Researching Civil War African Americans: A Guide

Prepared by Dr. Caroline Wood Newhall, Postdoctoral Fellow, VCCWS

Before You Start Research – Best Practices

1) **Have a general plan of initial information you possess and possible leads you would like to pursue.**
   a) What time period(s) are you looking for?
   b) What areas or places (such as residences, military camps, workplaces, etc.) do you already know about?
   c) Do you have any helpful details on the person or people you are looking for (name(s) - full and/or partial, employment, birthplace, birthdate, burial site)? How far back does your genealogical knowledge go? Start from there if you can.

   Write it all out ahead of time. Keep track of the plan and cross things off as you go so you remember where you left off the next time you return to your research.

2) **Create a Research Folder and series of documents with descriptive titles**. These will help you keep track of information as you go through your research. When in doubt, write it down!
   a) I like to use spreadsheets (Google Spreadsheets is my preferred resource - it is free and accessible anywhere with an internet connection, and you can download copies should you be someplace without WiFi) to keep track of my research data. You can create multiple sheets within one document. Tabs can include information such as "Primary Sources," "Secondary Sources," "Timeline of Events," "Important Places," and "Family Members" etc.
      i) This will allow you to keep track of a LOT of information in one place. I highly recommend using a spreadsheet for research, but you should do what is comfortable and works best for you.
   b) You can copy/paste important links that you can return to later. Hyperlinks will enable you to describe what the link is. (Just ask me how to create hyperlinks if you are unfamiliar with creating them, I will walk you through it)
   c) Take down the names of people you encounter during your research, where and when you spoke to or met them, and other pertinent details. This includes archivists, state employees, librarians, students, and many others! You never know who you will bump into in the course of doing research, and they could be a wonderful source of access and information down the road, as well as a potential friend.

3) **Make sure you have enough storage space, memory, backup hard drives, etc. depending on your preferred devices.** If you prefer a paper/pen to a laptop/smartphone, that works just as well! Just be sure to have a clear organization system (filing etc.) so you don't lose track of written notes.

4) **Consider using a citation manager such as Zotero**. This will help you keep track of online sources - you can install a plug-in to your web browser (e.g. Firefox, Chrome) that you can click when you are on a helpful or interesting page. You can return to it later using the Zotero application, and you can conduct word searches to find things quickly.

5) **Get excited to do some research!**

Keep in Mind

Pinpointing the correct person/ancestor can be difficult. Try to corroborate details to ensure you have found the correct person, place, and/or event. Using newspapers, city directories, maps, and other resources can help provide more information and context for not only identifying ancestors, but learning more about them as well!

Online and In-Person Research Tools, Sources, and Resources

Below is a list of helpful resources (including genealogical websites - both free and paid) that are available online. We have also included the names, websites, and appropriate phone numbers for several archives and other research facilities in Virginia and elsewhere. If you are looking at states not included on the list, we can help you find the appropriate resources.

Researching Enslaved and Formerly Enslaved African Americans
- Slave Ancestral Research
- African-American Genealogy
- Journey Into Your Past: African American Genealogy Resources
- Freedmen's Bureau Online
- Voices Remembering Slavery
- Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project
- Census and Census Slave Schedules (Ancestry.com, NARA, etc.)
    - https://www.archives.gov/research/genealogy/census/about
    - https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/measuringamerica.pdf
    - https://www.census.gov/prod/2000pubs/cff-2.pdf
    - See 1850 and 1860 for Slave Schedules

Military Records
- National Archives and Records Administration
- Library of Congress
- National Parks Service

- [Researching Your Civil War Ancestor](#)
- [Soldiers and Sailors Database](#)
- *Official Records of the United States and Confederate Armies*
    - Available on Google Books
    - Organized chronologically and by region
- *Official Records of the United States and Confederate Navies*
    - Available on Google Books
- Statistics, Information on Regiments
    - William Fox, *Regimental Losses of the Civil War*
    - Frederick Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*
- Regimental Histories
    - Louis Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment; History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry*
    - Stephen LaBarre, *The Fifth Massachusetts Colored Cavalry*
- Prison Records
- Freedmen's Bureau Records

Genealogical Websites
- **Free**
    - [Family Search](#)
    - [American Ancestors](#)
    - Census Records
- **Paid**
    - [Ancestry.com](#)
    - [Fold3.com](#) (Military Records)
    - HeritageQuest

Newspaper Archives
- **Free**
    - Chronicling America
- **Paid**
    - Newspapers.com

Maps
- Library of Congress
    - Battle Maps
    - County Maps with Property Owners
    - Sanborn Fire Maps
- Google Maps
- University Libraries' Websites

Historical Societies, Local Archives, State Archives, Museums etc.
- Town Records
- County Records

- State Records and Libraries
- Virginia Historical Society
- Freedmen's Bureau Records
- Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical & Historical Society (MPAAGHS)
- Library of Virginia
    - Hosts workshops on genealogical research, historical research, and archival research
- City Directories
- Runaway Slavery Advertisement Data Bases
    - *Freedom on the Move* (Cornell University)
    - NC Runaway Slave Advertisements
- Universities Studying Slavery websites
    - University of North Carolina
    - University of Virginia
    - Furman University
    - Georgetown University
    - Brown University
    - Harvard University
    - Rutgers University
- Research Handouts
    - Getting Started (AmericanAncestors.org)
    - Starting Your Genealogy Research (NARA)

Other Helpful Resources
- Black Digital Humanities Projects & Resources via the Colored Conventions Project (@CCP_org)
- Local Libraries
- Local Historical Societies
- FindAGrave.com
- Google Books
    - Often offers previews or entire copies of books. You can use a word search to search through them. Genealogy books from the 19th and early 20th centuries are often available in full here.
- Citation Software
    - Zotero (free)
    - Scrivener (paid)
- Historians, Archivists, and Researchers!