

# Startling Roots

## TV Show Traces Colonial Ancestors of Wanda Sykes

By FELICIA R. LEE

Thirty-nine lashes "well laid" on her bare back and an extension of her indentured servitude was Elizabeth Banks's punishment for "fornication & Bastardy with a negroe slave," according to a stark June 20, 1683, court document from York County, Va. Through the alchemy of celebrity and genealogy, that record and others led to the recent discovery that Banks, a free white woman despite her servitude, was the paternal ninth great-grandmother of Wanda Sykes, the ribald comedian and actress.

More than an intriguing boldface-name connection, it is a rare find even in a genealogy-crazed era in which Internet sites like ancestry.com, with more than 14 million users, and the popular NBC program "Who Do You Think You Are?" play on that fascination. Because slavery meant that their black ancestors were considered property and not people, most African-Americans are able to trace their roots in this country only back to the



Wanda Sykes

first quarter of the 19th century.

"This is an extraordinary case and the only such case that I know of in which it is possible to trace a black family rooted in freedom from the late 17th century to the present," said the historian Ira Berlin, a professor at the University of Maryland known for his work on slavery and African-American history.

Mary Banks, the biracial child born to

*Continued on Page 6*



Chris Ellis, known as Daze, with

## Artist

By RANDY KEN

When the Andrew Freedman Bronx in 1924, it looked like a lining up the Grand Concourse, advertised its odd function: a permanent home for the formerly wealthy who have lost their money but not their tastes.

"They were expected to have a reasonable culture," commented an observer at the time, "and not to eat