



Tracing your African American Ancestors: Records of Slave Owning Families

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In 1619, a year before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth, an English warship, the *White Lion*, brought the first African people to what would become the United States. The *White Lion* and another English ship, the *Treasurer*, were operating under letters of marque issued by the Dutch Prince Maurice. These letters allowed the warship to act as a privateer (essentially legal pirates) and raid Spanish and Portuguese ships. The *White Lion* captured these approximately 20 Africans during a raid on a Portuguese slave ship, the *San Juan Bautista*, which was enroute to Mexico².

Virginia law at the time did not recognize or allow for slavery. Therefore these first Africans became indentured servants and in many cases were freed after the completion of their indenture. These became the first free blacks in the colony. Their descendants were the ancestors of many of the free African Americans who lived in Virginia and Maryland prior to the Civil War.

Virginia law established slavery for life in 1662. This legal change came as more and more kidnapped Africans were brought to the colony. This law created the institution of African American slavery in the United States. The institution would not come to an end until the ratification of the 13th Amendment on 6 December 1865, more than 200 years later.

THE MYTH OF THE ANONYMOUS SLAVE

Two hundred years is a very long time. Long enough for empires to rise and fall, wars to be fought, and generations to be born and die. It is also long enough that a family may fail to remember the names of their earlier forebears, allowing them to fall into a historic haze. Combine that with the painful memories of a period of enslavement, and it is understandable that many parents would not want to pass information on to their children and grandchildren. Unfortunately, this leads to the idea that these people were anonymous slaves. People without names or histories. Unknown and unknowable.

Dee Parmer Woodtor, in *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African American Genealogy and Historical Identity*, warns us against this, saying, “there is no such thing as an anonymous slave or a slave without a history.”³

What she is saying is that every enslaved person had an identity. They had a name, they had parents, they probably had a spouse. They were born somewhere, they lived somewhere, they died

somewhere, and were buried somewhere. They were someone's darling baby boy or precious daughter. They were someone's cherished spouse. They were a mother or a father. They experienced joy, experienced grief, and every other human emotion. The fact that we don't know their names is more society's and our failing than theirs.

Compounding the problem is the fact that pre-1850 U.S. research is difficult for everyone. Courthouse fires and record loss as well as lack of record keeping means there are very few resources for that time frame. In fact, the most common records for pre-1850 research are wills, probate, and deed records. None of these exist for people who were enslaved.

So, what do we do?

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

First of all, we need to understand that the absence of public records does not necessarily mean the complete absence of records. Plantations were large commercial enterprises. The plantation owners needed to keep detailed records of everything that happened. These records might be in the form of ledgers, journals, diaries, letters, and even family Bibles. Additionally, they typically saved copies of public records, too. These might include lawsuits, wills and probate records, inventories, deeds, and records of purchases and sales of enslaved people.

The first step: Find the last slave owner. At this point, you will be moving from searching into researching. This will likely be a challenging project. No single approach will work in every situation for every family. You will need to get creative. For some ideas, consider the numerous books and articles on African American research⁴. Also, see "Finding the Last Owner of an Enslaved Ancestor" in the February 2020 issue of *PastPorts*⁵.

Step 2: Research the family of the last slave owner. The family probably left at least some public records, and these should be searched to develop an organized understanding of who these people were. To find your ancestors, you have to know the intricacies of the slave owner's family.

Let's consider some of questions about the slave owner and his/her family and why they might be important.

- What was the position of the last slave owner in the community? Were they among the very wealthy of the planter class or did they operate a smaller farm with just a few enslaved people? If they ran a large operation they probably left more family papers.
- Where did the slave owner live? Your ancestors' life experiences will be very different if they were enslaved on a Virginia tobacco plantation as opposed to an Alabama cotton plantation, or a South Carolina rice plantation, or a Louisiana sugar plantation.
- Where was the last slave owner born? If they were living in Mississippi but born in North Carolina, for example, they might have brought enslaved people with them when they established their new place.
- Who were the slave owner's parents? Did they inherit any enslaved African Americans from them? Did they leave wills or other papers?

- When and to whom was the slave owner married? In many cases, the enslaved African Americans may have come from the wife's family either by will or by gift. If so, that will be another family to research.
- When and where did the slave owner die? If it was before 1865, there might be a will listing the names of your ancestors.

This will probably get frustrating, maybe infuriating. You will probably end up knowing more about the slave owning family than they do, and in some cases, at least for a time, you might know more about that family than you do your own. Sometimes you might need to step away, take a deep breath, and come back to it later. We are building a foundation for further research. Remember to keep your eyes on the prize. You are learning about your own ancestors.

FINDING MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Finding the manuscript records left by the slave owning families can be challenging. In some cases, they might still be in the possession of a family member. The family member might live in a far away state and only know they have a trunk of old family papers in their attic.

The papers may have been donated to an archive. The archive could be at a county or state historical society or library, a university, or even the state archives. A word of caution: the archive could be anywhere. There is no reason to assume the family donated their papers to an archive where they lived in 1865. They might have moved or had some other connection elsewhere. It is also possible the papers were donated to more than one archive over the years by different family members, possibly of different generations.

These challenges do not need to be viewed as insurmountable obstacles. In many cases they can be overcome using *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC).

NUCMC is a free cooperative cataloging service which creates online searchable records in OCLC WorldCat on behalf of U.S. repositories. These records describe the holdings of the repository and makes their existence known to researchers around the world⁶.

Although some of these records might only be accessible by visiting the repository in person, others might be available on microfilm or digitally. This filming or digitization might be a local project by the repository, or it might be part of a larger collection.

*Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations*⁷ is one such collection. These archival records from sixteen repositories are arranged into three major sections and subdivided into twenty-two series. Printed finding aids describe what is in each part, but the records are also described in NUCMC. About half of the archives consented to having their materials digitized by ProQuest and made available to libraries as a subscription service known as *History Vault, Southern Life, Slavery, and the Civil War*. St. Louis County Library has a subscription to this database.

*The Charles F. Heartman Manuscript Collection*⁸ represents another type of archival source. The collection consists of documents collected by an individual as he found them and preserved because he thought (correctly) that they were important. Upon his death, the Heartman Manuscripts were divided between Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans and Texas Southern University in Houston. The portion belonging to Xavier has been indexed, microfilmed and dig-

itized.⁹ St. Louis County Library and St. Louis Public Library have copies of the microfilm and the *Guide to the Heartman Manuscripts on Slavery*¹⁰.

As with your research on the slave owning family, researching in these documents will likely cause you some distress. That is to be expected. You are reading about terrible things that happened to people who loved people you possibly knew and loved. You may have to stop and re-center yourself from time to time. Focus on the fact that you are trying to reclaim the names and the lives of people who history has tried to make invisible. As painful as the task may be, the effort will be worth it. They were survivors, and they deserve to be named and remembered.

CONCLUSIONS

Manuscript resources can be challenging to find and use, but can lead to remarkable genealogical finds for a diligent researcher.

NOTES:

¹African 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 22 April 2019).

²"African Americans at Jamestown," *Historic Jamestowne*, National Park Service Online Brochure, <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/african-americans-at-jamestown.htm>, (accessed 22 April 2019).

³Woodtor, Dee Parmenr, *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African American Genealogy and Historical Identity*. New York: Random House, 1999, p.250. (SLCL Call no. R929.1 W898F or 929.1 W898f, SLPL Call no. 929.1, OCLC no. 40331192.)

⁴A bibliography of African American genealogy resources can be found on History & Genealogy at St. Louis County Library's website. <https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/Tracing%20your%20African-American%20Ancestors%20Bibliography.pdf> (accessed 22 April 2019).

⁵"Finding the Last Owner of an Enslaved Ancestor," *Pastports* Vol. 12 No. 2 (February 2020) pp. 1-10. https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/02_2020.pdf (accessed 18 Feb 2020).

⁶Library of Congress, *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC). <https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/> (accessed 25 Apr 2019).

⁷See "Using Ante-Bellum Southern Plantation Records," *Pastports* Vol. 8 No. 2 (February 2015) pp. 1-8. https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/02_2015.pdf (accessed 25 Apr 2019).

⁸See "Heartman Manuscript Collection," *Pastports* Vol. 10, No. 2 (February 2017) pp. 1-4. https://www.slcl.org/sites/default/files/02_2017_0.pdf (accessed 25 Apr 2019).

⁹Digitized records are at <https://cdm16948.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16948coll6> (accessed 25 Apr 2019).

¹⁰Xavier University of Louisiana, *Guide to the Heartman Manuscripts on Slavery*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. (SLCL Call no. R 976.3 X3G, SLPL Call no. Z6621.X38 H4326 , OCLC Number 08377304)



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