
PROVING IDENTITY AND KINSHIP USING THE GPS: FINDING A FREEDMAN'S FAMILY

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Researchers of African American families who were enslaved before the Civil War encounter many obstacles. Discovery of the last slave owner and finding parents are special challenges. Tracing poor, landless, free persons of color and whites can be just as difficult. Understanding how to apply the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) can help you solve these genealogical problems. This lecture explores strategies to trace origins of the newly freed, work through questions of identity, and correlate evidence to come to a reliable conclusion. A case study illustrates the methodology.



Why Use the GPS?

The GPS helps researchers resolve problems of identity and kinship and assemble accurate family history. The GPS is *not* a procedure. It is a standard used to measure reliability of genealogical conclusions. Sound conclusions rest on the five pillars of the GPS—five interdependent elements that work together to support a “proved” conclusion. If any one of the five elements is missing then proof is incomplete. A genealogical conclusion is never final. New evidence can overturn a conclusion, but one that meets the GPS at the outset is later unlikely to be found wrong.

Proof Is Supported by the Five Pillars of the GPS¹

1. Reasonably exhaustive research
2. Complete source citations
3. Analysis & correlation of evidence
4. Resolution of conflicting evidence
5. Well-reasoned, written conclusion

What Is Identity?

Identity is more than a name or an alias that an individual might adopt. Many characteristics determine a unique person in history—times and locations of vital events, placement in a birth family, extended kin, occupation and skills, schooling and literacy, religious affiliation, military service, participation in events, and a social network or cluster of associates. Analyzing and correlating information from these features can

¹ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards* (Nashville, Tenn.: Ancestry.com, 2014), 1–3.

identify the correct individual when faced with persons of the same name living at the same time in the same place.

Barriers to Research

Several factors challenge researchers when tracing formerly enslaved families before the 1870 census. These can apply equally to poor, landless, or nonliterate free persons of color and whites.

- Lack of written family records
- Unrecorded oral traditions and stories
- Families divided and dispersed
- Records destruction across the South
- Illiteracy enforced by law
- Laws suppressing pre- and post-war activities (slave laws, Black codes, vagrancy laws, Jim Crow laws)
- Changes in forenames and surnames

Overcoming Barriers

- Expand research to local, state, and national records.
- Look for religious records.
- Use Works Progress Administration's historical records survey and slave narratives.
- Understand the geography and the political jurisdictions.
- Know the laws of the time to find out what records were created.
- Study naming patterns, get to know local family names, and keep an open mind about variability.
- Stay current with new resources

Identity and the GPS: A South Carolina Case Study

The case illustrates distinguishing identity of multiple, same-named men; understanding surname changes; and finding the last owner of an enslaved South Carolina ancestor from a partially burned county. Once identified, the owner and his records lead to the ancestor's mother. Each step in the research builds on the previous one by continually analyzing and correlating new evidence.

1. Identify your subject. Create a profile of your *unique* individual at a specific time and place.
2. Develop an effective research question. Being specific about what you want to know helps to direct research.
3. Analyze the starting point information.
4. Mine the records of the subject's last known location. Learn about that place, its laws, and available records.
5. Expand the research to include state and national records and surrounding former slave-owning families. Working backward and forward in time can yield clues to link a freedman to his former enslaved life.

"A shortage of written records is not exclusively the problem of the formerly enslaved. Prior to the twentieth century, much of the day-to-day life of the average person went unrecorded—especially among the poor and uneducated."

—Douglas S. Shipley²

² Douglas S. Shipley, "Teaming Oral History with Documentary Research: The Enslaved Austins of Missouri's 'Little Dixie,'" *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 90 (June 2002): 111.

6. Analyze, correlate, and assemble the evidence to arrive at a conclusion. Resolve any conflicting evidence and write it up. Does the conclusion meet the GPS?

Table 1 shows an example of evidence correlation involving a question of identity—in this case for a freedman named Hiram who lived in Abbeville County, South Carolina, after the Civil War.

Table 1: Correlating evidence from four U.S. censuses

<i>Identity Elements</i>	<i>1870³</i>	<i>1880⁴</i>	<i>1900⁵</i>	<i>1910⁶</i>
Name	Hiram Cochran	Hiram Cromer	Hiram Cromer	Hirum Cromer
Residence	Smithville Twp.	Smithville Twp.	Long Cane Twp.	Long Cane Twp.
Color	Black	Mulatto	Black	Black
Birth year (calc.)	1824–5	1824–5	Jan. 1830	1816–7
Birthplace	S.C.	S.C.	S.C.	S.C.
Parent's birthplace	[Not asked]	S.C. / S.C.	S.C. / S.C.	S.C. / S.C.
Occupation	Carpenter	Farmer	Farmer	Farmer
Land owner	No property	[Not asked]	Yes, mortgage-free	Yes, mortgage-free
Literacy	Read & write	Read only	Read & write	Read & write
Household composition	4 children born betw. 1858–65	Wife Elizabeth (b.1850) & 4 sons born betw. 1874–80 & step-dau.	Wife Elizabeth (b.1845) & 4 children born betw. 1885–90	Wife Elizabeth (b.1844) & 3 children born betw. 1880–91
Marital status	[Not asked]	Married	Married	Married–2nd
Marriage year	[Not asked]	[Not asked, estimated 1873]	1870	1870

³ 1870 U.S. census, Abbeville Co., S.C., pop. sched., Smithville Twp., p. 15, dwell./fam. 115, Hiram Cochran; National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) microfilm publication M593, roll 1481.

⁴ 1880 U.S. census, Abbeville Co., S.C., pop. sch., Smithville Twp., ED 16, p. 10, dwell./fam. 67, Hiram Cromer; NARA microfilm T9, roll 1217.

⁵ 1900 U.S. census, Abbeville Co., S.C., pop. sch., Long Cane Twp., ED 15, sheet 22, dwell. 345, fam. 351, Hiram Cromer; NARA microfilm T623, roll 1514.

⁶ 1910 U.S. census, Abbeville Co., S.C., pop. sch., Long Cane Twp., ED 18, sheet 2A, dwell./fam. 20, "Hirum" Cromer; NARA microfilm T624, roll 1446.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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Applying the GPS to Identity Problems

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African American Research and Case Studies

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