



Tracing your African American Ancestors: Advanced Techniques for African American Research

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African American genealogical research presents some unique challenges for most researchers. Often creative approaches and new ideas enable us to break through barriers and make the discoveries we are hoping for. No two cases are the same. There is no cookie cutter approach that will work for every research problem or even every family. Open-mindedness and flexibility are the key to success.

We will consider three topics: Getting Back to Africa, Breaking the 1900-1880 barrier, and Using Periodicals to help solve research problems. Many of these approaches are innovative and some of them might even seem crazy. But they might work.

PART 1—GETTING BACK TO AFRICA

For many of us of a certain age, January 1977 found us glued to the television as we watched *Roots*¹, a television mini-series based on Alex Haley's book, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*². The series told the story of Kunta Kinte, a free African man who was captured by slave traders and sold into slavery in Virginia. As many of us, both Black and White, sat enthralled by the story, we began to wonder if it might be possible to trace our own families back through the generations and across the Atlantic Ocean.

Haley's genealogical research has been shown to rely too heavily on oral tradition and much of his analysis has been proven to be faulty.³ Most experts believe that Haley actually managed to find his family's ancestral home even though the genealogy was faulty because the family had remembered certain words: Kamby Bolongo (the Gambia River) and Ko (Kora, a stringed musical instrument).

Most of us, however, do not realize we have a family tradition of names of objects and places from our ancestral homelands. Might there be other techniques and ideas that might aid us in jumping across the ocean?

The answer is a definite yes. Not only can DNA provide an answer, but also other techniques including migration patterns and research. Let us consider each of them in turn.

DNA

A number of companies provide DNA testing and offer a variety of services. For genealogical research the two most widely used are AncestryDNA and Family Tree DNA.

- The most common type of test is Autosomal. This test looks across and individual's DNA from all of his or her ancestors. It can connect you with cousins, and will also reveal in a general way where in the world your ancestors came from. All of the testing companies provide this test.
- The Y-DNA reaches back through the paternal line (father's, father's, father's etc.). Only males can take this test because only men have a Y chromosome. Y-DNA testing is only available through Family Tree DNA.
- The mtDNA test does the same thing but through the maternal line (mother's, mother's, mother's etc.). Both men and women can take this test. mtDNA testing is only available through Family Tree DNA.

MIGRATION PATTERNS

The movement of people from place to place, whether voluntary or otherwise, often appears random. Typically, it is not. Our objective as researchers is to identify the reasons people move from place to place. If we can discover the reasons, we can discover the pattern. Once the pattern is identified we can trace it back and identify where individuals most likely originated.

African Americans (or their ancestors) have experienced six significant migrations. The first is the notorious "Middle Passage" where they were brought from Africa against their will to the Americas.

The second, often called the "Second Middle Passage," occurred when American slave owners moved south and west or more often, sold their enslaved people south and west. This, unfortunately, resulted in the separation of many families on an auction block.

After the Civil War, many newly freed African Americans relocated. Their goal might have been to reunite with lost relatives, to try to make a better life for themselves, or perhaps just to get away from the places where they had been enslaved. These moves tended to be to cities near or in the south such as St. Louis, Memphis, Baltimore, or Cincinnati.

The "Great Migration" occurred between 1916 and 1930. This was a voluntary migration. With any voluntary migration you can expect both a push and a pull. In this case the push came from Jim Crow and lack of real opportunities in the south. The pull was the hope of jobs in the industrial cities of the north. During this time many African Americans left their homes in the south for the promise of places like Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and New York.

The "Second Great Migration" occurred between 1940 and 1970. This period again saw the push of Jim Crow and the pull of jobs and opportunities elsewhere. During this time many more African American Families left the South and headed north or west to places like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle.

Since 1970 what is called the "New Great Migration" is underway. As jobs in the industrial cities began to disappear. Like everyone else, African Americans began moving south. Typically this movement has been to southern cities such as Atlanta, Jacksonville, Dallas, or Houston. Moving south, in most cases, does not mean a return to rural Mississippi, Arkansas, or Alabama.

Because of these migrations, tracing a family becomes like trying to trace a single thread of spaghetti on a plate in an Italian restaurant. If your ancestors moved after the Civil War, you are likely as far removed from the place they left as mid-19th century German or Irish immigrants might be from their original homeland. If they came north during the Great Migration, you are as chronologically removed as the Italians and Eastern Europeans who came to the US during that same period. But there is a difference. Your ancestors have been here longer. When you trace back to Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama, you are still a long way from your origins.

Or are you? It turns out that if you can trace your ancestors back to the 1880 Census, and you can find one or more of them whose parents came from another state, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, or South Carolina, you might be able to use the statistics on the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database⁴ to determine, at least in a macro way their African place of origin.

If your ancestors were brought to Virginia or Maryland, for example, their most likely African origins are either the Senegambia (modern day Senegal or Gambia), the Bight of Biafra (modern Nigeria), or West Central Africa (modern Congo or Angola). A variety of factors determined where people were captured and where they were subsequently enslaved. These factors include which European country controlled which area in Africa, but also the particular skills the Africans in a particular region might have.

RESEARCH

If you study the 1880 US Census, you will determine that 961 of the enumerated people give their birth place as Africa. In the 1870 US Census, that number jumps to 1789 people. That doesn't sound like many until you consider their potential number of descendants. By 1975 those few people potentially had over 32 million living descendants.⁵ In 1980 the US Census Bureau reported 26,495,025 African Americans in the country. Statistically, every African American should find at least one of these people somewhere in their ancestry. Of course, statistics will also tell us that if you put your head in the oven and your feet in the freezer on average you will be comfortable.

PART 2—BREAKING THE 1900—1880 BARRIER

For many people, the loss of the 1890 US Census creates roadblocks and difficulties. Jumping back twenty years instead of the normal ten creates problems in the best of circumstances. For African American researchers the difficulties are often greater.

During the years between 1880 and 1900 most African American families were in a state of flux. People were searching for lost relatives. They were determining their surnames. They were in many cases moving around looking for better opportunities. They were doing all of this in a region of the country that was still recovering economically and physically from the Civil War. All of these things make them difficult to find.

One option might be to study their entire 1900 community. Which of their neighbors were born in the same state? Is there any evidence of a chain migration? Only rarely, even today, do people move as single individuals. By studying the entire community, you can sometimes reveal the origin of an entire group.

Part 3—Periodicals

Historical and genealogical societies all around the world often produce quarterly or other publications. They can be a great resource for genealogical research and yet they are often overlooked by researchers.

In many cases the societies publish records such as probate indexes or transcriptions of wills or court records in their journal, rather than online or in a book. The other type of journal article you can often find features an individual writing about how he or she solved a particular problem in his/her research. While the specific case may not apply to your research, perhaps you can apply the methods developed to solve one of your own research problems.

Conclusions

Sometimes, a little creativity in our research can make a huge difference between whether we break down a brick wall or not. We have looked at a few new ideas, perhaps some of them will provide insights for your research.

NOTES:

1. Blinn, William, *Roots*. David L. Wolper Production, DVD Video , 30th anniversary ed., Burbank, CA : Warner Home Video, 2011. Call no. DVD Roots
2. Haley, Alex, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2014. Call no. R 929.20973 H168R and 929.20973 H168R
3. See Mills, Elizabeth Shown and Gary B. Mills, “The Genealogist’s Assessment of Alex Haley’s Roots.” *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 72 (March 1984): 35-49. (Can also be accessed online at Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Historic Pathways* (<http://www.HistoricPathways.com>)).
4. Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/>. Accessed 1 February 2018.
5. Assumes 25 years per generation, 4 descendants per generation, and three generations alive at any given time.

Journal Articles Highlighting African American Research

Allen Cameron, "Lucinda Depp and Her Descendants." *The Genealogist*, 17 (Spring 2003): 3-36. **[Case Study, Virginia, Ohio, Wills, Probate, Land Sales, Slave Sales]**

Anderson, Leslie Elaine, "Tabitha (Bugg) George Smith of Mecklenburg County, Virginia." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 103 (March 2015): 5-28. **[Case Study, Virginia, Wills, Tax Records, Post Emancipation Records]**

Bell, Mary McCampbell, "Finding Manuscript Collections: NUCMC, NIDS, and RLIN." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 77 (September 1989): 208-218 **[Finding Manuscript Collections,]**

Brasfield, Curtus, "'To My Daughter and the Heirs of Her Body': Slave Passages as illustrated by the Latham-Smithwick Family." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 81 (December 1993): 270-282. **[Case Study, Tennessee, Researching the Slave-owners]**

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Flynn, Katherine E., "Jane Johnson, Found! But is she "Hannah Craftss"? The Search for the Author of *The Bondswoman's Narrative*." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 90 (September 2002): 165-190. **[Case Study, Virginia, Washington, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Escape from Slavery, Record Analysis]**

Hagar, Ruth Ann Abels, and Ann Carter Fleming, "Slaves, Soldiers, and Citizens: Special Civil War Recruitment Lists" *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 91 (June 2003): 139-143. **[Resources, Missouri, Identifying the Slave Owner]**

Hait, Michael, "Free and Enslaved: John and Melinda Human/Newman of Talbot County and Baltimore, Maryland." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 103 (June 2015): 115-127. **[Case Study, Maryland, Identifying the Slave Owner, Manumission Records, Free Registers]**

Hait, Michael, "In the Shadow of Rebellions: Maryland Ridgelys in Slavery and Freedom." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 100 (December 2012): 245-266. **[Case Study, Maryland, Court Records,]**

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- Hollister, Morna Lahnice, "Using Freedman's Bank Registers to Trace Enslaved Families: A South Carolina McFall Example." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 99 (June 2011) 125-132 **[Case Study, South Carolina, Freedman's Bank]**
- Jupiter, Del E., "Agustina and the Kelkers: A Spanish West Florida Line." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 80 (December 1992): 265-279. **[Case Study, Florida, Using Documents to Prove/Disprove Oral Tradition, Church Records]**
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- Leary, Helen F. M., "Sally Hemming's Children: A Genealogical Analysis of the Evidence." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*. 89 (September 2001) 165-207. **[Case Study, Virginia, Using Documents to Prove/Disprove Oral Tradition]**
- Lennon, Rachal Mills, and Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Mother, Thy Name is Mystery!: Finding the Slave who Bore Philomene Daurat." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 88 (September 2000): 201-224. **[FAN Principle, Louisiana, Case Study]**
- Mills, Elizabeth Shown, "De Mézières-Trichel-Grappe : A Study of a Tri-Caste Lineage in the Old South." *The Genealogist*, 6 (Spring 1985): 3-84. **[Case Study, Louisiana, Tri-Racial Families, Free African American Research, Tracing Back to Enslaved Ancestors]**
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- Mills, Gary B., "Backtracking a Cross-Racial Heritage in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *The American Genealogist*, 65 (July 1990):129-142. **[Case Study, Louisiana, Church Records, Mixed Race]**
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- Moneta, Daniela, "Virginia Pughs and North Carolina Wests: A Genetic Link from Slavery in Kentucky." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 97 (September 2009): 179-194. **[Kentucky, Case Study, Identifying Last Slave Owner, DNA,]**
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- Randall, Ruth, "Family Lore and Effects of Slavery on the Black Psyche: Rosa Grammar's Choice." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 97 (June 2009): 85-96 **[Case Study, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Using Documents to Prove/Disprove Oral Tradition]**
- Shipley, Douglas S., "Teaming Oral History with Documentary Research: The Enslaved Austins of Missouri's 'Little Dixie'." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 90 (June 2002): 111-135. For an expanded version, see Shipley, Douglas S., Frank and Fanny Austin: Oral and Documentary Research of a Formerly Enslaved Family. [Fredericksburg, Va. : D.S. Shipley, 199-?]. Call no. 929.2 A935S **[Case study; Missouri; Using Documents to Prove/Disprove Oral Tradition]**
- Waller-Frye, George, "The 'Mulatto' Adam Rogers of New London and His White Wife Katherine Jones." *The American Genealogist*, 53 (December 1977): 217-224. **[Case Study, Connecticut, Mixed Race, Colonial Era]**

Not Specifically directed at African American Research but demonstrates how researching a community and using the Genealogical Proof Standard can reconstruct family relationships when few records exist.

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Collier, Melvin J., *Mississippi to Africa: A Journey of Discovery*. Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2008. Call no. R 976.2 C699M **[Case Study, Mississippi]**

Hanks, Stephen, *Akee Tree: A Descendant's Quest for his Slave Ancestors on the Eskridge Plantations*. Franklin, TN: American History Press, 2013. Call no. R 929.2 E75H or 929.2 E75H **[Case Study, Mississippi, Virginia, Tracing ancestors to Africa]**

Hunter, Julius K., *Honey Island: A Broadcaster's Search for His Mississippi Roots*. St. Louis, MO: Virginia Publishing Co, 1999. Call no. R 929.2 R859H or 929.2 R859H **[Case Study, Mississippi]**

Streets, David H, "Case Study One: Milly Copenhaver." *Slave Genealogy: A Research Guide With Case Studies*, Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1986 pp37-42. Call no. 929.1089 S915S **[Case Study, Kentucky, Ownership of a Slave, Deeds, Census, Surnames, Researching the Slave Owners]**

Streets, David H, "Case Study Two: Cowan-Gillespie Slaves." *Slave Genealogy: A Research Guide With Case Studies*, Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1986 pp42-50. Call no. 929.1089 S915S **[Case Study, Kentucky, Court Order Books, Cemetery Records, Researching the Slave Owners, Slave Schedules, Census]**

Streets, David H, "Case Study Three: Simon Commonly Called Si." *Slave Genealogy: A Research Guide With Case Studies*, Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1986 pp50-67. Call no. 929.1089 S915S **[Case Study, Kentucky, Manumission Records, Wills, Probate, Tax Lists, Census]**



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