African American family research on Ancestry.com

Family history research begins in modern times and works backwards, generation by generation. Discoveries for all American families, regardless of ethnicity, are made through census records, military papers, vital records (births, marriages, and deaths), and other documents created over a lifetime.

African American family history research, however, can pose unique challenges as you follow your family into the 19th century, just prior to the Civil War.

Part One of this guide walks you through the steps to discovering your family's unique history through the 20th century and back to the 1870 census. Part Two shows you clues to look for in the 1870 census and earlier records, with tips for continuing your research even further back through time.

View the records

Ancestry.com is a fantastic resource for learning more about your family history — and viewing the historical records that mark key moments in your ancestors' lives. You'll have access to the records on Ancestry.com with a FREE trial or a paid membership. Visit www.Ancestry.com to get started.

PART 1: Getting to 1870

Start in 1940

Your research starts with family members who are alive today. Listen to stories, ask questions, and jot down names, places, dates, and other details. Then use these details to search the 1940 U.S. Federal Census on Ancestry.com for someone in your family who was living in the U.S. in 1940. (If you're new to the site, you may be asked to input your name so the site can save your search information into a family tree and conduct behind-the-scenes searches for additional records for you.)

- Start your search with the 1940 U.S. Federal Census because it lists all 134 million people living in the United States on April 1, 1940, by name. Along with names, you'll learn things like occupation, address, education level, birthplace, and other people living in the house.

- Pay attention to those details. You may find multiple people with the same name as your ancestor in the 1940 census, and you can use names of other family members, ages, street names, and other facts to make sure you've got the right person. Add the census record to your family tree so Ancestry.com can use it along with other details you provide to look for more records while you continue your search by moving on to the 1930 census.

Then work backwards

In family history, you work back through time, using details you pick up in more recent records to help you make discoveries in earlier ones. Use details from the 1940 census — names, ages, birthplaces, cities of residence — to search for your family in the 1930 census. Details from the 1930 census will then help you find records created in the 1920s, and so on.

- As you work back, use details from the census to search for birth and marriage records, city directories, enlistment or draft records, military muster rolls, obituaries and death records, and other documents. You may find a previous generation mentioned in some of these records, which will help you extend your line back further.

- Branch out. Keep a list of siblings and their birth years, too. These may come in handy when you want to follow a trail back further through time and can't find a record for your ancestor.

- Review all record images and save the ones you know refer to your family in your Ancestry.com family tree.
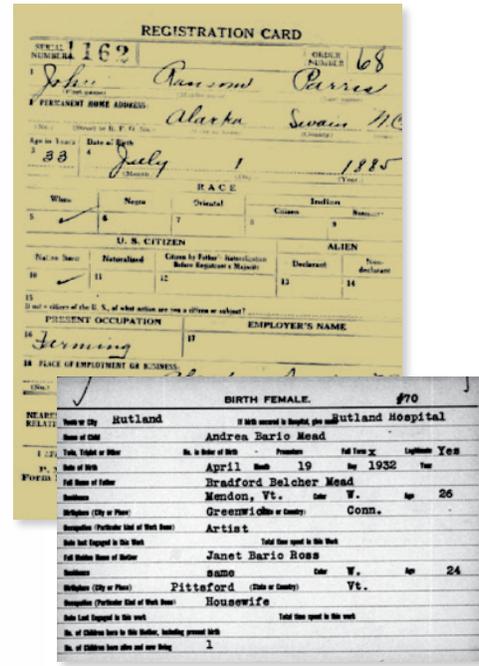
Death certificates

Death certificates were not required by law in most U.S. states until the early 20th century, but they can still be huge finds because they often include names of the deceased's parents. Say, for example, you locate a death certificate for your great-uncle Charley who died in 1915 at age 63. If his death certificate includes the name of one of Charley's parents, you'll have names and possibly other details about family members who lived before the Civil War.
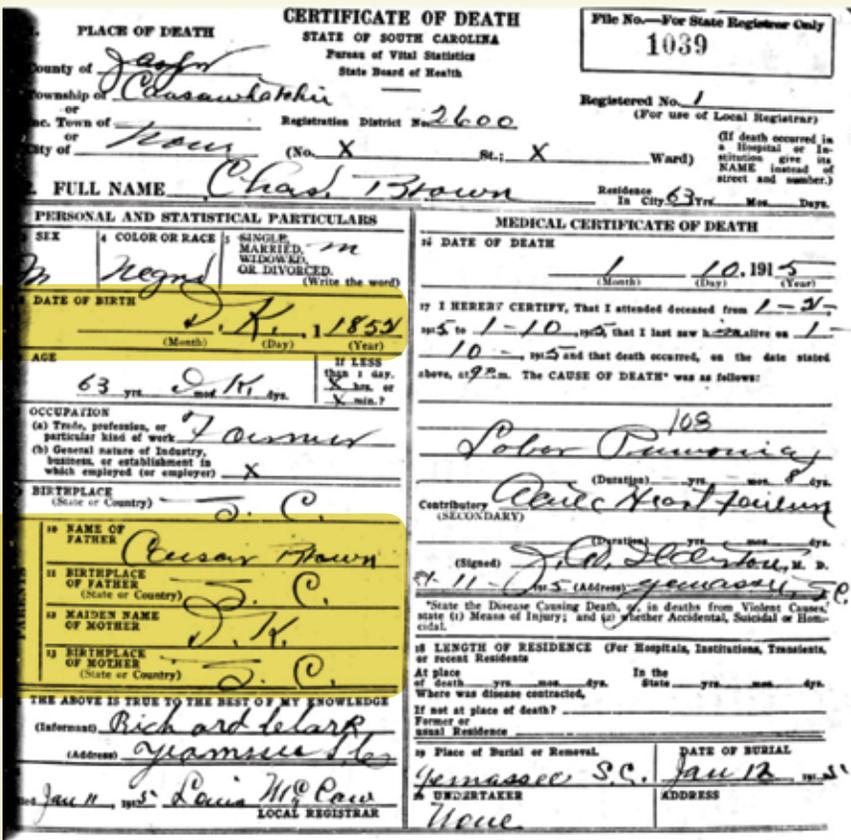
PART 2: Tackle 1870, 1860, and beyond

Your goal so far has been to trace your family back to the 1870 U.S. Federal Census. When you make a discovery in this key census, mine it for everything it reveals: names, relationships, ages, and anything else it can tell you about your family in the first census following the Civil War.

Depending on your family's status (free or enslaved) during the previous 10 years, your next step — going back 10 more years — may be a bit trickier.

In 1850 and 1860, enslaved men, women, and children were not listed on the census population schedules, nor were their names typically recorded in birth, marriage, and death records or other go-to family history documents. Following a slave through these years means refocusing your research and finding details and documents that pertain to the slaveholder instead. But first you'll need to determine who that was.

Free or slave?

Not all African Americans were enslaved — so don't automatically assume your ancestors were. Check the 1860 and 1850 censuses to see if any of your ancestors were listed as free persons of color.

Finding a slaveholder

Following emancipation, formerly enslaved people often stayed in the same area. This means that white, land-owning families living near your ancestor in 1870 may have been slave owners. So after you find an ancestor in the 1870 census, look through several surrounding pages and take careful note of white families in the area — especially those with the same surname as your ancestor. After emancipation, former slaves sometimes adopted the surname of their former owner, although the practice wasn't universal.

Pay attention to birthplaces given in the 1870 census. If your ancestor was living in Mississippi in 1870 but his birthplace is listed as Maryland, try to determine how that ancestor got to Mississippi. White, property-owning families with the same out-of-state birth location who were living near your ancestor in 1870 should also be considered potential former owners.

Look for surnames, birthplaces, and other clues in the 1870 Census, the first U.S. Census that lists former slaves freed after 1860.

Follow potential slave-owning families back to the 1860 census to determine whether they were still in the area and who the head of household was. Then search for him, her, or the plantation in the 1860 census slave schedules to determine whether the household held slaves. (See Using

Slave Schedules for more information.) Do the same for 1850. Prior to 1850, federal censuses listed only the names of heads of households, with tick marks for all other members of the household, free or enslaved, which makes all American research a little tougher.

Other records that mention slaves

Manifests, property records, wills and probate records, manumission and emancipation papers, and newspapers all may mention slaves. Since most slaves did not have surnames until after obtaining their freedom, you'll often be searching for documents related to the slave owner.

Property and probate records

Search property and probate records associated with slave-owning families. You'll typically find these records in the county where the slave owner lived or in the Tax, Criminal, Land and Wills collection on Ancestry.com. If the slave owner died before the end of the Civil War, estate inventories may list enslaved individuals by name, age, and family group. Slaves were considered property, so you may find transfers of ownership included in deeds of gift or trust, records of sale, and court records in county archives. Plantation records may also include details on slaves who lived there, although these records are not widely available. Look for them in university archives and occasionally at state historical societies.

Manifests

An 1807 law that banned the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the United States as of January 1, 1808, also required masters of vessels transporting slaves in coastal waters to provide a manifest detailing their slave cargo when leaving or entering a port. Ports of departure or arrival stretched from Baltimore, Maryland, to Texas on the Gulf of Mexico, and manifests could list a person's name, age, height, gender, port of destination, and name of the slave owner or shipper.
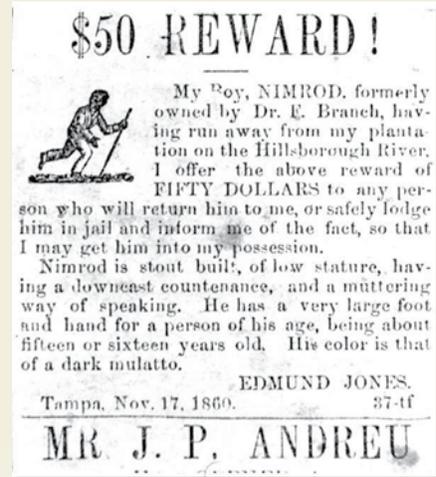
Records associated with the slave owner may reveal information about the slave, too.
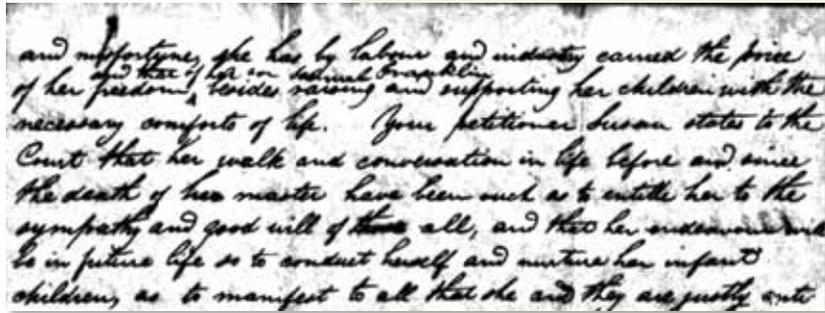
Read court records carefully to learn stories, names of family members, locations, and dates.

Names of owners on slave manifests plus other handwritten details may help you identify a slave in other records.

Military records

In 1863, President Lincoln authorized the use of African American troops in combat during the Civil War. More than 175,000 men served the Union as U.S. Colored Troops, and military service records are available for many of them on Ancestry.com. Records for Buffalo Soldiers, the first African American peacetime troops, may also include the names of former slaves.
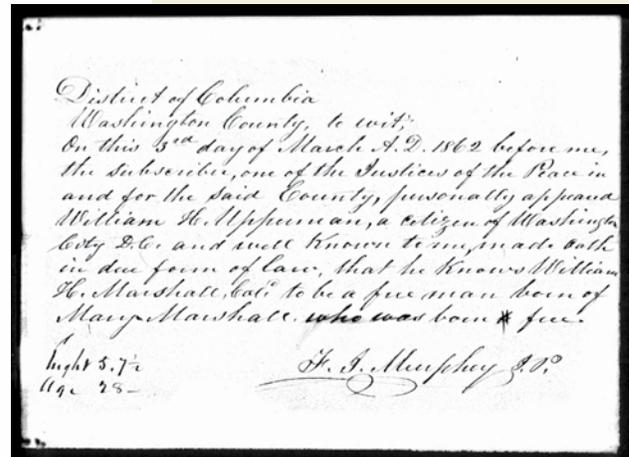
Emancipation records

Former slaves may also be found in collections of manumission and emancipation records. You will find collections for Washington, D.C., and Illinois on Ancestry.com and others at county archives. Use the map at the bottom of the Search tab on Ancestry.com to get a list of all records available for the location where your ancestor lived.

Freedmen's Bureau records

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, also known as the Freedmen's Bureau, was established in 1865 to supervise and manage matters relating to refugees and freedmen. Browse through the Bureau's records or search the records of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company (also known as the Freedman's Bank — note the spelling difference between the bank and bureau), which was created for former slaves and their dependents.

African American family history collection on Ancestry.com

All records unique to African American family history research on Ancestry.com can be accessed and searched directly from the African American collection at www.ancestry.com/aahistory.

Note that William's mother is also named in this document from the Washington, D.C., Slave Emancipation Records on Ancestry.com.
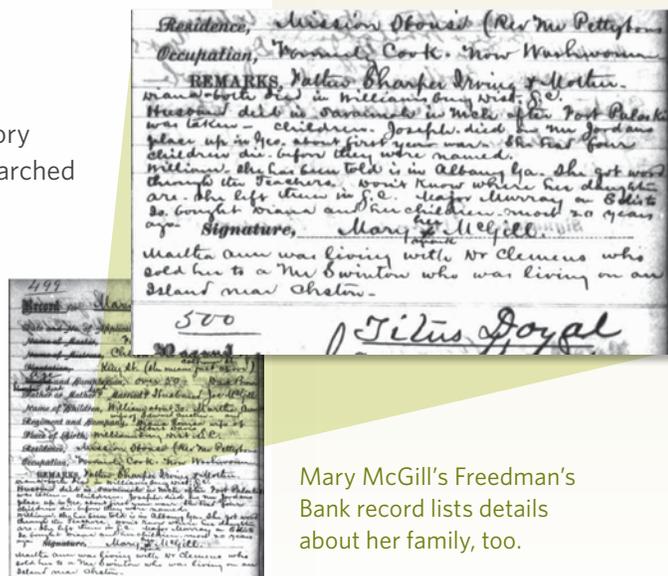
Mary McGill's Freedman's Bank record lists details about her family, too.

Using slave schedules and how they can help

In conjunction with the 1850 and 1860 censuses, the U.S. government counted enslaved individuals, who were considered property, on a separate census schedule. Known as "slave schedules," each includes the names of slaveholders and descriptions of slaves owned — slaves, however, are rarely listed by name. Still, you can use information in a slave schedule to help you learn more about an enslaved ancestor. Here's how:

Step 1. *Search for your formerly enslaved ancestor in the 1870 census.* Note his or her location, birth date, surname, and other details. Also make a note of white property owners, particularly those who own large parcels of land, living nearby. Look for white families who share your ancestor's surname as well.

Step 2. *Move to the 1860 census* and search for the white property owners you found in 1870, noting the ones who own slaves.

Step 3. *Search property owners discovered in Step 2 in 1860 U.S. Census Slave Schedules.* Compare details listed for the slaves they owned to the information you uncovered about your own ancestor in 1870 (be sure to subtract 10 years from your ancestor's age in 1870). Repeat the process with 1850 U.S. Census Slave Schedules. Found a match? Land, tax, newspapers, and probate records for the slaveholder may offer details about individuals the person owned — and even mention them by name.

Tips for continuing your search

Tip 1: Save your discoveries.
Use your Ancestry.com family tree (or start one from the Family Trees tab on Ancestry.com) to store your discoveries by selecting Save when you view a record on Ancestry.com. The site will use information in your family tree to search for more records about your family members and notify you about possible matches. This will help you continue back in time with your research.

Tip 2: Go wide.
Records of an ancestor's cousins or siblings may have information about your family, too. Research everyone. Family members often lived near one another, were mentioned in relatives' obituaries, and appear together in family photos. Adding your ancestors' siblings and cousins to your family tree will also help you connect with their descendants who are researching them today.

Tip 3: Take a DNA test.
If your family came to America from Africa as slaves, you likely won't be able to trace individuals directly back to a homeland. But an AncestryDNA test can give you a better idea of where your family originated and connect you to distant family members and cousins across the globe. Learn more at dna.ancestry.com.