

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

---

*Identifying unnamed Free Born African American individuals using a Research Plan incorporating genetic evidence takes creativity and patience. This session deconstructs a case study using Genealogy Standards to align and correlate DNA results and fragmentary records for African American families, beginning in 1812 in Virginia and North Carolina.*

*“Never start with your most difficult DNA problem.”* Karen Stanbary

## Introduction

Completely ignoring Karen Stanbary’s advice above, this DNA case study started with the most difficult problem. In his will proved in 1812, John Grant Rencher states:

My will is that in case the two free Born Mulattoes now living with me should they continue after my Death with my wife and obedient until they arive at the age of Twenty one I give unto each of them Twenty Five Dollars one good suit of Homespun Clothing good Hatt & other necessary apparel so as to make the suit complete one axe each one Mattock ea one weeding or Hilling Hoe to them and their Heirs forever.<sup>1</sup>

Believing for over forty years that John Grant Rencher may be the father of these two free born African Americans, there appeared to be no documented way to prove or disprove the believed hypothesis—until now. An African American cousin with Rencher DNA reached out to the author and asked about the family history to see how we might be related.<sup>2</sup> Using the power of DNA, coupled with fragmentary evidence, the story is coming together and providing some fascinating discoveries. The following case study unveils an ongoing research plan and strategy that aligns with the DNA standards as outlined and endorsed by the Board for Certification of Genealogists.

John Grant Rencher was born about 1745 in Dublin, Dublin, Ireland. He immigrated to America in the latter-half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and settled first in Granville County, North Carolina, later migrating to Orange and Wake counties.

---

1. John Grant Rencher will (1812), Wake County Loose Wills, arranged alphabetically, FHL microfilm 1,602,786, frames 1523-1530; also found in Wake County Will Book 10: 234, Superior Court, Raleigh, North Carolina; FHL microfilm 20,007.

2. The author is adopted and has no Rencher DNA, thus he had not seen the African American connections appear in his own DNA results summaries on various company websites.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ♦ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

---

There he had nine children from two different marriages, one son who died young by his first wife, Annie Lewis and seven sons and one daughter by his second wife, Anne “Nancy” Nelson. That he enslaved African Americans, there can be little doubt as there are bills of sale and the names and disposition of those living at the time of his wife’s death in 1829 are detailed in the administration papers of the final estate of John Grant Rencher.<sup>3</sup>

## Problem Statement

Using documentation and the known Rencher DNA in African American descendants, identify the names of the unnamed African Americans and uniquely distinguish both branches of the family.

## DNA Research Plan

**Standard 51. Planning DNA tests.** “Select previous test takers...based on their DNA’s potential to help answer a genealogical research question.”<sup>4</sup>

In this instance, many of the subjects of the study had already tested, primarily with AncestryDNA. The BCG Standard 51 states that “an effective plan for DNA testing is *selective* and *targeted* (emphasis added).”<sup>5</sup> If you are starting from scratch, an effective plan would begin with *targeting* those you want to have tested to prove your hypothesis. In this instance, the first piece of the plan for a biracial pedigree was to put together a picture of who had already been tested, both Black and Caucasian, and determine how they already fit into the overall pedigree. An extensive pedigree for both segments was created using Lucid Chart and serves as an ongoing visual tool to analyze and visualize the many facets of the research plan and findings.

The initial contact was able to share information about researchers in the family who had been able to trace their African American ancestry back to William Rencher, a freeborn African American barber who lived in Wytheville, Washington, Virginia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. William had been a very successful businessman and had fathered children with several women and had numerous descendants. One of those women was Myra Boyd, see Illustration 1 below. Together, they had four children, namely

---

3. John Grant Rencher inventory and account of sale (1829), Wake County Inventory Book 21:156, Superior Court, Raleigh, North Carolina; FHL microfilm 20,011.

4. Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 2d ed. Revised. (Washington, DC: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2019 and 2021), 29-30.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

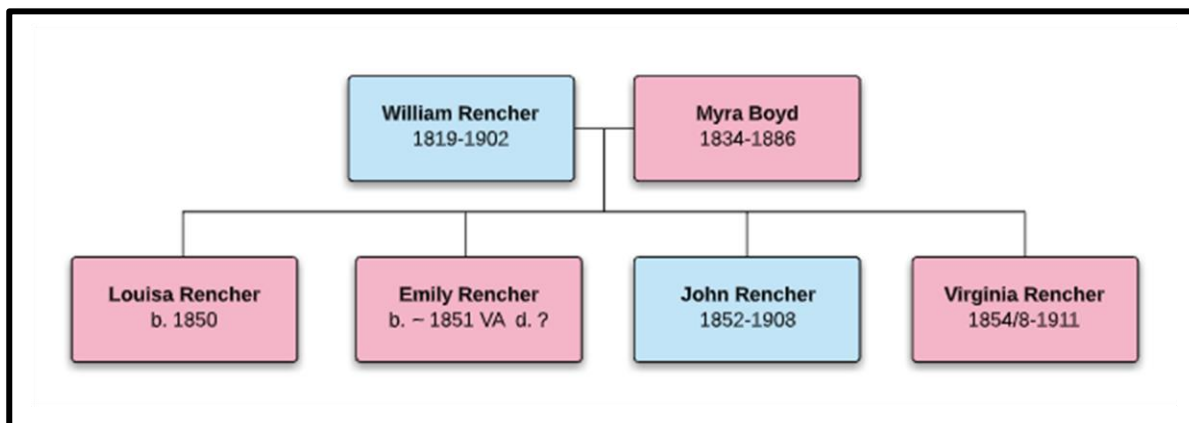
# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

Louisa, Emily, John, and Virginia. Unfortunately, the only male child, John Rencher (1852-1908) had no male descendants and none of the known descendants by the other women are known to have male direct lines, so a targeted YDNA test has not been obtained to date.



**Illustration 1**

Seventeen known descendants of three of the children—Louisa, John, and Virginia have all had autosomal DNA tests performed with AncestryDNA.<sup>6</sup> While that appears to be a considerable amount of data with which to work to solve the case, the tests need to be for the right cousin relationships to begin to eliminate sections of the pedigree and isolate the Rencher DNA segments. In this instance, the tests are disproportionate to one line.

An active genealogist in the family, a descendant of the Virginia Rencher line has gathered as many DNA samples as possible from her direct family members. She is also the active administrator for the DNA test kits for her children, siblings, and her aunt on AncestryDNA. The sample for her deceased aunt is the most promising for larger segments of DNA matches due to her being only three generations removed from William Rencher, the subject of the study.

Three of the descendants of Louise Rencher (b. 1850) through her daughter Virginia Gabriella (née Spurlock) Presley have tested with AncestryDNA. Two test takers from

6. To date, no descendants of Emily Rencher have been identified.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

her daughter Helen Presley and one from her daughter Virginia Presley. The two test takers from Helen Presley have granted access for their DNA test results to the author.

The initial contact made to the author is a descendant through the Helen Presley line. He has been instrumental in connecting the cousins he has identified and in assisting with the onsite research. Although he was not born in the area, his work brought him back to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the epicenter of the branches of this Rencher family and the myriad of descendants. See illustration 2.

## Descendants of Louise Rencher (b. 1851)

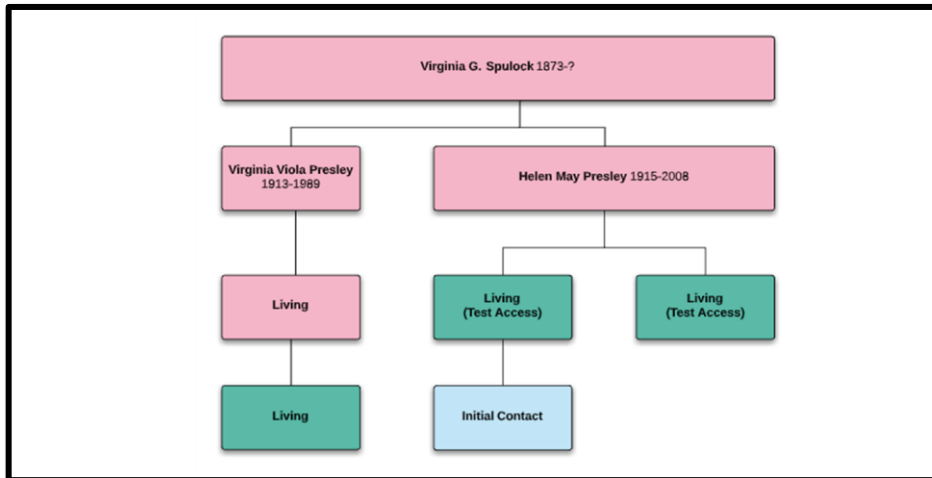


Illustration 2

The only son of William Rencher, John Rencher was also a barber in the Wytheville, Virginia area. Three of his descendants through his granddaughter Martha Dean Rencher have tested. No test access has been given for this family to the author.

This family adds a level of complexity not often seen but perfectly illustrates the issues with African American surnames. John Rencher had a barber's apprentice named George Henry Wilson. The apprentice fell in love with and married John Rencher's daughter Lula Davis Rencher. With John Rencher and John's father, William Rencher both having such a good reputation in the area, George decided that he also wanted his surname to be Rencher, so took the surname as his own although he does not have any Rencher DNA. However, his descendants have Rencher DNA through their mother, Lula Davis Rencher, not their father. See illustration 3.

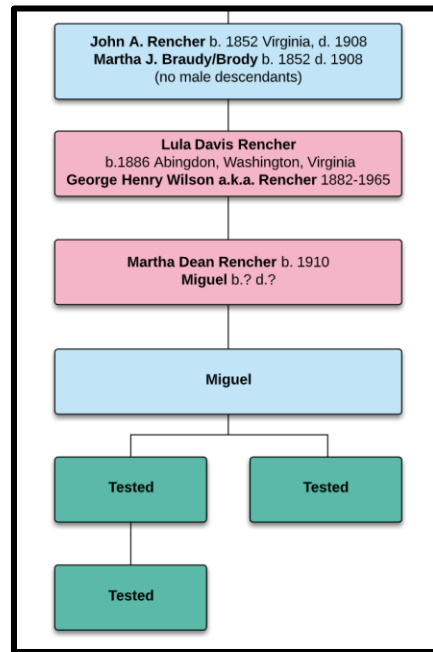
# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

## Descendants of John Rencher (b. 1852)



**Illustration 3**

Eleven of the descendants of Virginia Rencher have tested with AncestryDNA. This is not surprising since they have an active genealogist in the family. This line also has the benefit of having the closest generation to William Rencher. Loraine Henderson, now deceased, was tested, and provides a solid reference point from which to separate the DNA segments in the tests. The other test takers in this Rencher line descend from Arthur Henderson, a brother to Loraine Henderson.

The genealogist in this family has gathered numerous documents but was missing two key pieces of information. First, she had not connected William Rencher to the Chapel Hill area of North Carolina, and second, she did not have death information for William Rencher or information on the other women with whom William was connected during his life. Both needed pieces of information were added to the research strategy to determine that William was in fact descended from the North Carolina Caucasian group of Rencher's and not another branch of the family living in America, particularly in Maryland. See illustration 4.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

## Descendants of Virginia Rencher (b. 1854/8)

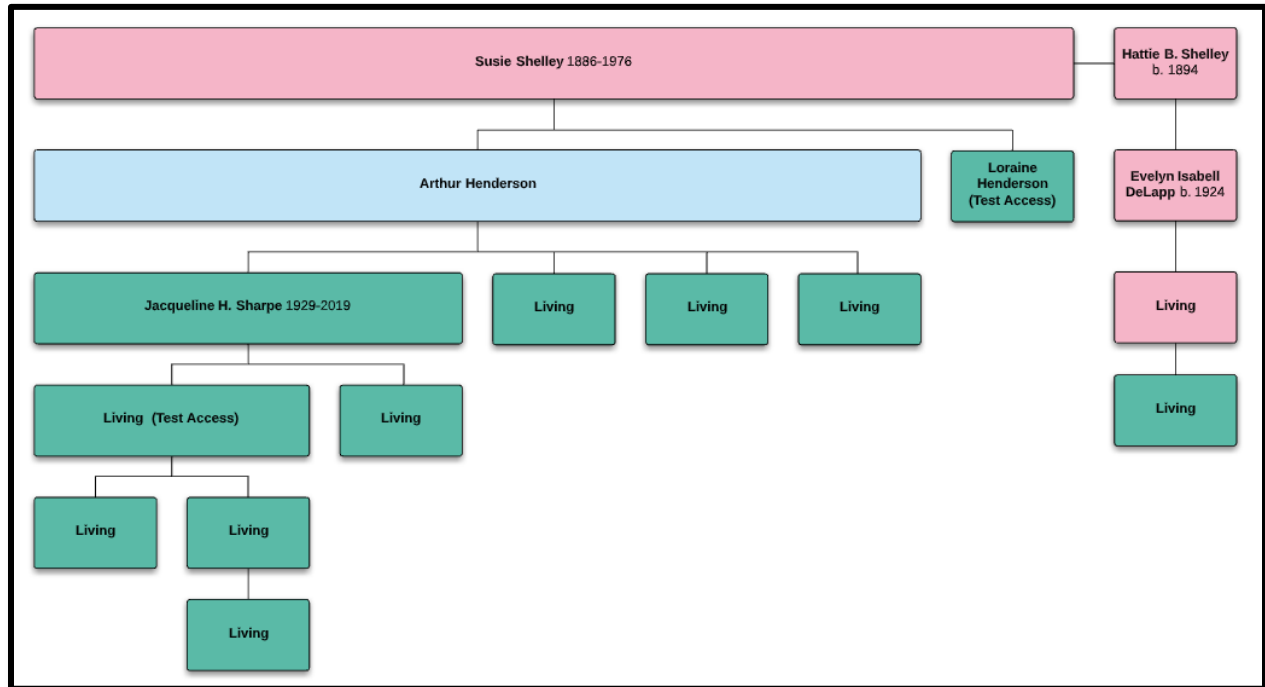


Illustration 4

### Standard 9. Planned research

1. Obtain access to the AncestryDNA results of the William Rencher descendants.
2. Obtain the research conducted by the William Rencher descendant. From this information, copies of the records and information for the source citations should be gathered.
3. Connect William Rencher, barber of Abingdon, Virginia to the area of North Carolina where John Grant Rencher lived.
4. The author had previously conducted research on African Americans in the Orange and Wake County area of North Carolina on possible individuals that could be one of the two unnamed African Americans mentioned in the will of John Grant Rencher. Research and match any of these individuals with any of the potential descendants in the DNA test takers of the William Rencher group.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

5. Identify additional targeted DNA tests needed to identify the freeborn African Americans.
6. Exhaust all collections of deeds of sale, apprenticeship, manumissions, and slave records to 1) identify the possible mother of the two freeborn African Americans, and/or 2) identify the names of the two freeborn individuals.

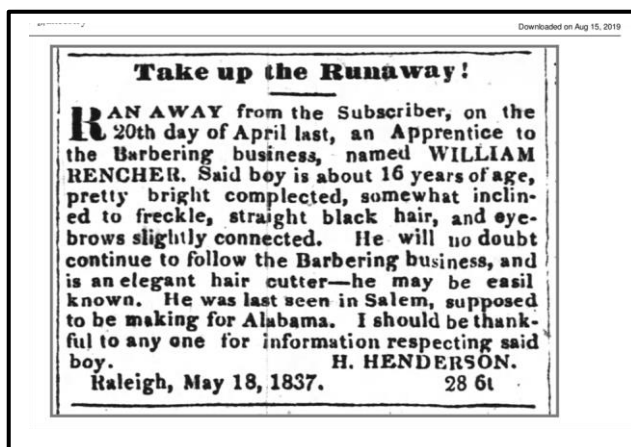
## Planned research results—abbreviated summary. Standard 9.

Permission was granted and access was given to two of the participants AncestryDNA test results. In addition, permission was granted to the genealogical research for one of those participants and access was also granted to the research conducted by another participant, but not the DNA test results.

## Research on William Rencher, Barber of Washington County, Virginia

Verifying what was already known about William Rencher from the data collected by his descendants was done and all source citations gathered. The next immediate concern was to connect William to the Orange and Wake County area where the Caucasian Rencher families lived. Since William Rencher had not appeared in years of extensive research in the area, the newspaper research was resumed to search additional pages added by the major online providers.

An exciting discovery was made with the notice of William Rencher as a runaway barber's apprentice. This tied him to the Raleigh/Durham area of North Carolina. Further research would produce a second entry connecting him, but this gave the research problem a viable link to the Caucasian Rencher DNA matches.



“Take up the Runaway!,” *Weekly Raleigh Register (Raleigh, North Carolina)*, 26 June 1837, p. 4, col. 3; digital images, Newspapers.com  
(<https://www.newspapers.com/image/56878580/?terms=%22William%20Rencher%22&match=1> : accessed 15 August 2009).

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ [RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG](mailto:RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG)

## William Rencher Census Comparison Chart

Family Member	1850 Census 68 <sup>th</sup> District, Wythe, VA <sup>7</sup>	1860 Census Goodson, Washington, VA <sup>8</sup>	1870 Census Goodson, Washington, VA <sup>9</sup>	1880 Census Goodson, Washington, VA <sup>10</sup>	1880 Census Mortality Schedule Goodson, Washington, VA <sup>11</sup>	1900 Census Abingdon, Washington, VA <sup>12</sup>
William Rencher	25 (b. 1825)	38 (b. 1822)	52 (b. 1818)*	55 (b. 1825)		82 (b. Jan 1818)
Sally Rencher		36 (b. 1824)	46 (b. 1824)*		49 (b. 1831)	
William Rencher		15 (b. 1845)				
John Jackson (stepson)			29 (b. 1851)			
Anna Stuart (Adopted daughter)			18 (b. 1862)			
Mary J. Harris (step-daughter)						55 (b. Aug 1844)
Louise Rencher			19 (b. 1851)*			

\* Recorded as “Beacher”

7. “United States Census, 1850,” database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/>: 14 July 2016), William Rencher (age 25), District 68, Wythe, Virginia; Roll: 982; Page: 230b, Images reproduced by *FamilySearch*.; National Archives microfilm publication M432 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

8. “United States Census, 1860,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/> : 24 March 2017), William Rencher (age 38), Western District, Washington, Virginia, image 344 of 361; from “1860 U.S. Federal Census population schedule,” database, *Fold3.com* (<http://www.fold3.com> : n.d.); citing NARA microfilm publication M653 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

9. “United States Census 1870,” database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/>: 12 March 2019), William Beacher (age 52), Goodson, Washington, Virginia, image 1 of 96, Images reproduced by *FamilySearch*. Original data:1870 U.S. census, population schedules. NARA microfilm publication M593, 1,761 rolls. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.

10. “United States Census, 1880,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/>: 15 January 2022), William Rencher (age 55), Goodson, Washington, Virginia, United States; citing enumeration district 95, sheet 92A, NARA microfilm publication T9 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

11. “United States Census Non-Population Schedule 1880,” database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/>: 16 July 2018), Sallie Rencher (age 49), Goodson, Washington, Virginia; citing, “Non-population Census Schedules for Virginia, 1850-1880”; T1132; microfilm publication T1132, roll number 19, page 1508, (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).

12. “United States Census 1900,” database with images, *FamilySearch.org* (<https://familysearch.org/>: 5 August 2014), William Rencher (age 82), Abingdon Magist[r]ate District, Abington Town, Washington, Virginia, ED 107, image 20 of 27; citing NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.).



# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

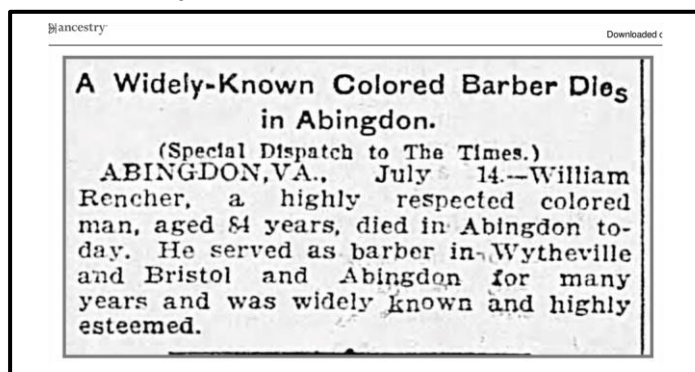
David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ♦ [RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG](mailto:RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG)

---

Noticeably missing from previous research were any census entries linking William Rencher to Myra Boyd and his four purported children fathered with her. When each census entry was examined in a comparative table, there were no entries for the 1870 U.S. census in Goodson County, Virginia, or the surrounding areas. Continued searches failed to identify him until a search was done using *Ancestry.com* searching under the term *barber* in the occupation field and the locality of *Goodson, Washington, Virginia*. Here, the family was located under the surname of “Beacher” and the only appearance of one of the daughters, Louise, aged 19 years, who was living with William and his second wife, Sally. Because the surname was recorded in the census as Beacher and correctly indexed, the entry was located using this technique. No other census entries, post or prior identify a barber in the area named William Beacher. The other identifying data in the census entry matches the known information on William and Sally Rencher.

Less common for African American research in this era, a tombstone marker was located for Sally [Sarah Ann] Rencher who died in 1880. She was also listed in the 1880 census mortality schedule of Goodson County, Virginia. The image was online at *findagrave.com*. She was buried in the Sinking Springs Cemetery, Abingdon, Washington, Virginia.<sup>13</sup>

The other key piece of information missing was any reference to the death of William Rencher. Again, his death entry was not able to be discovered using his name, although it is clearly spelled correctly in the newspaper, it was found using his race, occupation, and the locality.



13. *Findagrave.com*, digital images (<https://findagrave.com/memorial/93033999/sarah-ann-rencher> : accessed 16 August 2009), photograph, gravestone for Sara Ann Rencher (1824-1880), Sinking Springs Cemetery, Abingdon, Washington, Virginia.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ [RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG](mailto:RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG)

---

“A Widely-Known Colored Barber Dies in Abingdon,” *The Daily Times (Richmond Virginia)*, 15 July 1902, p. 5, col. 4; digital images, Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/image/80964664/?terms=%22Colored%20Barber%22&match=1> : accessed 18 August 2019).

## Research on Potential DNA Matches

### Research on James Rencher (b. 1790)

Previous research had identified a man named James Rencher, born circa 1790 and characterized as a “mulatto” in various records. From only documentary evidence, it was hypothesized that generationally, he was a fit to be one of the two unnamed African Americans named in the will of John Grant Rencher. Considerable descendant research had been done on his line, but nothing of late. Additional research on the descendants was conducted to see if anything could be linked to the numerous DNA matches in the AncestryDNA database. No connections could be made, thus research on James Rencher resumed.

James was married to a woman named Margaret (née —?—). She was born circa 1804 in North Carolina, parentage unknown. They had at least two known sons, George (b. 1833), and James Jr. (b. 1840). Research in the North Carolina State Archives identified the volume of “Negro Cohabitation Certificates, 1866-1868” for Orange County.<sup>14</sup> It was here that the marriage record of James Rencher to Margaret Rencher was located. It was recorded on 28 April 1866 indicating that they had been together since 1813. That date is questionable that they were living together as man and wife since she would have only been nine years old, but it may be when they met.

Regardless, the important piece of information from this discovery was the fact that they were both listed as “latly slaves but now emancipated.” This eliminated James as a potential candidate for one of the two unnamed African Americans in the will and confirmed why none of the DNA matches were connected.

---

14. North Carolina State Archives. Orange County “Negro Cohabitation Certificates 1866-1868” C.R. 973.603.1, n.p., Raleigh, North Carolina.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ [RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG](mailto:RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG)

---

## Research on Anderson Day (b. 1838)

Another African American cousin showing significant matches to the Caucasian Rencher descendants in the AncestryDNA matches could not identify a direct connection to William Rencher. An analysis of her lines indicated that her Day/Daye line looked the most promising.

Extensive research on this line proved unlikely as generationally, there the two lines could not be connected. The cousin relationship data suggested a 3C 2R relationship between the testers who were known descendants of William Rencher and the cousin. Anderson Day's father was identified as Reuben Day, b. 1786. This pre-dated William Rencher's birth in 1819 and thus eliminated this line.

However, there were a significant number of matches whose surname was Harris in these connections. This led to further investigations of an African American man named Rencher Nicholas Harris.

## Research on Rencher Nicolas Harris (b. 1900)

Rencher is such an uncommon name, that in this area of North Carolina all references to it immediately pique interest. Such was the case with a man named Rencher Nicholas Harris. From the AncestryDNA matches, there were numerous entries of Harris descendants—this looked promising.

An online biographical sketch of Rencher Nicholas Harris in *Open Durham* indicated that he “was a prominent black businessman and community leader, the first African American to be elected to the Durham City Council in May 1953. After declining to run for reelection, he was also the first African American named to the Durham City School Board in 1958. Born and raised in Virginia, Harris moved to Durham in the early 1920s as an employee of Banker's Fire Insurance, where he climbed the ranks to company secretary by 1939. He also served for a time as the head of the Durham chapter of the NAACP, and on boards at Lincoln Hospital, NC Mutual, and Mechanics & Farmer's Bank.”<sup>15</sup>

---

15. “Rencher Nicolas Harris,” *Open Durham* (<https://www.opendurham.org/people/rencher-nicholas-harris#:~:text=Born%20and%20raised%20in%20Virginia,%2C%20and%20Mechanics%20%26%20Farmer%20Bank>) : accessed 1 April 2011.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ [RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG](mailto:RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG)

---

The biographical sketch also listed his date and place of birth, Abingdon, Virginia, 7 October 1900 and his death in Durham, North Carolina on 4 January 1965. This direct link to Abingdon and the first given name of Rencher stimulated further research on this line.

His tombstone marker was quickly located on the *BillionGraves.com* website and in an interesting turn of events, the double marker listed him and his father, James C. Harris (1868-1953).<sup>16</sup> A copy of the death certificate for James C. Harris was in the online images on *FamilySearch.org* and James' parents were listed as Thaddeus Harris and Mary Jane (née "not obtained").<sup>17</sup>

With this information, James was quickly identified in the census records of Abingdon, Virginia as was his father in the 1870 census where he was a child, aged 1 in the household of Thaddeus and Mary J. Harris.<sup>18</sup>

The Library of Virginia in Richmond has placed the *Register of Colored Persons of Washington County, State of Virginia* online. Thaddeus S. Harris, aged 37 and Mary Jane Thomas, aged 25 were both listed as "free born." Incredibly, Thaddeus' occupation was listed as "barber," a strong indication that he may have been apprenticed or associated with William Rencher—such was the case.<sup>19</sup>

Mary Jane Harris' death certificate was in the online collection of Virginia State Board of Health records on *Ancestry.com*.<sup>20</sup> There, it recorded her parents:

---

16, *BillionGraves.com*, digital images (<https://billiongraves.com/grave/Rencher-N-Harris/17344234> : accessed 21 April 2011), photograph, gravestone for Rencher N. Harris (1900-1965), Beechwood Cemetery, Durham, Durham, North Carolina.

17. James C. Harris death certificate no. 13816, FamilySearch.org database and indexes, ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)), North Carolina State Board of Health, Raleigh, North Carolina.

18. "United States Census 1870," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (<https://www.ancestry.com/>: 12 March 2019), Thaddeus Harris (age 40), Abingdon, Washington, Virginia, image 6 of 78, Images reproduced by *FamilySearch*. Original data: 1870 U.S. census, population schedules. NARA microfilm publication M593, roll 1,681, p. 3B. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.

19. Thaddeus S. Harris entry, Washington County (Va.) Register of Colored Persons of Washington County, State of Virginia, cohabiting together as Husband and Wife on 27th February 1866, page 10, entry 16 *Library of Virginia* online index ([http://digitool1.lva.lib.va.us:8881/R/THB7DTXVQNE7DR61R6V3FVDJ8AL2LEKJEFDRS95YDSGE7G4LE6-00943?func=results-jump-full&set\\_entry=000028&set\\_number=377259&base=GEN01-LVA01](http://digitool1.lva.lib.va.us:8881/R/THB7DTXVQNE7DR61R6V3FVDJ8AL2LEKJEFDRS95YDSGE7G4LE6-00943?func=results-jump-full&set_entry=000028&set_number=377259&base=GEN01-LVA01)). Local Government Records Collection, Washington County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia 23219.

20. Mary Jane Harris death certificate no. 9175, *Ancestry.org* database images and indexes, ([www.ancestry.org](http://www.ancestry.org)), Virginia State Board of Health, Richmond, Virginia.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◇ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

---

Father: William Rencher b. near Raleigh, North Carolina

Mother: Mary Jane Thomas b. Salem, Virginia

This was exciting, exciting news...for a few minutes. Adhering to the Genealogy Standards, a reasonable exhaustive search identified Mary Jane Harris in the 1900 census of Abingdon, Washington County, Virginia actually living with William Rencher! Alas, her relationship to William was listed as “step-daughter.” Thus, there was no DNA connection to William—a very disappointing dead end—again.

However, the knowledge of the informant, Thad. E. Harris, son of Thaddeus, that William Rencher’s birthplace was “near Raleigh, North Carolina” provided sufficient evidence to adhere to the Genealogical Proof Standard cited in Appendix D—Glossary, to meet the first of five criteria “(a) yield at least two sources of independent information items agreeing directly or indirectly on a research question’s answer.”<sup>21</sup>

## Research to identify the names of enslaved individuals by John Grant Rencher

To establish the names of the enslaved individuals during the lifetime of John Grant Rencher, research was done in the available records of the Orange County area. This research was greatly aided by a project by the Orange County, North Carolina County Clerk where local university students abstracted information on all sales of enslaved people. It is unknown if any of them took the Rencher surname.

The known persons enslaved by John Grant Rencher were as follows:

1. **Female** (name and surname unknown), age unknown. Purchased from Hardy Sanders of Wake County, North Carolina, bill of sale dated 3 March 1790, proved February 1791. It was witnessed by Joseph Taylor.
2. **Jack**, born about 1740-1750, sold for £25 on 24 July 1800 to Page Chelsey Patterson. (Orange County Deed Book 9:286)
3. **Ben**, a blacksmith, mentioned in the 1812 will of probate, not mentioned in the 1829 administration. Instructions in the will were to sell him to pay debts, if necessary, but not the blacksmith tools. Enslaved blacksmiths were valued up

---

21. Board for Certification of Genealogists. *Genealogy Standards* p. 85.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ♦ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

---

to fifty-five percent more than other slaves.<sup>22</sup> Umstead Rencher Sr., son of John Grant Rencher was also a blacksmith. It may be that he learned the trade from Ben.

4. **Squire**, sold to Abraham Rencher at the administration of the estate of John Grant Rencher in 1829.
5. **Esther**, wife of Squire, sold to Abraham Rencher in 1829.
6. **Jenny** (Jane?), sold to Abraham Rencher in 1829.
7. **Lucy**, sold to Abraham Rencher in 1829.
8. **Solomon**, sold to Abraham Rencher in 1829.
9. **David**, sold to Robert Fleming at the administration of the estate of John Grant Rencher in 1829.
10. **Sylvia**, sold to Anderson Clements at the administration of the estate of John Grand Rencher in 1829.<sup>23</sup>

Since the disposition of all the enslaved individuals is known except for the female listed first in the list, none of these could be considered to be any of the two free born African Americans mentioned in the will.

The first female could have been manumitted and been the mother of either or both of the two free born persons mentioned. She could also be the same person as one of the named females in the list, Esther, Jenny, Lucy, or Sylvia.

## The Identity of the two Free Born African Americans!

Warren Eugene Milteer Jr., author of *North Carolina's Free People of Color 1715-1885*<sup>24</sup> included several key points of information regarding the social living conditions of free born people of color. In summary, he wrote:

- In many cases, free people of color grew up primarily outside of the influence of free people of color.

---

10. Williamson, Samuel H. and Louis P. Cain. "Measuring Slavery in 2016 Dollars" Online article, <https://www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php> (accessed 21 January 2019).

23. John Grant Rencher inventory (1812), Wake County Record Book, Wills, Inventories and Settlements of Estates 10:268, Superior Court, Raleigh, N. Car.; FHL microfilm 20,007.

24. Milteer, Warren Eugene Jr. *North Carolina's Free People of Color 1715-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020) 143.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

---

- In other cases, free children of color lived with white masters, as their apprentices and servants, and may have had little exposure to other people of color.
- Children in these situations may have been treated like members of an extended family and may have had access to white social networks.

Further investigations into Wake County, North Carolina apprenticeship records, 1770-1903 provided the answer. It should be noted that these records are arranged *alphabetically by the name of the apprentice*, not the name of the master, thus looking in the file for John Grant Rencher or his wife Nancy yielded negative results. The

needed records were located on *FamilySearch.org* in a record collection digitized at the North Carolina State Archives.<sup>25</sup> Records dated 1805 detail the original documentation of the apprentices being bound to John Grant Rencher. Shortly after his death in 1812, the administrators of his estate see that the two apprentices are bound to his widow, Nancy Rencher.

With the names of the two unnamed African Americans now in hand, extensive research to locate them or their descendants has met with complete negative results. No individuals with those names or substituting the surname Rencher for their surnames has yielded any possible connections.

A factor to keep in mind is the possibility that the two apprentices were in fact fathered by John Grant Rencher by a manumitted enslaved female, possibly the unnamed person purchased from Hardy Sanders and that one of them is the father of William Rencher and possibly the unconnected family of the cousins related to Anderson Day.

**Target new test takers based on their DNA's potential to help answer a genealogical research question.<sup>26</sup>**

---

25. North Carolina State Archives. "Wake County Apprenticeship Records 1770-1903," *FamilySearch.org* ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)) online digital images, citing Family History Library microfilm 2,030,672, item 4; DGS 007641025 digital images 1847-8 of 2006. Alphabetically arranged by the surname of the apprentice.

26. *Genealogy Standards*, pp. 29-30.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ◊ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

To isolate the Rencher DNA segments, each portion of the pedigree between the test taker and the Rencher ancestor needs to be eliminated for the lines without the Rencher DNA. To do this, select a targeted list of the right cousin relationships to eliminate the non-essential portions of the pedigree.

## Selecting the targeted test takers

Eliminating the paternal side of Lorraine Henderson's pedigree would isolate the Rencher DNA she received from her maternal ancestors. In this instance, a first cousin on her father's side should be tested. These would be the descendants of William and Carrie (née Pritchett) Henderson through a line other than Lorraine's father LeRoy Henderson.

Next, a descendant of her maternal grandfather, John Shelly should be selected. This would involve identifying a second cousin descendant through one of the lines other than Lorraine's mother, Susie Shelly. See illustration 5.

### Pedigree of Lorraine Henderson

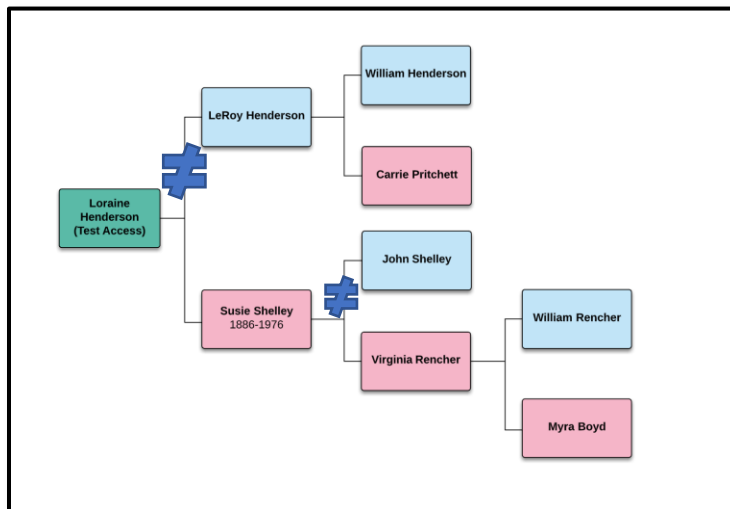


Illustration 5

## Conclusion to Standard 51. Planning DNA Tests.

Since all the identified test-takers are direct-line descendants of William Rencher, they are not candidates to help eliminate the non-related portions of the pedigree of



# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ♦ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG

---

Lorraine Henderson. Research to identified targeted test takers needs to be conducted to help isolate the DNA segments.

## **Standard 52. Analyzing DNA test results.**

### **Thoroughness of relevant documentary research**

At this stage of the research, the DNA segments have not been identified, but the documentary research has been extensive on William Rencher and his descendants.<sup>27</sup> Researchers with African American DNA provided a starting point for the research with the lineage they had been able to trace back to William Rencher. Additional research filled in missing pieces, analyzed critical relationships, and established timelines for events.

Since William Rencher settled in the southwest portion of Virginia, it was important to trace his migration from Washington County, Virginia back to the Orange and Wake County area of North Carolina. Establishing this connection would increase the probability that he is a descendant of John Grant Rencher or one of his five sons.

Due to the density of the population in the test area among the Black population, there are test takers with Nelson and Patterson surname results that match Caucasian test takers. This points to “the possibility of more than one common ancestor”<sup>28</sup> and/or the possibility that 1) one of the two freeborn mulattos was a descendant of John Grant Rencher, or 2) that one of the sons of John Grant Rencher is the father of William Rencher.

### **Conclusion to Standard 52. Analyzing DNA test results.**

The connections to the additional test takers needed have not been concluded. The test results for descendants of each of the five sons of John Grant Rencher are being examined to isolate which, if any, is the father of William Rencher. The Abraham Rencher line daughter’s out and dies out, there are no living descendants. The Umstead Rencher line is disproportionately represented due to the high number of descendants interested in family history. See illustration 6.

---

27. *Genealogy Standards*, pp. 30-1. Accuracy, completeness, and depth of each pedigree included in the analysis; Thoroughness of relevant documentary research.

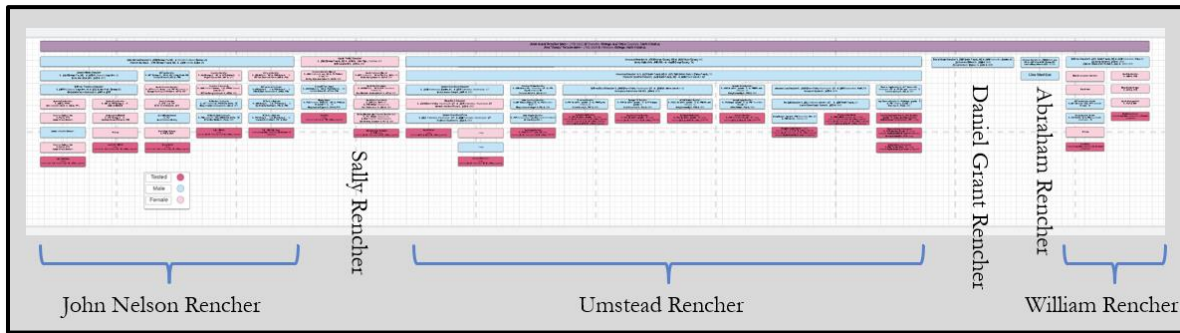
28. *Genealogy Standards*, Ibid, p. 30-2. The possibility of more than one common ancestor for each pair of DNA test takers.

# Identifying Unnamed Free Born African Americans—A DNA Case Study

BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS

VIRTUAL WEBINAR - MARCH 15, 2022

David E. Rencher, AG®, CG®, FUGA, FIGRS ♦ RENCHERDE@FAMILYSEARCH.ORG



**Illustration 6**

The limitations of *AncestryDNA* not having chromosome mapping capabilities makes this problem a good candidate for uploading the test results to *MyHeritage* who does have that feature. In addition, *23andMe* can also provide admixture analysis by the chromosome, thus the segments attributed to African American heritage and Caucasian heritage can be separated. It is free to upload your test results from *AncestryDNA* to *23andMe*, so this will provide an excellent advantage to sorting out the Caucasian and Black DNA matches.

## **Standard 57. Respect for privacy rights.**

The research on this African-American Rencher research problem has adhered to standard 57. All information shared in this presentation has been done so with the permissions of those who testers who have shared and granted access to their results on *AncestryDNA*. The identities of the others on the pedigrees have not been disclosed.

## **Conclusion**

This session illustrates a research problem currently in progress. Although the names of the unnamed African Americans have been identified, it illustrates the various stages of research, in some instances arriving at the end of the trail at a dead end. It also illustrates the need to modify the stages of hypotheses along the route as the evidence changes the believed outcomes and points in other directions.