

Genealogy Guide

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Introduction:

Family and community history research are integral parts of understanding ourselves, our communities, and the places and people that shape us. For African Americans, this search can feel more pressing and sometimes more frustrating, as many of our ancestors were kidnapped and brought to a new continent, enslaved, under-documented, and often treated as less than human. However, today, more than ever, many of our histories are more accessible than they have been in the past, thanks to the hard work and research of Black genealogists, historians of the African diaspora, and the many archivists, librarians, and historians that work in state and local repositories, as well as advances in technology. That doesn't mean that the research will be without challenges, brick walls, and other obstacles – that's part of the process – but today we have more tools to break through, climb over, and kick down many of those walls.

As we learn more about the families and communities that raised us, we are helping to make sense of the past, through the lens of our ancestors. As we better understand our communities and our families, it builds on and adds to the work of historians. Using genealogy to connect with the past helps add more nuance and description for future generations to learn from.

Part I: Getting Ready for Research

Information Needed:

To begin tracing your family or community history, you will need basic information about the people you want to research. The first step to research will be to have a conversation or do an oral history with the elders in your family and community. Ask for the names, places, and estimated dates of any and all family members you want to research. Keep this information somewhere easily accessible when you're doing your research, such as a frequently used note-taking app, or in a notebook you intend to use for your research.

To get started, you'll need to choose an online database. The most popular databases are FamilySearch and Ancestry. FamilySearch and Ancestry both have billions of digitized, indexed, and transcribed records from around the world. FamilySearch is free, while Ancestry is a subscription service, though many libraries throughout the country have access to Ancestry Library Edition, a free version of the database made accessible through library systems. Other databases, like the military database [Fold3](#), or the cemetery database [FindAGrave](#) may be helpful throughout your research, and are often connected to larger databases like Ancestry and FamilySearch.

While big online databases are wonderful places to get started, they are not the only places to look for records pertaining to family and community history. State archives, county and city courthouses, and local historical societies are also must-visit places for family and community history research. Similarly, just because you can't locate a document on the database at one time, doesn't mean it doesn't exist - it may not be digitized, or it may have an error in transcription or spelling that makes it harder to locate. When doing your research, remember: the more sources, the better.

Another thing to note: sometimes in doing genealogy we may come across traumatic or shocking material that our families or community members did not share with us beforehand. Seeing that a family member lost children on a census record, or seeing a violent cause of death on a death certificate can be an emotional experience. Being aware of your emotional state and sharing how you're feeling with a family member or friend can help you cope with the sometimes challenging nature of family and community history.

Part II: The Basics of Genealogy Research, 1950-1870

Once you have collected the names, dates, and places of a few family or community members, and chosen a database, it's time to begin the documentary research process. Most databases will have you enter the first and last name, estimated birth year, and place of a family member. You'll want to start with a family member born sometime between 1900 and 1950 - even if you know information about a family member born before that time, starting in that range will allow you to collect and connect documents related to each generation in your family. The most common and most helpful documents are the census or civil registrations, vital records like birth, marriage, or death records, or military records.

Census and Civil Registration:

The goal of a census (or civil registrations) is to collect basic demographic information on people living in a country. The United States Federal Census occurs every ten years, and has since 1790. The questions change from year to year (a comprehensive list can be found here: https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/index_of_questions/) but the heads of household, number of people in each household, general ages, and races have historically been recorded. Women were not listed by name regularly in the census until 1840, and all African Americans were not listed by name until 1870, after the end of slavery, though free Black people and women who owned property did show up prior than the dates mentioned. The census becomes available to the public 72 years after it's taken to protect the privacy of the people who are named. All censuses between 1790 and 1950 are digitized and searchable for free online, though the 1890 census is incomplete because of a 1921 fire in a federal building that destroyed much of it. The census is an important document because it attempts to list everyone by name, and often includes age, marital status, race, and birthplace, and, after 1840, lists everyone who is living in the household together. This allows us to make multigenerational connections. For example, if you find a grandparent in the 1920 census, and they are listed as a child, you will likely see them living with their parents and siblings. You can then use the "new" information you have about the previous generation to continue to go back in time

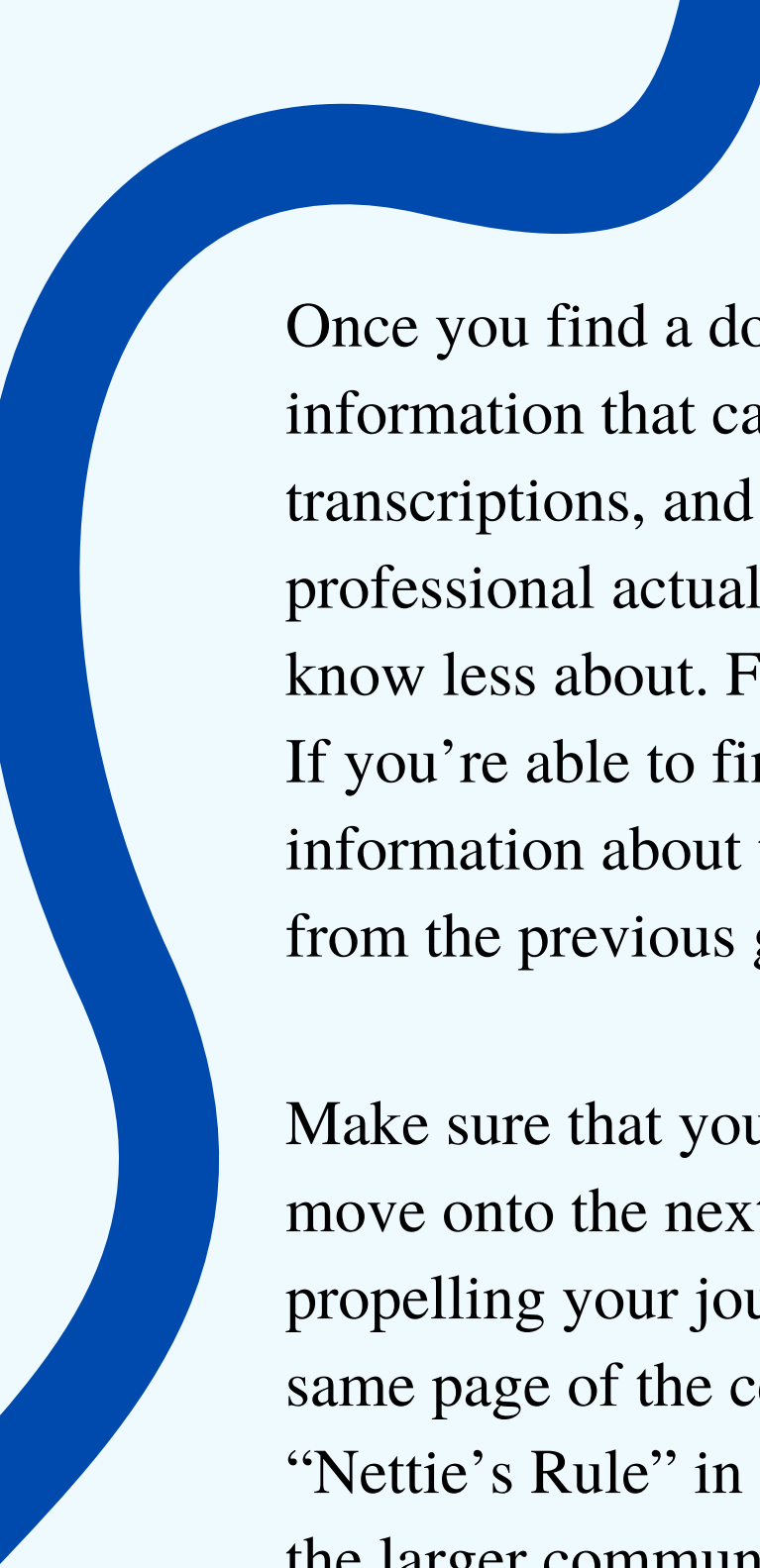
Vital Records:

Vital records, like birth, marriage, and death records, help us with important information like dates, places, and names of other important people in the lives of our ancestors. Vital records usually include the names of the parents of the people that the record is about.

Military Records

If you have family members that served, military records can be useful sources of information. Additionally, most men have draft cards from World Wars I and II that list names of close relatives, birthplaces, street addresses, and names of employers.

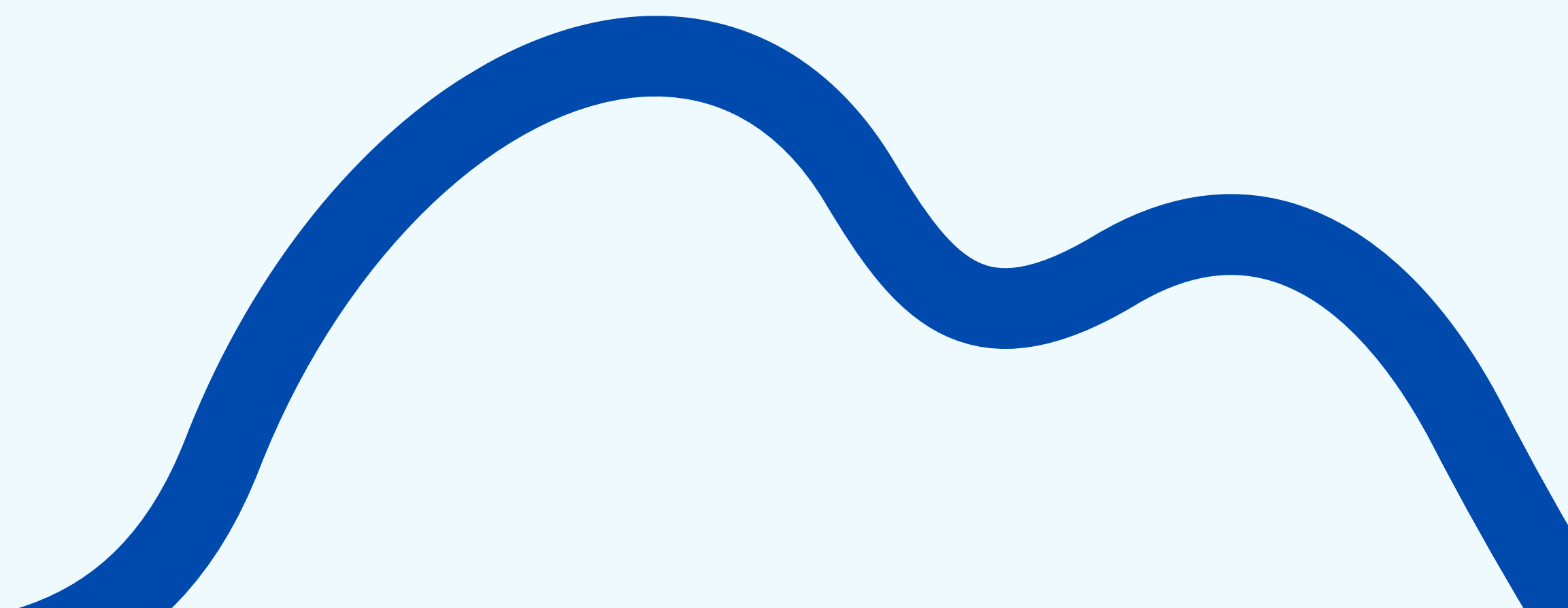
The first step once you have your beginning information is to type the information you have about the family member you have chosen into the corresponding fields, and press search. Make sure to leave the “exact” box unchecked; you’ll want to cast a wide net when you’re first searching. You will likely get many documents that may be matches for your family member, depending on the database you’re working in. You’ll want to peruse the matches to find one who is a match for your family member. Keep in mind: just because someone shares a name with your family member, doesn’t mean it’s a match. Make sure the place and dates make sense for your ancestor. Also, be open to different spellings of names, for example: even though the last name you have for your family member is “Green”, it could also be spelled “Greene”.



Once you find a document that's a match for your family member, you'll want to examine it to glean any new pieces of information that can help you learn more about the people you're searching for. Be aware of spelling errors that often exist on transcriptions, and make sure to open the digitized document to see what the census taker, court official, or medical professional actually wrote. Use what you learn from the documents you read to help learn more about family members you know less about. For example: on the census you will likely see your family member living in a household with other people. If you're able to find a census where your family member is a child and living with their parents, you may then learn new information about the parents that you can apply to searching for the previous generation. You can then use a family member from the previous generation in your next search, and repeat the process.

Make sure that you're taking in all of the information from the documents, and don't just skim over the information in order to move onto the next generation. Every clue matters, and you never know what piece of information could be helpful for propelling your journey further into the past. Also, make sure you look to see who is living near your ancestors, both on the same page of the census that they're located on as well as a couple pages in each direction. This technique, often called "Nettie's Rule" in genealogy circles, can be helpful in identifying extended family as well as having a better understanding of the larger community

Using this process tends to work well for most people up until the mid to late 1800s. For many African Americans doing research, the 1870 census can prove difficult to get past.



Part III: The 1870 Brick Wall and African American Genealogy

The 1870 Brick Wall is what genealogists call the difficulty many African Americans have getting beyond slavery in doing genealogy work. The 1870 census is the first census where the majority of African Americans are recorded for the first time, as it's the first census after emancipation. The 1870 census is also an important place to look for other family members that may live nearby. Once you've found the family you were looking for, look a few pages before and after on the digitized record to see if you can find any other names you may recognize. Aside from the Freedmen's Bureau Records, most African Americans are not easily found in documents prior to this census. This can be discouraging. However, there are different ways to continue your research for enslaved ancestors. To do this, you will also need to try identify the people who likely enslaved your ancestors. This can be tricky, but can sometimes be determined using the 1870 census: if there is a white family living nearby - within a few households - with a lot of land or personal wealth (columns 8 and 9), there's a chance that that could have been an enslaving family. If you can locate a family that fits this description, you can use the 1850 and 1860 slave schedules, to see if they did in fact own people, and if there's anyone who matches the age and sex of your ancestor (slave schedules usually do not list enslaved people by name).

Using property records, like wills and deeds, can also be a way to identify enslaved ancestors. Plantation records, when available, may also name enslaved people. State archives, historical societies, and local courthouses often have these types of records, though more of them are being digitized and transcribed. Additionally, the WPA Slave Narratives are available for free on the Library of Congress's website, and includes the largest collection of first-person accounts of slavery, despite the issues regarding how the oral histories were collected. About 10% of Black Americans were free during the antebellum period, and sometimes will be listed on any of the censuses between 1870 and 1790. Those ancestors are often easier to trace, and are usually concentrated in the Upper South and New Orleans.

Part IV: Closing

Learning more about our ancestors and the communities where we live or where our families lived in the past helps us to better understand why things are the way they are in the present, and can help us build a better future for coming generations. Using genealogical methods and documentary sources like the ones listed in this pamphlet are an excellent way to engage with the histories of your family and community. Don't stop there, though: as you continue to research, make sure to keep asking family or community members about stories they remember from growing up, songs they liked to sing or listen to, and recipes and food they enjoyed. Learning about the past through research is an important part understanding more about the lives of those who came before us, and can inspire us to carry on their legacies and honor them in the future.

Resources:

Below are helpful resources to begin your genealogy journey. In addition to these (mostly) web-based resources, local historical societies and public libraries are often a good stop for doing family and community based research. This is just an overview of some of the resources that are available and is not an exhaustive list.

Websites:

[FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org): Free database with digitized records and helpful resource guides.

[Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) and [Ancestry Library Edition](https://www.ancestry.com/library-edition): Ancestry is a subscription service with digitized records, but Ancestry Library Edition is available for free in many local libraries.

[Lowcountry Africana](https://www.lowcountryafricana.com): Genealogy website with digitized records (including plantation records) mainly in South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia.

[NCgenealogy.org](https://www.ncgenealogy.org): website with many North Carolina specific genealogy resources.

[Archives.gov](https://www.archives.gov) and [loc.gov](https://www.loc.gov): The National Archives and the Library of Congress both have federal records and resources that can be helpful to genealogists.

Books:

Black Genealogy by Charles L. Blockson

Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree by Tony Burroughs

Black Genesis: A Resource Book for African-American Genealogy by James M. Rose and Alice Eichholz

Black Indian Genealogy Research: African American Ancestors Among the Five Civilized Tribes by Angela Y. Walton-Raj

Videos:

BlackProGen: Nicka Sewell Smith, a professional genealogist, hosts monthly conversations on YouTube that can be streamed later.

Robert F. Smith Explore Your Family History Center @ NMAAHC: The EYFHC hosts programming throughout the year on topics related to Black genealogy that can be streamed on NMAAHC's UStream and YouTube channels.

Organizations:

[Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society \(AAHGS\)](#): AAHGS is a national organization with local chapters across the country. Visit their website to learn where each chapter is located.

[Midwest African American Genealogy Institute \(MAAGI\)](#): MAAGI hosts an annual gathering to help genealogists better their skills in African American genealogy.