

## RESEARCHING YOUR FAMILY HISTORY PART I

There are many reasons to explore your family history. I think all humans have a desire to know where they came from. For African Americans in particular, because so much of our ancestral past was erased, we want to try and fill that hole to the extent we can. For that reason alone, doing genealogy is rewarding. And then there's the reparations issue. Black people in America are often told reparations can't happen because slavery was so long ago, it's impossible to know who enslaved who and for how long. This is categorically false. The information regarding your enslaved ancestors' past can be found in most cases. With a little luck and some hard research work on your part, you can breathe life into your family's past.

Researching your family history can be a fun and interesting project. You don't need any special expertise to get started and you don't need to pay for anything, not even Ancestry.com. And you don't need the team of experts that are used in the show FINDING YOUR ROOTS. As you get deeper into your family history research can become a little more complex, but we are going to start with the beginning steps which you can do all on your own.

We are all getting older and are losing or have lost many of the elders in our family. They hold the key to many family stories that will be lost forever once they are gone. Let's try and maximize preserving as much of our family histories as possible. Talk to your elders while you can. Their knowledge will enrich your research.

### **CREATE A FILE!**

Get started by creating a file. Within that file have a document for each of your parents. Alternatively, you can create files for each line of your family. But in the beginning use whatever organizational technique that will work for you. Organization is key! On each parent's document go back as far as you can and simply write down the names of your parent's relatives in that chain. If you know where they lived include that information as well.

Ex. What was your father's full name. Where was he born? Who were his parents? Did he have siblings? Who were his grandparents, and so forth as far back as you can.

Do the same thing with your mother's family in her document and include her *maiden name* as part of her full name when you start writing her relatives down.

If your parents had siblings write down their names. If the siblings have spouses write the spouses names as well.

Don't worry if you can't go back further than your grandparents. You can add in more information later.

### **INTERVIEW THE OLD PEOPLE**

If you can, interview the elders left in the family. But be careful how you do this. Older people don't share all their business as people do today. Their histories sometimes include painful events, and they may not want to talk about them. Remember they were raised in a different time. And you don't want to make them feel like they are being interrogated! Also, as they get older their memories start to fail, and they may need a trigger to help them recall an event.

You can ask things like "What was your favorite thing to do when you were a teen?" "Where did you do that favorite thing?" "Who was your favorite cousin." These are non-threatening questions they may enjoy discussing. During the course of them giving you an answer, you'll have opportunities to ask follow-up questions, again, in that same non-threatening way. Take every opportunity you have left to talk to your elders. Ask them if there is anything they want you young folks to remember about the family.

Record the conversation if the elders will agree. If not, take notes and write up a memo of the conversation as quickly as possible after it is over. You too can forget things. Add the memo to your files or attach the .mp4 of the recording. If your elder mentions a person or an event you did not know about prior to your conversation, make sure to highlight the new information in your notes. You'll want to come back later and follow-up on any new information.

## **CENSUS RECORDS**

One of the great assets we have in doing family research is the U.S. Census. Yes, the same census we all fill out. The government has been keeping track of us since the 1700's! Only broad numerical data is released right away. The personal information you provide is not released for 70 or 80 years. The 1940 census was just released in 2021. Your parents and grandparents should be on the 1940 census (assuming they were in the United States at that time, and you are over 50 as of this writing 1/2023).

The census is organized by state. Each state is then divided into what are called "enumerated districts." It helps tremendously if you know the name of the state and the city, township, village, etc. where your grandparents lived. For a person now in their 60's or late 50's, in 1940 our parents would have been young teenagers....12-17 or 18. They were probably living with their parents, so see if you can find your grandparents in the census, with your parents listed with them. The census can tell you quite a few things depending on what information was being asked at the time. Over the years the information the government collects changes. But normally across all decades it will ask for name, age, whether there is a spouse, name, or number of children in the home, and whether anyone else lives in the house. This is a great way to learn who among your relatives was raised by someone other than their parents. They may also ask occupation and they will most certainly ask or guess (!) race. In the older census forms they asked where a person was born. This is really important information because it can help you identify a family or family member that relocates later. In prior years the census information was taken down by hand by a human being. There weren't any computers available for you to just go online and enter your data. The human census taker might have asked race or they may have eyeballed the resident and put down what they thought the race was.

## **HOW TO SEARCH THE CENSUS**

Ordinarily there is a name index that is used to search the census. In the past one had to go to a main library or the National Archives to look up names in a printed index. Looking up names was tricky because the census taker was a human being. How well they recorded your relative's/ancestor's information depended on

whether the census taker was literate and whether they had legible handwriting. This was the first level where an error could be introduced into the data. Many times, whoever transcribed the information from the census into the printed lists could not read the census taker's handwriting well. This introduces second level error into the transcriptions. The errors can make it more difficult to find your people, but don't give up. Another problem was figuring out how to spell the resident's name. Sometimes researchers get discouraged because they cannot find their people under the spelling as they believe it to be. There is a system called *Soundex* to take care of that problem. *Soundex* is now built into computerized searches, but basically what it does is take the name you input and bring up any spellings that might be phonetically similar.

EX: My paternal grandmother's maiden name was *Marzette*. When we first started searching for her, we couldn't find anything. We went to *Soundex* which gave us *Marzette*, *Marzet*, and *Morrisette*. And bang! That's where they were. The slave holder was named *Morrisette*. When emancipation came some of the family retained *Morrisette*, while others changed the spelling to *Marzette* or *Marzett*.

If you want to search the 1940 census by name index, you'll need to use [familysearch.org](https://familysearch.org) or if Ancestry.com already has your money you can use that. Family search is an excellent database created by the Mormons. Genealogy is extremely important to the Mormons and you can see their markings in all the old courthouse records throughout the country, where they have reviewed the information and recorded it. The Family Search database is free to use, but they do ask you to make an account. IT'S FREE! However, if you know where your parents/grandparents lived in 1940 you can just use the [National Archives](https://www.archives.gov) online search. The link is to their FAQ page. They have all the tables for the districts in each state. Look up the state where your people where and find the district for where they lived.

Once you find your grandparents in the census, scan the residences around them for a couple of pages and see if you recognize the names of any other relatives (on both sides of the family). This is why it is important to start by listing all the names and relationships you know of. Back in the old days, families, particularly in the south, tended to live in the same area. You may find brothers, sisters, or cousins of your grandparents (or adult siblings of your parents if you are from a very large family) in the same area. You may also learn if your grandparents were living with or near *their* parents. Sometimes you can learn the name of your great grandparents by finding them in the census with your grandparents. Add whatever new names you find to your family lists and make sure you make note of the relationships.

Once you complete your 1940 census search, go to the 1930 census, and look for the same people. They should be 10 years younger, and your parents will be much younger children. Do the same careful search in the neighborhoods around where your grandparents live to see if you can pick up the names of any additional relatives. Add new information to your lists. It seems simple to say but you should complete this process of going back ten years as far back as you can. Watch for changes in status. For example, in the 1920 census your grandparents may not be married yet. It is always easier to track the male relative because their names don't change. If you have your grandmother's maiden name, you can search for her family as well. This probably won't be hard to do if they lived in the same town or nearby. It's a little harder if your parents did not grow up in the same town but it's not impossible.

Keep going back in the census as far as you can. Search for your great grandparents in 1910 and then go back to 1900 and see if you can find them.

For most parts of the country there is no 1890 census because there was a fire in Washington that destroyed most of the census. However, there are a few counties in some states where the census had not yet been sent to Washington, so the materials survived. You should always check to see if your family is from one of those states.

The first census that listed Black people *by name* was the 1870 census. If you have southern relatives and they basically stayed in the same area of Virginia, North

Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, etc. where they were enslaved, with a little luck, you can probably find the family all the way back to 1870 by carefully following the steps above. Remember too that during this period of time newly freed families may have been on the move, relocating to other places or looking for family members who had been sold off. Don't be too discouraged if you cannot find them. But don't give up too easily.

It is possible that a family can "disappear" from the census for a ten-year period. There are many reasons for that. They may not have been home when the census taker arrived. The family may have migrated to a new state. Sometimes historical events such as a major flood can force relocation. Don't give up if you can't find them. Keep looking.

EX: One of our free Black families was traceable from 1790 forward. They disappeared in 1840. The entire family just disappeared. In fact a local event forced them to flee and they ended up in Ohio. In the 1850 census we found the whole family scattered and trying to resettle in OH.

IF YOU HAVE FREE BLACK heritage, you may be able to trace your relatives further back in the census. All free adult males and/or heads of a household had tax liability and were listed in the census by name, along with the number of people in their household (unfortunately the members of the household are not listed by name in the 1700's).

Part II will discuss how to search for your relatives during the era of enslavement and finding more information about free Black relatives.

## **OTHER FAMILY RECORDS YOU CAN GET FAMILY HISTORY INFORMATION FROM**

Many families keep important records like funeral programs, baptismal certificates, and information about church membership in a family bible. If your family does that, go through ALL of the papers in the family Bible. Many of them may have biographical information.

Let's look at:

FUNERAL PROGRAMS. Funeral programs can be an important source of information. Although a caveat is warranted here. *The information is only as*

*reliable as the person who provided it for the program. Sometimes information is incorrect because the narrator is innocently mistaken. Sometimes there is an intentional omission or error if the narrator thinks release of family information may cause embarrassment.*

EX: Out of wedlock children are sometimes omitted from the funeral programs. They are still blood relatives but the whole family may not know about them.

Despite the caveat, funeral programs can help with date of birth of the deceased; where they were born; who their parents were; siblings; and anyone in their direct line who predeceased them. Often funeral programs can tell you what church, synagogue etc. the deceased belonged to. This can be important because churches keep good records!

EX: It was only after reading my grandmother's funeral program that we learned she was from a small town in AL. She never said anything to us about it. My father had never said anything. We never went "down South." I grew up my whole life believing my father's family was from Brooklyn, New York.

Add any new information you find in the funeral programs to your files. If you think the information may be questionable, add it anyway and just highlight in a different color so that you have a visual cue to remind you that you need to come back to it.

## CHURCH RECORDS

These are great resources particularly if your loved one is/was a long-standing member of the church. The church minutes may mention them. They may be mentioned in committee minutes. They may have been married at the church, etc. Never overlook the importance of church records if your family is or was attached to a particular church. If you think church records may be important to you, ask the church secretary if they have a process for searching for your loved one in their records.

## CEMETARY RECORDS

When a family member is buried, in addition to the location of the plot, the cemetery will keep records of who purchased the plot and/or who in the family attested to the death. This can be very helpful when searching for information on relatives who are more removed from you such as great-great-grandparents.

EX: My great-great-grandmother is buried in the same cemetery as my great grandmother and my grandmother. We only knew about when she died. By looking at the cemetery records we got not only the date, but we were able to confirm that her brother, attested to the death. Finding his name listed as her brother helped us confirm which family in the 1850 census she belonged to.

## STATE DATABASES SEARCHABLE ON THE INTERNET

All states have maintained birth and death records since around 1925. Today, you don't need to travel to the state archive to find them. They are mostly searchable online. Again, birth and death records provide great biographical information. Both birth and death records can help with maiden names of female relatives. This will help you search for their families. Some places have restrictions on who can have access to a recent death record. Familysearch.org can be particularly helpful with birth/death/marriage records.

Old marriage records are usually searchable on a state database. You can learn some really interesting things in the marriage records...such as whether previous marriages existed. Marriage records are great help in obtaining women's maiden names and sometimes a relative of theirs you didn't know about before is listed as a witness to the marriage. That gives you another person to add to the file!

Special Note on 1870 Marriage Records;

Prior to the Civil war enslaved Black persons were not afforded the opportunity to legally register their marriages. As you know sometimes their partnerships were forced for the purposes of breeding. But in 1870, the newly freed men and women were given an opportunity to have their unions legally recognized. Many



did. There is a special group of marriage records that is specifically the records of these new registered marriages. The marriage records themselves hold valuable genealogical information. If you get your people back to 1870, check the marriage records in their state to see if your people are in the records. The Freeman's Bureau also has some records of marriage. Read the National Archives memo for information.

## **MILITARY RECORDS**

Many of our fathers and/or grandfathers were in the military. Some military records can be found online. The National Archives maintains all military records. They are another great source of biographical information. Sometimes military information may not be accurate so just keep that in mind. Boys might lie about their ages so they could enlist. And sometimes if too many Edward Jacksons enlisted on the same day the Army would change their name to make it easier for their record keeping!!! This was particularly true when Black men enlisted to fight in the Civil War. You can find when your relative enlisted, when they mustered out, and there will be a description of what they looked like physically, as well as their age. For older (historic) files you can also get pension information.

For the enlisted my grandfather (b. 1902) or Dad's age (b. 1924) the Department of Defense is more restrictive. If you can prove you are the child or grandchild of the person you are seeking information on, they will allow you access to the records. Finding out which branches your loved one served in is helpful. As more information is being published about Black folks in the Armed Forces its possible there can be biographical data or pictures of your relative out there for you to find.

## **CITY DIRECTORIES**

Back in the old days there were city directories which listed where people lived. Those of you old enough may remember the white pages phone book that used to be printed. City directories were like that but without the phone numbers. The city directory would list your relative and his/her address, as well as their occupation! That's good stuff there. I don't know if city directories are online. In

prior years we would go to the library of the municipality in question and actually look through the directories. In today's online all the time world, someone may have transcribed the directories. It's worth it to look for them.

Well, that's enough to get you started and all mostly from the comfort of your home. Get yourself organized and be disciplined in your research. Organization is key! Get organized up front and stay organized. You'll be surprised (hopefully pleasantly) what you will find.

1/23 MSJ