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—*The New York Times Book Review*



# THE INVISIBLE LINE

A SECRET HISTORY of RACE IN AMERICA

DANIEL J. SHARFSTEIN

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## Praise for *The Invisible Line*

"An astonishingly detailed rendering of the variety and complexity of racial experience in an evolving national culture moving from slavery to segregation to civil rights."  
—*The New York Times Book Review*

"In this meticulously researched history, Sharfstein's ace-in-the-hole is his ability to re-create dramatic events and build flesh-and-blood characters. . . . He sets out to change the way we think about race, and he succeeds brilliantly. . . . A must-read."  
—*Financial Times*

"A spellbinding chronicle of racial passing in America . . . Sharfstein . . . approaches his subject with a storyteller's verve and a novelist's gift for telling detail. *The Invisible Line* is not only a work of serious scholarship based on exhaustive archival research but an immensely satisfying read."  
—*The Boston Globe*

"Everyone knows when slavery ended, but few know how Slavery Lite continued under the oppressive sharecropper system. The persistence of such amnesia long after the triumphs of the civil rights movement makes *The Invisible Line* must reading. With dogged research, lawyer and journalist Daniel J. Sharfstein has stitched together the stories of three families toeing America's racial trip wire across several generations. Woven into a novelistic narrative, *The Invisible Line* presents a primer on the hypocrisies that confronted everyday Americans from the Revolution through to the 1960s. . . . *The Invisible Line* contains unforgettable struggles that should be recounted not just during Black History Month but year-round."  
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"[This] sweeping history of three black families in the U.S. was impeccably researched. Only a writer who lived and breathed his subject matter for more than six years could write with such authority . . . crafted in an immensely readable style . . . Sharfstein breathes life into his long-deceased characters and their stories."  
—Associated Press

"Enhanced by its almost lyrical prose, [*The Invisible Line*] explores questions of elective identity, usually based on wealth, behavior, and reputation, rather than color, as well as the often tumultuous events that led to historical and personal compromises. American social history scholars, genealogists, and general readers who wish to learn through vivid case studies will be interested."  
—*Library Journal*

“Drawing on archival material, Sharfstein constructs an absorbing history, demonstrating the fluidity and arbitrariness of racial classification.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“*The Invisible Line* is a detailed and instructive look at America’s tortured history and still-evolving attitudes toward race.”

—*BookPage*

“*The Invisible Line* shines light on one of the most important, but too often hidden, aspects of American history and culture. Sharfstein’s narrative of three families negotiating America’s punishing racial terrain is a must-read for all who are interested in the construction of race in the United States.”

—Annette Gordon-Reed, Pulitzer Prize-winning author  
of *The Hemingses of Monticello*

“*The Invisible Line* offers a trilogy of remarkable tales brimming with risk taking, camouflage, irony, narrow escapes, misgivings, regret, delight, and full-scale human drama. Excellent histories have been published about the Great Migration of twentieth-century African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, but, until now, no authoritative and cumulative work has looked at this preceding and overlapping social movement of race changing. This book overthrows nearly everything Americans thought they knew about race.”

—Melissa Fay Greene, author of *Praying for Sheetrock* and  
*There Is No Me Without You*

“An original and often startling look at the vagaries of the ‘color line.’ Sharfstein shows definitively that it was not a doctrinaire belief in racial purity that gave the South stability but rather a fluid understanding by its people and its institutions of racial difference and its multiple permutations.”

—Henry Louis Gates Jr., Alphonse Fletcher University  
Professor, Harvard University

“Sharfstein brings his original research alive with a novelist’s eye for vivid detail and narrative. A groundbreaking work that will stir reflection and debate.”

—Matthew Pearl, author of *The Dante Club*

"With lively prose and remarkable research, Sharfstein creates a fresh and stirring epic of American life. He weaves the vexing problem of race into the very fabric of national life and shows just how unsteady and complicated racial identity can be."

—Martha A. Sandweiss, author of *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line*

"A tremendous contribution to our understanding of the role of race in American history . . . One of those rare books that makes history come alive."

—Lawrence M. Friedman, Marion Rice Kirkwood Professor, Stanford Law School, and author of *A History of American Law*

"Deeply intertwined in the American story of race are these stories of camouflaged families and their passages across the color line. Daniel Sharfstein disentangles them with eloquence and compassion."

—David K. Shipler, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Country of Strangers: Blacks and Whites in America*

"A beautifully written book that reveals not only how the law has shaped American ideas about race but also how the complexity of human experience has pushed against the rigid boundaries of our legal categories."

—Mark S. Weiner, professor of law, Rutgers-Newark School of Law, and author of *Black Trials*

"Brilliant . . . a true American story. Its consequences pervade the American past and shadow its future."

—Ira Berlin, professor of history, University of Maryland, and author of *The Making of African America*

"A must-read for all serious students of the race line in American life, written with care, verve, sophistication, and enormous learning."

—Randall Kennedy, Michael R. Klein Professor of Law, Harvard University

"A powerful indictment of one of America's most enduring myths. Written with a novelist's eye for fascinating characters and rich sense of place and a scholar's precision and panoramic perspective, *The Invisible Line* makes visible the shifting artificial nature of the 'color line' and its dire, life-changing consequences. Read this book if you want to understand the roots of our knotted racial history. Read this book if you hope to untangle it."

—Bliss Broyard, author of *One Drop*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel J. Sharfstein is an associate professor of law at Vanderbilt University. A graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, he has been awarded fellowships in legal history from Harvard, New York University, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has written for *The Yale Law Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications. He lives with his family in Nashville, Tennessee.

*For Ann*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*The Invisible Line* is a work of history. It tells the stories of real people who left traces of their lives in census and military records, wills and property deeds, the occasional memoir, and stories in the back pages of newspapers. In the course of my research, I drew upon the resources of courthouses, manuscript libraries, government archives, and private collections in eighteen states and the District of Columbia. I found that I was able to reconstruct the lives and worlds of the book's main figures in considerable detail—their neighborhoods down to the siding on the homes, the day-to-day routines of their jobs, even the size of the collars they wore on their shirts. Above all, their individual characters emerged with remarkable clarity in private letters, newspaper interviews, and testimony in court and before Congress.

Many of the people I chronicle left behind a voluminous record of their thoughts, aspirations, and agonies. To convey the richness of their stories, I have written the book from their perspectives whenever possible. I have set scenes and described individuals and places as clearly and vividly as the sources allow, consistent with what I know about the time, locations, people, and events. Often the descriptions are based on letters, interviews, and court testimony. In the absence of these personal expressions, I have relied on other material, including documented sources from contemporaneous observers, local histories, and my own observations. Like every historian, I have made inferences in interpreting primary

sources, but these inferences—my interpretations of history—are always rooted in fact.

Because *The Invisible Line* is a history of race told largely from the perspective of people who lived in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, I have made every effort to preserve their individual voices by retaining the original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation in direct quotations. I also use a number of archaic terms to refer to African Americans. These are the terms that the subjects of this book used in order to think about racial categories and to define themselves and others.

“Now measure ten drops into the paint . . . There, that’s it, not too goddam fast. Now. You want no more than ten, and no less.”

Slowly, I measured the glistening black drops, seeing them settle upon the surface and become blacker still, spreading suddenly out to the edges.

“That’s it. That’s all you have to do,” he said. “Never mind how it looks. That’s my worry. You just do what you’re told and don’t try to think about it. When you’ve done five or six buckets, come back and see if the samples are dry . . . And hurry, we’ve got to get this batch back off to Washington by 11:30 . . .

“Let’s see,” he said, selecting a sample and running his thumb across the board. “That’s it, as white as George Washington’s Sunday-go-to-meetin’ wig and as sound as the all-mighty dollar! That’s paint!” he said proudly. “That’s paint that’ll cover just about anything!”

He looked as though I had expressed a doubt and I hurried to say, “It’s certainly white all right.”

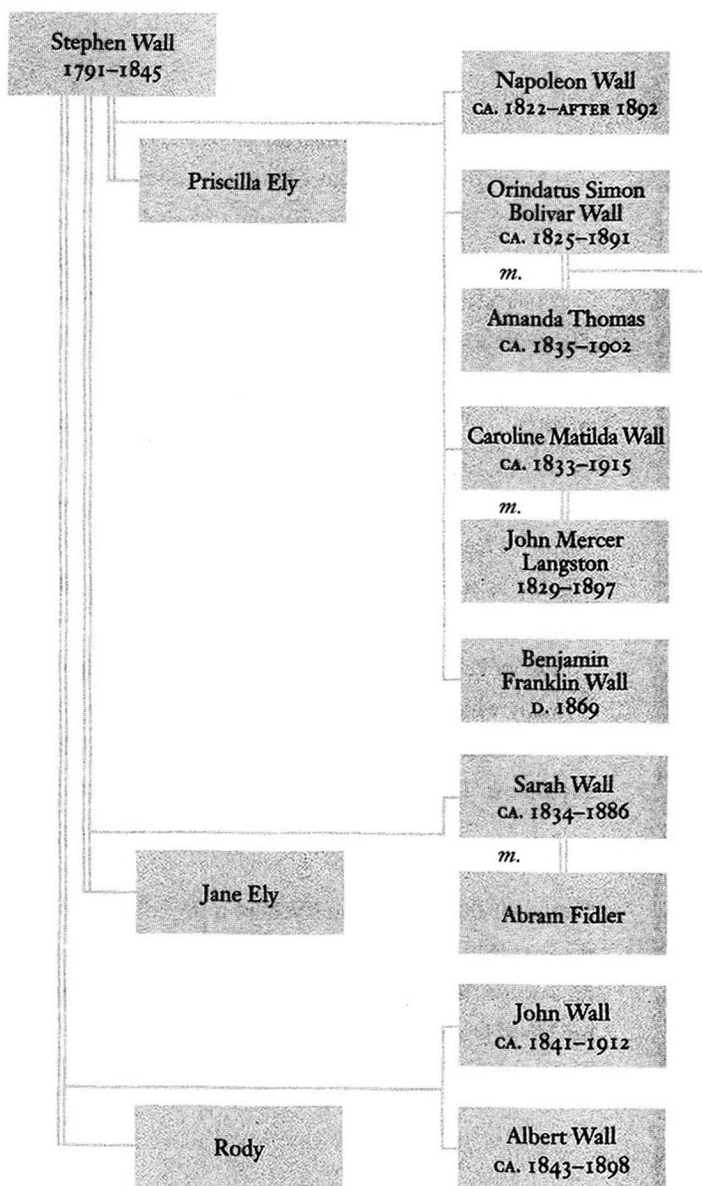
“White! It’s the purest white that can be found. Nobody makes a paint any whiter. This batch right here is heading for a national monument!”

RALPH ELLISON, *Invisible Man* (1952)

“Where is the blood of me? Where is my color? My blood is covered over the cornfield among these hills . . . Blood and sweat of mine is on the bare hills where they ain’t no timber—where there is old corn rows. That’s where my blood is and my color is.”

JESSE STUART, “Battle Keaton Dies,” in *Head o’ W-Hollow* (1936)

# FALL FAMILY TREE



Edward Wall  
1856–BEFORE 1933

Stephen R. Wall, aka  
Steven Russell Gates  
1857–1934

*m.*

Lillian Slee, aka  
Elizabeth Jane Gates  
CA. 1870–1936

Sallie Wall,  
aka Helen Easton  
1862–1933

Isabel Irene  
“Bel” Wall  
CA. 1864–AFTER 1946

*m.*

Gotthold Otto  
Elterich  
1866–1907

Laura Gertrude Wall  
B. 1873

Isabel Irene Wall, aka  
Lillian Isabel Gates  
1901–1980

*m.*

Charles Winward  
1901–1980

Ruth Garrigus  
1906–1997

*m.*

Roscoe Orin Wall,  
aka Russell Gates,  
aka Patrick Murphy  
1906–1945

*m.*

Charlotte Doster  
1918–2004

Ethel Ada Wall,  
aka Ethel Ada Gates  
1907–1970

Isabel Wall Winward  
B. 1937

*m.*

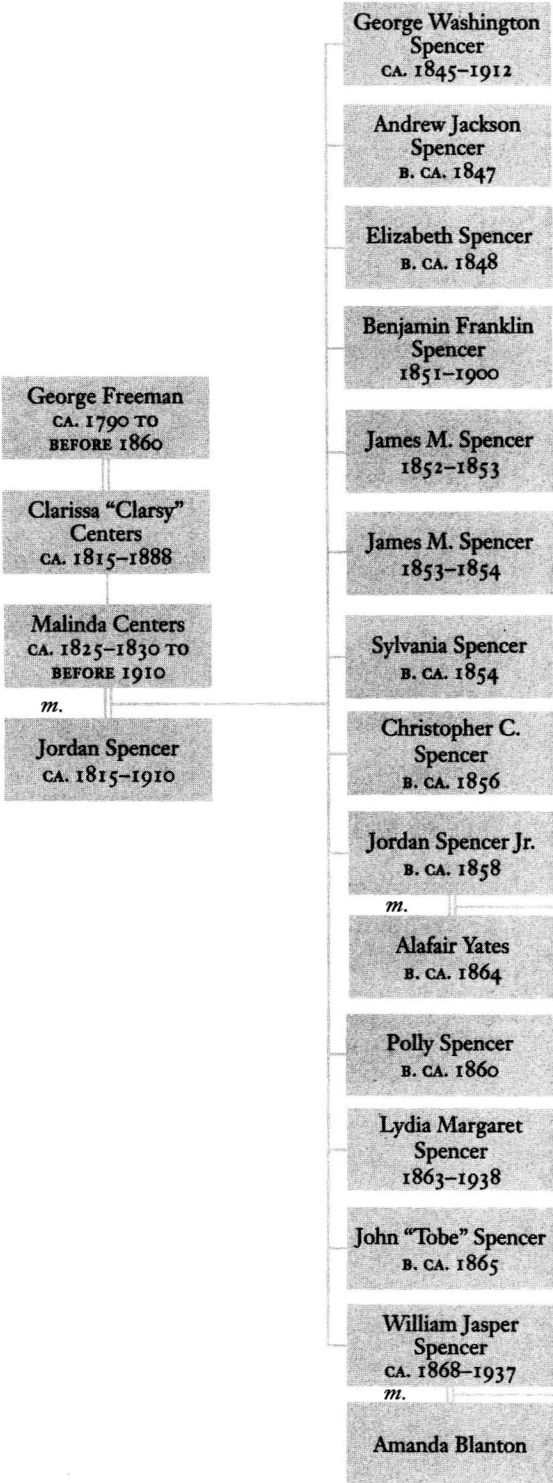
Richard W.  
Whittemore  
1934–2005

Patrick Gates  
B. 1932

Thomas L. Murphy  
B. 1943

*For reasons of space and clarity, the family trees depict only those branches that are featured in this book. Each family can claim dozens—even hundreds—of living descendants.*

SPENCER FAMILY TREE



George Spencer  
B. CA. 1880

*m.*

Armina Justice  
B. CA. 1880

Liengracia Spencer  
B. CA. 1887

Ben Spencer  
B. CA. 1888

Andrew Jackson  
Spencer  
B. CA. 1891

Vergia Spencer  
B. CA. 1893

John Spencer  
B. CA. 1895

William Spencer  
B. CA. 1897

Paris Spencer  
B. CA. 1899

Melvin Spencer  
1902-1982

*m.*

Callie Stiltner  
1908-1986

Cyrus Spencer  
1890-1973

*m.*

Dosha Marshall  
1897-1982

Bruce Spencer  
1918-1991

*m.*

Dessie May

Freda Spencer  
B. 1947

# GIBSON FAMILY TREE

