African-American Genealogy

A Beginner's Guide

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WHAT YOU'LL FIND WITHIN:

- Is it really that different?
- Family tradition
- Census and vital statistics
- The Jim Crow Era
- Reconstruction clues
- Slavery Days
- The unfulfilled promise of DNA

HERITAGE RESEARCH CENTER

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IS IT REALLY THAT DIFFERENT?

The question often occurs to beginning researchers, "Why would you need a separate guide for African American researchers? Is working on your black ancestors as different as all that?"

The answer is an unreserved "Yes!" It is true that each ethnic group presents its own unique challenges. Tracing Irish ancestors is very different from tracing German or French or Spanish or Chinese ancestors. But African Americans were the only group in the United States to be subjected to involuntary servitude (other than American Indians, for a much briefer period). And the period of slavery lasted from 1619, when the first slaves were marketed in the Jamestown colony in Virginia until 1865—slightly longer for those

enslaved in Indian Territory. Slavery existed in every seaboard British colony from Georgia to Massachusetts, but it was outlawed much earlier in the northern states. All the states north of Maryland and Delaware had banned it by 1804.

A substantial free black population was created by this early abolitionist movement. Their numbers continued to grow through freedoms (*manumissions*) granted to Southern slaves, runaways and race mixing. But free people of color were subject to different laws than whites. One should be familiar with local laws to make the best search.

For legal purposes, slaves were extensions of their masters. Any property in their possession was considered the master's property. Therefore, the identity of the owner is key to following them. There are also challenges in tracing names because most slaves were called only by their given names. They could pass from hand to hand in practically invisible ways.

Poverty, common to many African American ancestors, also creates challenges that tend to hamper progress even further. We have to be imaginative and flexible in our tactics and content ourselves with probabilities in cases where direct proof is lacking.

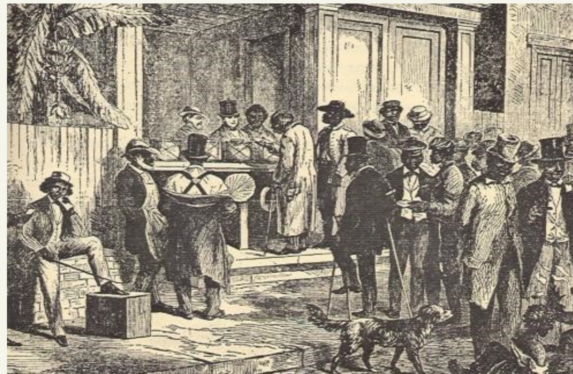
The Importance of Black Family History

So, why study black genealogy? Well, in a way, it was really the work of one black family historian which first inspired the widespread interest in family history. Alex Haley, through his *Roots* series of books, but even more through the television adaptations, excited people of all backgrounds to realize they too had family stories that needed telling. Previously, genealogy had more commonly been the pass time of elite groups—persons who might be eligible to join the DAR, or the Sons of the Cincinnati, or the Mayflower Society. Now, we realize that all of our ancestors, not just the renowned , wealthy, and powerful, created the America we know. We can't understand the national story without knowing their individual stories. And truly, the monopoly exercised on history by elite people tended to obscure the oftentimes sobering realities of American history as a whole.

Family Tradition; Family Treasure

Any family historian is thankful for bits of information that happen to pass to him by word of mouth. But for the African American researcher, a rich legacy of stories, documents and photographs is irreplaceable. That is because, traditions help to fill in gaps that public records do not address. And public records can be quite disappointing in this area of research. For instance, a deed might tell you that your ancestor purchased land from his former owner in the period after slavery ended, but it can't tell you how he got the money together to make the purchase or how he managed to hold on to it through tough economic times and in spite of race-prejudice. You might read that one of your ancestors was imprisoned for a crime in the early 19th century and even read a news story about it. But without family stories, how do you know what really happened, in a period when the legal system was especially corrupt? Public records rarely have photographs attached to them, so you won't know what your ancestors looked like unless someone in your family has kept this material and can share it with you. One very important kind of tradition relates to whether your older family members have ever heard about the white family who owned their forebears. There are very few public records that recorded the names former slaves took when they were freed and who their most recent owners were. Some guesswork is involved unless your family kept and passed down that memory. And if you don't know the owner's name, your research into that family will necessarily come to a halt. So interview all of your older relations and ask them about the names you are uncovering. Record what they say, preferably on audio tape. Track down all the cousins you can locate and ask them what family heirlooms they have. In this day and age, with portable scanners and digital cameras at our disposal, we have no excuses for not making an effort to reproduce and share our legacies with one another.

Do not expect census records to be accurate in every respect. Mistrust may have led people to give misinformation. Ages vary, names are spelled oddly, nicknames are used.



Common Starting points: Census and Vital Statistics

Most people of any ethnicity begin their research by locating relatives in the census. In April 2012, we finally got access to every decennial census from 1790 to 1940. Everything after 1940 will be protected from public view for privacy reasons. It is important, then, that you know the names of some ancestors born before that last available census year, and where they were living at that time. You can then branch out to death certificates, birth certificates and marriage licenses in that same neighborhood to find further clues about relationships and places of origin. These tactics are usually helpful until you approach 1865, when slavery ended in most places. Before that time, enslaved people were not listed in census records by name and their births and deaths were not recorded, except by some owners in their plantation records. Vital records are important, however, because they may give clues about relationships in slavery times. Someone who died in the 1910s or 1920s, when death certificates were first being kept, could easily have been born a slave and the certificate may list place of birth and parents. When gravestones are absent, as they are for many earlier burials, a death record may provide the missing information. Marriage records beginning in the latter 1800s usually mention parents of the bride and groom and witnesses, who may be relatives. Do not expect census records to be accurate in every respect. Mistrust may have led people to give misinformation. Ages often vary as much as ten years and names are spelled oddly at times. First names may shift to nicknames, then to middle names and back again.

Research in the Era of Jim Crow

After you've exhausted census and vital statistics, what else can you do to trace your ancestors? Don't forget to try to locate and visit the cemeteries where the death certificates say they are buried. Family members were often interred near one another, and the placement of gravestones, where they exist, can be of help. The records of black funeral homes and black churches, if they survive, are a very useful supplement.

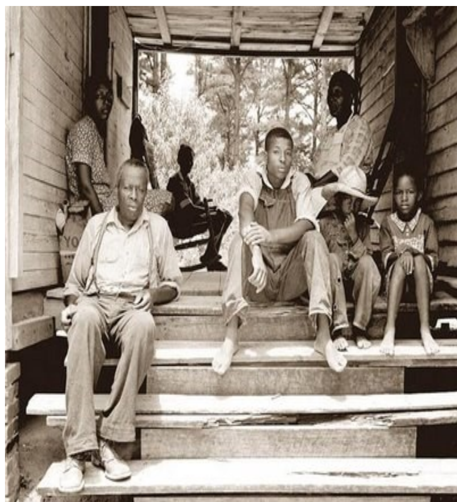
Survey all the surviving issues of the local newspaper from the time your ancestors lived in a given area. The local library in the county seat should be able to help. Likely, there are no indexes, so you'll be spending many hours searching issue to issue, but it may be worth your while. Some newspapers had special columns for African American news. In larger cities, there may have been separate African American publications. Be prepared to run up against some negative information in the "white focused" newspapers. Many of the stories about African Americans are crime-related with an occasional reminiscence about the old days from an elderly former slave or a notation about the death of a respected black person. You will also find a great deal of blatant racism.

Don't neglect the usual deeds, wills and estates, either. Though African American were often sharecroppers and farm laborers, many did own land and left it along with other property to their descendants. Many African Americans also served in the armed forces, particularly in World War I and World War II, so service and pension records are pertinent, where they survive. Draft cards also help locate eligible males, indicate employment and identify next-of-kin.

Finally, for families that farmed the land but did not own it, check out records of crop liens and chattel mortgages in the local land registry. Most farming families entered into agreements in order to get the advance of seed and equipment they needed to raise a crop. A prominent landowner often loaned this sum against the harvest or articles of personal property. You can also sometimes get details about the farms of sharecroppers in 1870 and 1880 agricultural schedules of the census, including the size of the farm and what it produced. The 1910 to 1930 censuses indicate whether land or homes were rented or owned, whether they were mortgaged or free.

"Reconstruction came with an initial burst of freedom and promise to African Americans residing in the South."

RECONSTRUCTION CLUES



The period from 1865 to 1877 is referred to as Reconstruction and it came with an initial burst of hope and promise for African Americans residing in the South. Federal troops occupied the region and missionaries and federal agencies worked to help freed people in the aftermath of the Civil War. In many places, African Americans became politically active, occupying positions of authority in local, state, and federal governments.

A proliferation of rights and opportunities resulted in a proliferation of records. Recent indexing projects have made many of these records more accessible than ever. Others still have to be searched laboriously. They include biographical directories of public officials, Freedman's Bank Records, Freedmen's Bureau Records (a federal agency set up to educate freed slaves and provide for their safety and fair treatment), pension and service records for former slaves who may have served in the Union army or navy, cohabitation records, which allowed former slaves whose marriages had not been recognized legally to come forward and formalize them, and voter registration records, which allowed black people political participation for the first time in American history.

There are also woeful tales of vigilante violence by whites attempting to maintain social and political control of the region. Check Freedmen's Bureau reports, local newspapers and federal and county court records for these darker stories.

Slavery Days

Slavery is undoubtedly one of the very darkest chapters in American history, and it can also be the most difficult area in which to perform research. The first hurdle involves identifying the former slave-owner of a freed person. There are very few records that will make a firm identification, though it is not unheard of to see such an allusion in Freedmen's Bureau reports, Virginia cohabitation records, or Southern Claims Commission records, for instance. Family traditions may identify a particular white family. But most folks are left making assumptions. All freed people did not take the names of their former owners, contrary to popular belief. They may have taken the name of someone they admired or on whose land they settled after the War. They may have preferred the name of a more remote slave owner—someone who had owned a grandparent, or the owner of the father as opposed to the mother of the family, for instance. A good rule of thumb, however, is that freed people who stayed in the county where they had been enslaved often took the former owner's name. The 1870 census provides interesting clues. The person on whose land the freed people lived was often the former owner or closely connected to the owner. The black family may have used first names common to the owner's white family. This was a common practice and can be a pointer. In worst case scenarios, it might be beneficial to map out the land of all the white people in a ten mile radius of your ancestor's 1870 residence (using deeds) and trace as many slaves' and freed people's names in that neighborhood as possible. This sort of community-wide study can reveal patterns and possibilities when other methods have yielded nothing.

Once you've located your ancestor's last slaveholder, it is time to learn all you can about that white family. Can you locate where the family papers today? If they have been preserved, they may provide the most benefit of all. Plantations were like manors in Europe. The occupants were almost totally under the thumb of the owner. So records were most likely to be kept by him, if at all. The larger plantations with greater slave populations were more likely to keep meticulous business records, including records of slave purchases, sales, births, and deaths. These may now reside in a public archive (university or government) or they may still belong to white family members. So start tracing the white family to the present day and contact living people for clues. Search the catalogs and finding aides of nearby universities for family papers or search the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) on-line.

Slaves are also sometimes documented in public records, but usually in less detail. The 1790 to 1860 censuses do list slaves by age and gender categories and this can help you narrow your search and separate slave owners from non-slave owners. But also look at estate records and wills of white owners, which often mention slaves by name and sometimes even give their ages. Deeds of sale regarding slaves are sometimes recorded in deed books (though they are not always indexed by grantor and grantee). Court records may mention slaves in connection with illegal activities or ownership disputes. Expect, however, to have more success with female ancestors than male ancestors and to eventually come to a dead end, beyond which you cannot pass.

DNA RESEARCH: A WORK IN PROGRESS

Of course, not all people of color were slaves before the Civil War. Some were **free persons**, even in the Southeast. Most of these individuals or their ancestors, however, had at one time been slaves. It is very likely the family was freed by a former owner. It is not that uncommon to find slaves freed in wills, although sometimes application was made to a local superior court or to a state legislative body in the owners' lifetime. Sometimes, but not always, special legacies and freedoms given to slaves may indicate that the white owner was a relative of the slave—very often the father or sexual partner. Slaves could be freed on the grounds of meritorious service, and bonds were frequently made for their good behavior and upkeep as free people. There were also certain individuals, mostly Quakers, who purchased slaves in order to free them and transport them elsewhere. In court records, you may find cases disputing a person's free status. These can be treasure troves of genealogical information which probably couldn't be obtained anywhere else. It can be like interviewing a remote ancestor about his/her lineage, since proving the mother's free lineage could determine the freedom of her children and grandchildren (called "Law of the Womb"). There are also frequently legal cases attempting to overturn provisions of wills which free slaves. But as the 19th century wore on, the number of free black people resident in the South dropped dramatically. This is because the laws became more and more hostile to their presence, as arguments about the morality of slavery became more and more heated.

The tragedy of black genealogy is that, eventually, all research avenues, except those of discovered white ancestors, will tend to become so obscure as to become impossible to follow any longer. The lack of surnames and the spotty private and public records of ownership, sale, birth, and death constructs a brick wall impossible to penetrate. In recent years, **DNA evidence** has held out the promise of identifying tribal origins in Africa and some companies have attempted to sell tests which suggest potential tribal origin. **Those claims have recently been discredited.** As it stands, DNA testing in Africa is too spotty to justify pinpointing particular tribes of origin for African Americans. This doesn't mean that the potential doesn't exist, but, so far, insufficient sampling has been done in Africa. DNA is useful, however, in determining degrees of Caucasian, African, and Amerindian origin, and it can help in deciding whether two people have the same male ancestor in common. In spite of family legends, however, much DNA testing has shown that very few African Americans have substantial American Indian ancestry. This legends about Indian forebears may have sprung up to explain non-African features which most often have their origins in white male sexual exploitation of black women.