

## RESEARCHING YOUR FAMILY HISTORY II

### MOVING BACK FROM 1870

Hopefully if you are reading this you already went through the steps listed in Part I and you are ready to tackle the enslavement period. This will be a more challenging journey. There will be different approaches depending on whether your family lines were all enslaved, all free or some mix of both. Some of our families also have indigenous ties, and that can be quite complicated. Make sure to read the National Archives Memo on research during the enslavement period.

### FREEDMEN'S BUREAU RECORDS 1865-1872 (Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Land known as the Freedman's Bureau)

The Freedman's Bureau was established by an act of Congress to deal with the chaos that was caused by the Civil War and by the dislocations of hundreds of thousands after the war. You'll note the official title deals with refugees and abandoned land as well. Refugees were mainly white women and children whose men folk had been killed fighting against the Union, and whose homes may have been confiscated by Union troops. It was also supposed to help the newly freed who had no money, no land, could not read and had no way to sustain themselves. Commissioners were sent out from Washington to investigate and report back on conditions in the Southern states they were responsible for. The Freedmen's Bureau records are incredible but until very recently were not indexed or transcribed. That is changing and [familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org) does have transcripts of some Freedmen's Bureau records. The Commissioners made disturbing findings regarding rampaging groups of whites who were summarily executing freedmen in the streets. There are also notations that sheriffs rounded up freedmen, put them in the jails and then leased them to the plantation owners whom they had just been freed from! This is the very beginning of the convict leasing program so popular in the South up until...well recently! Remember mass incarceration had its roots in slavery. It is still working as intended. Some newly freed are mentioned by name in the records. The Bureau also helped newly freed create bank accounts and there's some interesting information there. **CAVEAT:**

**The Freedmen's Bureau records are NOT easy to search. It doesn't mean you shouldn't, but do not start there.**

### ENSLAVED FAMILIES

Prior to 1870 there were two types of censuses for people. The main census was of free people. These were primarily White people listed by name. However, free Black persons were also listed by name. In the 1860 census all free male head of households were listed by first and last name. The free people census follows the same patterns as mentioned in Part I. Wives and children in the household were also identified by name.

The other main census were the Slave Schedules. Here free white males (or female head of household) who owned property were listed by last name and first name. There would then follow an itemization of the number of people they held enslaved. However, the enslaved were not enumerated by name. The schedule would merely say: I M 10 (1 Black male, age 10). And so forth. No enslaved was named by name unless they lived to reach 100 and were considered superannuated. At that point they were listed by first name and sometimes, happy news for a few families, what part of Africa they came from. The 1850 census was basically the same. How then will you find your people? Location. Location. Location! It is so important that you pay attention to family narratives. You may find the location nugget buried in the telling of family stories. There is a **caveat here: The names of towns changed over time. The location didn't change but the name can.** There's an online resource where you can track lost city names. See e.g., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ghost\\_towns\\_in\\_Alabama](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ghost_towns_in_Alabama)

This part of your search will probably be easier for those families who either stayed in the south or who know where in the south their families emigrated from. Were there slave holders in the places your families come from that have the same surname as your family? This will not be conclusive, but it gives you some place to start looking. Also look to see which other slave holders lived in proximity to the ones who may have held your family. Perhaps your family member is really from a neighboring plantation. Pay attention to names and

naming patterns. To find your people during this period in history you will need to learn about the White people who lived in the area. Yes...sadly to understand what happened to your people you must get to know the white families. Which white families appeared on the Slave Schedules in the areas where your family comes from? What kind of crop was being grown in your area? In So. Carolina for instance, rice growers usually had very large plantations. Rice growing was a labor-intensive crop. If you are from So. Carolina, check the slave schedules to see if you can identify a rice grower in the area your family comes from.

### Historical Societies

Check the historical societies. There's usually a county level historical society and a state level one. What families are being mentioned in the texts? Look for news stories, what families are they mentioning? Has there been a weather event that caused farmers to have issues? Has the local archive indexed and made available the papers of slave holding families in the area. The business records of a farmer may hold information about the number of enslaved that bore children in a given year. It may even name the slave who gave birth and the name of the child. Sometimes the farmer's wife will have kept diaries. In the dairies she may mention what is happening with her household enslaved. The biographical material of the white families can hold precious valuable information about your ancestors. All states have a state level archive as well and prominent families may donate papers to the archive. The state of Virginia has a very extensive archive of wealthy families from Virginia. These families often donate their family papers to UVA or the State Historical Society. If your family is from VA check those archives. If you think you have identified a family that may have held your family in bondage start researching everything you can find about the family.

### WILLS

Did the head of household die and leave a will? If so, the Will would be in the county probate records. These are legal documents and are available to the public. The will indicated how the property of the deceased, including human enslaved, would be distributed. Often in the bequests the enslaved are listed by name. The Will is indexed in the county records, and you can now search for the information online. Familysearch.org has excellent Will and Intestate records. Perhaps the holder died without a will. If he had enslaved people or other assets

his estate needed to have an administrator. The court would have appointed one. There would be intestate administrative proceedings where minutes were taken and filed with the court. These are searchable.

EX: This is how we found one of our families. The plantation owner was out looking for property in TX where he could move the AL enslaved. He died in a traffic accident on the way back. He hadn't made a will so there had to be an administration. We found our relatives and 98 others listed with the cattle, the farm equipment, and his law books. Our people were listed by name AND in family groupings!!!

Right before the Civil War many plantation owners tried to move their holdings from Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee and Mississippi to the eastern part of Texas. They were worried about whether a war was coming they were trying to protect their slave assets. After the end of the war some of those enslaved walked back to their former states to look for relatives. If you think your family may have been moved, check the Texas records.

### MORTGAGES, INSURANCE AND WORK CONTRACTS

The holder may have mortgaged the people held in bondage. The mortgage would be recorded and filed at the county courthouse, as would contracts if any enslaved were leased out to other farmers. Again, the contract may be recorded. Sometimes the enslaved were insured. Yes...insurance companies made significant amounts of money insuring the enslaved. Check to see if there are insurance records.

In the past decade research revealed the names of some of the insurance companies that wrote policies on slaves. Many of them are still in business today. *The Grio* posted a story about insuring slaves in 2016. <https://thegrio.com/2016/12/19/insurance-companies-sold-policies-covering-slaves/>

There's also a story in the 2022 LA Times which lists the insurance company AND the name of the enslaved who was insured. Unfortunately, that's behind a paywall, but here's the link. I wasn't able to find the report on the state's insurance site, but it's worth doing some digging to get the names. The companies

were not from CA. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-may-02-me-slavery2-story.html>

There's other coverage out there. Be a good, thorough researcher.

### TAX RECORDS

Check the tax records. The enslaved were property that created tax liability. Research who is appearing in the tax records. Has a property owner been declared in arrears and forced to sell property to settle a tax bill? If the enslaved were part of that order to sell they might be listed by name.

Property ownership can be confirmed through official tax records for the census year. Owning an enslaved was taxable. If we learned anything about taxes it's that the government is always interested in what you have. There are tax records out there!

Research during the enslavement period can be time consuming and frustrating, but your people are out there. Keep looking.

### DO YOU HAVE FAMILY NARRATIVES OF FREE BLACKS?

If any of your elders mentioned or if you suspect, you may have had free Black folks in your family it can be much easier to search for them. The lives of free black people were heavily regulated throughout the south. There were laws prohibiting them from engaging in some of the conduct free whites could do without penalty but record keeping was the same. As free people they would have been listed by name in the census. And sometimes you can find out what their occupation was, what kind of assets they had, and where they were born. They would appear in the tax records AND even back then the state was trying to take our children and use them for free labor. There are records in every state where the courts tried to put Black children in conservatorships to be placed in white homes.

In addition, free people in most southern states had to have emancipation papers – documents that proved they were either born free or were emancipated by a

former owner. These papers were usually registered at the courthouse. Registration gave the free black person a little tiny measure of protection. The emancipation record will normally name the free person, give their age at the time of registration, and give a physical description of the person, including any scars they may have. You can image what some of those descriptions looked like. The registrations should be searchable in state archives or with the historical societies. The Quakers also have some good records particularly around free Blacks and helping them to regain their freedom when unscrupulous whites tried to pretend they were actually enslaved and not free. In Tennessee, the Quakers sued prominent whites to gain release of free black men and women who had been kidnapped from North Carolina and taken into Tennessee when it was recognized as a separate state.

If your families are from Virginia or North Carolina, a researcher catalogued 120 free Black families from those two states (the eastern coastal areas). The book is entitled: **FREE AFRICAN AMERICANS OF NORTH CAROLINA AND VIRGINIA** by Paul Heinegg. This book is a treasure because he begins with the first mention of the person and then follows their family line as far as he can, usually until the mid or late 1700s. One of the families he follows was involved in the Nat Turner rebellion. As a consequence many free Black families associated with them had to flee the state because free blacks were being killed by whites regardless whether they were involved in the rebellion or not. If you are from that area make sure you look at Heinegg's book.

I'll stop here. There are other records dealing with the enslavement period: ship manifests, slave auction records etc. This is advanced research and maybe I'll do a memo on that later.

If you like to read up on this issue look for: **FINDING A PLACE CALLED HOME: A GUIDE TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN GENEALOGY AND HISTORICAL IDENTITY** by DEE PALMER WOODTOR, Ph.D

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