

# Getting Started in African American Family History Research

## Section 2: Records, Resources, and Repositories

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### Records

#### Census

1. *Federal Census*

The federal census began in 1790 and is taken every ten years. Censuses from 1790 through 1950 are available for research, except for the 1890 census. They can be found on Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, and AmericanAncestors.org.

2. *Slave Schedules*

In 1850 and 1860, enslaved individuals were recorded separately in slave schedules. These records are organized by enslavers. Enslaved individuals are not named, but instead described by their age, sex, and color.

3. *State Census*

Individual states also conducted state censuses during years in between the federal census. Not every state completed a census on the state level. The FamilySearch Wiki has a page that breaks down state censuses: [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/State\\_Census\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/State_Census_Records)

#### Vital Records

Vital records refer to birth, marriage, and death records. They generally provide dates and the names of an individual's parents and/or spouse. Modern vital records are often kept on the local level (either state, county, or town) while older records may have been moved to an archive, library, or local historical society. The location, availability, and accessibility of vital records vary from state to state. Those that have been digitized can be found on Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, and AmericanAncestors.org.

#### Church Records

Once you identify your ancestor's religion, you can consult church records for records relating to their baptism, confirmation, marriage, death, and burial. They can be found on Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, AmericanAncestors.org, and the Congregational Library and Archives (<https://www.congregationallibrary.org/digital-collections>).

### Freedmen's Bureau Records

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedman's Bureau) was established towards the end of the Civil War to help formerly enslaved people transition from enslavement to freedom and citizenship. They have a wide range of records to aid in African American research during the Reconstruction era. This article on the FamilySearch Wiki page can help you navigate the many collections available:

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African\\_American\\_Freedmen%27s\\_Bureau\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African_American_Freedmen%27s_Bureau_Records)

The Smithsonian also has a searchable tool for Freedmen's Bureau records:

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/freedmens-bureau>

### Military Records

- Pension records
- Military rolls
- Enlistment papers
- Draft cards/records
- Manuscripts (diaries or letters home)

Fold3 has a page dedicated to records of African American soldiers:

<https://www.fold3.com/collection/african-american/publications>

The following previous lectures provide in-depth guidance on researching Black soldiers:

- Researching Black Patriots and Loyalists During the Revolutionary Era:  
<https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/researching-black-patriots-and-loyalists-during-revolutionary-era>
- Researching Black Soldiers in the Civil War: <https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/researching-black-soldiers-civil-war>

### Probate Records

Probate is the process of settling one's property or estate upon their death. These records can help identify heirs and various family members. Additionally, probate documents often name enslaved people since they were considered property. Probate files may include:

- Wills
- Inventories
- Petitions
- Letters of administration
- Adoption
- Guardianships
- Divorce

Probate records are generally kept at the county level, with a few exceptions, and can be found on Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, and AmericanAncestors.org.

### Land and Property Records

Land and property records can help you determine where your ancestor lived and identify their relationships. These records are held at the local level (town or county); FamilySearch.org is a great resource to locate them. Keep in mind when navigating:

- Grantor – individual(s) selling property
- Grantee – individual(s) purchasing property

### Manumissions

These legal documents granted enslaved individuals their emancipation. Manumissions can be found in a multitude of locations including probate, land or property records, and court files. If unable to locate digitally, try:

- Archives (state or local)
- Colleges and libraries
- Local libraries (public or private)
- Historical societies

## **Resources**

### Published Resources

Researchers have conducted study projects and extracted information into published resources that may be based on:

- Record types (ex: probate, church records, etc.)
- Subject matter (ex: Black Civil War soldiers from Massachusetts)
- Location

Consult WorldCat.org or the American Ancestors library catalog (<https://library.nehgs.org>) to locate publications.

### Digital Resources

Created similarly to published studies, many scholars have created online databases or resources focusing on African American history. Some examples include:

- *Free African Americans in Colonial Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland and Delaware* by Paul Heinegg: <https://freeafricanamericans.com/>
- Digital Library on American Slavery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro: <https://dlas.uncg.edu/>
- *Freedom on the Move: Rediscovering the Stories of Self-Liberating People*, Cornell University: <https://freedomonthemove.org/>

## Local Histories

Popular during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local histories often include biographies or family sketches of prominent figures of a town or county. They also can help provide insight into what records to consult as you research your ancestors. Many are now out of copyright and available digitally on several sites, including:

- Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/>
- HathiTrust: <https://www.hathitrust.org/>
- FamilySearch Digital Library: <https://books.familysearch.org>
- Google Books: <https://books.google.com/>
- Open Library: <https://openlibrary.org/>
- Smithsonian Digital Library: <http://library.si.edu/digital-library>

## Personal Narratives

First-person accounts can provide powerful details of an individual's lived experience. They can include:

- Written works, such as memoirs and autobiographies
- Oral histories (collected by individuals and institutions)
- Personal letters and diaries

They may be found at colleges/universities, local historical societies, libraries, archives, or your own home.

## **Repositories**

### Online Repositories

- General genealogy websites:
  - Ancestry: <https://www.ancestry.com/>
  - FamilySearch: <https://www.familysearch.org/en/>  
FamilySearch Catalog: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>
  - American Ancestors: <https://www.americanancestors.org/>
- Location-specific websites – Archives of a specific state, county, or city
- Record-specific websites
  - Fold3 for military records: <https://www.fold3.com/>

### Physical Repositories

- |                               |                             |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Federal and state archives  | • Colleges and universities |
| • Town or city halls          | • Genealogical societies    |
| • Local historical societies  | • Regional museums          |
| • Public or private libraries | • Lineage societies         |

*Tip:* Familiarize yourself with a repository's resources by looking at their research guides and finding aids before you make the trip.



## Bibliography

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Newman, Debra L. *Black History: A Guide to Civilian Records in the National Archives*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives Trust Fund Board General Services Administration, 1984.

Smith, Franklin Carter. *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors: How to Find and Record Your Unique Heritage*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Betterway Books, 2003.

Woodtor, Dee. *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African American Genealogy and Historical Identity*. New York: Random House, 1999.

## Web Resources

10 Million Names Project: <https://10millionnames.org/>

African American Digital Bookshelf:

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African\\_American\\_Digital\\_Bookshelf](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African_American_Digital_Bookshelf)

African American Family Historic and Genealogies: A Resource Guide, Library of Congress:

<https://guides.loc.gov/african-american-family-histories/introduction>

African American Genealogy, FamilySearch Wiki:

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African\\_American\\_Genealogy](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/African_American_Genealogy)

African American Genealogy Research Guide, 10 Million Names (American Ancestors):

<https://10millionnames.org/research-help/african-american-genealogy>

ArchiveGrid: <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

FamilySearch Wiki: [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page)