



Tracing your African American Ancestors: Getting Started with Genealogical Research

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1 Genealogical research, regardless of the ethnic background of the individual, involves finding sources that establish relationships between a person and his or her ancestors. Sometimes these sources are documents created at the time of an event, such as a birth or death certificate. At other times, these sources might only point to an event, and it's up to the genealogist to fill in the complete picture.

Research typically begins with home sources. These are documents found around the home, or perhaps around the home of a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other relative. These documents might include birth, death, and marriage certificates, land deeds, military discharge papers, obituaries, insurance policies, church programs, family bibles, or a pile of old photographs. You might even get lucky and find a stack of old letters, a scrap book, or a diary. Also, talk to your older relatives. Most people know the names of their parents and many know the names of their grandparents. Your grandmother's grandmother is your great-great grandmother. If you ask them, they can often provide information that would take a great deal of research to find on your own.

Once you have assembled all of your home sources, begin combining the information onto genealogical charts, specifically four-generation charts² and family group sheets³. These can be downloaded from the St. Louis County Library's website. Write what you know to be absolute fact in ink, but if you aren't certain write it in pencil.

The information can be kept on paper or it can be maintained through the use of genealogical software. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, so use the method you are most comfortable with.

Your home sources need to get your research back to someone who was alive in 1940. It really doesn't matter who that was or how old they were in 1940. They just need to have been alive then. This is because the 1940 U.S. Federal Census is the most recent census to be released to the public.

The U.S. Government is constitutionally required to take a population census every ten years. The first one was taken in 1790 and the most recent in 2020. To preserve privacy, however, the census bureau releases them 72 years after the date they were taken.

Each decade's census asks different questions. For example, the 1930 Census asked for if the household owned a radio. They did not ask that question before 1930 because radios were not very common. They do not ask it now because they know everyone has one. Typical questions include name, age, gender, marital status, occupation, state (or foreign country) of birth and state (or foreign country) of his or her parents' birth.

In 2020, searching census records is relatively easy. They are available online and fully indexed on Ancestry and a number of other websites. Start with the 1940 Census and work backward in time to 1930, 1920, 1910, and 1900. As you move backward in time you will see parents becoming children and living with their own parents.

After the 1900 Census, most researchers hit a mild road bump. There should be an 1890 Census, but there isn't one. On January 10, 1921, a fire broke out in the Commerce Department Building where the censuses were stored. Although the fire was not extensive, the efforts to put it out created quite a bit of water damage. Eventually the records were destroyed except for a few fragments. This means you must jump a twenty-year gap back to 1880.

Working back from the 1880 Census to the 1870 can present more problems for African American research. 1870 was the first post-emancipation census. The newly freed men and women found themselves in a rather chaotic world. People were trying to find lost relatives who had been sold away (or sometimes had run away). You often can find a group of unrelated people with the same last name living together or a group with different surnames who are a family. In 1860 and 1850, enslaved people were counted in a separate Slave Schedule. Unfortunately, this schedule just lists people by age and gender under the name of the slave owner.

An important point to remember, however, is that not all African-Americans were enslaved. The 1800 Census reported over 100,000 free people of color, and by the beginning of the Civil War there were nearly half a million. These people were dispersed across the nation and many lived in the southern slave states.

Free African Americans were counted in the census as free people, and in 1860 and 1850 they were listed alongside their white neighbors. In 1840 and earlier they were enumerated on the same sheets as their white neighbors but in different columns. (Before 1850, the census takers listed the head of the household by name, and then counted everyone else by gender and age.)

As you continue your research, remember the Seven Cardinal Rules.⁴

1. Work from the known to the unknown.

Start with yourself and work back through your ancestry. Although it seems tempting to jump ahead, your future success depends on building a solid founda-

- tion. Brick walls aren't discovered, they are built.
2. Have a plan
Think about what you want to research today. Narrow your focus to what you are actually going to work on immediately. Try to phrase things as specific questions, such as "Where and when was my great-grandfather born?" or "When did my grandmother move to St. Louis?" By answering specific questions you can build your research. Don't go looking for records, see out evidence.
 3. Be Flexible
Flexibility means two things in Genealogy. The first involves abandoning your preconceived notions. Uncle Cooter might actually be Clarence, or George. Junior might actually have the same first name as his grandfather not his father. The second point of flexibility comes in your research. If your search for your great-grandfather's birth place and date unearths a treasure trove of information about your great-grandmother's family be flexible enough to change your focus and accept the gift in hand.
 4. Prove it!
Genealogical research is based on proof. Other people's research is not proof (especially if their research consists of undocumented online trees). The Genealogical Proof Standard is your friend. Learn how to use it.
 5. Cite your sources.
Citing your sources is a part of genealogical proof. It allows you to find the information again and re-evaluate it if things seem to be going off track. Likewise, it allows future researchers to find the same information and understand your thinking.
 6. Beware the internet, message boards, and online trees.
The internet has done great things for genealogical research. Materials sored hundreds and even thousands of miles away are now accessible. At the same time, however, it has allowed all sorts of people to publish questionable material on online trees, message boards, and even family web pages. You must learn to distinguish between these types of data.
 7. Get and stay organized.
One of the hardest parts of this research is staying organized. It will be a lot easier if you start organized and stay that way. Use the standard genealogical forms. Write the source citations on any copies you make (if it is a digital copy put the source in the file name). Piles of unidentified papers and looking up the same record over and over again will otherwise be the genealogist's curse.

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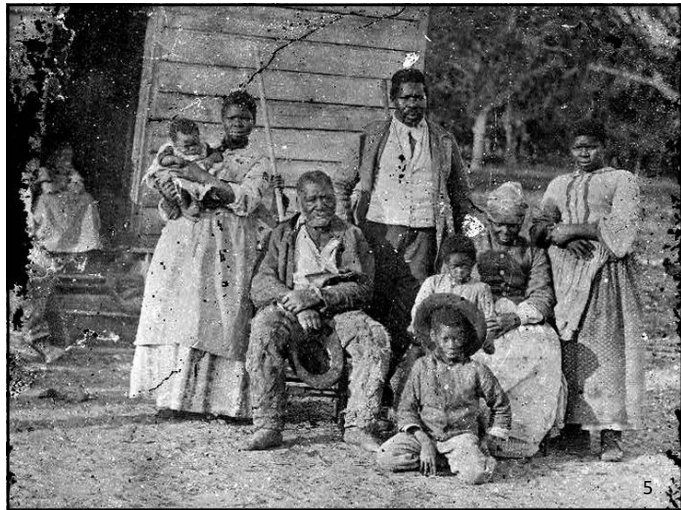
History & Genealogy at St. Louis County Library began in 1998 when the St. Louis Genealogical Society donated their collection of over 20,000 volumes. Since that time additional collections, including the National Genealogical Society Book Loan Collection, the Julius K. Hunter and Friends African American Research Collocation, among others, our collection has grown to over 100,000 resources.

History & Genealogy also provides access to a number of subscription databases to help with your research. Among these are AncestryLibraryEdition, FindMyPast, Fold3, HeritageQuest and many others. Many of the databases are accessible from home with a valid St. Louis County Library Card. Free classes on these databases and other genealogical topics are presented regularly around the St. Louis County Library System.

African-American research, like genealogical research in general, can be a fun and rewarding experience. It helps us connect with our own past, and puts our families within a larger historical context.

NOTES:

¹Original Photo Postcard circa 1910 of African American Family. Ebay <https://www.ebay.com/itm/1910-REAL-PHOTO-of-Proud-Black-African-American-Family-Three-Generations-/372621078879> (accessed 5 Sep 2019).



²Four Generation Chart at <http://tinyurl.com/ho5eyz6>

³Family Group Sheet at <http://tinyurl.com/jn8epee>

⁴Franke, Larry, *Who Were my Ancestors? Beginning Genealogical Research*. Presented many times at all branches of St. Louis County Library, St. Louis County Library Program, 2009—2020.

⁵African-American slave family representing five generations all born on the plantation of J. J. Smith, Beaufort, South Carolina. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/441634307185229439/> (accessed 16 Sep 2019).



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