

A CHANCE meeting in a Grahamstown supermarket between a social worker and a Rhodes University professor has inspired research into the origins of a Stutterheim family thought to be descendants of two freed American slaves.

The fascinating story of the Pirie Forest-dwelling Fourie clan – who have called themselves the “Frees of the Forest” for generations – would probably not have seen the light of day if Nospoho Adam had not bumped into Professor Russell Kaschula and told him she had found a picture of a long dead relative, Ellen Styles, and was planning to write a book about her slave origins.

Intrigued at being approached by a complete stranger with such a fascinating story, Kaschula – a renowned Xhosa expert – took Adam’s phone number and promised to help.

“We had never met before, she heard somewhere that I was a Rhodes University professor and took a chance asking me if I could help.”

According to Adam she was inspired to dig deep into her unique family roots by a photo she saw of her great, great grandmother Ellen Styles – who is believed to have come to the Eastern Cape with her missionary husband William Craft years after they escaped slavery in the United States – at a family funeral in East London in 2010.

“They (Fouries) claim to be descended from American slaves who moved to Pirie forest in the 1800s. “Their lives were, and still are, dedicated to freedom and liberation for all,” Adam said

A year after their chance meeting, Kaschula – who in the meantime had been awarded a prestigious National Research Foundation SARChI post in the field of Intellectualisation of African Languages, Multilingualism and Education – had secured a photo of Styles and a modest grant to fund research into

The incredible story of two American slaves who escaped and found freedom in South Africa hundreds of years ago may sound like the stuff of a Wilbur Smith bestseller but many are convinced it is true. **David Macgregor** investigates the mysterious origins of the “Frees of the Forest” near Stutterheim.

the historical claims. Adam’s ongoing research is written up in Xhosa and has been translated to English by Kaschula.

According to Adam and Kaschula – who both have separate family roots stretching back several generations in the Stutterheim area – the Pirie Forest is no ordinary place.

They say that for generations there have been “interesting interracial interactions and language dialects that have emerged from the forest”.

Although directly related to the Fouries – who call themselves the “Frees of the Forest” – Adam admitted little is known about the origins of her ancestors even though they have lived in and survived from the forest for many generations.

“It has not been easy for me to understand that I have slave roots ... to think that Ellen Styles was a slave makes me heartsore,” she explained.

During the course of her ongoing research it emerged that Ellen Styles and William Craft were born into slavery in the US and later escaped to England before arriving in South Africa.

“Exactly how the former slave couple ended up in a forest in the Eastern Cape is still a mystery and speculation ranges from being shipwrecked near East London to travelling here to do missionary work.

Craft is believed to have changed his name to Barrend Free soon after his arrival.

According to Adam the surname was later changed to Fourie by Bar-

rend. “One story I heard was that there was a livestock auction where one item was given away free.

“Barrend decided then to change the family name from Free to Fourie because it seemed like free things had no value.”

Although research into how the light-skinned “Frees of the Forest” ended up in Stutterheim still has a long way to go, Adam and Kaschula are convinced their remarkable journey started on the other side of the world.

Since she started digging into her roots, Adam has established that Ellen Styles was born in Georgia to an Afro/American slave mother “owned” by a General Smith – who was her father.

“She was allowed to marry William Craft, she appeared too white to be a slave and the darker William allowed for her to be accepted in a slave community church.”

In the book *Touched by Fire* by American author Christopher Datta, one woman in the slave church at the time is said to have commented: “look at her, she thinks she is better because she is as a yellow ‘moon’ like her father” when describing Ellen Craft (Styles).

“Ellen had to make a plan to escape slavery because her children were going to be slaves like them. She also disrupted the cultural and gender mores of the 19th century.”

In her 1860 book *Running 1000 Miles to Freedom*, a copy of which

the researchers have read online, the couple describe how darker-skinned William acted as Styles’ slave during their daring daylight. “She escaped as a man, disguised as a planter Mr Johnson.”

The couple then went to England before ending up in the Pirie Forest. Over the years Styles developed a reputation as a selfless medical/spiritual woman.

“Her patients used to pay with what they can afford ... cows, chickens and goats,” Adam says.

Although her children were pale in complexion, they hated to be identified as white. “They wanted to be identified as themselves”.

Many of her Xhosa-speaking offspring have followed in her spiritual footsteps.

One relative was a renowned diviner who reportedly would disappear under water for many days and people of the river – *abantu bakomkhulu* – used to smear a white clay on her face.

Styles’ son Boet Fourie – a well-known *igqira* (traditional healer) in the area – was classified white but hated the racial tag, preferring to identify with the disadvantaged population instead.

Although ‘Frees of the Forest’ married across the colour line and moved all over the Eastern Cape over the years – they usually stay near a wooded area. Many still stay near Pirie Forest. — davidm@dispatch.co.za



CENTRAL FIGURE: Ellen Styles, matriarch to the ‘Frees of Stutterheim’, is believed to have been an escaped American slave, her light-skin attributed to her father, a slave owner



FRANTIC DASH: Ellen Styles or Craft as she was at this stage, dressed as a man, accompanied by her ‘slave’, to escape from the US in the 1800s



UNDER COVER: Style’s husband, William Craft, is believed to have escaped slavery and the US, by pretending to be his wife’s slave