

Pursuit of African American Family History for Beginners

Timothy N. Pinnick
Wilmington, NC
pinnick.aabooks@gmail.com

Interest in family history has surged among African Americans in recent years to levels not seen since the era of Alex Haley and the mini-series *Roots* in the 1970s. Research has certainly changed in many ways since then, most notably the ability to search vast storages of genealogical information on computers or other devices.

A few keys a successful research experience:

- ★ Become familiar with the foundational strategies, essentially the conventional wisdom, when it comes to conducting African American research. These guidebooks are out there and can be obtained fairly easily.
- ★ Understand that everything you need is NOT on the internet. Onsite research in the communities your ancestors came from must be done, whether you do it or have it done by someone else.
- ★ Read the “fine print” when it comes to where Ancestry (and others) get their data. It is important to find out if some parts of a particular record set were left out of the database being searched.
- ★ Take the time to look into state libraries & archives, local historical & genealogical societies, and the local libraries. Start your investigation online as many have a substantial web presence.
- ★ Realize that you are going to have to pay for some needed documents and research work/advice.

African American research methodology. Unique and effective ways to locate ancestors is a process that is constantly being added to. Methods employed in the various time periods, Reconstruction, Slavery-Era, Early Twentieth Century, etc., will oftentimes have different components. But at the core of each one will be the foundation built on KNOWING the history of the period as it pertains to African Americans, and in general; this knowledge extends from the national down to the county/local level.

African American research strategy. Prior to the end of slavery, creating or preserving the records of enslaved African Americans in the courthouses, etc., was rarely done; the same is true to a lesser degree for the first 50 years of freedom. The records of most importance to you will differ, as will the strategy for locating and analyzing them. Beware of the Jim Crow effect in which courthouse records as well as news in the local paper will be segregated. Cultural and social differences will also impact what is written and the perspective. In county histories, expect the information to be scant and largely hidden in the cracks in most cases.

AfriGeneas contains a wealth of information for the African American researcher. One of the most popular sections of the website is the Forum area where participants read & post messages on two dozen different lists, with topics ranging from cemetery to DNA research. Nationally renowned speakers, authors, and researchers are forum managers as well as regular participants. The organization also has a Facebook page. Participants are very helpful.

**AfriGeneas is a forum where ideas and opinions are expressed by researchers willing to help, but be mindful that those who comment are not all of the same degree of experience, or knowledge in a subject area. However, anyone can have a useful idea or develop a great strategy regardless of experience; let common sense be your guide.*

Public libraries are an essential tool for researchers. Many have a database for census research and more; Ancestry, Heritage Quest or both. What really makes them valuable is that they provide the springboard to thousands of books and other resources by use of the interlibrary loan process.

WorldCat is a location in cyberspace where the catalogs of thousands of libraries can be searched simultaneously. Individuals can set up accounts there (not required) to better organize and keep track of their searches and results. It is an excellent place to start in search of materials that will aid your research. Several years ago, there was an agreement between WorldCat and FamilySearch to make each others records accessible in their respective catalogs. Be aware however, that everything you discover there will not necessarily be eligible for interlibrary loan to your local library.

Newspaper Research. This is a critical part of the research process. Hundreds of thousands of historical newspapers have made it onto the internet, but the majority are still offline; mostly in microfilm format. To sort out things online, go to the newspaper section of The Ancestor Hunt. This a great place to become more proficient with newspaper research. I have written a book on locating and using African American papers, however to immediately begin learning about this topic you can view a lecture which was recorded at a Michigan library on YouTube. Finally, ProQuest has digitized nine of the most consequential African American newspapers. They are in a fully searchable database that can be found in its entirety at many of the major university libraries.

National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). NARA is arguably the largest government repository of records of value to those researching the African American experience and beyond. The main building in Washington, DC, and the numerous branches throughout the country house textual and microfilm records relating to genealogy, including pre-World War II military, the Census Bureau, and the Freedmen's Bureau. The "Resources for Genealogists" section on their website is wide-ranging, informative, and very valuable. Reggie Washington, a NARA employee for decades (now retired), has authored several articles and official government documents related to African American records. His work along with others can be found at the agency's website, some of which appears there in the form of articles in the publication Prologue.

FamilySearch.org is the portal through which the vast riches of the renowned Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah can be perused by the genealogical community. For over 100 years, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been involved in working with thousands of government, church, and private archives around the world to digitize and preserve their record collections, and make copies of them available to you. The digitized resources can be accessed on the website, and much more is available through the Family History Library

or in over 4,800 family history centers in 70 countries. Excellent research guides and information on every state and hundreds of topics are wonderfully organized on the website, much of it part of their extensive research wiki.

Allen County Public Library. Located in Fort Wayne, Indiana, it is one of the premier genealogical research collections in the United States. Under the longtime manager of the Genealogy Center, Curt Witcher, they have built perhaps the largest collection of African American materials pertaining to family history in the country as well. ACPL is also responsible for the creation of PERSI (Periodical Source Index), a massive collection of genealogical & historical society journals and newsletters.

Social Media is one of the most up and coming ways to become engaged with the genealogical community. Angela Walton Raji and Thomas MacEntee are two major players in this arena.

Some Links and Additional Items

Afrigeneas

<http://afrigeneas.com/>

Worldcat

<http://www.worldcat.org/>

Ancestor Hunt

<http://www.theancestorhunt.com/newspapers.html>

Finding and Using African American Newspapers

http://blackcoalminerheritage.net/aanewspaper_book.html

African American newspapers lecture at Kalamazoo Public Library

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2VVEgdLKfQ>

Angela Walton-Raji

<http://www.african-nativeamerican.com/>

Thomas MacEntee

<https://hidefgen.com/>

Several African American beginner books (locate them on the webpage of your local library or use Worldcat)

- Black Roots by Tony Burroughs
- A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors by Franklin Carter Smith and Emily Anne Croom
- Finding Your African American Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide by David T. Thackery
- Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity by Dee Parmer Woodtor

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