

This guide describes:

- Strategies for discovering your African American ancestors in various periods of history:
 - Beginning Your Search
 - Searching Recent Records
 - Searching Transition Records from Slavery to Freedom
 - Searching Records for Slaves
- The most useful records and indexes to search.

Most of these records are available through the Family History Library and Family History Centers. The letters *FHL* begin the Family History Library call number of the record described.

- Specific information you need to trace your African American ancestors.

BEGINNING YOUR SEARCH

- Write down what your family knows about your ancestors.
- Record names, dates, and places on family group record forms and pedigree charts.
- See *How Do I Start My Family History?* (32916) for more information.

SEARCHING RECENT RECORDS

Start with the most recent generations. Look at general federal and state records and then look at records specifically for African Americans.

For step-by-step instructions for finding African-American families in recent U.S. records, see *Finding Records of Your Ancestors, Part A: African American, 1870 to Present* (36367). You can order this at:

www.familysearch.org

General U. S. Records

1. Search United States records, as described in the *United States Research Outline* (30972) such as:
 - Census records
 - U.S. military records
 - Homestead records
 - Social Security Death Index

For information on these records, see:

www.familysearch.org/sg/usout.html

Tips

- Search as many kinds of records as you can find to document the lives of your family back to 1870.
- Study the lives of all family members, including aunts, uncles, and cousins—not just your direct ancestors.
- Look for changing surnames. Some African Americans changed surnames several times. If you can't find your family in a census record, but you know the family's location at the time of the census, look for first names and approximate ages of family members. You may find a match.
- If your ancestor is not listed in an index, check the original records anyway. Some indexes do not include African Americans.
- Understand that some old records may have described your ancestor in terms used at the time that are not appropriate.
- African Americans may be listed in “colored” registers. You may also see the abbreviation “Col” next to your ancestor's name.
- If your ancestor is not in a “colored” register, try the “white” register. Your ancestor's race may not have been accurately recorded.

2. Search records from the state where your ancestor lived.

- Cemetery records
- City directories
- Church records
- Court records
- Land records
- Probate records
- School records
- Vital records (government records of births, marriages, and deaths)
- Voting records

These records are described in a research outline for the state, available online at:

www.familysearch.org/sg/

Scroll down to find the outline for the state(s) your ancestors lived in.

3. Study the local histories for each town, county, and state where your ancestor lived.

- Look for information on African American churches, schools, and cemeteries.
- Learn about local laws that affected your ancestors: Did African Americans vote? Did they have a curfew? Were there laws specifically for African Americans?

4. An excellent guide that carefully explains how to search for your ancestors is:

Woodtor, Dee Parmer. *Finding a Place Called Home: An African American Guide to Genealogical and Historical Identity*. New York: Random House, 1999. (FHL book 973 F2wd.) This explains basic as well as complex research techniques. It includes unique sources such as the records of the Freedmen's Bureau.

5. Join an African American Genealogical Society in your area or the area where your ancestors lived.

African American Records

- African American records at the Family History Library are listed in the bibliography below. Look for records from the place and time your ancestor lived.

Taylor, Marie. *Family History Library Bibliography of African American Sources*. Salt Lake City: Family History Library, 2000. (FHL book 973 F23tm; fiche 6002568.) This bibliography:

- Has citations for about 3,320 African American sources.
- Includes Canadian records.
- Includes records in the collection by 1994. (The Family History Library Catalog does not list all these records.)
- Includes articles from historical and genealogical periodicals.

This bibliography has two sections:

- Search the “Bibliography Arranged by Subject” section for general types of records, such as church, court, slavery and bondage, or vital records.
- Search the “Bibliography Arranged by Locality” section for records from the U.S. state or Canadian province where your ancestor lived. Each state or province has a subject section, followed by a section for each county.

Over the years African American sources have been cataloged in many different ways at the Family History Library. This *Bibliography* was created to make the African American genealogical sources easier to locate. For example:

Burkett, Randall. *Black Biographical Dictionaries 1790–1950: Cumulative Index*. 3 vols. Alexandria, Va.: Chadwyck-Healey, 1991. (FHL book 973 F2bbd.) The 300 African-American biographical dictionaries indexed in this work are available in the Family History Library, but they are not listed separately in the FHL Catalog by title. The bibliography corrects this problem by listing each title separately. You will also find numerous entries for articles from historical and genealogical periodicals you would not find by using the library catalog.

For information about Melungeons, tri-racial families, African Americans with Native American ancestry, and free people of color see the Taylor bibliography, pages 54–56. Also see:

www.members.aol.com/strat43z/melung.html

and

www.ccharity.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=Web_Links&file=index&req=viewlink&cid=21

- The following records can help you determine if an ancestor was born free or freed by a slave owner.
 - Federal censuses, 1790–1860. Any ancestor listed in the federal population schedule was free.
 - Local government registers of free persons of color. Freed slaves had to register with the local government to prove their freedom.
 - Local court, land, and probate records. The lives of free African Americans were still closely regulated by law and custom.

SEARCHING TRANSITION RECORDS FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM

Records of the Underground Railroad

Many slaves “stole” themselves. See:

- *Family History Library Bibliography of African American Sources*, by Marie Taylor, 2000. (FHL fiche 6002568)

Look under “Migration” in both sections. Also see:

www.freedomcenter.org/freedomstations/

and

www.nationalgeographic.com/features/99/railroad/j1.html

Making the Slave Connection

You must first identify the slave owner, and then study the owner’s records for clues to your family. Correctly identifying your ancestor in slave records is difficult. Even professional researchers are successful only about 50 percent of the time.

Keep in mind that only about 15 percent of former slaves took their last slave owner’s surname. Some took the surname of people they admired, such as Lincoln or Washington, and some took a surname they had been using for many years without the knowledge of the slave owner.

Sources for identifying the slave owner:

Military Records

- Civil War Colored Troops Service and Pension Records. These records list the date and place of birth of the soldier and may name the last slave owner.
- Other useful military records:
 - Buffalo Soldiers (Indian wars)
 - Philippine Insurrection (1898)
 - Spanish-American War (1899–1901)
 - Mexican border disputes (1905–1907)
 - World War I (1917–1918).

For information on the above records, see:

- *U.S. Military Records Research Outline* (34118), available online at:

www.familysearch.org/sg/Military.html

- Research outlines for the states where your ancestors lived, which are online at:

www.familysearch.org/sg/ht_list.html

and

www.aagsnc.org/genlinks/Military_Resources/

Freedman’s Savings and Trust Records

Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, 1865–1874. National Archives Microfilm Publications, M0816. Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1969. (FHL films 0928571–91.)

- Information includes birthplace, place brought up, residence, age, complexion, name of employer or occupation, spouse, children, father, mother, brothers and sisters, remarks, and signature.
- Early books give the name of the former master or mistress and the name of the plantation.
- The Freedman's Bank records are part of National Archives Record Group 101, Records

of the Comptroller of the Currency. For more information, see:

www.rstl.com/freedman.htm

Note: Do not confuse records of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company with records of the Freedmen's Bureau listed below. When the trust company closed, the Freedmen's Bureau tried to recover the money. Freedmen's Bureau records are part of National Archives Record Group 105.

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau)

There are two sets in this collection: commissioner's records and field office records. The field office records are the most useful, but can be searched only at the National Archives.

For a guide to the field office records, see:

Everly, Elaine, and Willna Pacheli. *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Field Offices of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands: Record Group 105*. Washington, D.C.: NARA, 1973. (FHL book 973 F23ea.)

The records are divided as follows:

- Part 1, Alabama–Louisiana
- Part 2, Maryland–South Carolina
- Part 3, Tennessee–Virginia and Records of the Field Offices of the Freedmen's Branch, Office of the Adjutant General, 1872–78

Some records of the Freedmen's Bureau are available online at:

www.aagsnc.org/genlinks/Genealogical_Resources/Freedmens_Bureau_Records/

Southern Claims Commission Records

United States. House of Representatives. Commissioners of Claims. *Records of the Commissioners of Claims 1871–1880*. National Archives Microfilm Publications, M0087. Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1945. (FHL film 1463963–76.)

- Nearly 22,300 cases are filed by individuals, family groups, churches, and businesses.

- Case files include items such as family letters and Bibles, wills, probate records, personal accounts, property inventories, and other genealogical data.
- These records can help you learn if an ancestor had been a slave.
- Records include testimony of neighbors, relatives, and former slaves to support a claimant's assertion that he or she is due repayment for property taken during the Civil War because of loyalty to the Union.

A master index to these case files is:

Mills, Gary B. *Southern Loyalists in the Civil War: The Southern Claims Commission*. Baltimore, Md.: Genealogical Publishing, 1994. (FHL book 975 M2s) Gives the name of the claimant, his or her county and state, the commission number, office and report numbers, and the year and status of the claim.

American Slave Narratives

Typescript pages of interviews with more than 3,500 former slaves. For an index, see:

Potts, Howard E. *A Comprehensive Name Index for the American Slave [Narratives]*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. (FHL book 973 F22p.)

Search the narrative collection online for a fee at:

www.ancestry.com/search/rectype/biohist/slavnarr/main.htm

Apprenticeship and Orphans' Records

See both Freedmen's Bureau and county court records for information on guardianship and apprentices. Former slave owners often became the legal guardians of infants and small children. Orphans old enough to work were also apprenticed to the former slave owner.

Another Way of Identifying the Slave Owner

If the sources listed above do not help you identify a slave owner, try the following technique:

1. Find your family on the 1870 census.
2. Make a list of every family with property on the 10 pages before and 10 pages after your ancestor. Add your ancestor's surname to this list if it is not already there.
3. Act as if each family name on the list was the name of the former slave owner. Use the records listed under Search Records of Slaves. As you use the records you will start eliminating some names, and others will look more promising.
4. If you don't find a match, try to find out if the family moved from a different location. If so, repeat this process as you check the census records for the other location.

SEARCHING RECORDS FOR SLAVES

When you know the slave owner's name or if you have a list of possibilities:

1. Study the life and records of the slave owner and his family. Your ancestor's life was inseparably connected with the slave owner. Your ancestor will be listed in records of the slave owner's property.
2. Look for the slave owner's name in:
 - Federal census schedules, 1850 and 1860. Slave schedules give the age and sex of each slave. For information on using slave schedules, see:

www.webarchaeology.com/html/slavsched.htm
 - The 1850 and 1860 federal census mortality schedules. These give the names of slaves who died and the names of the slave owners.
 - Tax records. These list slaves and their monetary value.
 - Land and property records. Search for information about deeds, sales, mortgages, or rental transactions of slaves.
 - Probate, estate, and chancery court records. These show the distribution of slaves at the death of a slave owner.
 - Plantation records. Account log books give the names of slaves, family relationships, and their assigned tasks. Some records give the slaves'

birth and death dates. They also record when a slave was bought, from whom, and for how much.

- *Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War*, Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1966.

See *Family History Library Bibliography of African American Sources* for the films and guide books for this collection. Whenever possible, these records are listed under the county or state where the plantation was located. They are then listed alphabetically by the name of the slave owner.

Other Slave Owners

Several large industries owned slaves. See:

Slavery in Antebellum Southern Industries. Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1991. (FHL book 975 H6s.)

Indian tribes also owned African slaves. See:

- Native American records. Slaves are often listed as members of the tribe.
- www.hometown.aol.com/angelaw859/index.html

Emancipation Time Line

Slavery began in 1620 in the colonies. The following are key dates for emancipation:

- 1777 Vermont is the first colony to abolish slavery.
- 1780 Pennsylvania passes a gradual emancipation law.
- 1783 Massachusetts prohibits slavery.
- 1783 New Hampshire prohibits slavery.
- 1784 Connecticut bars slavery.
- 1784 Rhode Island bans slavery.
- 1790 Boston becomes the first U.S. city without slaves.
- 1799 New York begins gradual emancipation.
- 1804 New Jersey begins gradual emancipation.

- 1807 The U.S. Congress bans the slave trade by prohibiting “the importation of slaves into the United States or the territories thereof” after 1 January 1808.
- 1863 The Emancipation Proclamation frees only slaves in states in rebellion against the Union.
- 1865 Last slaves in America freed on 19 June.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Guidebooks and Histories

Walker, James D. *Black Genealogy: How to Begin*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia, Center for Continuing Education, 1977. (FHL book 973 F27w.)

Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*. New York: Pantheon, 1976. (FHL book 973 F2gu.)

- A short, step-by-step guide with charts, worksheets, and definitions.
- Good background information about family life in various parts of the country at different times.
- Tells about surname customs and how surnames changed.

Burkett, Randall. *Black Biographical Dictionaries 1790–1950: Cumulative Index*. 3 vols. Alexandria, Va.: Chadwyck-Healey, 1991. (FHL book 973 F2bbd.)

- Indexes 300 African American biographical dictionaries that are available on microfiche
- Available for a fee on the Internet at:

www.il.proquest.com/products/pt-product-AfricanAmBio.shtml

Internet Sites

- www.afrigeneas.com
Supports research of African American ancestors.
- www.aagsnc.org/genlinks/Genealogical_Resources/
Has links to African American history and genealogy divided into 17 categories.
- www.athena.english.vt.edu/~LIT/BWW/chronology.html
Has chronological information about Africans in America.

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