



## African American Family Research

**African American genealogy follows standard methods and strategies for 20<sup>th</sup> century research.** Once you begin to research prior to 1870 you will have to employ a variety of strategies to search for earlier ancestors.

### **Ten Tips:**

#### **Tip 1: Start with yourself and work your way back**

Note your own information, then note everything you know about your parents and then move to your grandparents, great grand and 2x great grands if you know who they are. List birth dates, marriage dates, death dates as well as locations for each record.

#### **Tip 2: Gather Information**

Look around your home. What information do you already have? Do you have graduation, wedding or funeral programs, newspaper clippings, family reunion documents, or photos of relatives? Search for school and church records. Also look for family bibles as they can provide valuable information.

#### **Tip 3: Interview all living Relatives beginning with the elders!**

Interview all living relatives. Start with the elders but don't overlook anyone who may have known now deceased relatives. Use your smartphone to make recordings and take photos of family members. Ask open- ended questions and let your relatives answer your questions as they desire. If discussing painful family events, be mindful that this may be not be welcome. Allow them to discuss this type of information with you in their own time.

#### **Tip 4: Organize your Information**

Once you have information and some interviews, take the time to review everything and organize it by each generation. Utilize genealogy software which will generate pedigree charts and store photos and other information on your family members.

You can also set up electronic files to save the information you've discovered or use notebooks, journals or file folders if you prefer paper. Just makes sure you save your information to the cloud or make at least two copies of print materials that you can distribute to other family member.

**AFRO-AMERICAN HISTORICAL AND GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY, INC**  
**P.O. Box 73067 Washington, D.C. 20056-3067**  
**www.aahgs.org**



**Tip 5: Determine your Research Question**

Now that you have reviewed and organized your information, **what is it that you want to know?** Do you want to know the names of your 3x great grandparents, do you want to know where or when someone was born? **Write down your question.**

**Tip 6: Utilize Public Records for research**

Identify public records that can aid in answering your research question such as;

- Vital Records (Birth, Marriage and Death)
- Federal and State census records
- Tax records
- Voter registration rolls
- Land Records (Deeds)
- Military records (Enlistment, Draft Cards, Service Records and Pension files)
- Social Security Index

**Before 1870-The Fork in the Research Road!**

Free People of Color can be found in federal census records from 1790 forward. Check state censuses if they exist for the state you are researching.

Some states also required Free People to register at the county level so you may find Free Negro Registers or information may be found in the back of court Minute Books. The registers provide detailed descriptions along with information on how the person obtained their freedom or if they were born free.

As enslaved African Americans were considered property, they would be noted in a variety of documents including court records, however this will require you to know the name of the slaveowner. Several public sources may aid in identifying a slave owner. Look for information in documents such as:

- Freedmen's Bureau Records
- Freedman's Bank Applications
- Slave Narratives
- Southern Claims Commission
- Slave Compensation Claims (Civil War Border States such as Kentucky, Maryland, Delaware, Missouri) as well as Washington, DC (1862)

**AFRO-AMERICAN HISTORICAL AND GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY, INC**  
**P.O. Box 73067 Washington, D.C. 20056-3067**  
**www.aahgs.org**



Enslaved persons were often noted in court records. Once you have identified the slave owner research:

- Wills
- Probate/Estate Records
- Slave Inventories/Appraisements
- Deed Records
- Deeds of Gift
- Bills of Sale
- Slave Insurance Policies
- Deeds of Trust
  - Enslaved persons were often used as collateral for loans
- Civil Court records(lawsuits)
- Tax Records
  - Some county tax records list the names and ages of enslaved persons
- Private sources of information would include family Bibles, letters, diaries, and administrative books of former slave owners

**Tip 7: Expand Your Search to Collateral Relatives and Neighbors**

A collateral relative is any blood relative who is not your direct ancestor, such as aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, nieces, and nephews. Researching collateral relatives may lead to documenting additional ancestors and uncovering more about your family history.

Also take time to study other families who live nearby your relatives. There may be family connections which can provide insight into your family research.

**Tip 8: Consider DNA Testing**

Autosomal DNA testing works best for genealogical research because it utilizes the DNA from both parents and inherited from many paternal and maternal ancestors. If you have living parents test them. If not test your aunts and uncles. Testing siblings and cousins can be beneficial as well.

**Tip 9: Explore the Social-Political History of your Ancestors**

It's important to understand the social and political history of your family research location. Having insight regarding this history will provide you with a better understanding of how major events, such as the Revolutionary War, Civil War, Reconstruction, slavery, Jim Crow, migration, Civil Rights Movement etc., affected your

**AFRO-AMERICAN HISTORICAL AND GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY, INC**  
**P.O. Box 73067 Washington, D.C. 20056-3067**  
**www.aahgs.org**



ancestors' lives. It will also provide you with clues on the type of record sets that were generated for the area during that time period. Find and read books, articles, webinars, etc. that focus on or relate to the history of the research area.

**Tip 10: Document Your Family History**

Now that you have made family discoveries, document your findings. Consider writing and publishing an article, or a book about a relative or a family line. Utilize other modalities such as video, music or art to tell the story of your ancestors and share it with family and friends.

- **Visit the AAHGS website Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, Inc.**  
<https://aahgs.org> Click on the **Resources** tab to access information, charts and forms and a self-guided course (10 Million Names) on African American Family Research

**Websites for African American Research**

- Ancestry.com <https://www.ancestry.com/c/african-american>
  - FamilySearch.org African Americans  
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/unitedstates/ethnicities/african-american>
  - 10 Million Names [www.10millionnames.org](http://www.10millionnames.org)
  - Black Pearls of Genealogy <https://thebpog.org/>
  - National Archives <https://www.archives.gov/>
  - Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov>
-