of First Union National Bank in Charlotte and graduate of N.C. A&T State University, says Queen Charlotte's case illustrates how white history blurs black roles.

"Our history books were written in America with its beliefs about racial superiority," says Kelly Alexander Jr., president of the state NAACP. "I grew up in an age before I knew Hannibal was black. But you go back and look at the statues of his time, and there was no question he was black."

Sculptor Weathers says he doesn't know whether Queen Charlotte had black ancestors. But the bulk of her portraits and even a lock of her hair still preserved in England give no indication, he says.

"To me it doesn't matter if she was black or not."

### Errors in article:

- misattribution of the "pictures of Negroes" quote to Horace Walpole (a contemporary of Charlotte who commented about her in his *Letters*), when it was J. A. Rogers writing that about himself
- gets the sculptor's name wrong — it is "B. Graham Weathers" not "B. Grant Weathers"
- "characterized by another historian, Brunold Springer" — Springer was not an historian, he was a Jewish German lawyer who wrote several books about scientific racism from an antiracist perspective.

- Alexander states "I grew up in an age before I knew Hannibal was black." — this is not a historically-accurate description of Hannibal and is widely considered to be Afrocentric pseudohistory.

Feb 27 1997 "Was Queen Charlotte Black? Debate lives" in *The Charlotte Observer*

# Was Queen Charlotte black? Debate lives

Some Observer readers pan portrait of a lady

**By KATHLEEN PURVIS**  
*Food Editor*

Charlotte Sophia of Mecklenburg-Strelitz was many things in her 76 years, including wife of King George III and a patron of artists and writers.

But was she black?

An image of Queen Charlotte that ran in The Observer's Food section Wednesday showed her with European features.

In painting the illustration, artist Al Phillips used several images of the queen. One was the familiar coronation portrait from Charlotte's 1761 marriage to George III, painted by Allan Ramsay, which now hangs in the Mint Museum of Art.

However, some readers objected to the rendering, because it did not show Queen Charlotte as a black woman, a claim that dates to the 1930s and that resurfaced several years ago in controversy surrounding a statue on College Street.

On "The Breakfast Brothers"

## DEPICTIONS OF QUEEN CHARLOTTE



A painting from the Mint Museum collection, circa 1762  
by Allan Ramsay



A portrait from an 18th century  
enamel beaker



From Wednesday's  
Observer Food front  
by Al Phillips

SOURCE: The Mint Museum

Staff graphic

show Wednesday on WPEG-FM (98), hosts Keith Richards and B.J. Murphy called the portrait an error and urged listeners to call The Observer.

Some local historians disputed that claim, however, saying there is no way it can be verified. At Johnson C. Smith University, spokeswoman Vanessa Baxter said members of the history depart-

ment had no information to prove it.

"I've read about her and written about her, and I have never found any documentation to support this question," said Charlotte author Mary Kratt, who wrote the plaque that is with a statue of Queen Charlotte on College

**Please see CHARLOTTE / page 9A**

# Historians question claim German-born queen of England was of African descent

## CHARLOTTE

Continued from page 1A

Street. "People have asked me this, but I've never seen anything on paper that would support this."

Robin Brabham, special collections librarian at UNC Charlotte, said he has heard the claim but had never pursued it.

"I've never seen any kind of written documentation. I would be surprised if she were, quite frankly."

Phil Busher of the Mint Museum says the question surfaces occasionally because of the Ramsay portrait, which depicts the 17-year-old queen with full lips and a broad nose.

"It has led to a number of questions with our docents," Busher said. The museum has even checked with Buckingham Palace. "When asked about this, they simply say there's no validity to this claim."

In Germany, he said, "they were rather surprised, wondering where this one came from."

In the three-volume book "Sex and Race" by historian J.A. Rogers, who wrote in the 1930s and '40s, the Ramsay portrait and a disputed eyewitness description were cited in Rogers' claim that Charlotte was of African descent.

However, the Mint's files have 50 images of the queen and each

one looks different, Busher says. It was common in those days for artists to change their paintings to reflect what the subject of the painting wanted — particularly royalty, he says.

"If you look at the 49 other images we have, you can't believe it's the same person," Busher said.

"In all the portraits I have seen of her, other than the Ramsay portrait, she has aquiline features," said Kratt.

"Strictly going by features, I'd have to caution against making any racial assumption. Curly hair and full lips — those features are not relegated to any race in particular," Busher said.

After checking through his resources, Brabham said one 1818 biography showed a detailed genealogy for the queen. Born in Minrow, Germany, in 1744, she was the daughter of Karl Ludwig Friedrich, duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, and Elisabeth Albertine.

"That's not to say that the chart is completely accurate," Brabham noted. "It may be that if there were African ancestry, the knowledge of it would have been suppressed in the early 19th century."

"Granted, history is full of surprises," said Busher. "The bottom line, really, is she was one of England's outstanding queens. And if African Americans want to adopt her as their own, I'm all for it."