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

Not Ashamed Of Queen's Features

I was somewhat aghast at the Rev. Mmotalepula 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, Ramsay, 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

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

Errors in article:
- misattributes 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.
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" 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, spokesman Vanessa Baxter said members of the history department 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

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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 1940s, 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."