

# *The Effects of Slavery and Emancipation on African-American Families and Family History Research*

by Tristan L. Tolman, AG

The condition of the black family in America has been an issue of intense debate since the Civil War. At the heart of this debate is the belief of some scholars that slavery created a propensity for a weak and fatherless family. This matrifocal (mother-centered) family, they argue, became typical of African Americans both during slavery and after emancipation and has been perpetuated generationally to the present time. Other scholars vehemently disagree. They counter that black American families cannot be classified as either weak or fatherless. These scholars maintain that blacks adapted to their difficult circumstances in creative ways to preserve familial ties.

Although the end of the Civil War resulted in legal freedom for slaves, black families continued to face challenges in creating and preserving familial ties. What were the effects of slavery and emancipation on African-American families, and what are the implications for researching their family history today? This article will argue that blacks placed the highest priority on their families both during and after slavery despite the overwhelming difficulties they faced. It will also provide tips for locating genealogical records for slave ancestors.

### **The Definition and Importance of the African-American Family**

It is important to define “family” as it has been used by African Americans. Scholars generally agree that since the beginning of slavery in the United States, African Americans have viewed their families in terms of kin networks. These kin networks formed the social basis of African-American communities.<sup>1</sup> Slaves were often forcefully removed from their families. They adapted to their circumstances by creating family units with other slaves with whom they lived and worked. Slaves conferred the status of kin on non-blood relations, addressing each other as brother, sister, aunt, or uncle.<sup>2</sup> Slave parents taught their children to address all older slave men and women by kin titles, a practice that bound them to these adults and prepared them in the event that sale or death separated them from their own parents and blood relatives.<sup>3</sup> Parents relied on these kin networks to help them raise their children and understood that at any time, they may also need to assume the role of “aunt” or “uncle.”<sup>4</sup> A black freedwoman remembered her uncle asking, “Should each man regard only his own children, and forget all the others?”<sup>5</sup>

---

1 Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 3.

2 Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era* (New York: New Press, 1997), 3.

3 Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 219.

4 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 8.

5 Laura M. Towne, as quoted in Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 185.

# African-American Research



*All photos in this article, including cover, courtesy of the Library of Congress and Michael Hait.*

Despite the importance of these networks, however, scholars continue to debate the existence and preeminence of the nuclear slave family. Did black families remain intact during slavery? Were black fathers important members of slave families, or were most slave families matriarchal?

Slave owners regularly separated black family members from each other by sale. The “legacy of involuntary exodus was overwhelmingly destructive to their marriages, kin groups, and communities.”<sup>6</sup> When the cotton and sugar plantations in the Lower South created a high demand for able-bodied slaves (especially men) in the nineteenth century, approximately one million black men, women, and children were sold from the Upper to the Lower South.<sup>7</sup> The constant withdrawal of family members (especially men) from slave families damaged and sometimes destroyed slave marriages and families.<sup>8</sup>

The antebellum South did not recognize slave families either by law or custom. Slaves could not legally marry, and slave parents had no legal claim to their children.<sup>9</sup> Husbands and wives could only live together or visit each other with their masters’ consent.<sup>10</sup> One great tragedy of the involuntary separation of parents and children was that many of the slave marriages endured long enough to produce children that had been nurtured by both of their parents before being sold away.<sup>11</sup> Maria Perkins, a slave, wrote her husband the following letter, which revealed her heartache at the forced breakup of her family:

Dear Husband I write you a letter to let you know my distress my master has sold albert to a trader on Monday court day and the other child is for sale also and I want you to let [me] hear from you very soon before next cort if you can I don’t know when I don’t want you to wait till Christmas I want you to tell dr

6 Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), viii.

7 Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 144.

8 Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, viii.

9 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 7; Elizabeth Regosin, *Freedom’s Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in the Age of Emancipation* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 1–3.

10 Ibid, 155–156.

11 Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 154.

## African-American Research



Hamelton and your master if either will buy me they can attend to it know and then I can go afterwards I don't want a trader to get me they asked me if I had got any person to buy me and I told them no they took me to the court house too they never put me up a man buy the name of brady bought albert and is gone I don't know where they say he lives in Scottesville my things is in several places some is in staunton and if I should be sold I don't know what will become of them I don't expect to meet with the luck to get that way till I am quite heartsick Nothing more I am and ever will be your kind wife.<sup>12</sup>

According to Brenda E. Stevenson, Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles, this continual separation denied slaves the ability to function as families. It prevented them from sharing the responsibilities of households and children and providing each other with intimacy and love.<sup>13</sup> No slave was immune to the danger of family separation. Since no one could predict when an owner would die and how his estate would be divided, all slave marriages were insecure.<sup>14</sup> Statistics confirm this reality. In 1864–1865, one in four marriages of African Americans involved at least one member who had been forcefully separated from a spouse from an earlier marriage.<sup>15</sup>

Custom and the nature of slavery did not allow slave men and women to physically protect or financially support their families. Husbands

could not protect their families from abuse or exploitation, and the primary role of slave women was the work they performed for their masters—not their families.<sup>16</sup> It was difficult for slaves to discipline their children because they had no authority over them. Masters assumed disciplinary control of slave children and undermined the authority of slave parents by disciplining them in front of their children.<sup>17</sup>

Even when families were allowed to live together under one roof, slavery threatened a family's ability to stay together. Demographer Richard Steckel calculates that throughout the South, more than one-half of slave infants died before they were one-year old. This mortality rate was almost double that of whites. Although the survival rate improved after slave children reached a year of age, their mortality rate continued to be double that of whites until they were fourteen years old.<sup>18</sup>

Due to these challenges, some scholars contend that slave families became divided, matrifocal, and even pathological. For example, Daniel P. Moynihan's *The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action*<sup>19</sup>

12 As quoted in Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 35–36.

13 Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 161.

14 Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 153.

15 Ibid, 20.

16 Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 161.

17 Ibid, 249.

18 Ibid.

# African-American Research

argues that the black family in America has become a “tangle of pathology.” Additionally, Stevenson asserts that most slave children in Virginia did not grow up in two-parent homes and the parental role of slave men was greatly diminished.<sup>20</sup> These scholars agree that matri-focality was a fundamental characteristic of most slave families, even when fathers lived locally.<sup>21</sup> This condition, they argue, has plagued black families throughout the generations.



Other scholars disagree. Herbert Gutman, Ira Berlin, and Leslie Rowland state that slave children typically had two-parent homes and that many slaves had enduring (although not legally-recognized) marriages. Their findings are based on their extensive studies of population censuses, county marriage registers, government records, and letters written by slaves themselves.<sup>22</sup> While Stevenson’s study centers almost exclusively on Virginia slaves, the research of scholars such as Gutman, Berlin, and Rowland encompasses slaves throughout the South.

Although it was often difficult, slaves did develop and sustain family relations. They established family units and welcomed other kin into their families as needed.<sup>23</sup> They named and nurtured their children, expected loyalty from them, and tutored them in how to survive in slavery.<sup>24</sup> Slaves forged a culture centered on family and church.<sup>25</sup> They valued their family relationships and reserved their harshest judgments for the owners that tampered with their families. In fact, slaves believed that the worst form of punishment was an owner’s interference with their family relations. They would rather endure the reduction of food or clothing, the increase of their workload, or even the administration of violence than the separation from their loved ones.<sup>26</sup>

Despite arguments to the contrary, many slave fathers played key roles in their families’ lives. Many fathers who lived apart from their families were allowed to visit their wives and children on weekends and holidays. Some owners provided slave fathers with access to transportation to facilitate these visits. Many fathers found ways to be involved in the

---

19 Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965).

20 Ibid, xii.

21 Ibid, 222.

22 See, for example, Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 8; Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 10–11.

23 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 7.

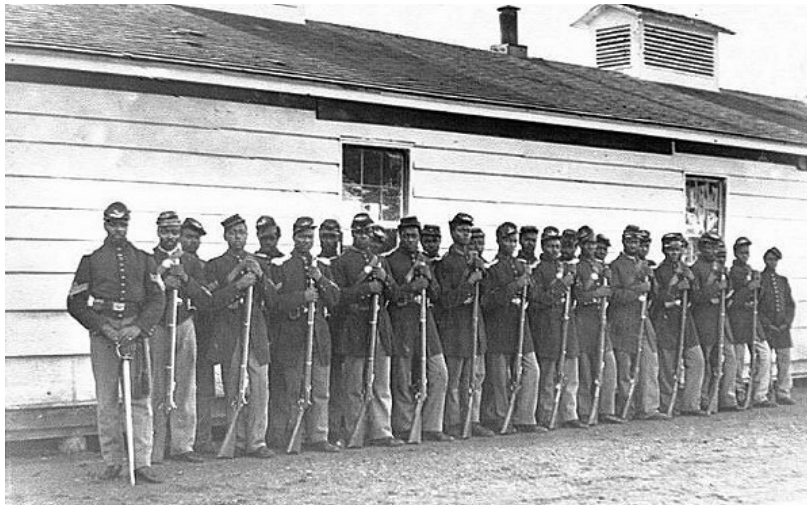
24 Ibid, 8.

25 Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 78.

26 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 10.

# African-American Research

lives of their wives and children when they lived close enough to do so. They provided emotional support, moral instruction, discipline, affection, and physical protection when possible. Often they brought their families extra food, and many taught their sons specialized skills such as hunting, trapping, fishing, metal and wood working, and the practice of folk medicine.<sup>27</sup>



During the Civil War, approximately 180,000 black soldiers served in the Union army.<sup>28</sup> The families of these soldiers frequently camped in makeshift villages near the army to be near their husbands, sons, and fathers. The soldiers assisted them as they could—sharing food and clothing from their own military rations when possible.<sup>29</sup>

## Post-Bellum Family Reunification

Perhaps the most revealing evidence regarding how African Americans valued their family relationships came after the Civil War. After they were freed, thousands of former slaves whose families had been dissolved by sale and distance set out to reunite with their relatives from whom they had been forcibly separated.<sup>30</sup> Much of the movement was local since many family members lived on neighboring plantations. Some freedmen, however, traveled hundreds

of miles to reunite with their loved ones. Occasionally a former slave who had been sold away from his family to the Southwest crossed half the continent to return to his family when he was freed.<sup>31</sup>

Union military officers were overwhelmed by ex-slaves who were on the roads, searching for family members from whom they had been separated. Agents of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau, who were hired after the war to provide relief to refugees and ex-slaves, received hundreds of letters from freedmen requesting assistance in locating lost relatives.<sup>32</sup> One ex-slave wrote to the Bureau from Texas with a request for assistance in locating "my own dearest relatives" and included a long list of sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, and in-laws from whom he had been separated when he was sold in Virginia twenty-four years before.<sup>33</sup> Others took out advertisements in local newspapers, offering rewards for the return of lost family members. A typical plea for help was placed in the *Nashville Colored Tennessean*:

During the year 1849, Thomas Sample carried away from this city, as his slaves, our daughter, Polly, and son... We will give \$100 each for them to any person who will assist them ... to get to Nashville, or get word to us of their whereabouts.<sup>34</sup>

27 Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 251.

28 Regosin, *Freedom's Promise*, 3.

29 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 74–75.

30 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 173.

31 Gao Chunchang, *African Americans in the Reconstruction Era* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 73.

32 Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 257.

33 Foner, *Reconstruction*, 82.

# African-American Research

Although these requests usually ended in failure, some succeeded in reuniting family members. One Union officer wrote his wife in 1865, “I wish you could see this people as they step from slavery into freedom. Men are taking their wives and children, families which had been for a long time broken up are united and oh! such happiness. I am glad I am here.”<sup>35</sup> A Freedmen’s Bureau officer recounted that family members searched for lost family members “with an ardor and faithfulness sufficient to vindicate the fidelity and affection of any race, the excited joys of the re-gathering being equaled only by the previous sorrows and pains of separation.”<sup>36</sup>

One problem with reuniting families occurred when freedmen and freedwomen located their spouses only to find that they had remarried since their separation. Freedmen’s Bureau agents devised a tactic for resolving such problems. One agent explained, “Whenever a negro appears before me with 2 or 3 wives who have equal claim upon him, I marry him to the woman who has the greatest number of helpless children who otherwise would become a charge on the bureau.” Typically, the woman that was selected was younger, since Bureau agents supposed that middle-aged women would have older children that could support them. Only about 4 percent of husbands abandoned one family to live with another. Some husbands and wives even lived in combined families with



two or more wives per husband.<sup>37</sup> Creative solutions such as this provide evidence of the commitment blacks felt towards their families, even amidst the challenges their families faced because of slavery.

The task of reuniting families was often extremely difficult—if not impossible. Some slaves had been sold so often or so long before emancipation that family members no longer had reliable information about their whereabouts. For example, when Milly Johnson, a freedwoman in North Carolina, set out to locate her five children, she could only provide the Freedmen’s Bureau with reliable information about the whereabouts of one of them.<sup>38</sup>

## The Struggle for Economic Independence

Another problem that freed black families faced was obtaining economic security. Scholars generally agree that one of the great tragedies of emancipation and Reconstruction was the government’s failure to provide freedmen with land. Many newly freed blacks had believed that the benevolent government that had freed them would provide each family with “forty acres and a mule” so they could start life anew. For the vast majority of black families, this expectation was not fulfilled.<sup>39</sup>

Some scholars argue that the extreme poverty of most ex-slave families contributed to their pathological and matri-

34 Foner, *Reconstruction*, 84.

35 John W. DeForest, as quoted in Foner, *Reconstruction*, 84.

36 Chunchang, *African Americans in the Reconstruction Era*, 73.

37 Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 261.

38 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 214.

39 Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen’s Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), xi, 197.

# African-American Research



focal state after emancipation. They contend that if black fathers had received land and been given the opportunity to become self-sufficient, perhaps their wives could have stayed at home to nurture the children. This may have allowed their children to receive better education. In short, if black families had enjoyed economic security, perhaps they would have maintained familial stability.

The evidence testifies in favor of the resilience of the African-American family. Emancipation, despite economic and other challenges, stabilized and strengthened them. After emancipation, thousands of black husbands and wives officially and legally validated their marriages.<sup>40</sup> Parents and children were more often able to live under the same roof, and by 1870, a large majority of blacks lived in two-parent households.<sup>41</sup> Newly freed blacks reaffirmed

their commitment to God and religion by organizing churches that sunk deep roots in Southern soil. After emancipation, most black mothers quit working in the fields and became full-time homemakers. Some white planters lamented this loss in the labor force, and one planter even appealed to the head of the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia for measures to require black women to return to the fields. Nevertheless, black women almost universally withdrew from field labor, sending a clear message that their families came first.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately, the opportunity for black women to remain at home was often short-lived. The dire poverty of most black families made it necessary for fathers and mothers to contribute to the family income. One journalist, Charles Nordhoff, explained in 1875, "Where the negro works for wages, he tries to keep his wife at home. If he rents land, or plants on shares, the wife and children help him in the field."<sup>43</sup> Even if they worked in the fields, however, freedwomen continued to fulfill their housekeeping roles as well.

Whites did not generally give loans for purchasing land to poor blacks, and white prejudice prevented many blacks from acquiring even small tracts of land.<sup>44</sup> As a result, many black men became either wage laborers or sharecroppers.<sup>45</sup> Some white planters continued to wreak havoc on African American families after emancipation. Desperate to recover some of the labor force that they lost when their slaves were freed, many white planters used apprenticeship laws to keep black children bound to them as laborers—often without the consent of the children's parents. This deprived the parents of raising

40 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 155–156; Regosin, *Freedom's Promise*, 7–8.

41 Chunchang, *African Americans in the Reconstruction Era*, 73; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 84. Foner states that this statistic is documented by census returns and by the Congressional Ku Klux Klan hearings.

42 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 185; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 85; Chunchang, *African Americans in the Reconstruction Era*, 89; Sharon Ann Holt, "Making Freedom Pay: Freedpeople Working for Themselves, North Carolina, 1865–1900," *The Journal of Southern History* 60, (May 1994): 232.

43 As quoted in Foner, *Reconstruction*, 86. See also Chunchang, *African Americans in the Reconstruction Era*, 75.

44 Chunchang, *African Americans in the Reconstruction Era*, 87–88.

45 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 185; Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, 233.

# African-American Research

their children and benefitting from the labor their children would have contributed to their own families.<sup>46</sup> Black parents fought desperately for the return of their children, even attempting to buy them out of apprenticeship.<sup>47</sup> Orphaned black children were particularly vulnerable to apprenticeship. A member of an orphan's kinship family would often step forward to fight for the child's release from bondage, illustrating the continued importance of family for blacks after emancipation.<sup>48</sup>

Some of the familial problems created by slavery have had lasting effects, which are evident today. Many black families still suffer from poverty.<sup>49</sup> A significant number of black men suffer from poor health, and black men have a particularly high death rate.<sup>50</sup> Despite this, most black families in the United States are headed by men.<sup>51</sup> Over time, their economic status has risen, and today most black Americans grow up in two-parent, middle-class families.<sup>52</sup>

## Implications for African-American Genealogical Research

The unique circumstances of black families in America have important implications for genealogical research. If researchers understand the black family in slavery and emancipation, they will more often be able to locate helpful records and correctly identify slave ancestors. Although the process for researching free blacks is similar to that of researching whites, it can be quite different from the process of researching slaves.

To search for black ancestors who were slaves, a researcher must first identify the slave owner.<sup>53</sup> Although almost no slaves kept written records of their own, they were frequently mentioned in the records of their owners. Wills and probate records often mentioned slaves by name and sometimes even listed their relationships to each other. All records of the slave owner should be researched for clues to the identities and relationships of the slaves.<sup>54</sup>

It is also important to understand slave-naming patterns. Naming patterns often provide important clues for identifying family members and kin. Slaves frequently named their children for parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and sometimes even great-aunts, great-uncles, and deceased siblings.<sup>55</sup>



46 Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 402.

47 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 212, 223, 233, 236.

48 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 236.

49 Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 77, 80.

50 Ibid, 84.

51 Ibid. 80.

52 Ibid, 80–81.

53 David T. Thackery, *Finding Your African American Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide* (Orem, Utah: Ancestry, 2000), 5.

54 *African American Records Quick Guide* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2000), 3.

55 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 8; Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 190, 192, 195, 198–200. Gutman indicates that in naming children after their kin, slaves often displayed a preference for the maternal line. However, he also states that many slave sons were named for their fathers, perhaps because these children were more often separated from their fathers.



## African-American Research

However, slaves were rarely named after their owners, and only about 15 percent of former slaves took their owners' surnames when they were emancipated.<sup>56</sup>

During slavery, many slaves were not permitted to have surnames.<sup>57</sup> Those who had surnames often retained their own and refused to assume those of their masters when they were separated from family members by sale. In doing so, slaves rejected close identity with the new owners and retained a connection with their family.<sup>58</sup>

Many emancipated slaves changed their surnames, indicating their complete abandonment of the past. One freedwoman explained, "When us black folks got set free, us'n change our names, so effen the white folks get together and change their minds and don't let us be free any more, then they have a hard time finding us."<sup>59</sup> Some took surnames of people they admired, such as Lincoln or Washington, while others took a surname they had been using for many years, often without the knowledge of the slave owner.<sup>60</sup>

This surname was often that of a remote ancestor who owned the family many years earlier, and it may hint at ties to a family of origin.<sup>61</sup> Researchers

should note the surnames of all of their black ancestors, since they may serve as important clues for connecting family members. Also, some blacks changed their surnames several times.<sup>62</sup> If a particular surname cannot be found, ignore the surname and focus on given names, ages, and relationships.<sup>63</sup>



From 1790 to 1840, slaves appeared only as counts under the name of the slave owner. Free black heads of household, however, were named in these censuses. Those who were not heads of household were counted in the "other free persons" category from 1790 to 1810 and "free colored" persons from 1820 to 1840.<sup>64</sup> In the 1850 and 1860 censuses, slaves were enumerated in separate slave schedules. Unfortunately, these schedules do not list slaves by name. The name of the owner or person with whom the slave was living was recorded along with the number of slaves owned and the number of slaves manumitted. Each slave was then listed by age, sex, and color.<sup>65</sup> Few slave schedules have been indexed.<sup>66</sup> In the 1850 and 1860 censuses, the names of all free black

household members were listed.<sup>67</sup> Beginning in 1870, former slaves were listed by name on population census records along with their birth years,

56 Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 8; *African American Records Quick Guide*, 3; Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 232.

57 Regosin, *Freedom's Promise*, 8–9.

58 Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 252.

59 Alice Wilkins, as quoted in Chunchang, *African Americans in the Reconstruction Era*, 82.

60 *African American Records Quick Guide*, 3; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 79.

61 Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 231–232, 240; Regosin, *Freedom's Promise*, 59.

62 *African American Records Quick Guide*, 1.

63 *Finding Records of Your Ancestors, Part A: African American, 1870 to Present* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2003), 8.

64 Anne Bruner Eales and Robert M. Kvasnicka, eds., *Genealogical Research in the National Archives of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2000), 22–25.

65 *Ibid.*, 25–26. Slave schedules also asked whether the slaves were deaf-mute, blind, insane, idiotic, or fugitives.

66 Loretto Dennis Szucs and Matthew Wright, *Finding Answers in U.S. Census Records* (Orem, Utah: Ancestry Publishing, 2002), 77.

67 Eales and Kvasnicka, eds., *Genealogical Research in the National Archives of the United States*, 25–26.

68 *Ibid.*, 26.

# African-American Research

birth states, and other household members.<sup>68</sup> State census records can also be useful in researching African Americans. State censuses were often taken in years between federal censuses, and some of them were designed in part to monitor African-American movement into northern cities. Antebellum state censuses do not list slaves by name.

Since many ex-slaves were legally married after emancipation, civil or church marriage records may provide the names of bride and groom, their birth dates and parents' names, the marriage date and place, and the residence of the couple. Many times, blacks were listed separately in "colored" registers or in the back of "white" registers. The abbreviations "col" or "cold" indicate the person was "colored" and can be an important clue. Some African Americans with light skin may have been listed in "white" registers and others may have been listed in the wrong book, so it may be necessary to search both registers.

Court records, military records, and newspapers can be valuable genealogical resources for locating black ancestors. The court records of slave owners, including probate records, can be very helpful in tracing slave ancestry. Slaves were valuable property. They could be inherited, and they were often gifts from a father to his daughter upon her marriage. Slaves could be used as collateral to secure a mortgage or leased to bring income to a fatherless family. For all of these reasons, slaves were frequently mentioned in the court records of their owners.<sup>69</sup> Military records can be of great assistance to researchers looking for ancestors that served in the Civil War. The U. S. Colored Troops service and pension records give the date and place of birth of the soldier and may name the last slave owner.<sup>70</sup> Newspapers can pro-

vide researchers with valuable clues about runaway slaves and ex-slave families who were searching for each other after emancipation. For the latter, black newspapers may be particularly useful.<sup>71</sup>

Since most freedmen did not purchase land after emancipation, land records may be less helpful in researching African-American ancestors. Between 1865 and 1900, only 25 percent of the black farmers of the South acquired land.<sup>72</sup> However, if the possibility exists that a black ancestor did in fact own land, then one should search the land records of the county or counties where the ancestor lived. When Congress created the Freedmen's Bureau, it also created the Freedman's Savings and Trust, known as the Freedman's Bank. The commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau encouraged the freedmen to invest their money in the bank, and many did so. By 1874, the deposits in all branches totaled \$3,299,201. In addition to its role as a savings institution, the bank also assisted freedmen by providing them with loans.<sup>73</sup> The records of both the Freedman's Bank and the Freedmen's Bureau can be of great assistance to family-history researchers. Bank records include a person's birthplace, place brought up, residence, age, complexion, name of employer or occupation, spouse, children, father, mother, brothers and sisters, remarks, and signature. Early books also give the name of the former master or mistress and the name of the plantation.<sup>74</sup> Bureau records contain field office records and commissioner's records. Case files of the Southern Claims Commission Records include family letters, family Bibles, wills, probate records, personal accounts, property inventories, and other genealogical data. They include testimonies of neighbors, relatives, and former slaves to support a claimant's assertion that

---

69 Marsha Hoffman Rising, "Slavery in the Family," *Ozarkin* 18 (Spring 1996): 7.

70 *African American Records Quick Guide*, 3.

71 As African Americans migrated from fields to urban centers, many large cities with a substantial African-American population established an African-American newspaper. Examples are the *Chicago Defender*, the *Detroit Tribune*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the (New York) *Amsterdam News*. To learn whether a particular area had a black newspaper, contact the reference department of that area's local or county library.

72 Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule*, 197–198.

73 Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule*, 159–160; Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 216.

74 *African American Records Quick Guide*, 3.

## African-American Research

he or she lost property during the Civil War because of loyalty to the Union and was due repayment.<sup>75</sup>

As with all genealogical research, the lives of all family members should be researched, including siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins—not just one's direct ancestors. The kin may provide important information about the family and may eventually guide a researcher to information about a specific person in the family.<sup>76</sup> For example, Freedman's Bank records not only include information about the freedmen who opened bank accounts, but they also name their spouses, children, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and sometimes even their former masters. Thus, even if one's direct ancestor did not have his own bank account, he still might be mentioned in the bank records of one of his kin, along with the rest of his family.

Several excellent genealogical guides are available, such as Tony Burroughs's *Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Internet websites, such as AfriGeneas ([www.afriogeneas.com](http://www.afriogeneas.com)), devote themselves to assisting African Americans with genealogical research. Local and national genealogy conferences and workshops regularly offer classes designed to assist researchers with African-American research and help professional genealogists learn more about this unique field of research. Samford University's annual Institute of Genealogical and Historical Research (IGHR) will be offering a track entitled Researching African-American Ancestors: Slave and Reconstruction Era Records in 2012 and 2014 ([www4.samford.edu/schools/ighr/index.html](http://www4.samford.edu/schools/ighr/index.html)). The Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy (SLIG), sponsored by the Utah Genealogical Association, plans to offer an African-American research track in 2014 (<http://www.infouga.org>). Classes on African-American research are regularly offered at conferences sponsored by Brigham Young University, the

International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists (ICAPGen), the National Genealogical Society (NGS), and the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS).

Since African Americans first arrived in America, they have emphasized the importance of family, kin, and community. Although black families have faced serious challenges during slavery and emancipation, they have proven to be resilient and adaptable in the face of these challenges. Due to the effects of slavery, African-American family history research is often both laborious and difficult. Despite the obstacles, many blacks persevere in seeking out their ancestral roots. Today, as black Americans reach back and discover their ancestors, they exhibit once again their belief in the importance of the family.



*Tristan L. Tolman, AG® is a professional genealogist, author, editor, and publisher. She has a bachelor's degree in Family History and Genealogy from Brigham Young University and is accredited in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic States. Tristan has been actively involved in the genealogical field for over twenty years. She currently serves as First Vice Chair of the International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists (ICAPGen). She is also a member of the National Genealogical Society and the Association of Professional Genealogists. She specializes in U.S. research, writing personal and family histories, and preparing genealogical information for publication. She and her husband Blair have authored several books together, and they are the parents of five children. Tristan can be reached through her website, <http://www.leaveafamilylegacy.com>.*

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 1.

# African-American Research

## Further Resources

- African American & African Ancestored Genealogy. *AfriGeneas*. <http://www.afrigenas.com> : 2011.
- Berry, Mary Frances and Blassingame, *John W. Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Burroughs, Tony. *Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Christine's Genealogy Website. <http://ccharity.com> : 2011.
- Cimbala, Paul A. and Miller, Randall M., eds. *The Freedmen's Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1999.
- Cox, LaWanda and Cox, John H., eds. *Reconstruction, the Negro, and the New South*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973.
- Everly, Elaine and Pacheli, Willna. *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Field Offices of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands: Record Group 105*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1973.
- Freedman's Bank Records*. CD-ROM. Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2000.
- Finding Records of Your Ancestors, Part A: African American, 1870 to Present*. Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2003.
- Howells, Cyndi. *Cyndi's List of Genealogical Sites on the Internet: "African American."* <http://www.cyndislist.com/african.htm> : 2005.
- Mills, Gary B. *Southern Loyalists in the Civil War: The Southern Claims Commission*. Baltimore, Maryland.: Genealogical Publishing, 1994.
- Oubre, Claude F. *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.
- Potts, Howard E. *A Comprehensive Name Index for the American Slave*. Westport, Connecticut.: Greenwood Press, 1997.
- Rising, Marsha Hoffman. "Slavery in the Family." *Ozar'Kin* 18 (1996).
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Quick Guide to African American Records." *FamilySearch*. [https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Quick\\_Guide\\_to\\_African\\_American\\_Records](https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Quick_Guide_to_African_American_Records) : 2011).
- The Freedmen's Bureau Online*. <http://www.freedmensbureau.com> : 2011.
- United States. House of Representatives. Commissioners of Claims. Records of the Commissioners of Claims, 1871-1880. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1945.
- Walker, James D. *Black Genealogy: How to Begin*. Athens, Georgia.: University of Georgia, Center for Continuing Education, 1977.
- Woodtor, Dee Parmer. *Finding a Place Called Home: An African American Guide to Genealogical and Historical Identity*. New York: Random House, 1999.