



## RESEARCH GUIDE

# African American family research on Ancestry

Updated 1/17/2025

[Visit Records of Enslaved People on Ancestry >](#)

Family history research begins in our present day and works backward, generation by generation. Discoveries are made through census records, military papers, vital records (births, marriages, and deaths), and other documents created, collected, and preserved over a lifetime.

However, due to the practice of chattel slavery in the United States until 1865, researching African American family history prior to the Civil War and emancipation can pose unique challenges. Important biographical information for both free and enslaved people of African descent was often excluded from official records making them difficult to trace prior to the 1870 U.S. Federal Census. Difficult, however, does not mean impossible. You may be surprised how information from your living relatives can aid you in your journey of finding your ancestors.

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.

NAME OF INSTITUTION	NAME OF INDIVIDUAL	AGE	SEX	RACE	DATE OF BIRTH	PLACE OF BIRTH	EDUCATION	INDUSTRY	RELATIONSHIP
	Robert Jones, Jr.	35	M	N	11/15/14	Alabama	High School	Manager	Head
	Elizabeth Jones	32	F	N	8/20/18	Alabama	High School	Homemaker	Wife
	James Jones	10	M	N	12/10/39	Alabama	Elementary	Student	Son
	Mary Jones	8	F	N	5/15/41	Alabama	Elementary	Student	Daughter

## View the records

Ancestry® 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® with a FREE trial or a paid membership. Visit [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) to get started.

## PART 1: Getting to 1870

### Start in 1950

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 1950 U.S. Federal Census on Ancestry® for someone in your family who was living in the U.S. in 1950. *(If you're new to the site, you may be asked to enter 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 1950 U.S. Federal Census because it lists 151 million people living in the United States on April 1, 1950, 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 1950 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® can use it along with other details you provide to look for more records while you continue your search by moving on to the 1940 Census.

## African American Family Research

A clipped corner on a WWI registration card may indicate that this person was African American.

## 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 1950 Census—names, ages, birthplaces, cities of residence—to search for your family in the 1940 Census. Details from the 1940 Census will then help you find records created in the 1930s, and so on. Keep working backwards until you reach the 1870 Census.

- 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® 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 was born in 1852 (1) and died in 1915 at age 63 (2). If his death certificate includes the names of Charley's parents (3), you'll have names and possibly other details about family members who lived before the Civil War.



Old City Cemetery in Tallahassee, Florida. A burial site for enslaved people, as well as enslavers, Union soldiers, and Confederate soldiers.





### Free or enslaved?

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 free.

Name	Description		Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each person, male and 15 years of age.
	Age	Sex	
John M. Vignath	1	M	B
Eliza Watson	23	F	B
Samuel	32	M	B
Walter	7	F	B
John	4	M	B

## 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. This record is important because it was the first census taken after the Civil War which means it was the first federal census to include formerly enslaved African Americans. When you discover an ancestor in this key census, mine the record for everything it reveals: names, ages, the state, county, and town where they lived, anything else it can tell you. Every piece of information you gather from the 1870 census can aid you in your search for your family in 1860 and before.

Depending on your family's legal 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, census takers did not list enslaved men, women, and children 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 an enslaved person through these years means refocusing your research and finding details and documents that may pertain to their enslaver instead. But first you'll need to determine who that was.

### Finding an enslaver

Pay attention to birthplaces given in the 1870 Census. If your ancestor was living in Mississippi in 1870 but their 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 enslavers.

Following emancipation, formerly enslaved people often stayed in the same area and many signed labor contracts with their former enslavers. This means that white, land-owning families living near your ancestor in 1870 may have been enslavers. 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, formerly enslaved people sometimes adopted the surname of their enslaver, although the practice wasn't universal.

Page No. 164 Inquiries numbered 7, 16, and 17 are not to be asked in respect to infants. Inquiries numbered 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 20 are to be answered (if at all) merely by an affirmative "yes" or "no."

SCHEDULE 1.—Inhabitants in \_\_\_\_\_, in the County of DeKalb, State of Georgia, enumerated by me on the 27 day of July, 1870.


Post Office: Albany Rt. 1, Asst. Marshal.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Name	The name of every person whose place of abode on the first day of June, 1870, was in this family.	Age	Sex	Color	Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each person, male or female.	Value of Real Estate	Value of Personal Estate	Place of Birth, naming State or Territory of U. S., or the Country, if of foreign birth.	Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.	Whether married within the year.	Whether single within the year.	Whether married within the year.	Whether single within the year.	Whether single within the year.	Whether single within the year.	Whether single within the year.	Whether single within the year.	Whether single within the year.	Whether single within the year.
1	Eliza Mary	30	F	B	Washing House			Geo											
2	Martha	20	F	B	At Home			"											
3	James Grant Lee	20	M	B	Farm Laborer			"											
4	Sam	20	M	B	Washing House			"											
5	Albany	10	F	B	At Home			"											
6	John	10	M	B	"			"											
7	James Grant Lee	20	M	B	Farm Laborer			"											
8	Eliza	20	F	B	Washing House			"											
9	Martha	20	F	B	At Home			"											
10	James Grant Lee	20	M	B	Farm Laborer			"											
11	Sam	20	M	B	Washing House			"											
12	Albany	10	F	B	At Home			"											
13	John	10	M	B	"			"											
14	James Grant Lee	20	M	B	Farm Laborer			"											
15	Eliza	20	F	B	Washing House			"											
16	Martha	20	F	B	At Home			"											

Look for surnames, birthplaces, and other clues in the 1870 Census, the first U.S. Census that lists formerly enslaved people freed after 1865.

# African American Family Research

**\$50 REWARD!**



My Boy, NIMROD, formerly owned by Dr. E. Branch, having run away from my plantation on the Hillsborough River, I offer the above reward of FIFTY DOLLARS to any person who will return him to me, or safely lodge him in jail and inform me of the fact, so that I may get him into my possession.

Nimrod is stout built, of low stature, having a downcast countenance, and a muttering way of speaking. He has a very large foot and hand for a person of his age, being about fifteen or sixteen years old. His color is that of a dark mulatto.

EDMUND JONES.  
Tampa, Nov. 17, 1860. 37-4f

**MR. J. P. ANDREU**

Records associated with an enslaver may reveal information about the people they enslaved, too.

and unfortunate, she has by labor and industry earned the price of her freedom, beside saving and supporting her children with the necessary comforts of life. Your petitioners desire state to the Court that her youth and conversation in life before and since the death of her master have been such as to entitle her to the sympathy and good will of those all, and that her endeavours in future life so to conduct herself and nurture her infant children, as to manifest to all that she and they are justly entitled to freedom.

Read court records carefully to learn stories, names of family members, locations, and dates.

Follow families who may have enslaved people back to the 1860 Census to determine whether they were still in the area and who the head of household was. Then search for them in the 1860 Census slave schedules to determine whether the household held people in bondage. (See: [Using slave schedules on page 6 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 more challenging.

## Other records that mention the enslaved

Manifests, property records, wills and probate records, manumission and emancipation papers, and newspapers all may mention enslaved people. Since most enslaved people were not referred to in documents with surnames until after obtaining their freedom, you'll often be searching for documents related to the enslaver.

## Property and probate records

Search property and probate records associated with families that enslaved people. You'll typically find these records in the county where the enslavers lived or in the Court, Land, Wills and Financial collections on Ancestry. If the enslaver died before the end of the Civil War, estate inventories may list enslaved individuals by name, age, and family group. Enslaved people 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 enslaved people who lived there, although these records are not widely available. Look for them in university archives and occasionally at state historical societies. [View U.S. Wills and Probate collection](#)

## Newspapers

Last year, Ancestry unveiled a new collection of 38,000 newspaper articles related to more than 183,000 formerly enslaved people in the United States from 1788 to 1867. The [Articles of Enslavement collection](#) is available to everyone at no cost and aims to help descendants of previously enslaved people make family history discoveries.

**Manifest of Slaves, Passengers on board the Brig Atlas Thompson**

Master, Captain One Hundred & Twenty-Two, bound from Charleston, S. C. for New Orleans

SLAVE CLEARANCE.—Printed and Sold by A. E. Miller.

1 NAMES.	2 SEX.	3 AGE.	4 HEIGHT.	CLASS.	OWNERS or SHIPPERS.	RESIDENCE.
			FEET. INCHES.			
Antonio	Male	Thirty Seven	Five Six	Black	Charles Folger	New Orleans
John	Male	Thirty Three	5 3/4	do	Shipped by	
John	Male	Twenty Nine	5 3/4	do	Wm. J. Cannon	Charleston
May	Male	Forty	5 4	do		
Harry	Male	Minister	5 3/4	do		
Sam	Male	Ten	4 1/2	do		
Hester	Female	Thirty Six	5 4 1/4	do		
Samiah	Female	Twenty Two	5 1 3/4	do		
Eight Slaves	Man and Woman	Age 2	Age 2	do	Charleston	Jan 17 1832
	Examined & found 30 Aug 1832				John B. Thompson	
					Samuel G. Smith	

Names of enslavers and other details on slave manifests may help you identify enslaved people in other records.

## Manifests

An 1807 law that banned the transatlantic slave trade to the United States as of January 1, 1808, also required masters of vessels transporting enslaved people in coastal waters to provide a manifest detailing their 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 (1), sex (2), age (3), height (4), port of destination (5), and name of the enslaver or shipper (6).





### Emancipation records

Formerly enslaved people may also be found in collections of manumission and emancipation records. You will find collections for Washington, D.C., and Illinois on Ancestry® and others at county archives. Use the map at the bottom of the Search tab on Ancestry® to get a list of all records available for the location where your ancestor may have lived. [View emancipation records](#)

District of Columbia  
 Washington County, to wit;  
 On this 3<sup>rd</sup> day of March A.D. 1862 before me,  
 the Subscriber, one of the Justices of the Peace in  
 and for the said County, personally appeared  
 William H. Upshuman, a citizen of Washington  
 City D.C. and well known to me, made oath  
 in due form of law, that he knows William  
 H. Marshall, late to be a free man born of  
 Mary Marshall, who was born free.  
 Height 5.7 1/2  
 Age 28-  
 H. J. Murphy J.P.

Note that William's mother is also named in this document from the Washington, D.C., Slave Emancipation Records on Ancestry®.

Jan 9 1871 RECORD BY Robert S. Tarleton  
 Date, Jan 26 1871  
 Where born, South Carolina  
 Where brought up, Combles near Green Pond, S.C.  
 Residence, Combles near Green Pond, S.C.  
 Age, 36 yrs Aug 1871 Complexion, Dark Brown  
 Occupation, Preacher of A.M.E. Church  
 Works for, [blank]  
 Wife or Husband, Nancy  
 Children, Nancy, Joseph, Sophia died 1865  
 Father, Joseph Tarleton  
 Mother, Sarah Tarleton, died July 29/61  
 Brothers and Sisters, Parady, Boda, Betsy, etc.  
 REMARKS: James Maxwell came with him.  
 Signature, Robert S. Tarleton

Robert Tarleton's Freedman's Bank record tells us when he was born, his occupation, and even the names of his wife, children, parents, and siblings.

### Military records

In 1863, President Lincoln authorized the use of African American troops in combat during the Civil War. More than 175,000 men fought to liberate themselves and those who remained in bondage as U.S. Colored Troops, and military service records are available for many of them on Ancestry®. Records for Buffalo Soldiers, the first African American peacetime troops, may also include the names of formerly enslaved men. [View military records](#)

### Freedmen's Bureau and Freedman's Bank 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 freedpeople. 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 formerly enslaved people and their dependents. [View Freedmen's Bureau Collection](#)

### African American family history collection on Ancestry®

Records unique to African American family history research on Ancestry® can be accessed and searched directly from the African American collection at [www.ancestry.com/aahistory](http://www.ancestry.com/aahistory).

## Using slave schedules

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 enslavers and descriptions of the enslaved—however, census takers rarely listed the enslaved by name. Still, you can use information in a slave schedule to help you get leads about an enslaved ancestor. Here’s how:

### Step 1.

Search for your formerly enslaved ancestors in the 1870 Census. Note their 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 and birth location as well.

1426	1855	Hendrick Austin	38	M	B	Tham Sator			Ga
		Julia	32	F	B	Tham Sator			"

### Step 2.

Move to the 1860 Census and search for the white property owners you found in 1870.

511	511	W W Hendrick	45	M		Plantation	✓	35925	72835	Washington Co
		R W	28	F						Baker
		Ala O	2	M						"

### Step 3.

Search property owners discovered in Step 2 in 1860 U.S. Census Slave Schedules. Compare details listed for the people they enslaved 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 potential match? Land, tax, newspapers, and probate records for the enslaver may offer details about individuals the person enslaved—and even mention them by name. [View slave schedule records](#)

Mr W Hendrick	1	511	F	B						
	2	28	M							
	3	18								







## Tips for continuing your search

### Tip 1: Save your discoveries

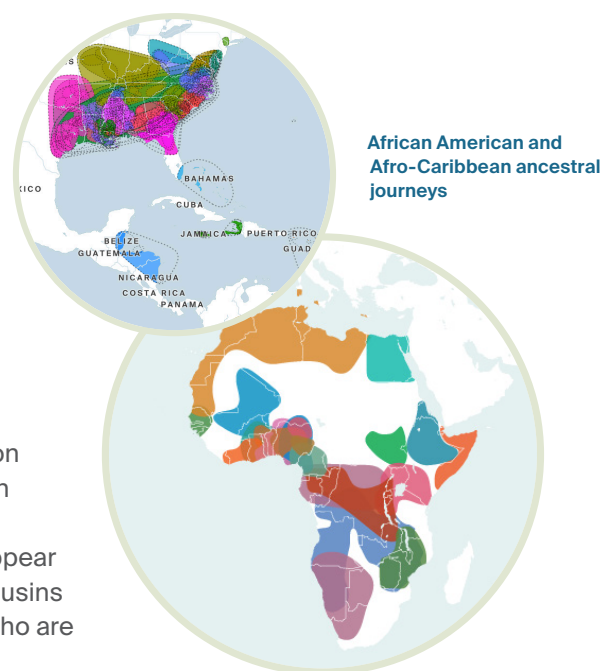
Use your Ancestry® family tree (*or start one from the Trees tab*) to store your discoveries by selecting Save when you view a record on Ancestry®. The site will use information in your family tree to search for more records about your family members and notify you about possible matches. This will help 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 help you connect with their descendants who are researching them today.

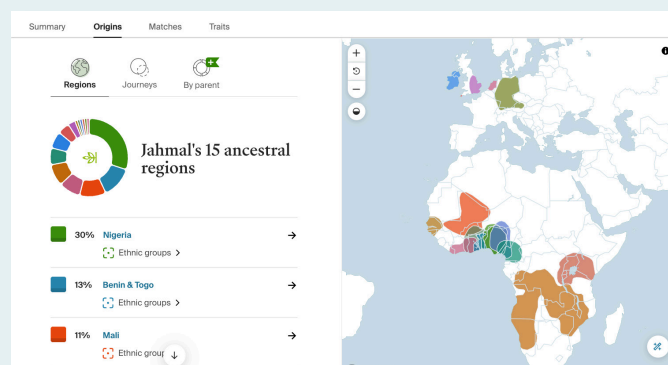
### Tip 3: Take a DNA test

Records alone typically won't be enough to trace an ancestor back to a specific location in Africa. AncestryDNA can help you discover your origins from over 3000 places and populations around the world—including 22 ancestral regions and 63 ethnic groups in Africa, and more than 400 African American and Afro-Caribbean ancestral journeys that may tell you about your family's history in the New World. You may even connect with distant family members and cousins from across the globe.



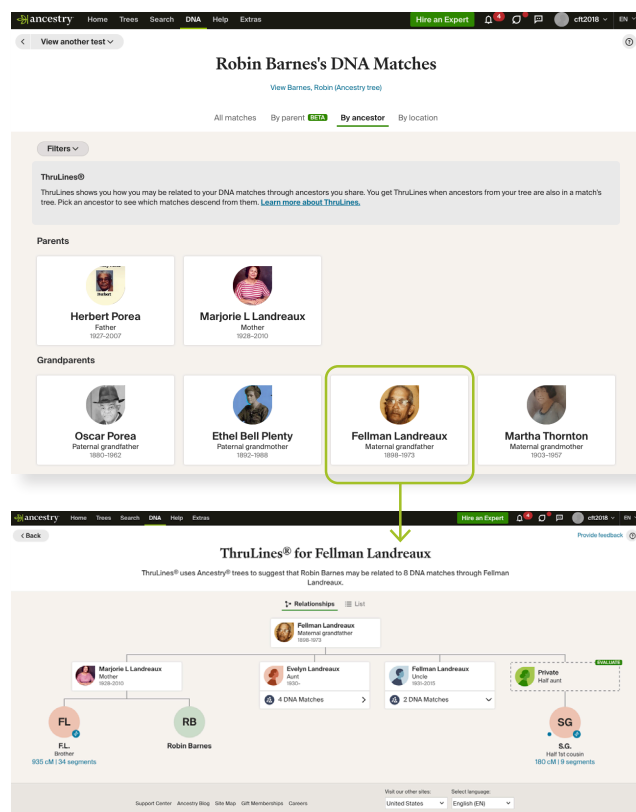
## Ancestral regions

Ancestry regions can give you an idea of where in Africa your ancestors may have lived hundreds of years ago.



## ThruLines®

ThruLines® shows you how you may be related to your DNA matches.

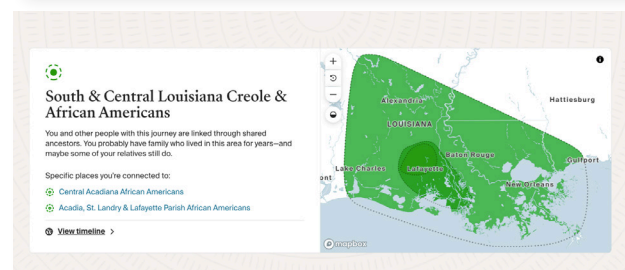
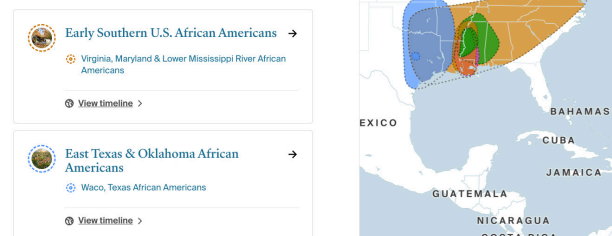


## Ancestral journeys

Ancestral journeys identify more recent people and places in your past. AncestryDNA has identified more than 400 African American and Afro-Caribbean Ancestral journeys.

### Jahmal's 4 ancestral journeys

Learn where your ancestors likely lived and moved in the past 300 years.  
[How this works](#)



## DNA Matches

DNA matches connect you with living relatives.

