

# How to Explore Your Family History

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 [scpreservationtoolkit.com/preservation-tools/how-to-guides/how-to-explore-your-family-history/](https://scpreservationtoolkit.com/preservation-tools/how-to-guides/how-to-explore-your-family-history/)

## How-To Guides

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Your family's story is an important part of our collective history. Family history is deeply connected to the history of communities. Communities form the backbone of our past, and are an essential part of the story of African American history in particular. Black family and community history has typically not been given the same attention and resources as white family history – we have far fewer family collections in archives from Black families. Because the stories of our African American families have not been afforded the same level of importance to the historical narrative, it's even more vitally important to preserve, remember, and tell these stories now and for future generations.

## What is Genealogy?

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Family history is often called “genealogy”. Genealogy is “the study of families, family history, and the tracing of their lineages.” It is important to include community history in the definition of genealogy as well, because African American families were (and continue to be) deeply intertwined within the community. Together, the family and community story can provide clues, context, and history that we can't find anywhere else, which makes a more full and truthful picture of our past.

## Who does genealogy?

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### 1. Professional Genealogists

1. These are experts who have specialized in genealogy research and family history specifically and who work professionally doing this type of work. They may work at an institution like a museum or archive, or for a genealogy company, or even as a consultant offering their services.

### 2. Historians and Researchers

1. Many professionally trained historians and researchers know how to do genealogy research, but not all have specialized or have experience in this field. Historians with extensive genealogical experience could be considered professional genealogists. Many public historians who work with members of the public often have genealogy experience, but it depends on what types of work or projects they've done. If you're looking to hire a professional, make sure they have a good depth of experience and knowledge under their belt, as genealogy research often requires specific knowledge.

### 3. Everyday people

1. Lots of members of the public and everyday people do genealogy! Many often start by being interested in discovering their family history, often by searching online, talking to family members, or discovering family documents/artifacts. Some will sign up for an Ancestry or FamilySearch account to create a family tree and search for additional records.

## **Starting Genealogy for Your Family:**

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### ***Find out what you already have***

1. Do you have a family historian or genealogist?
  - Has someone in your family already done genealogy research on your family that you can use as a starting point?
  - If so, review this material thoroughly before you start researching on your own, as it will help you immensely in your search
  - Who has objects/artifacts in your family's history and what are they? Is it research, documents, memorabilia, etc? Try to see if you can go through anything they might have, as this is part of your research. Often, family objects, documents, and memorabilia tell us a rich story that cannot be told from an archival document.
  - If you don't have a family historian, has someone in your extended family or community taken on this role? Often extended family or community members will amass a lot of information that might include people in your immediate family, and this can be a starting point. You never know what someone else may know until you ask!
- Who has passed down knowledge and stories?

Passed down and generational knowledge, as well as oral histories, are an amazing source of information that we cannot get from documents. Make sure to seek out family and community members who hold these stories. (see our How To Guide on How To Record Family Stories).

### ***Define your why – your research questions***

1.

1. Define what is it you want to know, and why will help you decide how to conduct your research, where to look for information, and where to begin.
2. Some starting points could be:
  - Do you want to know where your parents or grandparents or great-grandparents were born and what their life was like?
  - Are you trying to fill in a gap in knowledge or find a missing relative that you don't know much about?
  - Are you trying to find out where your ancestors came from and where they lived?
  - Are you trying to trace your ancestors' roots?
3. Is your goal to make a family tree and trace your roots as far back as you can? Is your goal to find a relative? Is your goal to learn more about someone's life and how they lived?

Depending on your goal, you might start researching in a different direction

4. Are you trying to connect the dots between your family to your ancestors who were enslaved? Are you trying to trace your roots to Africa or find where your ancestors lived prior to being enslaved and brought to the US? This will require a specific type of research with its own set of limitations, so it's important to know.

#### • **Research – Tools**

##### 1. Ancestry

Ancestry is an online genealogy tool that lets you build detailed family trees, research and save records, and helps you trace back your family lineage. It requires a paid subscription. Do keep in mind that Ancestry is not specifically built for African American genealogy, and keep in mind that it is only as good as the information you put in. See our blog post about tips for using Ancestry for more.

##### 2. FamilySearch

FamilySearch is another option for an online genealogy tool that lets you do research on records and build family trees, but it is free to use.

FamilySearch also has great research wikis with helpful information, and has specific information relating to African American genealogy.

##### 3. FindaGrave

FindaGrave is a free website that lets you search for specific cemeteries or specific family members' graves. It is based on crowdsourced information from gravestones. This can help you identify where an ancestor might be buried, as well as establish birth and death dates if their gravestone lists them.

- **Research – Types of documents to search for:**

1. Census Records

- The Census, which is recorded every 10 years, surveys the American population about location, household, and demographic information. Historical censuses contain far less details than today's records, but they are an excellent way to track an ancestor through time and establish family relationships.
- You can search the census through tools like Ancestry or FamilySearch or through the [National Archives site](#). You can search for a family member's name or you can go through the pages for the specific town or location where you know they lived. Be aware that spellings are not always accurate, so try out multiple different spellings to find the correct person.
- You can also find out where they were born, their age, ages of children, marriage status, if they owned property, and what their profession was.
- Start at the most recent censuses and track the person back through earlier censuses. Since census records are listed by household, this is a great way to find missing relatives or parents/grandparents, etc. You can use this to also narrow down date ranges where life events happened, such as birth of children, marriage, death, moving locations etc.
- Be aware that very little of the 1890 census remains today as the majority of it was burned in a fire. There will be a 20 year gap here between 1900 and 1880, so use other documents to verify during this time period.
- Be aware that the first year most African Americans were listed in the census was 1870. The 1870 census is crucial for Black genealogy, as it shows where newly freed people were just 5 years after the end of the Civil War and emancipation. To trace ancestors beyond 1870, you will likely need to search for the records of who enslaved them. More on that below.
- [National Archives gives several useful tips on the census, "Clues in Census Records 1850-1950"](#). There is a lot of useful information on their website as well.

2. Marriage certificates

- Publicly searchable and useful to establish matrilineal lines and maiden names, as well as who the parents were, places of birth, and other useful information.
- It is easiest to search for these on something like FamilySearch or Ancestry, but many are available through the Vital Records at SCDH (South Carolina Department of Archives and History), searchable by county.

### 3. Death certificates

- Publicly searchable and useful family information usually included, as well as cause of death.
- Many available through the Vital Records at SCDAH, searchable by county.
- If there was a Coroner's Inquest, that would be indicated and then you can search for the inquest document (many are at SC Department of Archives + History (SCDAH)).

### 4. Birth certificates

- Also useful for family details such as location born, name and age of mother and father, etc.
- Many are available through the Vital Records at SCDAH, searchable by county.

### 5. Obituaries

- These are very helpful as they often list family members still living and dead and can help you connect the dots.
- Look in historical newspapers for these.
- Many are available through the Vital Records at SCDAH, searchable by county.

### 6. Marriage announcements in newspapers

The county or state library may have Birth, Death, Marriage announcement indexes from local newspapers.

### 7. Military/veteran records

Enlistment records, militia records, pension records, discharge records, Widows and Orphans records (such as the 1890 Census of Union Veterans and Widows, at SCDAH).

### 8. City directories

- If the city has directories, this can be useful for tracking individuals and families as they moved around.
- Find out if your local city or county archives or records have these archives (they will usually not be digitized and you'll have to search in person by hand or by microfilm).

### 9. Deeds

- Deeds to property are useful for additional information.
- There is usually a city or county office of deeds that will keep this information, although it is rarely digitized, and tedious work to search for. SCDAH has some and is a good place to start.

## 10. Wills

- Wills are an extremely useful document to have access to, if you can find them – look at SCDAH first, and then local archives, as well.
- Just note that it is harder to find wills from African American families as those documents were not prioritized to save. It is useful though, to find wills and other estate documents from the white people who enslaved African American ancestors (more on that below).

## 11. Newspaper articles

- Take the time to search in local newspapers – they are a treasure trove of information. Specifically look for historical Black newspapers.
- [Historical Newspapers of South Carolina](#) (from Univ. of South Carolina) (has an African American papers section) (free)
- [Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers from Library of Congress \(specific South Carolina papers\)](#) (has an African American papers section) (free)
- [Historical Newspaper Resources at the South Carolina State Library](#) (free and some paid, some available with state library card access)
- [Newspapers: Historical Black Newspaper Collection](#) (available with state library card)

### **Specific types of documents to look for when doing research on enslaved ancestors or ancestors immediately after emancipation:**

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Documentary research on enslaved people is difficult because enslaved people were not treated as human beings, but as property. Thus, much of the documentary evidence we have for enslaved people is found within the papers of the people who owned them. Despite it being difficult, you should not assume you won't be able to find anything – it is not at all impossible to do this type of research and it can help tie together connections in your family tree in unexpected ways. Sometimes, you may even be able to discover a story of an ancestor's resistance and agency that is incredibly empowering, despite the deep trauma of their circumstances. Remember to give yourself room to feel grief and overwhelm when doing this research – the toll is heavy and generational trauma has real effects.

**Freedmen's Bureau Labor Contracts** – These were labor contracts negotiated by the Freedmen's Bureau after emancipation between plantation owners and newly freed slaves. These contracts will list freedmen's names, describe the work they were contracted to do, how much they were paid and when, any stipulations on their working days/hours and general ability to move freely, and occasionally, negotiated provisions for freedmen's families and access to resources. Tip: you can search using a formerly enslaved person's name (try multiple different spellings of names), but you can also search by the name of the person who used to enslave them, as that might bring up more records and some freedpeople worked as tenant farmers for their prior enslavers.

Where to look:

*Use FamilySearch to search for South Carolina labor contracts.*

*Use the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)'s newly developed Freedmen's Bureau records search portal.*

*Lowcountry Africana has labor contracts digitized for lowcountry counties.*

*More information on Freedmen's Bureau records from the National Archives.*

*More information and helpful tips on Freedmen's Bureau records from FamilySearch.*

### **Wills and Estate papers from enslavers/plantation owners (Probate Court records)–**

These documents list out property and assets owned by enslavers at their time of death, which usually included a list of enslaved people, their associated dollar value, possibly their age and family ties.

- *Where to look: Look at SCDAAH as well as in your local county archives. Some may be available digitized, but some will not. Will Transcripts (1782-1855) are available online from SCDAAH (search for them here).*
- *Lowcountry Africana has some records digitized and searchable by county in the lowcountry.*

**Bills of Sale/Ledgers from enslavers/plantation owners** – there are records associated with the sale and purchase of enslaved people, as those sales and purchases were usually meticulously recorded. These documents give you an idea of the movement of someone, where they lived, how old they were, possibly what their role or occupation was, and possibly who their family was.

- *Where to look: SCDAAH has a lot of these records by county. Some may be available digitized, but many will not.*
- *Look as well as in your local county archives.*
- *This website has some records digitized and searchable by county in the lowcountry.*
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**WPA Slave Narratives** – These were narratives or informal oral histories with newly freed people throughout the South written by workers with the Works Progress Administration Federal Writers Project in the 1930s. A word of caution – they are complicated documents, as they can contain inaccuracies and are tinged with the worldview and often racism of the people who recorded them, as the recorders chose what got written down. But they are also first hand accounts of slavery from enslaved people and give voice and agency to folks whose stories we would not otherwise have today. For more, see The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection and The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection.

*Where to look: [Library of Congress, WPA Slave Narrative Collection](#)*

## **Newspaper ads**

- Sales of enslaved people/slave auctions – Ads were often run in newspapers to advertise for slave auctions or sales, and while this will likely not give you any names of enslaved people, it is useful to help track the movement of enslaved people and connect dots to who enslaved them.
- Ads for escaped enslaved people – Enslavers often ran ads for escaped or runaway (freedom-seeking) enslaved people, placing bounties on their heads or offering rewards for their capture. These ads often included a physical description which can be a key piece of information.
- Ads for hire – Enslavers also ran ads in order to find an enslaved person “for hire” (they would pay the other person who enslaved them not the enslaved person themselves) or to “hire out” their enslaved person to others for payment
- *Where to look: see above section for links to historic newspapers*
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**Census Records** – see above section for description and tips.

*Where to look: see above section for links. Using FamilySearch or Ancestry to search census records is often the easiest way.*

**1850/1860 Slave Schedule and 1860/1870 Agriculture Schedules** – Enslaved people were not listed in the census prior to 1870. Instead, you can search for them in the 1860 and 1850 Slave Schedules, which enumerated enslaved people at plantations. Records are listed by location and the name of the enslaver/plantation owner, so if you know this information it is much easier to search. You can also look at the 1860 and 1870 Agricultural Schedules, which enumerated plantations and farms and often included a list of enslaved people working those lands (and then in 1870, the sharecroppers/tenant farmers).

*Where to look: These are available at SCDAH, although not digitized. The easiest way to search is through FamilySearch.*

*[Search the 1860 Slave Schedule on FamilySearch](#)*

*[Helpful information and tips on the slave schedule article from International African American Museum \(IAAM\)](#)*



**Voter Registration Records** – many newly freedmen registered to vote in the 1870 election, as this was the first national election they would have been able to vote in. There was an extensive effort by the Freedmen’s Bureau to register Black men to vote. Voter registration records are a helpful record to reference, as it will tell you where they were registered to vote and their age. In some cases, you may be able to find what election they voted in and for whom.

*Where to look: SCDAH has 1868 state voter registration records. [You can search online here](#) but may have to visit in person, as not all records are digitized.*

**Militia Enrollments** – many newly freedmen also enrolled in the local militia during Reconstruction. There were specific African American militia units across the state. These records can help establish where an ancestor was, how old they were, and help fill out a picture of their life post-emancipation.

*Where to look: SCDAH has Militia Enrollments of 1869 available online ([search online here](#)), but again it may be worth an ask to the archivists to see what is available in person.*

## ***Additional Resources***

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- 10 Tips for Ancestry blog article on the SC Preservation Toolkit
- Ask a Genealogist: Robin Foster
- Ask a Genealogist:
- A helpful outline of what collections and documents are at SCDAH that might help your search for Black ancestors: [African American Genealogy at SCDAH](#)
- How to search available online records through state archives and a list of links to search for online collections: [SCDAH Online Research](#)
- [You can submit this form](#) through SCDAH for a Genealogy Research Request for records relating to a specific person in certain collections (most useful will be Charleston Will Transcripts and County Estate Papers).
- Watch this video [BlackProGen Live! Ep 51: Finding and Tracing Enslaved Ancestors](#).
- FamilySearch’s helpful wiki on [Researching African American Genealogy](#).
- FamilySearch also has helpful more in-depth wikis on individual topics, such as [Freedmen’s Bureau records](#), [Slave Schedules](#), etc.
- Robin Foster’s company Genealogy Just Ask. Also her book [My Best Genealogy Tips: Finding Formerly Enslaved Ancestors](#)
- For lowcountry resources and some digitized records look at [Lowcountry Africana](#).
- Kansas City Black Archives. See article on [Black Archives in KC is now showing African Americans how to uncover their roots](#)
- [IAAM Center for Family History](#) in Charleston, SC. We know that 1 in 4 enslaved African Americans came through the port of Charleston.

## **Explore Related Resources in the Toolkit**

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**Need help researching & writing your nomination?**

[Check out the Experts Database.](#)

**Want to explore funding opportunities?**

[Check out our Grants & Funding page.](#)

**Want to pair your National Register Listing with a South Carolina Historical Marker?**

[Check out our How-To Guide on How To Get a State Historical Marker.](#)