

Beginner's Guide to African American Genealogy

By Lamar DeLoatch, President,
North Carolina Afro-American
Historical & Genealogical
Society, Inc.

I. Introduction

Before you start tracing your family's genealogy, there are a few Genealogy Golden Rules you need to remember. They will help you to find the correct ancestor and will save you lots of time and tears in the long run:

Golden Rule No. 1: SPELLING DOESN'T COUNT.

Years ago, most people could not read or write. Even those whose job it was to record official records often misspelled names. Always consider alternate spellings based on the phonetic sound of your surname.

Golden Rule No. 2: DON'T ASSUME THE ENSLAVED HAD THE SAME SURNAME AS THE ENSLAVER.

Studies have shown that enslaved people had the same surname as their owner only about 20% of the time. And once freed, many of the formerly enslaved adopted surnames totally different from their previous names.

Golden Rule No. 3: USE DISCRETION.

We know how excited you will be to share any information you will find, but be careful when sharing information about living relatives.

II. Now You Are Ready to Begin

Step 1 - Try filling out your first set of genealogy forms, such as an Ancestor/Pedigree Chart and a Family Group Sheet. These forms will tell you how much you have to find out from family members.

Step 2 – Call or write all important family members to let them know you plan to do your family’s genealogy, and ask for their assistance in this important project. Please ask them to not throw away any photos, letters, or documents after a death.

Step 3 – Collect and copy all of your family’s records, then move back to your parents’ generation, then your grandparents’ generation. The documents you want to find are birth certificates, marriage licenses, death certificates, funeral programs, school or military records, employment records, deeds, wills, bible entries, photos, etc.

Step 4 – Interviews!! Create an address book of all your relatives, including in-laws. Interview those over 50 years and over, first. We recommend you tape record these interviews so you can listen instead of write. Once completed, interview the rest of your family but don’t expect to have all of your questions answered during the first interview, as you can follow-up with more detailed interviews in the future. Please remember to ask for records at the same time you conduct the interview.

Step 5 – Join a local genealogical society. At this point in your research, it is time to take advantage of the wonderful things your local African American Genealogical Society can offer, such as study groups for specific states, research trips, guest speakers, and most importantly, answers to many of your questions. It is always a good idea to let as many people as possible know what surnames you are researching and from which states and countries. Leads can come from the oddest places.

III. Genealogy Websites for Beginners

Websites for building your family tree

1. AAHGS.org
2. Ancestry.com
3. Archives.com
4. FamilySearch
5. Findmypast
6. MyHeritage

Websites for DNA tests

1. 23andMe
2. AncestryDNA
3. [Family Tree DNA](http://FamilyTreeDNA)
4. [Living DNA](http://LivingDNA)
5. MyHeritage

Websites for learning more about genealogy

1. [Cyndi's List](http://Cyndi'sList)
2. FamilyTreeMagazine.com
3. Google
4. ThoughtCo
5. [Your DNA Guide](http://YourDNAGuide)

Websites for exploring regional and ethnic resources

1. AfriGeneas
2. [Irish Genealogy](http://IrishGenealogy)
3. JewishGen
4. [New England Historic Genealogical Society's American Ancestors](http://NewEnglandHistoricGenealogicalSociety'sAmericanAncestors)

Websites for beginner-friendly records

1. BillionGraves
2. [Chronicling America](http://ChroniclingAmerica)
3. [Find a Grave](http://FindaGrave)
4. Fold3
5. GenealogyBank
6. NewspaperArchive
7. Newspapers.com

IV. Where are the Records of the Enslaved?

1. Family Bible Collections
2. Church Records
3. Diaries/Dowry List (Book)
4. Employment Agreement Records
5. Family Business Accounts
6. Breeding Records (In The South)
7. Court Records, Deed Records, and Plantation Records/Wills
8. Freedman's Bureau Records (1865 – 1872) (11st Welfare System)
9. Insurance Policies: (Aetna, New York Life, & American International Group – 1856)
10. Apprenticeship Bonds
11. Branding Records (Coast of Africa – Identified the Ship)
12. Manumission Documents (Before 1870)
13. Mortality Schedules (1850 – 1888)
14. Sharecropping Records
15. 1901 Civil War Pensions
16. Freedman's Savings & Trust Records
17. Estate Records
18. Enslave Cohabitation Records – 1867
19. Southern Claims Commission (1870) (Over 23,000 claims were filed)
20. Bastard Records
21. 1860 & 1870 Census / Population (Every 10 years)
22. 1850 & 1860 Slave Schedules
23. Agriculture Census (Begins 1840) (Every 5 years)
24. Bill of Sale

The North Carolina

African American

Heritage

Commission



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

SIX GENERATION PEDIGREE CHART

