

incentive to tell people what they want to hear.”
erately misleading customers, they may have a financial
added. “While I don’t think any of the companies are delib-
these tests and may not be aware of the limitations,” he
“People are making life-changing decisions based on
Genome Project and an author of the *Science* editorial.

New York University who was an advisor on the Human
the science,” said Troy Duster, a professor of sociology at
“My concern is that the marketing is coming before
they’re also proprietary, making it hard to verify results.

the databases of many companies are not only small—
cific ethnic group to which they might have belonged. And
tell exactly where ancestors might have lived, or the spe-
tests trace only a few of a customer’s ancestors and cannot
draw the wrong conclusions or to misinterpret results. The
bases used to compare DNA results might lead people to

The authors said that limited information in the data-
what results actually mean.

number of scientists and scholars said companies might
not be fully explaining the limitations of genetic testing, or
in an editorial in *Science* magazine in October [2007], a
thing. We hope to bring a little order to the field.”

tests mean you can’t rely on this alone to tell you any-
roots,” he said. “The limitations of current genetic DNA
cal and other records to try to help people discover their
“What we hope to do is combine this with genealogi-

The new venture is called AfricanDNA.

genetic testing and genealogy work for African Americans.
a DNA testing and genealogy firm in Houston, to provide

Mr. Gates recently teamed up with Family Tree DNA,
prompted him to enter the field.

said his experience and similar stories from others have
for African and African American Research at Harvard,
Mr. Gates, director of the W. E. B. Dubois Institute
Native Americans.

try or the ethnic group of origin for African Americans or
issues is the ability of the tests to determine the coun-
nies make about their tests. One of the most controversial
Mr. Gates who have questioned assertions that compa-
grown, so has the number of scientists or scholars like

But as the number of test takers and companies has
added genetic testing as a service.

logical site, for about \$300 million shortly after the site
investors recently bought Ancestry.com, an online genea-
vate equity investors have moved in: Spectrum Equity
two or three only 6 years ago. The field is so hot that pri-

dozen companies now offer such services, up from just
The demand has spawned an industry. Almost two
might not otherwise have known.

to fill gaps in family histories and find distant cousins they
Khan or Marie Antoinette. For still others, it’s an attempt
to see if they have links to historical figures like Genghis
between African Americans and their forebears. Others want
ancestors after centuries of slavery wiped out links be-

For some, the test allows them to reconnect with African
The expectations and reasons for taking the test vary.
tests may help to provide the final piece of the puzzle.

And for those who have reached that point, genetic DNA
Yet for many, the paper or digital trail eventually ends.
story less daunting than in years past.

find through the internet, making the hunt for family his-
narratives, and other documents have become easier to
ords, birth and death certificates, ship manifests, slave
family trees, according to *Science* magazine. Census re-
to determine their ancestry or to expand their known
An estimated 460,000 people have taken genetic tests

what they thought I wanted to hear,” Mr. Gates said.
genetic matches, most of them in Europe. “They told me

that the first company never told him he had multiple
Why the completely different results? Mr. Gates said
were not Nubian or even African, but most likely European.

pany started him. It concluded that his maternal ancestors
group. Five years later, however, a test by a second com-
be traced back to Egypt, probably to the Nubian ethnic
company told him his maternal ancestry could most likely

Mr. Gates says his concerns date back to 2000, when a
industry’s critics.

recently this Harvard professor has become one of the in-
popularize such tests and companies that offer them. But
using DNA testing, has done more than anyone to help
Lives explores the ancestry of famous African Americans
Henry Louis Gates, Jr., whose PBS special *African American*

*The ambiguities surrounding the molecularization
of race in biomedicine also show up in some
genetics researchers’ efforts to use DNA testing
to trace “racial” ancestry. In 2007, journalist Ron
Nixon reported in the New York Times about the
growth of private companies that will trace genetic
ancestry for their clients, sometimes for a hefty fee.*

DNA Tests Find Branches but Few Roots

IN THEIR OWN WORDS