



Federal Records that Help Identify Former Enslaved People and Slave Holders

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Researching African American ancestors who lived before the American Civil War (1861–1865) poses unique challenges. Enslaved individuals rarely had surnames and created few records themselves. Successful research usually requires positively identifying the slave holder(s) who may have created records that mentioned slaves. In addition, Southern states lost records due to the Civil War and other courthouse fires, and often didn't begin recording births, marriages, or deaths until after 1900. Even African Americans whose ancestors were free before 1865 may find research challenging if their ancestors moved frequently, worked for others, and owned no land.

Successful family history research—regardless of one's ancestors' race or ethnic background—requires "reasonably exhaustive research" in all relevant records. It requires researching not only direct ancestors but also their "FAN" club—family, associates, and neighbors—because records created by or about those individuals may provide critical information about one's own direct ancestors. Quality research requires investigating all types of records: federal, state, county, local, church, newspapers, and so forth.

The National Archives and Records Administration, as the custodian of the permanently valuable records of the U.S. Federal Government, holds a wide variety of records that may help African Americans identify slave holders and ancestors who were enslaved before 1865. This presentation highlights some of those records.

Federal Population Census, 1790–1940

- Available online at Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org, and HeritageQuest.com
- Census records are basic building blocks for everyone's research.
- Start with the 1940 Census and work your way backwards.
- Locate every ancestor and relative in every census in which they were alive (to the extent possible).
- Taken at 10 years intervals.
 - 1790–1840. Heads of households named; other free white persons listed in categories by age and gender; enslaved persons listed in categories by age and gender.
 - 1850–60. All free persons listed by name with their age, gender, marital status, state or country of birth, and amount of real property and personal property owned (if any).
 - 1870–80 and 1900–1940. Every person listed by name with their age, gender, marital status, state or country of birth. State or country of birth of each person's parents given in the 1880 and 1900–30 censuses. Occupation and other information.
 - 1890. Mostly destroyed as a result of a 1921 fire. Information for about 6,160 persons survives. Most researchers have to make the "20-year leap" from 1900 to 1880. Therefore, it is very important to obtain as much information as possible from the 1900 and later censuses and other records to make that "leap" successfully. More information about the 1890 census www.archives.gov/research/census/1890
- Things to keep in mind:
 - Names may not be spelled the way you expect.
 - Ages, birthplaces, and relationships may be reported differently in different censuses, depending upon the knowledge of the person providing the information to the enumerator.
 - African American families may be reported under different surnames in 1870 than in 1880.

Federal Slave Census Schedules, 1850–1860

- Exist for Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey (1850 only), North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah Territory, and Virginia.
 - 1850 (FamilySearch.org): www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1420440
 - 1850 (Ancestry.com): “1850 U.S. Federal Census – Slave Schedules”
 - 1860 (Ancestry.com): “1860 U.S. Federal Census – Slave Schedules”
- For each slave holder, the following information is given:
 - Number of slaves owned.
 - Number manumitted (freed) in the year preceding June 1.
 - Age, gender, and color of slave
 - If slave is a fugitive, from what state.
 - If deaf and dumb, blind, insane, or idiotic.
 - Number of slave houses on that owner’s property.

Civil War and Later Military Pension Files

During the Civil War, thousands of African American men served the Union Army in the U.S. Colored Troops as well as in the U.S. Navy. In the years after the war, the veteran and his widow or other dependents may have applied for a pension.

INDEXES

- National Archives Microfilm Publication T288, *General Index to Pension Files, 1861–1934*, online:
 - FamilySearch.org: www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919699
 - Ancestry.com: “U.S., Civil War Pension Index: General Index to Pension Files, 1861–1934”
- National Archives Microfilm Publication T289, *Organization Index to Pension Files*, generally arranged by state, then by regiment, then by company: online at
 - Fold3.com: www.fold3.com/browse/249?military.conflict=US+Civil+War (search database “Civil War Pension Index”)

PENSION FILES – Only a small portion are digitized and online

- Survivor’s Original (SO-numbers): catalog.archives.gov/id/563386
- Survivor’s Certificate (SC-numbers): catalog.archives.gov/id/300019
- Widow’s Original (WO-numbers): catalog.archives.gov/id/567876
- Widow’s Certificate (WC-numbers): catalog.archives.gov/id/300020; more on www.fold3.com/browse/249?military.conflict=US+Civil+War (search for database “Civil War Widows’ Pensions”)
- Survivors and Widows (C and XC-numbers): catalog.archives.gov/id/300021
- Copies of pension files that have not been digitized may be reviewed in person at the National Archives Building – or – ordered from the National Archives. For more information and to order, go to: www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/pre-ww-1-records

Civil War Compiled Military Service Records

INDEXES - The free National Park Service “Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System” index was compiled from records in the National Archives: www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm

- Direct link to Soldiers search: www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-soldiers.htm
- Direct link Sailors search: www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-sailors.htm.

UNION ARMY COMPILED MILITARY SERVICE RECORDS (CSMRs). After obtaining the person's military unit information from the index, the second step is to obtain the person's military service record.

- Most complete online collection is on Fold3.com
- Some online in National Archives Catalog at catalog.archives.gov/id/300398
- CSMRs that have not been digitized may be ordered from the National Archives. For more information, go to: www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/pre-ww-1-records

UNION NAVY research is more complex. For more information, see:

- "Sailors in the United States Navy, 1798–1885" online at www.archives.gov/files/research/military/navy/navy-sailors-records-1798-1885.pdf
- "Officers in the United States Navy, 1789–1925" online at www.archives.gov/files/research/military/navy/officers-1789-1925.pdf

Post–Civil War Compiled Military Service Records

On July 28, 1866, Congress passed an act that authorized the Army to raise six regiments of African American soldiers. These regiments later became known as the "Buffalo Soldiers" and served with distinction on the Western frontier of the United States. The U.S. Army organized the African American soldiers into four newly organized infantry regiments and two cavalry regiments designated the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments and the 38th, 39th, 40th, and 41st Infantry Regiments. In late 1869, the U.S. Army reorganized the infantry regiments. The 38th and 41st became the 24th Infantry Regiment, and the 39th and 40th became the 25th Infantry Regiment. For more information about researching men in these regiments, see "Records Pertaining to the Military Service of Buffalo Soldiers" online at www.archives.gov/files/research/African-Americans/buffalo-soldiers.pdf

Confederate Slave Payrolls, 1862–1865

The Confederate government required many slave holders to provide slaves to work at military fortifications and other facilities throughout the South. The payrolls for that slave labor that usually indicate the name and place of residence of the slave holder; name of slave; month(s), year(s), during which the slave was employed, the location at which the slave was employed, the Confederate officer under whom the work was performed, the number of days worked, the daily rate of pay, and the total amount paid. To be paid, the slave holder had to sign the slave payroll acknowledging receipt of pay. If the slave holder was personally unable to travel to obtain payment, he could execute a power of attorney authorizing another person to act on his or her behalf. A few payrolls include white employees, free African Americans, or notations that a particular slave escaped or absconded.

- Information and digital images are online at catalog.archives.gov/id/719477
- Includes enslaved persons from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. (Most are from Virginia and North Carolina).

Bureau of Pensions Law Division Case Files, 1862–1933

The Law Division prosecuted pension fraud, promoted compliance with legal requirements for pension payments, and answered inquiries about legal questions. More information is online at catalog.archives.gov/id/2538355.

- Some files contain correspondence or affidavits in which African Americans gave information about their identity and ownership before the Civil War. For example, Samuel Christian, a formerly enslaved

person, explained why he was known both as Samuel Christian and Samuel McLean in the “Case File of Samuel Christian” – Digital images online at catalog.archives.gov/id/44181294.

- Former slave holders may be mentioned even when that has no direct bearing on the immediate legal issues. As one example, the “Case File of J. P. Flood” (digital images online at catalog.archives.gov/id/84288969) is about the postmaster of Dover, Tennessee, who fraudulently appropriated pension moneys belonging to an African American pensioner, Esther Summers. The January 28, 1878, summary of the original investigative report indicates that "Daniel McAnlay states that the pensioner [Esther Summers] was formerly the slave of his mother."
- Some correspondence and investigations relate to promoters of the “Ex-Slave Pension Movement.” It was legal for a promoter to merely sell membership in an ex-slave pension club; it was illegal for a promoter to falsely claim to be a U.S. Government agent.
 - Augustus Clark was prosecuted but acquitted for allegedly representing himself as a U.S. Government agent. Testimony of several former slaves identifies their dates and places of birth and former slave owners in the “Case File of Augustus Clark” – digital images online at catalog.archives.gov/id/45273738.
 - William Dotson of Somerville, Tennessee, described his work and authorization for organizing ex-slave pension clubs in the “Case File of William Dotson” – digital images online at catalog.archives.gov/id/75646751.
 - Printer D. O. Fleming of Pulaski, Tennessee, sent the Bureau of Pensions samples of fliers or broadsides he had printed for two meetings of the “Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association” of Giles County, Tennessee, in 1899 that are in the “Case File of D. O. Fleming” – digital images online at catalog.archives.gov/id/83891243.
 - Some formerly enslaved persons wrote letters identifying their dates and places of birth and identified former slave holders in the hope that they could obtain a pension. One example is the “Case File Concerning Ex-Slaves” – digital images online at catalog.archives.gov/id/79443574.

Freedmen’s Bureau Records

The Freedmen’s Bureau—formally known as the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands—was established in 1865 by Congress to help millions of former black slaves and poor whites in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. The Freedmen’s Bureau provided food, housing and medical aid, established schools and offered legal assistance. It also attempted to settle formerly enslaved persons on land confiscated or abandoned during the war. There are Washington, DC, headquarters records, as well as records created in each of the states. These have been microfilmed and can be found online.

- **Marriage Records** – National Archives Microfilm Publication M1875, *Marriage Records of the Office of the Commissioner, Washington Headquarters of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1861–1869*, online at Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org (www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1414908). Includes records from Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.
- **Records of the Assistant Commissioners** for each state contain a variety of correspondence and records about various subjects. Records are available for Alabama, Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Online at FamilySearch.org at www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2427901, and North Carolina, on FamilySearch.org at www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1803698.

- **Records of the Field Offices** for each state contain a variety of records including reports of persons and articles hired, lists of people in industrial schools and freedmen's homes, school reports, lists of orphan children, registers of rations issued, contracts, voluminous correspondence about various matters. Records are available online for Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. For links to digitized records, go to www.archives.gov/digitization/digitized-by-partners and search for the term "field offices."

Freedman's Savings and Trust Company Records (Freedman's Bank), 1865–1874

The bank was a private corporation chartered by Congress to provide a safe place for freedmen to save their money. In an effort to protect the interests of depositors and their heirs in the event of a depositor's death, the bank branches collected a substantial amount of detailed information about each depositor and his or her family. The data found in the files provide researchers with a rare opportunity to document the black family for the period immediately following the Civil War. For more information, see Reginald Washington, "The Freedman's Savings and Trust Company and African American Genealogical Research," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 1997), online at www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/freedmans-savings-and-trust.html.

- **National Archives Microfilm Publication M816, Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedman's Saving and Trust Company, 1865–1874** – digital images online at FamilySearch.org (www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1417695) and Ancestry.com (search.ancestryinstitution.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=8755)
 - This series consists of 55 volumes of signatures and personal identification data about 67,000 depositors in 29 branches of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company.
 - The information may consist of account number, name of depositor, date of entry, place of birth, place brought up, residence, age, complexion, name of employer or occupation, wife or husband, children, father, mother, brothers, sisters, remarks, and signature.
 - Early volumes may contain the name of the former slave holder and the name of the plantation.
 - Copies of death certificates have been pinned to some entries. In these cases, the death certificate has been filmed directly following the page showing the registration of the depositor's signature.
 - Many numbers are missing, a few are out of numerical order, and in some cases blocks of numbers were not used. Many registers appear to be missing. The volume for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 1870–June 1874 contains signatures of officers of societies.
- **Dividend Payment Record of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, 1882–1889** – digital images online at catalog.archives.gov/id/566993
 - This series consists of ledger books that contain information on depositors for each bank.
 - The ledger sheets in each book include a running number for each entry, the number of the depositor's account, the name of the depositor, the balance due (currency, number of the dividend, silver), payments of dividends (number of the dividend), and remarks. Dates of the dividends and entries are also shown.

Southern Claims Commission Claims Files

The Southern Claims Commission was established by the Act of March 3, 1871, to provide compensation for citizens of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia who had suffered property damage or loss by Federal troops during the Civil War. Claimants were required to prove their losses and that they had remained loyal to the Union during the war. Some claims were approved while others were disallowed (not approved).

- Approved claims: More information and links at catalog.archives.gov/id/566157
- Disallowed claims: More information at catalog.archives.gov/id/562207

Typical claims files include the claimant's petition, inventories of supplies and property for which compensation was desired, testimony of the claimant and others (both favorable and adverse) relating to the claim, copy of the commission's report, and the certificate of settlement from the Third Auditor of the Treasury.

Formerly enslaved persons sometimes testified on behalf of their former masters. Some former slaves themselves submitted claims, such as Emily Frazier of Limestone County, Alabama, Claim No. 43846, who claimed loss of a mule and some hogs. See her file at catalog.archives.gov/id/57551354.

Coastwise Slave Ship Manifests

By the act of March 2, 1807 (2 Stat. 426), Congress outlawed the African slave trade effective on January 1, 1808, and in 1820 declared it to be piracy punishable by death (3 Stat. 600–601). Remaining unimpaired, however, were the rights to buy and sell slaves, and to transport them from one slave state to another. The 1807 act also imposed regulations on the coastal transportation of slaves. Effective January 1, 1808, vessels under 40 tons in coastwise trade were prohibited from transporting slaves. The captain or master of vessels over 40 tons in coastwise trade were required to provide a manifest of slave cargo to the collector of customs (or the surveyor of customs) at the port of departure and at the port of arrival. Manifests created under the 1807 law include the “name and sex of each person, their age and stature [height], ... whether negro, mulatto, or person of colour, with the name and place of residence of every owner or shipper of the same....”

- **Annapolis, Maryland, 1822:** Two manifests; more information at catalog.archives.gov/id/4693973
- **Beaufort, South Carolina, 1826–1830:** More information at catalog.archives.gov/id/2767350; images online at Ancestry.com in “U.S., Southeast Coastwise Inward and Outward Slave Manifests, 1790–1860” database.
- **Charleston, South Carolina, 1820–1858:** More information at catalog.archives.gov/id/2767346; images online at Ancestry.com in “U.S., Southeast Coastwise Inward and Outward Slave Manifests, 1790–1860” database.
- **Mobile, Alabama, 1820–1860:** More information at catalog.archives.gov/id/2554808; images online at Ancestry.com in “U.S., Southeast Coastwise Inward and Outward Slave Manifests, 1790–1860” database.
- **New Orleans, Louisiana, 1807–1860:** National Archives Microfilm Publication M1895, *Slave Manifests of Coastwise Vessels Filed at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1807–1860* (30 rolls). Digital images online at Ancestry.com in “New Orleans, Louisiana, Slave Manifests, 1807–1860” database, and some are online at catalog.archives.gov/id/5573655.
- **New York City, New York, 1822–1852.** One manifest is for 1822; the rest are for April to August 1852. Digital images online at catalog.archives.gov/id/7821181
- **Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1800–1860:** More information at catalog.archives.gov/id/875814
- **Savannah, Georgia, Coastwise Slave Manifests, 1801–1860.** For more information, go to catalog.archives.gov/id/1151775; images online at Ancestry.com in “U.S., Southeast Coastwise Inward and Outward Slave Manifests, 1790–1860” database.

Records of the Board of Commissioners for the Emancipation of Slaves in the District of Columbia

The District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act (12 Statutes at Large 376), adopted April 16, 1862, ended slavery in Washington, DC, by paying slave holders for releasing their slaves. These records were

microfilmed as National Archives Microfilm Publication M520, *Records of the Board of Commissioners for the Emancipation of Slaves in the District of Columbia, 1862–1863*, are Treasury records from the Accounting Officers of the Treasury (Record Group 217), and are online in Settled Treasury Accounts, 1790–1894 (catalog.archives.gov/id/302045) as well as online on FamilySearch.org at www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2515818.

Fugitive Slave Case Files

Federal courts were sometimes involved in the legal process by which enslavers retrieved escaped enslaved persons, which was governed by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 (1 Statutes at Large 302) as amended by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (9 Statutes at Large 462). U.S. District Court and U.S. Circuit Court records, held in NARA's research facilities, include fugitive slave case files.

- See some examples at [catalog.archives.gov/search?q=%22fugitive%20slave%22%20case%20file&f.oldScope=\(descriptions%20or%20online\)&f.level=series&SearchType=advanced](https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=%22fugitive%20slave%22%20case%20file&f.oldScope=(descriptions%20or%20online)&f.level=series&SearchType=advanced)
- The escape of Joshua Glover of Missouri involved about a dozen court cases: catalog.archives.gov/search?q=%22fugitive%20slave%22%20%22joshua%20glover%22&f.oldScope=descriptions

District of Columbia Records

NARA holds some District of Columbia records due to its status as federal land not within the bounds of any state, including some of its earlier Metropolitan Police records. For information, see catalog.archives.gov/id/659. Among these are the “mug shots” from **Identification Books, 1878–1896** (NAID 1460515), online at catalog.archives.gov/id/1460515. The mug shots include images of a few African Americans born before 1865 who *may* have been born into slavery. Follow this link: catalog.archives.gov/search?q=slave&f.ancestorNalds=1460515.

Final Thoughts

The above examples are certainly only a partial list of federal records that may provide information about individuals who were enslaved before 1865. Information may be recorded in surprising and unexpected places. Always research all records created about the geographic location in which your ancestors lived.

The National Archives Catalog (catalog.archives.gov) provides information about NARA's holdings. As of November 2021, the Catalog contains more than 146 million digital images. The staff continues to add more information and digital images. **Search for surnames and/or geographic place names of interest annually!**