

## Researching the Formerly Enslaved: It Takes a Village!

Renate Yarborough Sanders  
yarsan@aol.com

Researching formerly enslaved ancestors is not an impossible task; however, it can be a very challenging endeavor for those who undertake it. Unlike most genealogy research, studying the lives of the formerly enslaved requires researchers to dig into the record of other families – those of the slave holder(s) – in order to uncover information related to the lives of the enslaved. Because of this, the descendants of those who once owned other humans can play a pivotal role in assisting the research of anyone who is working to uncover the life of an enslaved ancestor.

### Getting Started with Slave Ancestral Research

Beginning to research a formerly-enslaved ancestor (FEA) will start out just like any other genealogy project. The researcher will begin with what is known and work backwards. If the ancestor lived after Emancipation, look for them in the 1870 Census to establish baseline data. For many African-ancestored researchers, the 1870 Census is referred to as a “brick wall” that must be burst through (or broken down), but it is a really the true go-point for slave ancestral research because it is with the 1870 that we often get our first glimpse of an ancestor’s post-slavery life. Researchers will use data obtained from this census to establish age, location, marital status, family members, occupations, and more information about an ancestor who is being enumerated by name in a federal census for the very first time. The researcher will also gather information about known or potential former slave owners who live in proximity to their ancestor(s).

*To be sure one should take the path of researching someone who was formerly enslaved, the researcher should carefully study the 1850 and 1860 Census documents to eliminate the possibility that their ancestor may have been a free person of color. If so, they would be enumerated in one, or both, of these census years and the research would take a different path.*

### Documenting the lives of the enslaved

Records of the lives of enslaved people may be found in some public repositories such as courthouses, county offices, and church archives; however, the more intimate details of their lives are more often found in the personal artifacts of the people who “owned” them – the enslavers. Items like family bibles, diaries, letters, plantation records and business ledgers, photographs, and even family lore amongst the descendants of slave owners are all valuable sources of information about the formerly enslaved. Often, these more personal items are still in the possession of the descendants of the slave-owners – many times even still in place on the same antebellum-era property. For those researching a FEA, the opportunity to see and interact

with any artifact that that is about or may have even been touched or experienced by their ancestor, would bring an enormous sense of joy, gratitude, and fulfillment.

### **Joining the Village: How can descendants of slave owners help?**

Descendants of slave owners (DSO) often hold the key to helping those researching enslaved ancestors learning anything about their ancestors' lives before 1870. Only a small percentage of descendants of enslaved ancestors (DEA) are fortunate enough to have an ancestor who was interviewed or mentioned in the WPA (or other) slave narratives. Even smaller is the number of the fortunate few whose ancestors' lives are outlined in Civil War Pension Files. For the bulk of these descendants, the only chance of learning the more intimate details of an enslaved ancestor's life will come through whatever information is held or known by the family of the slave owner. Even something as simple as sharing a photo of the home the owners lived in is a helpful gesture from a DSO to a DEA.

Slave-ancestored researchers are working hard to find any evidence of the lives of their forebearers and many are hoping/trying to find and meet the descendants of their ancestors' owners. However, this can also work both ways! If you are a DSO, and you have knowledge of or information related to your ancestor's involvement as a slave owner, YOU can help by beginning to research their enslaved population and seek out their descendants on your own, and perhaps you'll meet each other halfway. Whether or not you're related by blood, you are related by circumstance. Your ancestors shared their lives in the same space at the same time; their lives were intimately intertwined, regardless of what we may think of that, today.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind when connecting with descendants of your ancestor's enslaved family.

1. **You are not your ancestors!** Although the topic of slavery is an emotional one for all parties, it's important for descendants of slave owners to try to refrain from feeling/expressing guilt or shame when interacting with descendants of the enslaved. Though you may experience these feelings inside, DEAs realize that you did not enslave their ancestors and that both you and they are simply studying something that happened in the past which involved both of your families (which are sometimes the same family). The goal, for both parties, is to learn, share, and understand as much as possible about the lives of your ancestors, and for both sides to respect each other's position in doing so.
2. **Be honest.** Say and share what you do and don't know. Don't withhold information from DEAs simply because you think it may be too sad, brutal, or risqué. African-ancestored researchers are well-aware of the trauma and nuances of slavery and are prepared for whatever they may learn about their ancestors. Yes, some things are hard to talk about, and you may find yourselves crying together – or there could even be some very uncomfortable or angry moments; but still, if you know something about an enslaved

ancestor, and withhold that information from their descendant(s), you're being selfish and unfair to that researcher - so find a way to share the info.

3. **Consider meeting in person.** If logistics allow it, and both parties are willing, consider meeting the DEA in person, at some point. This is sometimes referred to as “coming to the table”; but whatever you call it, it’s an opportunity for personal reconciliation with the past and this can be a very powerful meeting. Some DSOs and DEAs even make plans to visit the very properties where their ancestors once lived and worked. If you or a family member still lives on that property, consider inviting the descendants of enslaved workers to visit. If you do this, be a great host, by all means, but also please consider allowing your guests some alone time in some of the spaces their ancestors most likely inhabited – even if no outbuildings remain. The enormity of the opportunity for a DEA to experience and reflect in these spaces cannot be overstated. For many, this is the most powerful gift you can give them.
4. **Consider DNA testing.** Almost all African-ancestored descendants in the United States are showing some level of European ancestry in today’s DNA testing market and at least 35% of African American men have European paternal haplogroups.<sup>1</sup> When these results are received, most people don’t have any idea where the European is coming from. But, thanks to matching services provided by most of the DNA testing companies, DEAs and DSOs are beginning to make connections which allow both parties to gain greater insight into their ancestors’ history and behavior, and African Americans are getting more inclusive information about who and what has contributed to their genetic identity. By completing DNA testing and responding or reaching out to your matches, you’re contributing to the potential overall research success of many who simply want to know their history.
5. **Share widely.** If you are not comfortable with the idea of meeting descendants of your ancestors’ enslaved families, there are still ways you can help with the research. All that’s needed is a willingness to share! Consider donating family documents to a local or state library or another public repository. Historical societies are a good option and will care for and preserve your items properly. Or, if you’d prefer to keep what you have in your possession, simply scan documents and take photos or video of artifacts and upload the files to a blog, Facebook page or web site. There are also many organizations that will accept your files and present them online for you. Here are a few:
  - Afrigeneas (Slave Data Collection) <http://afrigeneas.com/slavedata/>
  - The Beyond Kin Project <https://beyondkin.org/>
  - The Slave Name Roll Project <http://slavenamerollproject.blogspot.com/>
  - The Int’l African American Museum Center for Family History <https://cfh.iaamuseum.org/>

Additionally, there are many surname and locality-based genealogy groups on Facebook, most of which are either closed or secret in order to provide some level of privacy and focus for participants. These groups are great platforms for sharing information, photos, and research

queries, and provide the perfect setting for DSOs and DEAs to come together and learn from one another about any shared ancestral connections.

### **Summary**

The lives of slave owners and the people they enslaved were intricately intertwined in an intimate way that cannot be denied. To learn about the lives of formerly enslaved ancestors, one must research the slave owners. Period. By becoming an integral part of the research “village” of descendants of the enslaved, those who descend from slaveowners can strengthen, provide context for, and valiantly assist in moving that research forward.

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> “How African is Black America?” Black Demographics Accessed May 3, 2019

<https://blackdemographics.com/geography/african-american-dna/>

***Renate Yarborough Sanders retains the copyright to the intellectual content of this presentation.***