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GENEALOGY GEMS: BEGINNING AFRICAN AMERICAN RESEARCH

BY NANCY RICHEY

VISUAL RESOURCES LIBRARIAN, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY, WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

The popularity of the television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* highlights the burgeoning interest in genealogy. African American genealogy presents a special challenge. Though this is an exciting avenue of outreach for librarians, it is challenging because records are limited and sometimes difficult to find. The interested researcher must first identify whether the records sought represent free or enslaved ancestors; because slaves were treated as property, the records documenting their lives will not usually be found among vital records. Furthermore, the surnames assigned to slaves could be changed with ownership, and were often changed deliberately by ex-slaves after the Civil War; in both cases, the links to families got lost. Also, racial identities might not have been reported correctly for these individuals in the records that do exist.

Despite these challenges, many family historians have successfully traced their African American lineage. Librarians who take the time to learn how best to assist African American family historians provide valuable outreach to a population under-represented in library collections, as well as generate community goodwill. A successful search can provide historical evidence for many undocumented communities and individuals, and bring to light their role in American history.

To begin researching African American heritage, librarians should encourage the researcher to follow the basic genealogical research techniques first, and also to become acquainted with African American history, especially as it relates to the slave era. Below are the basic techniques for all family history researchers.

1. WRITE DOWN YOUR OWN INFORMATION, AND THEN ADD WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT OTHERS

Many forms and charts are available online to begin the process of recording family information – researchers can just Google “genealogy charts” to find them. The most common chart types are the *ancestral chart* (records the ancestors from whom one directly descends) and the *family group sheet* (records the family unit, i.e. parents, spouse, children).

2. ASK QUESTIONS AND RECORD THE ANSWERS

Interviewing relatives and family friends can fill in the gaps and give the researcher many paths to follow. For African Americans, oral history is an especially important part of the research process, because those interviews might provide clues that just don't exist on paper. The best questions are open-ended, and cannot be answered with a simple YES or NO. Many lists of possible interview questions are available online by Googling “genealogy interview questions.” And don't forget that family memorabilia and photographs make excellent “prompts” to get stories going during interviews.

3. START FINDING RECORDS AND DOCUMENTS

The first records all researchers should consult are those closest to them, within the family home. Letters, photographs, awards and trophies, family Bibles, scrapbooks, insurance papers, funeral programs, and other such “records” are the best place to start to gather names, dates, and places. Once the family-specific sources have been collected and studied, the family historian can verify and supplement that information with available vital records (birth, death, and marriage). Other essential sources for all family historians include census and naturalization records, city

directories, church, school, and organization records, cemetery headstones, military records, probate records and wills, real estate records, newspaper articles (especially obituaries), and court records.

And here is where the researcher tracing African American lineage starts to need the help of an information professional—the following specialized record sets play a vital role in African American research:

- apprentice and indenture records
- bills of sale for slaves
- African American newspapers (pre-1900)
- records of historically black colleges and businesses
- records of slave burial grounds in owners' papers
- poll tax records (a.k.a. 'head tax' or 'capitation')
- sharecropper agreements
- real estate deeds/transfers and estate inventories
- voter records
- manumission records

The researcher should also systematically search the myriad records associated with the American Missionary Association (a Protestant abolitionist organization), the Freedman's Savings and Trust, and the Freedmen's Bureau (both government-sponsored organizations designed to aid freed slaves). Finally, the researcher can check the records of the Southern Claims Commission, an executive-branch effort to reimburse Union sympathizers living in the South whose property was confiscated or damaged during the Civil War.

THE 1870 CENSUS

The researcher tracing African American families can usually go back successfully at least to the 1870 census, the first to list

African Americans by name (previous census takers noted their existence only with tally marks), but earlier records will be more difficult to find.

All researchers using the census should remember to search the census pages for an area (either microfilm rolls or online slides), and not rely on the index alone. Looking through the census page by page for a certain area can reveal nearby relatives and friends the researcher didn't know about. For researchers wanting to go deeper than the widely known "population schedules," the librarian can help them find mortality schedules and other such specialized lists, such as the 1890 schedule of surviving soldiers of the Civil War and the 1850/1860 mortality schedules, which listed slaves. A good starting place is the Ancestry.com database called "Selected U.S. Federal Census Non-Population Schedules, 1850-1880."

In the population schedules, researchers should note white families with the same surname, and watch for black children indentured to white families. Once a slave-owning family is identified, they can be found in previous years' census, and then their land, tax, and probate records can be searched for information on their slaves. Free blacks appear by name on census lists prior to 1870; in fact, free African American heads of household were listed in the federal census beginning in 1790.

African American family history is not lost, but certainly requires extra effort. For African American researchers, the most numerous and richest sources are usually found at the local level, working with a local librarian who knows the collections best.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As noted in the first Genealogy Gems column (*Kentucky Libraries* 74.4), this space is devoted to the subject of genealogy, and we welcome submissions on any related topic. Please see that first column for a list of specialized topics which we plan to cover. No column in this series is meant to be a comprehensive look at the specific subject discussed. Submitted manuscripts will be edited by the *Kentucky Libraries* editorial board.

Please direct questions or submissions to Katherine Pennavaria, column editor, at k.pennavaria@wku.edu.

RECOMMENDED PRINT RESOURCES

Beasley, Donna. *Family Pride: The Complete Guide to Tracing African-American Genealogy*. New York: Macmillan, 1997.

Byers, Paula K. (ed.). *African American Genealogical Sourcebook*. New York: Gale Research, 1995.

Burroughs, Tony. *A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Gorin, Michelle Bartley. *South Central Kentucky Vital Statistics: Births & Deaths for Slaves and Black Families*. Glasgow, KY: Gorin Genealogical Pub., 1994.

Newman, Debra L. *List of Free Black Heads of Families in the First Census of the United States, 1790*. Washington: National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1973.

Pucket, Newbell N. (comp.) and Murray Heller (ed.). *Black Names in America: Origins and Usage*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1975.

Witcher, Curt Bryan. *African American Genealogy: A Bibliography and Guide to Sources*. Fort Wayne, Indiana: Round Tower Books, 2000

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

RECOMMENDED WEB RESOURCES

Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society: www.aahgs.org

Kentucky African American Griots: www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~kyafamer/

Born in Slavery—Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938: memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html

AfriGeneas: www.afrigeneas.com/

Cyndi's List: www.cyndislist.com/african-american/how-to/

Our Black Ancestry: www.ourblackancestry.com/

Africana Heritage Project: www.africanaheritage.com/