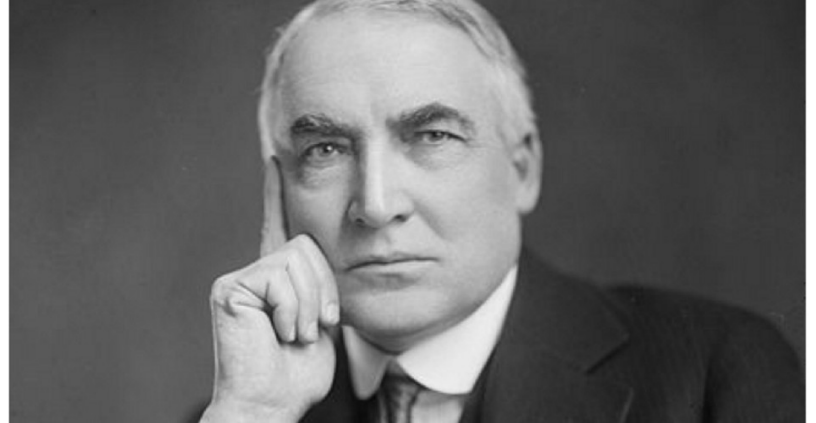




Written by [Steve Byas](#) on September 14, 2015

Do DNA Tests Really Prove President Harding Fathered Illegitimate Child?

In mid-August, the media gleefully reported that DNA testing confirmed that conservative Republican President Warren Harding fathered an illegitimate child, a girl whom he didn't acknowledge while he was alive. Testing of a known descendant of Nan Britton, who claimed Harding fathered a child with her, and the descendants of known relatives of the former president "proved" that Harding fathered a child by Britton, about 30 years his junior. Or maybe not.



Four years after the death of President Harding, Nan Britton caused a national stir when she authored a book, *The President's Daughter*, claiming that the late president was the father of her child, Elizabeth. With no other proof to back up her scandalous charges, Britton was generally dismissed as either delusional, or an opportunistic liar.

Harding's "descendants" have, as CNN reported on August 14, "persistently denied the claim," an impossibility considering that Harding had no known descendants. The "descendants" were actually descendants of a brother to President Harding.

But rather than continuing to deny Britton's assertions, a grandniece, Abigail Harding, and a grandnephew, Peter Harding, initiated DNA testing by contacting Jim Blaesing, a great-grandson of Nan Britton.

Abigail Harding's statement, as reported by CNN, is interesting. "Right before the results came back, we had a little nagging fear, you know, what if the results came back negative." Why would Abigail Harding have a "nagging fear" that the results might indicate that her famous relative, President Harding, did not father Nan Britton's daughter? One can only interpret her remark that she wanted it to be proved that Harding had fathered an illegitimate child, although she also told reporters that her famous relative was a much better president than he has been portrayed.

Peter Harding expressed hope that the public will overlook the sex story — saying his famous relative "loved women and he loved sex, as every healthy American man does, (but) he was not a womanizer" — so now we can "focus on his achievements."

Now, Blaesing and the Hardings are looking to have a family get-together next March.

Many media outlets took the DNA tests as proof of Harding paternity of the Britton child. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* stated, "DNA proves President Harding fathered child out of wedlock," while *The Guardian* boldly proclaimed, "DNA test confirms Warren Harding fathered child outside his marriage."

ABC News insisted, "Warren Harding Love Child Confirmed Through DNA Testing."

The *New York Times* was somewhat more reserved. "DNA is said to solve a mystery of Warren Harding's love life."



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Vanity Fair even added that not only did the DNA test prove the Harding paternity, but citing Britton's book, even told its readers that she added, "the fact that the two also had sex in a closet in a West Wing closet." Really?

Well, as Lee Corso sometimes says on ESPN's game day program, when challenging another panelist's prediction of the outcome of an upcoming football game, "Not so fast!"

First of all, there are reasons Britton's charges have been considered lacking all these years, despite liberal academia's near-universal relegation of President Harding to the lower ranks of American presidents in what must be justly considered an effort to smear a very successful conservative president. Harding had a strong record as president: He cut taxes, lowered the national debt, and refused to intervene in the severe post-World War I economic depression, leading to a quick end to the depression. His refusal to resort to such government meddling is in stark contrast to the later failure of Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt to end the Great Depression, when both adopted government interventionist policies.

Had there been known evidence that Britton's charges were true, liberal academics would have told us so, but her claims rang too hollow.

Britton's book was unusually explicit for its day, making frequent references to alleged sexual activity, involving her and the former president. She certainly had a "thing" for Harding. In her high-school English book, she wrote several references to Harding, who was then the local newspaper publisher in Marion, Ohio. She even wrote on page one of the book that among the reasons that George Washington should be honored was because "he looks like Harding."

She had named a soldier in Europe, Edmund M. Christian, on the birth certificate as her daughter's father, but in the book she said that the girl was conceived in Harding's Senate office in 1919, and that they continued the affair even after he was president.

Frank Gibbs, who traveled with Harding during the presidential campaign in 1920, said he was with Harding "almost constantly," and yet he had "never heard of a woman by the name of Nan Britton." Patrick Kenrey, the doorkeeper at the executive offices for 35 years said that not only had he "never" heard of Nan Britton, but furthermore he knew that "no strange woman ever came here to see President Warren G. Harding." Ike Hoover, who began working at the White House during the administration of President Benjamin Harrison in the 1880s, and left at the start of the administration of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, was especially blunt: "Nan Britton is a liar."

Harry Daugherty, campaign manager for Harding, and later the attorney general, was vehement in his denunciation of Nan Britton. "Without hesitation, therefore, I say that I never heard of her, nor heard of her name spoken, until the appearance of the book, *The President's Daughter*."

Daugherty challenged Britton's account on multiple points. He noted that Richard Wightman, who helped Britton write the book, was sued for divorce due to his association with Britton. He called attention to the fact, that despite supposedly seeing Britton several times in the period before Harding was president, he never bothered to see his supposed child.

What Daugherty found particularly incredible in a book of 439 pages, "There is produced not a single letter of Harding's to Miss Britton. The writer says that he was an habitual writer of love letters and sent her hundreds — many of them forty to sixty pages long! The author of the *The President's Daughter* could not produce one of these, for a simple reason. They were never written. They were never received by Miss Britton. One genuine love letter would have been enough to establish her case.



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But she never has and never could produce it.”

Britton claimed that she had destroyed all of the alleged love letters.

Despite his “love of children,” Harding and his wife never had any children. The reason long given for why they never had children, was the assertion that Harding was sterile, which *Vanity Fair* and other reports dismissed as just family lore.

Actually, it was more than just a family story. Harding married Florence Kling De Wolfe in 1891. She was a divorcee, and in her previous marriage, had mothered a child. Yet, over several years of marriage, she and Harding never had any children. This would have been unusual, especially for the day. Harding told a friend, Mont Reily, that he wanted children, but he was unable to father a child, and Mrs. Harding did not wish to adopt.

“I have never had any children. I have never been able to be the father of children,” Harding told Reily. “I would be the happiest man on earth if I had half a dozen little ones playing around my knee. But God ordered it otherwise.” Interestingly, Reily recalled that Harding told him this just before Harding was nominated for president in the summer of 1920, about a year after the birth of Britton’s daughter. According to historian Robert Ferrell, other friends expressed knowledge of Harding’s inability to father a child.

And, when his wife later had persistent health problems, Harding carried on an affair over several years with a local neighbor woman, Carrie Phillips, who also never had any children during that time.

Doctor Joseph De Barthe, writing in *The Answer* in 1928, concluded Harding was physically unable to have a child. De Barthe learned of Harding’s sterility from the president’s brother, George Harding, also a physician. Harding’s three nephews, were all told the reason that their famous uncle had no children was due to his sterility. When De Barthe accused Britton of writing her book simply to make money, Britton sued. The jury took only one hour to return a verdict of “no cause for action.”

In her book, Nan Britton repeatedly expressed her deep love for the late president, all while publishing a sordid book that no doubt helped cement Harding’s unfavorable historical reputation. She claimed to have had sexual relations with the president in a White House closet, but it appears that she had already begun demanding money from him, before he was president. Ira Smith, who worked in the White House mail room, recalled opening a letter from Britton very early in the Harding Administration (in 1921). To his shock, in what he described as a “blackmail” effort, Britton was demanding money for support of her daughter. He said he tore up future letters from her, without even opening them. Yet, Britton said in her book that she received money regularly from Harding before and after this incident, which leads one to question why she would need to demand money, if she was already receiving very generous amounts of it. According to Britton, she received several hundreds of dollars at a time from Harding. “Often,” she wrote, Harding sent her \$300 or \$400 in a single letter, and once even gave her two or three \$500 bills. This is an amazing amount of money, considering the annual average income was less than \$1,500 in 1920.

When Harding died of an apparent heart attack in the summer of 1923, Britton was vacationing in Europe. According to her, she returned to the United States, and went to Marion, Ohio, to see the president’s sister, Daisy. Daisy Harding had been Britton’s high-school English teacher, and the two had developed a friendship that continued after Britton’s graduation. But Britton’s visit was not just to offer condolences for her brother’s passing. She wanted money from Daisy, in exchange for not revealing that her brother had fathered an illegitimate child. In a later letter to Daisy Harding, demanding more



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money (Daisy was limited in how much money she could give on a school teacher's salary, which was only about a thousand dollars per year). Britton warned her that "any publicity in connection with this would reflect upon the character and reputation of Mr. Harding," adding, "I am sure you will agree that none want that."

Daisy was unable to meet Britton's continued demands for more money, so Britton turned to Dr. George Harding. Harding refused, arguing that any settlement with Britton would not be permanent, but "only a prelude to requests for more." He persuaded his sister, Daisy, to cut off Britton, as well. A short time later, Britton began writing her famous book, at the urging of her superior, at the Bible Corporation of America. The book sales started slowly, but picked up greatly after the columnist H.L. Mencken wrote a favorable review, which helped drive the sales up over 100,000 copies.

The book made Britton and some financial backers a nice profit, but without any compelling evidence, it gradually became more of a curiosity than anything. After all, she could produce none of the supposed multiple letters and no one came forward to claim sighting them in public places in New York and Washington, such as restaurants and hotels, and with the testimony that Harding was unable to have children, it appeared that her accusations would remain without evidence.

Then, some descendants of a Harding nephew decided it was time to conduct a DNA test.

When the results were trumpeted as proving Harding's fatherhood of Nan Britton's daughter in several media outlets, one of Harding's grand nephews, Dr. Richard Harding, was not so gleeful about the results. He told the *New York Times*, "I'm not questioning the accuracy of anybody's tests or anything. But it's still in my mind to be proven." When contacted by *The New American*, however, Dr. Harding seemed more resigned to the results proving that his famous uncle had indeed fathered Britton's child.

Indeed, Wikipedia even referred to Harding's fatherhood of Elizabeth Ann Britton as "a fact that was demonstrated by DNA testing."

But what, exactly, can be demonstrated by DNA testing for genealogical purposes? First of all, it should be stressed that what was done in this case was not a paternity test. After all, none of President Harding's DNA was used in the test, and none of his descendants were tested, since Harding has no descendants (unless Britton's daughter is his daughter). What was used was some DNA from descendants of some Harding nephews and a descendant of Elizabeth Ann.

And such a test would be a long way from being conclusive.

The Tech, a site that discusses DNA testing for genealogical purposes, said that the type of tests done for the Harding-Britton case "look at so little DNA," that they "are not nearly so good at relationships when you aren't looking at direct descendants." Gen Trace DNA Testing Laboratories tells visitors to its site, "a cousin test is not as conclusive as a parentage test." One must realize that, typically, a person has about 200 third cousins, and they may not share enough DNA to even be detected as relatives. This is because, while they both inherit DNA from a common ancestor, they do not necessarily inherit the same DNA. Harvard genealogy expert Henry Louis Gates has said that these tests do not produce "obvious yes/no answers. At best, all you can hope for is a strong maybe."

According to genealogy expert Kimberly Powell, in her online article, "Sorting out the DNA Tests Available for Genealogy," most tests are sent with a cheek swab or small brush, which one rubs on the inside of the cheek.

"DNA tests can help you learn about your paternal and maternal ancestry. There are also tests that can



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help you determine whether you are of African, Asian, European, or Native American descent.”

Genealogists basically use two types of tests. One tests specific markers on the Y-Chromosome of one’s DNA, known as “STR markers.” Females do not carry the Y-chromosome, and the Y-DNA test can only be used by males. “It passed down directly from father to son,” Powell noted. “The specific set of results from the test STR markers determines your Y-DNA haplotype, a unique genetic code for your paternal ancestral line.” Obviously, this test would be useless in the Harding-Britton case, since Britton’s child was a girl, not a boy.

There is also a test, known as mtDNA, which traces from mother to child. “If two people have an exact match in their mtDNA, then there is a very good chance they share a common maternal ancestor.” Again, this test would likewise be of no use in proving that Harding had anything to do with Elizabeth Ann, but would only indicate that Nan Britton is her mother, which no one has ever doubted. “It is important to keep in mind,” Powell explained, “with this test that a male’s mtDNA comes only from his mother and is not passed on to his offspring. For this reason, the mtDNA is only useful to females, or for a male testing his mother’s lineage.”

Finally, there is an autosomal DNA test. The autosomal DNA contains almost the entire genome, or blueprint of the human body. According to Powell, this is where we find the genes that determine our physical characteristics, from hair color to disease susceptibility. “Because autosomal DNA is inherited by both men and women from both parents and all four grandparents, it can be used to test for relationships in all family lines.” This testing was originally used as a tool for determining biogeographical origins, or the percentage of various population groups, such as African or European, that exist in one’s DNA.

In other words, this type of testing could demonstrate a high likelihood that two individuals have some common ancestry, somewhere. In other words, that they are cousins of some sort. This is the basis for the claim that Jim Blaesing, the grandson of Elizabeth Ann Britton, is a distant cousin to Peter and Abigail Harding.

This, is, of course, one possible interpretation of the test results. A professional genealogist told me that there are other explanations. “One can be a cousin, or somehow related, in lots of different ways,” she told me, dismissing the assertion that the Harding-Blaesing tests “prove” Harding fathered Britton’s child. Considering that the typical individual has almost 200 third cousins, she told me that it is possible that Blaesing and Harding’s relatives who took the DNA tests could actually be related in some unknown fashion other than through Warren Harding.

In examining the ancestry of the Harding and Britton families, we find that both families lived in the general area of Marion, Ohio, for a number of years. Warren Harding was born in Blooming Grove, Ohio, which is a short distance east of Marion. Britton’s father and mother met at Claridon (also a few miles from Marion), while her mother was teaching school. Nan was born in 1896 in Claridon. Britton’s maternal grandmother was a Richards, but in her book, Nan Britton does not even give her father’s first name, just referring to him as “Doctor Britton.”

In *Trace Your Roots with DNA*, Megan Smolenyak and Ann Turner examine the use of DNA testing for cousins. Smolenyak and Turner note that the average person shares about 25 percent of DNA with grandparents, blood uncles/aunts, nieces/nephews. “The grandchild must have one of the four possible alleles found in the grandparents at every marker. Relationships between uncle/aunt and niece/nephew do not have this requirement, but at 25 percent, they do not share much more of their DNA than two



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randomly chosen people,” Turner and Smolenyak note.

“As we have seen,” Turner and Smolenyak continue, “first cousins do share more of their DNA with each other than with a random man on the street, yet the amount is small enough that it is not always possible to prove a relationship with relationship testing.”

And that is for first cousins. In the case of the Harding-Blaesing testing, if Warren Harding fathered Elizabeth Ann Britton, the individuals tested would only be, at most, second or third cousins. In other words, Nan Britton’s daughter would be a first cousin to Harding’s nephew, but Jim Blaesing is the grandson of Britton’s daughter. If proving a blood relationship through this test for first cousins is problematic, then one must conclude that asserting that one could prove a relationship with alleged third cousins is even more questionable.

This would seem to indicate that such assertions as made by media outlets about Harding are unsupportable. When one considers the total lack of supporting evidence otherwise, we should be much more cautious.

It is certainly possible that Harding could have been mistaken that he was sterile due to childhood mumps, and that his failure to have children by either his wife or Carrie Phillips was just an amazing coincidence. It is also possible that Harding sent Britton multiple letters, even after the birth of Elizabeth Ann, but she destroyed them all. It is even possible that Harding, a U.S. senator, and Britton carried on a very public affair, attending shows together, eating in restaurants together, and registering at various hotels, and not one person ever stepped forward to confirm her story. It is possible that the DNA tests indicating a possible relationship between the descendants of Harding’s brother and Nan Britton do so because Warren Harding did father Elizabeth Ann. Britton’s great-grandson, James Blaesing, a Portland construction worker contended that the DNA results cleared his ancestor’s name. “My grandmother wouldn’t lie for anything. She was the classiest (and) the most wonderful woman you would ever meet.”

It is all possible.

But, it is also possible that Harding expressed to more than one person that he was sterile and had never had children, because he was sterile and had never had children. It is also possible that Nan Britton made it all up.

In the end, media should exercise more restraint in their reporting. DNA testing that *might* be indicative of some blood relationship should not be reported as proving something. Certainly, the DNA testing lends at least some credence to Nan Britton’s testimony that President Warren Harding fathered her child, but it does not prove it.

But the media generally opts for the more sensationalistic story, especially when it presents another opportunity to smear a conservative Republican president.



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