



## Tracing your African American Ancestors: Digging Deeper

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As researchers work on their family histories, they soon recognize the need to examine additional sources. Family papers, oral history, and census population schedules are great tools, but more records are needed to dig further into our family's history.

Some of these records are more easily accessible than others. We will consider them first.

### **CENSUS NON-POPULATION SCHEDULES**

We are all familiar with the census population schedules. They are a genealogist's great friend. They provide names, ages, and family relationships. But as the census takers made their rounds, they collected other information too. They compiled this into other schedules including Slave Schedules, Mortality Schedules, Veterans Schedules, Agriculture Schedules, and others.

**SLAVE SCHEDULES** exist because of Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3 of the United States Constitution. It provides that enslaved people would be counted as 3/5 of a person for the purposes of apportioning representation in the House of Representatives and for purposes of direct taxation. To calculate this the number of enslaved people in an area needed to be known but not necessarily their names. Consequently enslaved people were typically not enumerated by name. Occasionally, the census taker did not follow their instructions. The 1860 Slave Schedule for Boyd County, Kentucky, and the 1850 Slave Schedules for Bowie County, Texas and Utah County, Deseret list enslaved people by name. Are there others? Who knows.

**MORTALITY SCHEDULES** enumerate everyone who died in the 12 months preceding the census. The purpose of this effort was to discover significant causes of death in the country that could possibly be addressed by efforts at public health. Because enslaved people were enumerated by name in the schedule, it can be a very early existence in the census records for people who might otherwise be nameless in public records.

**VETERANS SCHEDULE** enumerates surviving Union soldiers, sailors, and marines who had served in the "war of the rebellion" or their widows. The January 1921 fire in the Commerce Department Building destroyed the 1890 Veterans Schedule for all states alphabetically from Alabama to part of Kentucky. No separate veterans enumeration was taken during prior or subsequent censuses.

**AGRICULTURE SCHEDULE** documents the work of everyone involved in farm production during the census year. It records the production of land owners, but also tenant farmers and

sharecroppers. Although not directly useful for genealogical research. It can give interesting glimpses into the lives of your ancestors.

OTHER SCHEDULES, specifically Industry & Manufacturing Schedules, Social Statistics Schedules, and the Defective, Dependent, Delinquent Schedules were taken from time to time. Any of these may also provide interesting information about your family.<sup>2</sup>

### **BIRTH RECORDS**

Most southern states did not issue birth certificates before the mid-nineteen-teens. This means that to find birth information for your ancestors you will need to expand your search.

DELAYED CERTIFICATES OF BIRTH came into existence with the advent of Social Security. In order to apply for Social Security an individual needs a birth certificate. This created a problem at the beginning, because many eligible people were born before their state issued birth certificates. To solve this problem, states began issuing delayed certificates of birth. To acquire such a certificate an individual had to supply proof of their birth. Typically, these certificates are available from the vital records office of the state in the same manner as a standard birth certificate. Some states have separate indexes for these which are publicly available.

BIRTH REGISTERS were created in some states or individual counties or cities before states issued birth certificates. These registers can provide information about our ancestors. In the decades immediately preceding the civil war, Kentucky, Virginia and possibly other states recorded the births of enslaved children in their registers.

CHURCH RECORDS can be another potential source for birth records. Denominations that practice infant baptism typically record birth information in the baptism records. In heavily Roman Catholic areas, such as South Louisiana, it is quite common to find slave baptism in the church records.

### **MARRIAGE RECORDS**

Marriage between enslaved people was generally prohibited. That said, many slave owners, allowed "slave marriages" because of the stability and comfort they could bring to the plantation. In these marriages the couple promised to be faithful until death or distance prevented it. Unfortunately records of these unions were rarely if ever kept.

After the Civil War many people solemnized their marriages either through the Freedmen's Bureau or at the local county courthouse. Church marriage records might also exist in some locations.

### **MILITARY RECORDS**

African Americans have fought in every war in U.S. history. In addition to the records of the U.S. Colored troops at the time of the civil war, a researcher would be advised to check service and pension records for all periods of history

### **LAND RECORDS**

Records of Land ownership often survive even if other records were lost in courthouse fires. These records can be a goldmine of information about families. Additionally, it is not uncommon to find African Americans obtaining land patents, particularly in the western states.

## **NEWSPAPERS**

Newspapers have existed since the earliest days of the settlement of what is now the United States. Historically, they have been difficult to search and therefore tend to be an underutilized resource. Databases, such as *Newspapers.com* and *NewspaperARCHIVE* have made it much easier to find articles about your ancestors.

## **DEATH RECORDS**

Death certificates are a relatively new document. Most states did not begin issuing them until the early part of the twentieth century. This means other resources must be used to find information about your ancestor's deaths.

DEATH REGISTERS sometimes exist for periods before death certificates were issued. Typically, these are large books and the entries are written across two pages. There may or may not be indexes in the volume.

CEMETERY RECORDS, if they exist, can provide information about your ancestors. The records typically include a date of death and a date of burial. Sometimes they include a birthdate too. If the individual was buried in a family plot, you can often learn about other family members. Even if your ancestor is buried in a single grave, it is likely other family members are buried at the same cemetery. *FindAGrave.com* and *Billiongraves.com* have cemetery information from around the world.

CHURCH RECORDS may contain information about funerals conducted at the church. Not all churches maintain such records and the amount of detail in them tends to vary from place to place.

FUNERAL HOMES also keep records. Because these are private business records, there is no requirement that they be made publically available. Also, if a funeral home is sold or the business closes, the records may be difficult to find.

When your research takes you to 1870, you will need to move into some new record sets. These can be more difficult to use, but diligent effort will produce results.

## **RECONSTRUCTION RECORDS**

The reconstruction period was a time of chaos for most African American Families. Emancipation had come, but they found themselves in an American South that had been both physically and economically devastated by war. To help remedy this problem, the Federal Government established the Freedmens Bureau and the Freedmans Bank. Additionally, other records were created by the emancipated people themselves.

THE FREEDMENS BUREAU, officially titled the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands began in the aftermath of the Civil War. Its job was to provide clothing, education, temporary camps, hospitals, solemnize slave marriages, reunite families, provide transportation, manage indentures, help people find employment, supervise labor contracts, manage abandoned lands and confiscated property, and provide veterans services. Many of these activities created records. Although they are not easy to search, these records can be a treasure trove of family information.

THE FREEDMAN'S BANK was created by congress to provide a safe place for the newly emancipated people to save their money. It had branches throughout the south and some northern cities. Although the bank ultimately failed, it left records of the depositors which typically identify

family members, (often including parents), place of birth, and distinguishing characteristics of the depositors.

#### NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENTS

After the Civil War, emancipated African Americans were very interested in finding relatives they had been separated from during the period of slavery. Many placed advertisements in newspapers seeking information on lost family,. Often pastors would read these notices to their congregations after services and many families were reunited through this process. Some of these advertisements have been digitized and indeed through projects such as “Last Seen” from Villanova University and “Lost Friends” from the Historic New Orleans Collections.

#### ANTE-BELLUM RECORDS

Plantation agriculture was big business. Like the owners of most big businesses, the plantation owners kept detailed records of their activities. Records of the births, and deaths of the enslaved population are often included in these records. These can be found in a number of resources including the Heartman Collection and the Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations.

Legal records from the time can also provide information. Slave owners wills, probate, court documents, legislative records, deeds, mortgages, and other public records may contain the names of your ancestors. If you are descended from free blacks, their names are almost certainly in free black registers.

#### OTHER RECORDS

This discussion only scratches the surface of the available records. Consider what else might be out there. Genealogical and historical society journals from your ancestral counties should be read. Pay attention to oral histories, church histories. Even voting records may reveal clues about your family. Also be aware of the need for research in courthouses and archives. Although great strides have been made digitizing records in recent years, there is still much out there to be discovered.

There are a wide variety of record sources for African American Research. Some of them can be challenging to use, but with diligence and patience you will be able to learn about your ancestors lives.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>African American Woman Researching in a Library, USFWS Conservation Library, <https://nctc.fws.gov/resources/knowledge-resources/> accessed 23 Sep 2019.

<sup>2</sup>For more information see, Dollarhide, William, *The Census Book: A Genealogist's Guide to Federal Census Facts, Schedules and Indexes; With Master Extraction Forms for Federal Census Schedules, 1790-1930*. Bountiful, Utah: Heritage Quest, 1999. Call no. R 929.1 D665C. Also available online at HeritageQuest.



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