



A MYRIAD OF SLAVERY DATABASES*

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INTRODUCTION

A 2020 peer-reviewed research note developed new measures for the size and growth of the population of enslaved people, and estimated that the total number who lived in the United States between 1619 and 1860 is approximately 10 million.¹ In the summer of 2023 American Ancestors announced the *10 Million Names* project, an undertaking to recover the names of people of African descent who were enslaved in the area of the United States between the 1500s and 1865.² The monumental task of centralizing datasets about enslaved ancestors is a work in progress. In the interim, there are a multitude of existing databases that serve a similar purpose but are more limited in scope. This document provides background information regarding applicable Genealogy Standards, followed by a survey of current databases that name enslaved people and can be accessed free of charge.

APPLICABLE GENEALOGY STANDARDS

The first prong of the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS) requires “reasonably exhaustive research,” emphasizing the use of original records.³ Researchers of enslaved African American ancestors face a host of challenges in meeting this requirement due to:

- Family ties that were severed due to involuntary separations;
- Present and latter-day attempts to obscure information about biological relationships;⁴
- Laws that criminalized teaching the enslaved to read and write, and thus prevented the vast majority from creating their own records; and

* Referenced websites were viewed on 28 August 2024.

¹ J. David Hacker, “From ’20 and odd’ to 10 million: The growth of the slave population in the United State,” *Slavery & Abolition* 41 (2020): 840–855; viewed online, *PMC PubMed Central* (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7716878/>).

² “Our Mission,” *10 Million Names* (<https://10millionnames.org/about-10-million-names>). Although the author is not involved in the development of the planned database, currently she is collaborating with its staff to provide an opportunity for students who register for the African American Genealogy course at the 2025 Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy to contribute to the 10 Million Names Project.

³ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, second edition revised (Nashville, Tennessee: Ancestry.com 2021), 1.

⁴ See, for example, John Anderson Brayton, “Check the Original! Two Lessons Learned the Hard Way: Hardy of South Carolina—A “Discreet” Omission to Hide an Indiscretion,” 90 *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* (March 2002): 69–73. This article contrasts a 1969 abstract that “omitted the primary heir and left out significant information that changed the entire thrust of” a 1769 will “that hints of a master-slave concubinage.”

- Sources that did not always identify human chattel with given names and rarely included surnames.

Postbellum geographic proximity and shared surnames do not necessarily evidence familial relationships between Freedmen,⁵ as they could have assumed the surname of a common enslaver. Moreover, well into the twentieth century, there was a dearth of genealogical finding aids for this community. For example, the records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—arguably the single richest source of information about enslaved ancestors—were not microfilmed until the enactment of the Freedmen’s Bureau Records and Preservation Act in 2000.⁶

Despite the obstacles to researching in this area, genealogy standards for evaluating conclusions about enslaved ancestors are the same as those that apply to any other community. Thus, original records are preferred.⁷ In the latter regard, it is important to keep in mind that a database is not a record; it is a source. Researchers should not rely on derivative information included in a database—such as an abstract.⁸ Rather, unless an image copy of the original is also provided, competent genealogists should seek the original record. If an image copy is used, the documentation of the information it contains should make that clear.⁹

SELECTED DATABASES THAT NAME ENSLAVED PEOPLE

Existing U.S. databases that name enslaved people are based on specific records such as newspapers, distinct regions or locations such as the Northeast, diverse record sets that include many different types of documents, or some combination of these parameters. The sources set forth below span both the antebellum and post bellum periods, and all are indexed by the names of enslaved people or Freedmen. For ease of reference the databases below are listed in alphabetical order by the name of the website where they can be found.

1. *AfriGeneas.org* (<https://afrigeneas.org>). To the author’s knowledge, this was the first website to offer a searchable database of surnames in service of the vision to “find and document the last slaveholder and the first African in each family.” As of this writing, however, the slave records database has been co-opted by an unrelated website.¹⁰
2. *Ancestry*, * “U.S., Newspapers.com™ Auctions of Enslaved People and Bounties on Freedom Seekers Index, pre-1880” (<https://www.ancestry.com>). This new and free database

⁵For the definition of “Freedmen” as those formerly enslaved, see Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery, Updated, with a New Introduction and Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut, London: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 267.

⁶The See “Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Records,” *National Archives and Records Administration*, (<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/brochure.pdf>).

⁷ Board for Certification of Genealogists, *Genealogy Standards*, 1.

⁸ For guidance regarding how the citation of information in database entries should be handled see Elizabeth Shown Mills, “Fundamentals of Research & Analysis,” *Evidence Explained, Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace*, fourth edition (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2024), 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, at 54-55.

¹⁰ Links to other databases on the site are also either broken or have been co-opted, but some are working—for example, those with death records and photos. Based on a response to inquiries sent to several people listed on the website, the site appears to be orphaned.

was released on 6 June 2024 and can be accessed by registering for a free *Ancestry* account.**

3. *Ancestry*, “U.S. Freedmen’s Bureau Records,” (<https://www.ancestry.com/cs/freedmens>). This is another free ancestry collection that was made available in 2021. The Freedmen’s Bureau was established in the War Department, primarily to assist former slaves.¹¹ Most people came into contact with the Freedmen’s Bureau at the local level in field offices.¹² Field office records covering the period 1865–1872 include marriage records of the formerly enslaved, complaints, claims relating to the pensions of Black soldiers and sailors, and labor contracts between Freedmen and Planters.¹³
4. *Beyond Kin Project* (<https://beyondkin.org>). Records created by or with respect to slaveholding families are among the most important sources for documenting the lives of enslaved people. This project was launched in 2016 to “facilitate the documentation of enslaved populations, particularly by recruiting the resources . . . of the descendants of slaveholders.” Anyone can contribute to this website.
5. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives From the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936 to 1938* (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>). This collection includes “more than more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves.”
6. *Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records* (<https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/search/default.aspx>). Although “Land Patents” are not searchable by race, because there were no cash sales other than under the authority of the 1866 Homestead Act during the period when it was in effect, it is possible to narrow a search to a pool that is likely to include Freedmen—the intended beneficiaries.
7. “1780 Slave Register,” *Chester County, Pennsylvania* (<https://www.chesco.org/4572/1780-Slave-Register>) was created in connection with the Pennsylvania gradual emancipation act, to prevent the importation of new enslaved people into Chester County; it is searchable by “slave name,” “slave owner,” and township.
8. *Digital Library on American Slavery* (<https://dlas.uncg.edu>). The website describes itself as “an expanding resource compiling independent collections focused upon race and slavery in the American South, made searchable through a single, simple interface.”
9. *Enslaved, People of the Historical Slave Trade* (<https://enslaved.org>). The website includes information from nearly a half million records of enslavement, via interconnected links to other projects and databases.

** The inclusion of *Ancestry* is for informational purposes about the company’s free databases; it is not intended as an endorsement.

¹¹ “An Act to establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen and Refugees,” 13 Stat. 507 (3 March 1865); *USlaw.link* (<https://govtrackus.s3.amazonaws.com/legislink/pdf/stat/13/STATUTE-13-Pg507.pdf>).

¹² National Archives and Records Administration, *Freedmen’s Bureau Field Office Records* (<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/brochure.pdf>).

¹³ Reginald Washington, compiler, *Black Family Research, Records of Post-Civil War Federal Agencies at the National Archives*, Reference Information Paper 108 (National Archives and Records Administration: Washington, DC, revised 2010), 4-5; (<https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/ref-info-papers/rip108.pdf>).

10. *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/en/united-states/ethnicities/african-american>). The “Find Your African American Ancestors” page was launched in 2024. This site is not strictly a slavery database, but as you can enter the birth year of a person who was born before slavery was abolished in a particular location and pull up information about that person.
11. *FamilySearch*, A Handwritten Text Recognition (HRT) tool was used to create *FamilySearch's* “Full-text search” that was launched at RootsTech in 2024.¹⁴ This is not limited to African Americans who were enslaved; however, it is possible to locate records regarding enslaved people by including search terms such as “slave.”
12. *Franklin County, Pennsylvania Walk Unbowed Project* (<https://iaamuseum.org/center-for-family-history/digital-archives/>). This is an ongoing project to “preserve and publish the names of slaves in Franklin County.”
13. *HeinOnLine.org* (<https://heinonline.org/HOL/SlaveryIntro?collection=slavery>). The “Slavery in America and the World: History, Culture & Law” collection includes “every statute passed by every colony and state on slavery, every federal statute dealing with slavery, and all reported state and federal cases on slavery.” This collection was once offered for free to individual users; at some point the site stopped accepting new registrations but did not revoke existing privileges. You can access the site at libraries that subscribe to *HeinOnLine* even if you do not have a subscription.
14. *International African American Museum: Center for Family History* (<https://cfh.iaamuseum.org/contribute-photos-or-documents/>). This site hosts a digital collection that includes photos, funeral programs, bible records, and family histories.
15. *Mississippi State University* (<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/lantern/>). The “Lantern Project” is a collaborative effort by institutions in Mississippi and Alabama to provide “centralized and institutionally supported access to information in legal records documenting enslaved persons.”
16. *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery* (<https://www.informationwanted.org>). This is a collection of newspaper ads placed by Freedmen who had been separated from family members during slavery. These ads appeared into the early 20th Century. You can contribute success stories to this website.
17. *Lowcountry Africana* (<https://lowcountryafricana.com/about/>). This website is entirely dedicated to records that document the family and cultural heritage of African Americans in the historic rice-growing areas of South Carolina, Georgia and extreme northeastern Florida.”
18. *Mapping the Freedmen’s Bureau* (<https://mappingthefreedmensbureau.com>). This is an interactive website where the location of Freedmen’s Bureau offices is marked, as well as those of other institutions that served the formerly enslaved, such as branches of the Freedman’s Savings Bank, Freedmen Schools and the location of battle sites where men who were in the US Colored Troops fought.

¹⁴ See Yvette Hoitink, “Handwritten Text Recognition, Harnessing the Power of Artificial Intelligence to Transcribe and Search.” *NGS Conference Compendium*, 18 May 2024.

19. *Maryland State Archives* (<http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov>). The “Legacy of Slavery in Maryland” website includes a guide to researching African American Families at the Maryland State Archives,¹⁵ but many documents can be researched online, including Manumissions and inventories that include enslaved people held in estates.¹⁶
20. *Mississippi State University* (<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/lantern/>.)” The “Lantern Project” is a collaborative project led by institutions in Mississippi and Alabama to provide, “centralized and institutionally supported access to information in legal records documenting enslaved persons.” including probate records, court records (orphans court, civil court, criminal court, and others), deeds, receipts, bills of sale, and other documents which were or could have been used as evidence in a trial, from across Mississippi and the Deep South.”
21. *National Archives* “National archives at Atlanta,” National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/atlanta/finding-aids/rg36-slave-mobileinw-name?>). This database contains information from slave manifests that are part of a record group of the U.S. Customs Service.
22. *National Museum of African American History & Culture (Smithsonian)* (<https://sova.si.edu/record/nmaahc.fb>). The “Freedmen’s Bureau Digital Collection” includes “digital surrogates previously available on the 1918 rolls of microfilm held by the National Archives and Records Administration.”
23. *Northeast Slavery Records Index* (<https://nesri.commonsc.gc.cuny.edu>). NESRI is an index of records that identify enslaved people and enslavers in the states of New York, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.
24. *National Park Service* (<https://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>). The “Soldiers and Sailors Database” includes an index with basic information about the service records (name, rank, and unit) of those who served in the Civil War; the search feature allows users to filter results by reference to United States Colored Troops.
25. *Oklahoma Historical Society* (<https://www.okhistory.org/research/dawes>). Researchers can use the “Search the Dawes Roll, 1898-1914” tool to determine if an African American Ancestor was enslaved by a member of one of the so-called five civilized tribes. Imaged copies of relevant documents can be accessed at no cost on the website of the National Archives and Records Administration.
26. “Shelby County, AL, Deed Books Referencing Enslaved People [1818–1835],” *FromthePage.com* (<https://fromthepage.com/schs1854/deed-books/cropped-801-1-comp>); this link leads to the results of this ongoing transcription project of the Shelby County Museum & Archives.

¹⁵ “Researching African American Families at the Maryland State Archives,” Maryland.gov (http://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/pdf/researching_african_american_families.pdf).

¹⁶ Database,” Maryland.gov (<https://slavery2.msa.maryland.gov/pages/Search.aspx>).

27. *Texas Runaway Slave Project* (<http://digital.sfasu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/RSP>).
This is as an ongoing project to add materials to the database of runaway slave advertisements, as well as court records, manuscript collections, and books.
28. “*Virginia Untold Search*”
(https://lva.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?vid=01LVA_INST:VU&lang=en).
This website provides digital access to records that document the lives of enslaved and free African Americans in the Library of Virginia’s collections. One can search by type of document (for example, bills of sales or deeds of emancipation), and images are accessible without signing in.