

Researching African American Ancestors

Three Primary Time Periods

Researching your family history is an exciting and rewarding process. Tracing African American ancestors, however, is not without unique challenges. This research can be divided into three primary time periods:

1870 - Present (1870 Census)

The 1870 U.S. Federal Census was the first to record all African American persons. Begin by tracing your family back to 1870 using typical genealogical sources and methods, but note there may be segregated and lost records. The depth and quality of research for this period will inform your success during the following, more challenging, periods.

1865 - 1870 (Reconstruction Era)

While slavery was officially ended by the 13th amendment in 1865, many southern states implemented Black codes, which limited African Americans' rights. The Freedmen's Bureau, a federal relief agency founded to help freedmen transition from slavery to citizenship, was also founded in 1865. Bureau records are a valuable genealogical source for this period.

Pre - 1865 (Civil War)

The big question for researching the Civil War and before is: Was my ancestor enslaved prior to the 13th amendment? (See flowchart on last page of handout.) While not impossible, vague and scarce records make this the most challenging period to research, since enslaved persons were typically recorded using categories of age, gender, and race, or first name only

Census Records

Population Schedules (1790 - 1940)

1870 - the earliest census to list all people by name, serves as a jumping off point for pre-1870 research, which, for many with African American ancestors, is a major brick wall. If this is the earliest instance you find your ancestor in a census, take special note of their birthplace (state, territory, or country).

1860 can help indicate whether your ancestor was a free person or enslaved prior to 1865.

1850 lists each free member of the household, with name, age, sex, and skin color (white, black, or mulatto).

1820 - 1840 count "free white persons," "slaves," and "freed colored persons" in age/gender categories.

1790 - 1810 censuses count "slaves" and "all other [free nonwhite] persons", with no categories for age/gender.

Schedule 2 (1850 - 1860)

Often called "slave schedules," these were enumerated as supplements to the population schedules in 1850 and 1860. Typically these include the name of the enslaver, the age, sex, and color for each enslaved person, and a tally of both "manumitted slaves" and "fugitive slaves". Usually, no name for the enslaved person is listed, but there are exceptions.

Mortality Schedules (1850 - 1880)

Enumerated with each population schedule from 1850 to 1880, this schedule records the names of those who died during the year prior to enumeration of the census (1849, 1859, 1869, and 1879), often including enslaved people.

Records for Researching African American Ancestors

Vital records

Vital records document our ancestors' births, marriages, and deaths. Research the location (at FamilySearch Research Wiki) where your ancestor lived to learn which records may be available and where they are kept. Barriers to registration and denial of rights, as well as the tradition of midwifery, mean records may be scarce. Seek them out regardless and use the records below to supplement.

Military records

Black people have fought in every U.S. conflict. Before and during the Civil War, African Americans typically served in volunteer armies, with the first regular army opportunity, the Buffalo Soldiers, an all-Black regiment organized in 1866. The army remained segregated until 1952. The FamilySearch Research Wiki's African American Military Records page is a great place to learn more about available service records, pension files, and bounty land records.

Newspapers

In addition to obituaries and death notices, birth, marriage, or social announcements, local news, and probate or estate sale listings, enslaved ancestors may be documented in newspapers in escapee (or "runaway slave") notices, registrations of "free persons of color," or manumission announcements.

Church records

Church records often pre-date official vital records, providing valuable information from earlier periods. Even prior to the Civil war, many denominations accepted black people who were both free and enslaved, and many predominantly black churches kept their own records too. If the church no longer has their records, look online or check with local libraries, historical societies, or state archives.

Tombstones and cemetery records

The further back in time you go, the more difficult it can be to read or locate burials, especially for African Americans. Find a Grave and Billion Graves are good places to start looking but check local cemeteries for additional information.

Court and legal records

Civil, criminal, and probate courts produced many records documenting African American ancestors, depending on local laws and rights. If your ancestor was enslaved, their prior enslaver's probate records (wills, inventories, etc.) may be especially useful. Also look for land and property records, manumission records, and escaped enslaved person (or "fugitive slave") case files. When applicable, search for both your ancestor and prior enslavers.

Immigration and naturalization records

African Americans may have been listed on passenger lists if free or ship manifests as cargo (if enslaved). In 1808 Congress outlawed the international slave trade, but did not forbid the buying and selling of enslaved people between enslaver states. Larger ships were required to document the name, sex, age, height, and skin color of enslaved persons, as well as name and residence of the enslaver or shipper. Because many African Americans were born on U.S. soil and granted citizenship by the 14th Amendment in 1868, naturalization records are helpful primarily for those who were foreign-born and came to the U.S. after 1868.

1867 Voter registration lists

As a result of an 1867 act of Congress requiring districts to register all male citizens over 21 who were qualified to vote, we have a number of voter registration lists that can be a useful resource for finding male ancestors during this period. Surviving records may be available online or be held by local archives.

Researching African American Ancestors

Records for Researching African American Ancestors (continued)

Funeral programs

Unique to the African American community, funeral programs were especially popular in the 1930s and 1940s (many African Americans were denied the opportunity to publish obituaries in mainstream newspapers) but span from the late 1800s to present day. They may include photographs, birth/death dates, funeral/burial details, and even a full obituary.

Firsthand accounts

Autobiographies, oral histories, interviews, articles, letters, and court testimonies documenting African Americans from as early as the 1700s are available online, in published and unpublished books, and through libraries and archives. One notable resource is the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Born in Slavery collection which includes around 3,600 narratives of previously enslaved African Americans, available on the Library of Congress website.

Registrations of "free persons of color"

Before the Civil War, local laws may have required "free persons of color" to register with local courts. They typically did this by presenting their manumission papers to the local county clerk, where their information would be recorded in registers. Not all have survived, and they may be difficult to access.

Plantation records

Many enslaved people did not live on large plantations. However, plantation records (if you can find them and if they survived time and the Civil War) may provide rich genealogical details. They are typically considered private business records and may be kept by local, state, or college libraries and archives, historical societies, or they may still be held by a descendent of the plantation owners.

Additional record sources include schools, civic/social/fraternal organizations, orphanages, voting and tax rolls, city/county directories, family Bibles, secondary sources, and social media and community projects.

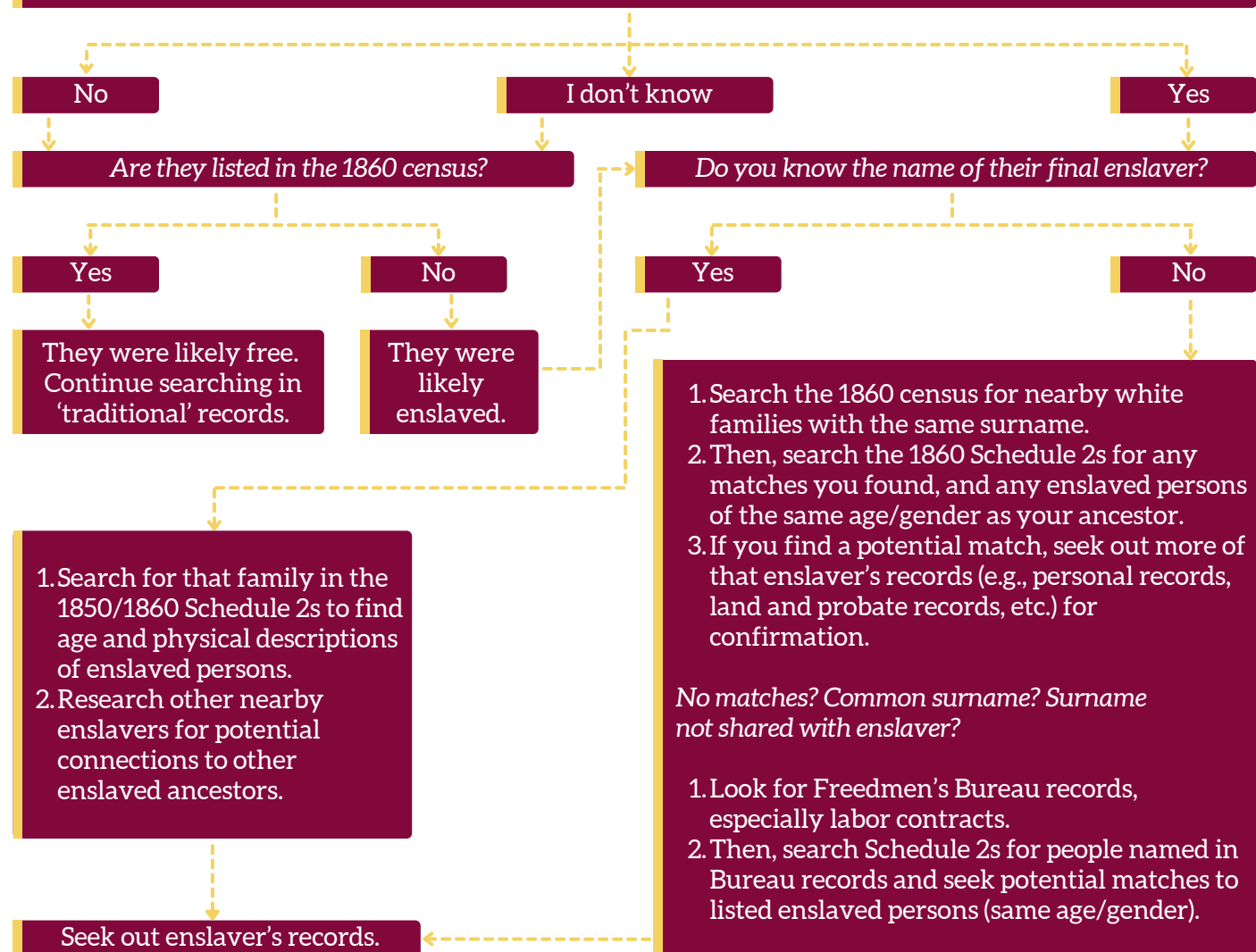
Key Resource: Freedmen's Bureau records

Officially the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, this federal relief agency was founded in March of 1865. It sought to provide social and medical services to those formerly enslaved as they transitioned to citizenship, as well as refugees who lost, or were forced to move from, their homes during the Civil War. Accessible for free through Ancestry and FamilySearch, Freedmen's Bureau records help bridge the gap between 1865 and 1870 and were, for many formerly enslaved people, the first time their names were recorded in an official capacity. The Freedmen's Bureau oversaw:

**Apprenticeships | Education | Abandoned Lands | Marriages | Complaints, Crimes, and Trials | Rations
Labor Contracts | Hospitals and Medical Care | Banking | Transportation | Military Claims |
Correspondence**

It is advised to exhaust all genealogical records from the present back to 1870 before proceeding to Freedmen's Bureau records. Researchers with more confirmed information from present - 1870 will have more success pushing past 1870.

Was your ancestor enslaved prior to 1865?



Additional Resources

A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors by Franklin Carter Smith

Black Roots by Tony Burroughs

Black Courage 1775-1783 by Robert Ewell Greene and *Forgotten Patriots* by Eric G. Grundset

Slave Testimony by John W. Blassingame

Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society and AfriGeneas

List of Black Servicemen, List of Free African Americans in the Revolution, and The Black Loyalist Directory

Digital Library on American Slavery and Enslaved | People of the Historical Slave Trade

International African American Museum | Center for Family History

Association of African American Museums

Find more records via FamilySearch, 10 Million Names, National Archives, WorldCat, and ArchiveGrid.