

African American Strategies and Records

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Objectives

- I. Research Strategies
- II. Records Types and Value
- III. Finding the Records

I. Research Strategies

Family records and home sources

Look for any possible information about your family and ancestors in records you may have in your home or in a relative's home. The more information you gather, the easier it will be to locate and recognize individuals in other records. Records to look for include obituaries, death records, funeral programs, birth records, journals, diaries, family Bibles, family letters, and photographs.

Organize

Label the documents and photos you have discovered and organize them. Be sure to thoroughly go over all documents for all the facts. You may want to build a tree using an online program or home computer software.

Research logs

A research question will help you stay focused. A good research question is about one person and one event. One at a time.

Prepare your research plan and research log. One of the biggest rookie mistakes is not keeping track of your research. If you do not you will likely repeat searches and miss other searches. A research log is the best way to keep track. There are many different variations of logs. They can be created on paper or digital. Use the format you are most comfortable with.

Move from the known to the unknown

Start with the present and work back in time. Look for death records for your ancestor instead of jumping to the birth record. Clues from the death record can help you find the correct birth record.

Example of working back in time: look for the death records, census records, marriage record, and then birth records.

Find a person in every record possible

Find each person in every possible record. For example, when looking for death records search for a death certificate or register, obituary, cemetery record and funeral program. Each record can contain different and helpful information.

Find all known family members

Search for everyone in the family – that includes siblings, aunts, and uncles and sometimes even nieces and nephews. The more you know about the structure of the family, the more success you will have in locating your family in other records.

Be aware of name changes

Surnames can have multiple spellings for the same name. Be liberal in your thinking about how a surname is spelled. Make a list of all possible variants and search using the versions. African American names may change over generations. Less than 25% of those with enslaved ancestors carry the ancestors last enslaver surname.

Helpful resources for research strategies

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [Researching African American Genealogy](#)

FamilySearch Webinar [Getting Started in Genealogy](#) by Rhonda R. McClure

FamilySearch Webinar [The Research Process](#) by Tim Bingaman

Helpful resources for family sources

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [Putting Photos and Documents as Memories in FamilySearch Family Tree](#)

FamilySearch Webinar [Attaching Sources to Family Tree](#) by Roger Grua

Helpful resources for research logs

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [Research Logs](#)

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [Document AS YOU GO!](#)

FamilySearch Webinar [Research Logs part 1](#) by David Dilts

FamilySearch Webinar [Research Logs part 2](#) by David Dilts

II. Record Types and Value

Voter Registration

After emancipation and the passing of the 14th and 15th amendments blacks began to exercise their rights as citizens and vote. Voter lists were often created. FamilySearch has digitized and indexed voter lists for South Carolina, North Carolina, Texas, Florida and Louisiana. You can locate the registrations by using the digital state pages or through a FamilySearch Catalog place search for the county and/or state.

Church Records

Church records are a very helpful resource for African American families. They contain events, such as christenings, baptisms and burials, membership lists and minutes of proceedings. If you do not know the denomination check all records for the time period. You can find church records on FamilySearch by conducting a Catalog search for the state, county, and city where your ancestors lived.

Helpful resources for church records

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [United States Church Records](#) find lists of denominations and repositories.

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [African American Church Records](#)

FamilySearch Webinar [United States Church Records](#) by Joni Kesler

Cohabitation Records

Cohabitation records were created to identify and legitimize marriages and children born to those in slavery. These records were created according to the laws of each state.

Helpful resources for cohabitation records

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [Cohabitation Records](#)
Website [Library of Virginia Digital Collections](#)

Military Records

The United States Army began to organize African Americans into regimental units known as the United States Colored Troops (USCT) in 1863. The enlistment of free blacks and slaves was considered a key to winning the war. Many USCT regiments originated as state militia units before 1863. The regiments included cavalry, artillery, and infantry. Approximately 186,000 African Americans served in the USCT units during the Civil War.

Helpful resources for Civil War Colored Troops

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [United States Colored Troops in the Civil War](#)

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [United States Civil War 1861-1865, Part 1](#)

FamilySearch Historical Records [United States Civil War Service Records of Union Colored Troops, 1863-1865](#)

FamilySearch Historical Records [United States General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934](#)

Slave Importations

Slave importations are often listed in land and property records. They were most often created when enslavers transported enslaved persons across state lines.

Helpful resources for slave importations

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [African American Slavery and Bondage](#) includes links to slave trade, registers and manifests.

Tax Records

In the Southern States tax records were often used to record slaves, sometimes by name. FamilySearch has an extensive collection of tax record lists, both personal and real. Using the FamilySearch Catalog "Place" search is an effective way to find if there are digital tax records for your locality of interest. Many extracted tax lists are in books.

Vital Records

Vital records include birth, marriage and death registers and certificates.

State certificates

States have different laws regulating the creation and archiving of state vital records. Check the state of interest for compliance years and where the certificates are housed. Most states offer certificate copies for a fee at the state and county level.

- Birth records: if the date you are searching for is earlier than state regulated birth records check for a birth register at the county level. A register is a book which lists the births as they occurred. Birth records usually contain parent's names, often revealing the mother's maiden name.
- Delayed birth records were created in the 1930s and 1940s for those whom a record was not created at the time of birth. Delayed births were often recorded in the county where the individual was residing at the time and not necessarily in the county where they were born.
- Marriage records: Most marriage records only include the name of the couple, their ages, and their residence. However, some marriages include the names of their parents (such as Virginia and North Carolina). In the south, marriage records might be separated by race, thus located in different, labeled volumes. Be sure you are checking the correct volume.
- Death records: Most counties and states recorded death records earlier than birth records. A death certificate or register may contain valuable information about birth, age, marital status,

spouse name and burial information. If the date you are searching for is earlier than state regulated death records check for a death register at the county level.

Helpful resources for locating state and county vital record certificates

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [United States Genealogy](#)

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [United States Vital Records](#)

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [How to Find United States Birth Records](#)

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [How to Find United States Marriage Records](#)

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [How to Find United States Death Records](#)

FamilySearch Webinar [United States Vital Records](#) by Joni Kesler

Website [AfriGeneas](#) (free): African American specific death database – small but always growing.

Website [Online Searchable Death Indexes & Records](#) (links to indexes and images)

Land and Property – Deeds

Slaves were considered property by their slave owners. Oftentimes, land and property records include yield deeds of trust, bills of sale, and other documents naming slaves with their first names and identifies the slave owner.

Probate Records

Before 1863 enslaved persons were considered personal property and, therefore, may be mentioned in a probate. Enslaved persons could be willed, divided up between heirs or sold to pay debts in an estate settlement. Sometimes the relationship between enslaved family members is stated or a move is documented.

Helpful resources for United States probate records

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [United States Probate Records](#)

FamilySearch Webinar [United States Probate Records](#) by Tim Bingaman

Plantation Records

Owners of plantations kept ledgers which indicated names of slaves, buying and selling of slaves, doctors attending those who were sick, and other interesting facts which may be helpful in locating people.

Helpful resources for the plantation records

FamilySearch Book collection 973 D22cj: *A Genealogical Index to the Guides of the Microfilm Edition of Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War* by Jean L. Cooper. Available at the Family History Library. View WorldCat link under notes section to locate a copy in a library near you.

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [African American Slavery and Bondage](#) includes links to plantation lists and collection repositories.

FamilySearch Historical Records [Records of Ante-bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution Through the Civil War : Series A-N](#) click on each series separately to access the links to the digital records.

Newspapers

Newspapers helpful for African American research include local newspapers as well as newspapers specific to African American communities. To increase readership newspapers often included ethnic sections so check in all newspapers published in your area of interest. Public libraries are the keepers of local newspapers so check if they have lists of newspaper names and/or actual copies. Many libraries have created extracts such as death and obituary lists.

Obituaries are a great resource for locating information about an individual's birth and death as well as spouse and other surviving family members. Some obituaries are extracted out of newspapers and can be found as compiled records sets. Most likely you need to search for local newspapers. African American obituaries can be found in local newspapers as well as African American newspapers.

Helpful resources for digital newspapers

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [United States Newspapers](#)

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [Digital Historical Newspapers](#)

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [African American Newspapers](#)

FamilySearch Webinar [Finding and Using Historic Newspapers, part 1-3](#) by Billie Stone Fogarty

FamilySearch Webinar [Using the A. Lincoln Pres. Library's Newspaper Collections to Assist with African American Research](#) by Tim Pinnick

Helpful digital newspaper databases and collections

Website [Newspaper Archive](#) (\$)

Website [Genealogy Bank](#) (\$) some obituaries accessible at FHL or local FamilySearch Center

Website [NewsBank](#) (\$) sometimes free with Public Library card

Website [Newspapers.com](#) (\$) free at FHL and local FamilySearch center

Website [Ancestry](#) (\$) free at FHL and local FamilySearch center

Website [Chronicling America: Historical American Newspapers](#) by the Library of Congress

Website [United States Newspaper Program](#)

Website [United States Newspaper List](#)

Website [Online Historical Newspapers Site](#)

Website [Public Libraries](#) Contact the Public Library in the county of interest

Website [XoogleAnswers](#) links to digital collections for each state

Website [Accessible Archives](#) African American newspapers

Freedmen's Bureau Records

The official government title of the bureau is The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. The bureau was created during reconstruction to help with relief efforts for freed enslaved and poor whites. It was active 1865-1872 and contains a wide variety of data about the African American experience during enslavement and transitioning to freedom. The collection contains 1.5 million digital images covering the following categories,

- Labor contracts
- Ration records
- Education records
- Claim records
- Records of complaints
- Hospital and medical records
- Land and property records
- Court records
- Marriage records
- Records of person hired
- Assistant Commissioner records

Helpful resources for Freedmen's Bureau records

Website [The Freedmen's Bureau Online](#)

Website [Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau](#)

Website [DiscoverFreedmen](#)

FamilySearch Webinar [Mine the Gold: - Effectively Research Millions of New Freedmen's Bureau Records from FamilySearch](#) by Thom Reed. Many of the records presented in this 2017 presentation are now indexed and name searchable. Only the field office records are not yet completely indexed. This is a valuable presentation, nonetheless.

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [African American Freedmen's Bureau Records](#) Includes links to collections on FamilySearch, both indexed with images and browse only images. The majority of Freedmen's Bureau Field Office records are browse only. Virginia and Washington D.C. are name searchable.

Freedman's Bank Records

Freedman's Savings & Trust Company was created to assist newly freed enslaved transition to freedom successfully. It was created in 1864 but failed by 1874. However, the registers have survived and contain personal information on depositors. Information may include name, residence, description, and family members. It is fully indexed, and images are online at FamilySearch.

Helpful resources for Freedman's Bank records

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [United States, Freedman's Bank Records](#) includes links to the Freedman's Bank Records and other digitized records associated with the Freedman's Savings & Trust Company available on the NARA website.

FamilySearch Historical Records [United States, Freedman's Bank Records, 1865-1874](#)

III. Finding the Records

Helpful resources for FamilySearch Historical Records

FamilySearch [Help Center](#) choose for helpful tips or enter a subject in the search field, ex. "historical records."



Helpful resources for FamilySearch Catalog

FamilySearch Research Wiki article [Introduction to the FamilySearch Catalog](#)

FamilySearch [Help Center](#) choose for helpful tips or enter a subject in the search field, ex. "catalog."

