

The *FamilySearch Research Wiki* has a page titled “[Researching African American Genealogy](#)” that contains seven steps to get you started on your family history. This case study follows these steps. It also uses tips found in the Wiki page “[Quick Guide to African American Research](#)”

Step One: Start With Yourself

“Identify what you already know. Start with yourself and work backward in time by filling in as much information as you can, by memory, on a pedigree chart. Try to fill out full names (including maiden names for women), relationships, and dates and locations for births, marriages, and deaths.”

- This can easily be done on *Ancestry.com* or *FamilySearch.org*

Step Two: Gather Family Information

“Gather home sources (birth certificates, marriage licenses, deeds, etc.) and family information. Look in the homes of parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Gather records that show family names; dates of birth, marriage, and death; places; or relationships. Older relatives will likely have more records and information than others.

Records may include:

- Bibles
- Newspaper clippings
- Birth, marriage, death certificates
- Diaries
- Letters
- Scrapbooks

Also look at compiled sources for any information about the family.”

Step Three: Interview Your Relatives

“Interview relatives, both those who live nearby and those who live faraway. Interview them either by phone or in person. Make sure to interview the eldest living relatives; their knowledge can often fill in gaps when records become scarce.

When conducting oral interviews:

- Set up appointments (by phone for those who live far away and in person for those who live near).
- Prepare questions beforehand.
- Record the interview (ask for permission beforehand).
- Write down notes afterwards.
- Compare memories between relatives.
- Fill out family group sheets to organize ancestors according to the information learned.

Topics to cover in interviews:

- When and where things happened. Location is key in genealogical research.
- Relationships
- Names (including maiden names, nicknames, spellings, etc.)

Be aware of sensitive topics for the interviewee.”

- See [RLP 201: Coming to the Table](#) for a discussion of the importance of oral history in African-American Genealogy.

Step Four: Write for Copies of Records (*Look at Original Records*)

“With the information learned from the records found and interviews conducted, obtain copies of more records. These records will help prove relationships and extend the family line further. Some may be online, but others may need to be ordered from county courthouses or state vital records offices.

Such records include:

- Birth, death, marriage, divorce
 - Courthouse Information
 - Land/probate deeds, conveyances, affidavit of heirship, guardianship
 - Tax records (includes slave information)
 - Voter registration
 - Social security administration”
- I like to start by seeing general FamilySearch/Ancestry hints and looking at those original records
 - When determining if a hint is for your ancestor, think DR.P. - Dates, Relationships, and Places. If these things match your ancestor - it is likely a record that shows your ancestor!

Step Five: Follow Up on Death Record Clues

- Legal name of descendant
- Marital status
- Parent(s) names(s)
- Parent’s birthplaces
- Date and place of birth and death
- Who verified death
- Funeral home that handled remains
- Cemetery
- Verification of social security number
- **Make sure you look at the informant of the death certificate.**
- Order any death certificates you don’t have.

Step Six: Search the Census

“Federal census records are taken every ten years and are available from 1790 through 1940. Only the head of household was listed from 1790 to 1840. Starting in 1850, every member of the household was listed. Starting in 1880, relationships to the head of household were added. The 1870 census is the first one in which all African Americans were listed. Some state census records are also available depending on the state.

Census records usually list:

- Name, age, race
- Relationship to head of household
- Occupation
- House number
- Literacy
- Military experience
- Home/farm ownership
- Value of property
- Birthplace
- Birthplace of Parents

Begin searching with the name of a person you know who would have been included in the 1940 census. If you have trouble finding the person, look for siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles. Most families lived only a few doors from each other.”

Step Seven: Search State and County Records

“In many cases, state and county records are the best sources for finding information. Most states and counties have an archives office. Many of these records are online, but some may only be accessible at the archives.

State and county records may include:

- State censuses
- Church records
- Cemetery records
- Vital records
- Land and property records
- Narratives, histories
- Directories
- Voter registration cards
- Tax lists (this is important for slavery research)
- Wills and probate
- Criminal and civil proceedings”

Making the Slave Connection

“You must first identify the slave owner, and then study the owner’s records for clues to your family. Correctly identifying your ancestor in slave records is difficult. Even professional researchers are successful only about 50 percent of the time.

Keep in mind that only about 15 percent of former slaves took their last slave owner’s surname. Some took the surname of people they admired, such as Lincoln or Washington, and some took a surname they had been using for many years without the knowledge of the slave owner.”

- Search the 1860 census and 1860 slave schedule for your ancestor’s surname.

Another Way of Identifying the Slave Owner

“If the sources listed above do not help you identify a slave owner, try the following technique:

1. Find your family on the 1870 census.
2. Make a list of every family with property on the 10 pages before and 10 pages after your ancestor. Add your ancestor's surname to this list if it is not already there.
3. Act as if each family name on the list was the name of the former slave owner. Use the records listed under Search Records of Slaves. As you use the records you will start eliminating some names, and others will look more promising.
4. If you don't find a match, try to find out if the family moved from a different location. If so, repeat this process as you check the census records for the other location."

Searching Records for Slaves

"1. Study the life and records of the slave owner and his family. Your ancestor's life was inseparably connected with the slave owner. Your ancestor will be listed in records of the slave owner's property.

2. Look for the slave owner's name in:

- Federal census schedules, 1850 and 1860. Slave schedules give the age and sex of each slave. For information on using slave schedules, see: United States Census, Slave Schedule, 1850 - FamilySearch Historical Records and U.S. Census Slave Schedule, 1860 which each contain a section, *How to Use the Collection*.
- The 1850 and 1860 federal census mortality schedules. These give the names of slaves who died and the names of the slave owners.
- Tax records. These list slaves and their monetary value.
- Land and property records. Search for information about deeds, sales, mortgages, or rental transactions of slaves.
- Probate, estate, and chancery court records These show the distribution of slaves at the death of a slave owner.
- Plantation records. Account log books give the names of slaves, family relationships, and their assigned tasks. Some records give the slaves' birth and death dates. They also record when a slave was bought, from whom, and for how much.
- Antebellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War, Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1966."

Helpful Sources:

- UGA's historical newspaper project: <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/>
- Georgia Archives (very good for historic maps of Georgia): <https://vault.georgiaarchives.org/>
- FamilySearch Catalog for your county of interest
- County histories for your county of interest
 - Try to find historians who have specifically researched slavery in this county. Many counties have African-American specific historical societies. These societies are incredibly helpful with researching.