



Guide to African American Genealogical Research

The practice of African American genealogy, particularly in the South during the Antebellum and Civil War periods, is difficult for myriad reasons. Often the names given to enslaved African Americans were laid aside after emancipation, and official birth, death, and marriage records were not kept for the enslaved population. Census records from before the Civil War enumerate the number of slaves kept by each household, but these individuals are not listed by name. Further, a frequent misconception still exists that most emancipated African Americans chose the surnames of their most recent masters.

Several books provide an essential guide to the journey and, it must be said, digitization efforts and the online publication of many important genealogical resources has been a boon to the practice. **It is the purpose of this guide to provide access points to genealogical instruction as well as primary source materials available online and in local or prominent libraries and repositories.**

As an introductory survey of genealogical practice, as well as a comprehensive listing of available databases, primary sources, research guides, and printed as well as online resources, UNC SILS alumnus [Rebecca Knight's guide to African American genealogical research at the University of Delaware](#) is exemplary, and an excellent starting point. The website [AfriGeneas](#) is also quite helpful, and offers a wealth of resources and links to primary source material.

Resources listed in Rebecca Knight's guide, such as the UNC-Greensboro's [Digital Library on American Slavery](#), [information on accessing and researching Slave Ship Manifests](#), and the [African American Gateway](#) website, contain links to primary resources as well as several bibliographies indicating the location of valuable archival collections related to the practice, in particular the [Guide to African-American Documentary Resources in North Carolina](#), published by the University Press of Virginia. For those outside of the state, or in search of further bibliographic information for their research, the Newberry Library in Chicago has an excellent Bibliography of African American Family History, available online [here](#). Their collection of documents related to those researching North Carolina families in particular is quite robust, and many of these documents may also be located at the nearest public university library.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC is a new and valuable resource as well, with many current initiatives designed to facilitate communication and further research into the genealogy of African Americans. In partnership with FamilySearch international, [the NMAAHC offers the public the opportunity to transcribe Freedman's Bureau Records](#), recently digitized and made available online. For in-person visits to the museum, the [Robert Frederick Smith Explore Your Family History Center](#) provides researchers with in-person guidance as well as access to multiple digital collections and community curation initiatives.

A more theoretical introduction to genealogical research may be found in *Prologue* magazine, which is published by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). [The 1997 Summer issue features sixteen articles by historians and NARA staff, all focused on different aspects of African American genealogical research](#). NARA has published several guides to their federal holdings pertaining to slavery, in particular the [Freedmen's Bureau records](#) and [records specifically related to the US Slave Trade](#). Lastly, NARA offers a concise [guide to the 19th century US Census](#) and how to use it. NARA published a 1979 guide to the names of [Free Black Heads of Families in the First Census of the United States](#). [There is a guide to the 1830 census as well](#), published in 1925, as well as a guide to [Free Black Owners of Slaves in the 1830 census](#).

For a more community-focused approach, the [African American Genealogy wiki on familysearch.org](#) is also excellent.

[Ancestry.com](#) is a valuable tool for primary source genealogical research, but can be a bit daunting at first. Many of the links on [Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet](#) go straight to specific Ancestry.com resources, saving researchers the trouble of trying to find them. There are also links to digitized primary resources in libraries and other repositories around the nation on this site. The UNC-CH Libraries offer free access for faculty and students to both Ancestry and Newspapers dot com, as do many public libraries, and the Archives of the State of North Carolina. New researchers should check with the reference librarian at their local library to ensure access.

Part of the [Digital Library on American Slavery](#), an initiative of UNC-Greensboro, is the [Race & Slavery Petitions project](#), which offers “a searchable database of detailed personal information about slaves, slaveholders, and free people of color. Designed as a tool for scholars, historians, teachers, students, genealogists, and interested citizens, the site provides access to information gathered and analyzed over an eighteen-year period from petitions to southern legislatures and country courts filed between 1775 and 1867 in the fifteen slaveholding states in the United States and the District of Columbia.” A glossary of terms and search help are provided on the site.

Further research can be conducted online and onsite at the State Archives of North Carolina (SANC). SANC also offers several helpful guides for [genealogical research more generally](#), and [slave genealogy specifically](#), which are linked to and appended here. [A guide to finding valuable primary resource documents related to vital records](#) held by the State Archives and County Agencies is also appended here, as well as a [helpful video](#) produced by SANC that offers instruction in reading slave schedules on pre-Civil War census records.

For those willing to travel to Salisbury, NC, the [Andrew Carnegie Library at Livingstone College](#) has an impressive African American Collection that has been used by many prominent genealogists. The items in this collection are not digitized, however, and an appointment will need to be made to view the collection. Resources are also shared amongst members of the

[African American Historical and Genealogical Society](#) (AAHGS). There is a local [North Carolina chapter of the AAHGS](#) as well.

One of the largest and most useful resources available to those interested in Slave Genealogy is the enormous [Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War](#). This collection has several series and parts from various universities throughout the South, and contains a wealth of primary source material. Originally available on microfilm, the collection has been digitized in its entirety and is available through the UNC-CH library as part of a bundle known as ProQuest History Vault. This collection is also available at several university and public libraries throughout the nation, and may be located using WorldCat, [here](#).

What follows is a list of records or resources that may prove helpful in genealogical research for African Americans. Please note that this list is not comprehensive, but offers a good introduction to the primary source materials that genealogical researchers may find themselves using.

Federal, State, and County Public Records:

- Birth and Death Certificates
- Orphan's Court
- County and Court Clerk
- Recorder of Deeds
- Assessor's Records
- Circuit Court and Clerk Records
- Probate Court (this includes numerous "slave as chattel" records)
- Employment Records
- Prison Records
- Almshouse Records
- Census Records
- Military Records
- Freedmen's Bureau records
- Daughters of the American Revolution
- Pension Bureau

- Social Security Records
- Southern Claims Commission
- 1867 Voter Registration Records
- Marriage and Cohabitation records
- Manumission Records

Plantation Records

- Sharecropping Records
- Breeding Records
- Slave Collars
- Branding Records
- Insurance Policies

Further resources:

- Ship's records
- Slave Narratives
- [WPA Oral Histories of Slavery](#)
- Slaveholder Family Information
- Cemetery Inscriptions
- Runaway Slave notices (in newspapers and local publications)