

Tracing a Kentucky Family from Freedom to Slavery: A Case Study

©2020, Deborah A. Abbott, PhD All rights reserved
dbrhabbott@yahoo.com



The most difficult part of genealogical research for African Americans is finding and identifying slave ancestors and their owners, but as difficult as this might seem, it is not impossible. For many people of African descent, the experience can become overwhelming. This lecture will focus on the clues and resources needed to recreate an African American ancestor's journey from freedom to slavery, including the importance of using the U.S. Federal Census records and the records of the potential slaveholder.

Understanding Slavery in the United States

Studying African-American history and its relationship to the history of the United States along with the slavery system is crucial. It's important to familiarize yourself with the laws pertaining to slavery not only within the U.S., but also in each state and county that is being researched. Researching during the slave era requires genealogists to focus not only on the direct slave ancestor, but also on collateral families as well as the cluster of people surrounding them. The family of the slaveholder will become a very important part of the research process as one moves beyond 1870. Information found in pre-1870 records that relate to enslaved persons will usually be found among the slaveholder's business and personal property records. Understanding that not all former slaves took the surname of their slave owners is paramount, since some may have chosen a name that connects them to their surroundings, other families, events, etc. Former slaves may also change their names periodically and this alone can make the research process difficult. Even though slave marriages were considered illegal prior to 1865, some did exist. Declarations of some of these unions may be found in courthouses, government repositories, bibles, and/or personal records of slaveholding families. Additional documents that can provide links to slavery may be found in archives, libraries, manuscript collections of universities and colleges, private papers, as well as many national and state repositories.

Preparation Needed for Successful African American Research

Prior to 1870, the life of African Americans who were enslaved cannot be separated from that of the slaveholding families, therefore, complete understanding of genealogy basics is a must.

Genealogy researchers must always practice the following techniques: (1) Work from the **known** to the **unknown**; (2) Compare, contrast and prove each piece of evidence that you find; and (3) work from the **present** to the **past**.

Careful examination of home sources, oral histories, and analyzing all other genealogical documents cannot be under estimated. In addition to using U.S. federal censuses, mortality schedules, vital records, etc., you must become familiar with pre-1870 records such as state/county/township histories, manuscript collections, etc.

The Case Study

Using a case study, learn how basic tools of family history research can enable you to move from freedom to slavery. Learn the importance of analyzing information and realizing how collateral/cluster line research can be helpful in moving you toward success in the genealogical process. In addition to using census records, this journey will utilize numerous other record groups to prove how the lives of two families, one black, one white are intertwined. Using the 1940 U.S. Federal Census as the starting point in Chicago, Illinois, we will follow an African American family back to their Boyle County, Kentucky roots. This journey will not be a straight line, we will encounter a few bumps, several families and explore places we never expected. As with all genealogical projects this one will require patience, determination, and the ability to think outside the “box” if we want to bring light to the rich history of this African American family.

Sample of Sources/Resources Used in the Case Study

- Court Records
 - Wills, estate, probate records
 - Estate Settlements
 - Inventories; court orders;
 - Deeds, i.e., land, gifts, chattel records, mortgages, etc.
- Church records (Black & White)
- Freedman’s Savings Bank & Trust (1865-1874)
- Government Related Records
- Thesis/Dissertations
- Oral Histories
- 1890 Veterans Schedule
- Civil War Service & Pension records
- Newspapers/Magazines
- State Census
- Non-Population Census Schedules
- Manuscript collections
- Historical & Genealogy Societies
- Public/Private College/Universities, Libraries & Archives

Recommended Readings

Abbott, Deborah A., PhD. and Sunny Jane Morton. “Invisible Ancestors”. *Family Tree Magazine*, (January 2015) 45-49.

_____. “Ohio’s Free Negro Registers”. *Ohio Genealogy News*, Vol. 44, No. 1. (Spring 2013) 12-14.

- African American Research: A Practical Guide*. Diane L. Richard, Compiler. Ajax, ON, Canada: Moorshead Magazines, Ltd, 2019.
- Bell, Mary McCampbell, et al. "Finding Manuscript Collections: NUCMC, NIDS, and RLIN," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 77 (September 1989): 208-218. Updated in June 2006 issue of NGSQ
- Berlin, Ira. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Boston, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Berry, Kenyatta D. "Tracing Slave Ancestors." *Family Tree Magazine*, Vol. 10, Issue 4, July 2009.
- _____. *The Family Tree Toolkit: A Comprehensive Guide to Uncovering Your Ancestry and Researching Genealogy Paperback*. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2018.
- Burroughs, Tony. *Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- Blassingame, John W. *Slave Community Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Byers, Paula K. (Editor). *African American Genealogical Sourcebook*. Detroit, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1995.
- Cooper, Jean L. *A Genealogical Index to the Guides of the Microfilm Edition of Records of Ante-bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War*. Bloomington, IN, 2003.
- Eichholz, Alice, PhD, CG. *Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources*. 2004. Digital version found at:
[https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources](https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/Red_Book:_American_State,_County,_and_Town_Sources)
- Finkelman, Paul. "Slavery in the United States: Persons or Property? In *The Legal Understanding of Slavery From the Historical to the Contemporary* (ed. Jean Allain), Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 105-134.
- _____. *State Slavery Statutes*. Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1989.
- Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. New York: Knopf Publishing Group. 8th Edition, 2000.
- Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.
- Hait, Michael. *Genealogy at a Glance: African American Genealogy Research*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing, Co., 2011.
- _____. *Records of Slave Claims Commission, 1864-1867*. Maryland: Hait Family History Research Services, 2010.
- _____. Breaking the Chains: Tracing Former Slaves. *Family Chronicle Magazine*, Vol. 13, No. 3, January/February 2009.
- Library of Congress. *NUCMC: National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2003. Published volumes, annual indexes, and combined indexes listed collections that cover repositories reported from 1959-1993.

- Leary, Helen F.M., and Lee Albright, "Designing Research Strategies," in Helen F.M. Leary, editor, *North Carolina Research: Genealogy and Local History*, 2nd Edition, Raleigh: North Carolina Genealogical Society, 1997, pp 17-67.
- Milton, Sandra Beane. "Tracing Their Trail: Into Slavery". *Ohio Genealogy News*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Spring 2013), 24-26.
- Rawick, George P. (Editor). *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972-73. Forty-one Volumes.
- Rose, Christine. *Courthouse Research for Family Historians: Your Guide to Genealogical Treasures*. Hammond, IN: CR Publications, 2004.
- Rose, James M. and Alice Eichholz. *Black Genesis: A Resource Book for African-American Genealogy*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2003.
- Shaw, Robert B. *A Legal History of Slavery in the United States*. Potsdam, NY: Northern Press, 1991.
- Smith, Franklin Carter and Emily Anne Croom. *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors: How to Find and Record Your Unique Heritage*. Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, 2003.
- Smith, Robyn N. *The Best of Reclaiming Kin: Helpful Tips on Researching Your Roots*. Elkridge, MD: Robyn N. Smith, Publisher, 2016.
- Streets, David. *Slave Genealogy: A Research Guide with Case Studies*. Baltimore, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1986.
- Szucs, Loretto Dennis and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking (Editors). *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy*. 3rd Edition. Provo, UT: Digital version found at: https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/The_Source:_A_Guidebook_to_American_Genealogy
- United States, National Historical Publication and Records Commission. *Directory of Archival and Manuscript Repositories in the United States*. 2nd Edition. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1988.
- Washington, Reginald. *Black Family Research: Records of Post-Civil War Federal Agencies at the National Archives*. Washington, DC: United States National Archives and Records Administration, 2010.
- Woodtor, Dee Parmer. *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity*. New York: Random House, 1999.

Sample Resources Used for this Case Study

- Brown, Richard Carl. *A History of Danville and Boyle County Kentucky, 1774-1992*. Danville, KY: Bicentennial Books, 1992.
- _____. "The Free Blacks of Boyle County, Kentucky, 1850-1860: A Research Note". *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 426-438. August 1989.
- _____. *Keepers of the Faith: Black Churches in Boyle County*. Danville, KY: Kentucky Advocate, 1993.

- Boyle County Genealogical Association. *Boyle County, Kentucky, Cemetery Records, 1792-1992*. Danville, KY: The Association, 1992.
- Daughters of the American Revolution. St. Asaph's Chapter. (Danville, KY). *Boyle County, Kentucky Will Records, Books I & II, 1842-1897*. McDowell Publications, 1985.
- Daviess, Maria T. *History of Mercer and Boyle Counties*. Volume I. Harrodsburg, KY: The Harrodsburg Herald, 1924.
- Denis, Michael J. *We Were Here: African Americans in Danville and Boyle County, Kentucky*. Parksville, Kentucky, 2019. <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~kydaahs/index.htm>
- Dorris, Jonathan Truman. *A Glimpse at Historic Madison County and Richmond, Kentucky*. Richmond, KY: Richmond Daily Register Co., 1934.
- Ellsberry, Elizabeth Prather. *Cemetery Records of Boyle County, Kentucky, 1970*. Self-Published, 1970.
- First Convention of Colored Men of Kentucky Proceedings*. March 22, 23, 24, and 26, 1866. Lexington, KY: The Convention.
- Galloway, Peggy Selby, Helen Irene Estes, Beverly Gail Holman, and Edward B. Estes (Compilers). *Marriage Records: Boyle County Kentucky 1800-1890*. Danville, KY, 1998.
- Griffin, Richard. W. *Newspaper Story of a Town: A History of Danville, Kentucky*. (Reprinted from the 100th Anniversary Edition of the Kentucky Advocate Newspaper). Danville, KY: Danville Advocate-Messenger and the Kentucky Advocate. 1965.
- Gross, Viola Rowe. *Two Hundred Years of Freedom: A Genealogy and History of the Doram, Rowe, Barbee, and Allied Families*. Kentucky: Kinnersley Press, 2003.
- Heart of Danville Main Street Program Book Committee (Compiler). *Danville and Boyle County in the Bluegrass Region in Kentucky: An Architectural History*. Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing Company, 1999.
- Inventary of the Doram-Rowe Family Collection, 1829-1975* (Bulk 1829-1901). Lexington, KY: Kentucky Historical Society, 2009.
- Lucas, Marion B. *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*. Frankfort, KY: Kentucky Historical Society, 1992.
- Sears, R. D. *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2002.

Sample Repositories/Libraries Used for this Case Study

- Kentucky Historical Society, Martin F. Schmidt Research Library, 100 W. Broadway, Frankfort, KY. <https://history.ky.gov/resources/martin-f-schmidt-research-library/>
- Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives, 300 Coffee Tree Road, Frankfort, KY. <http://www.kdla.ky.gov/>
- The Filson Historical Society, 1310 S. 3rd Street, Louisville, KY. <https://filsonhistorical.org/collections-resources/>
- University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY. <https://libguides.uky.edu/?b=s>

Eastern Kentucky University, Special Collections & Archives, 521 Lancaster Avenue, Library 126
Richmond, KY www.archives.eku.edu

Berea College, Special Collections & Archives, 101 Chestnut Street, Berea, KY.
<https://libraryguides.berea.edu/aboutsca>

Centre College, Grace Doherty Library, 600 W. Walnut Street, Danville, KY.
<https://library.centre.edu/c.php?g=658041>

Boyle County Courthouse, 321 West Main Street, Danville, KY. <http://boyleky.com/>

Boyle County Public Library, 307 West Broadway, Danville, KY
www.boylepublib.org <https://www.boylepublib.org/online-resources>

Mercer County Courthouse, 207 W. Lexington St. Harrodsburg, KY www.mercercounty.ky.gov

Mercer County Public Library, 109 West Lexington Street, Harrodsburg, KY www.mcplib.info

Sample Databases Used for this Case Study

JSTOR, a digital library originally containing digitized back issues of academic journals. It now encompasses books and other primary sources as well as current issues of journals. It provides full-text searches of almost 2,000 journals. www.jstor.org

Chronicling America Historic American Newspapers, a database that allows you to search and read digitized newspaper pages from 1880–1922 and find information about American newspapers published between 1690-present. Chronicling America is sponsored jointly by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress. www.chroniclingamerica.loc.gov

GenealogyBank.com, an online subscription database is one of the largest collections of digitized U.S. newspapers from all 50 states, dating back to 1690. Search over 2 billion records which include, census records, social security death index, obituaries, government publications and historical books. Within this source one can find birth, marriage and death announcements, letters, advertisements, hometown news, photographs, opinion pieces, etc. www.genealogybank.com

Hathi Trust Digital Library, www.hathitrust.org, founded in 2008, is a partnership of academic and research institutions, offering a collection of millions of titles digitized from libraries around the world. This database includes digital material from *Google Books* www.books.google.com and the *Internet Archives* www.archive.org, as well as local libraries.

Historical Newspapers, a newspaper database with 17,000 newspapers from the early 1700-2000s. www.newspapers.com Newspapers.com Obituary Index, 1800s-current and other digital newspapers can be found through Ancestry.com.
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/histnews/>



From Slavery to Freedom, Exhibit, Heinz History Center, Pittsburgh, PA