

Your Results are In! Using DNA in your African American Research

Presenter: Jessica M. Trotter

“For a few days after I received my results, I looked in the mirror and didn’t know how to understand myself.” ~ Jesmyn Ward¹

Genetic Genealogy

- Offers the ability to extend genealogies further into the past with more accuracy
- Can confirm or eliminate relationships
- Can strengthen weak paper trails or weaken strong ones
- Is rarely (if ever) a magic bullet to solve all your brick wall problems
- Can offer unexpected and unwanted insights
- Is constantly adapting and improving
- *Has* to be done hand in hand with thorough traditional genealogy research

Getting started

If you have living relatives... hunt them down and talk to them. Note every little detail—it might be more useful than you think. And find out who is saving funeral programs, bibles, or photographs, etc. Ask them if they are willing to take a DNA test but be respectful of those who don’t want that or don’t want to move their information onto sites beyond where they tested.

Search Family Clusters

We migrate with family groups, religious communities, or communities reacting to changes in our environment. Start in the small circles and continue out. Follow the lines of siblings and in-laws, neighbors, and religious communities. Look for common birthplaces, surnames, and first name patterns. And especially when researching the formerly enslaved, don’t limit yourself to the local African American community. You’ll eventually start to see the mirrored migration patterns between previous slave holding families and distinct sets of the formerly enslaved.

Pedigree Triangulation

Clustering groups and comparing pedigree charts to establish common ancestors. This often requires the researcher to work on building out multiple trees—those of their own and their matches.

Surprises

n.p.e.—technically non-paternity event—more accurately, not the parent expected—ex. The next-door neighbor’s child or, come to find out, my aunt and father are genetically only half-siblings.

¹ From her essay “Cracking the Code” in *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race*, 2017, p. 94.

Steps

- Clustering Matches—look at shared matches and any linked and unlinked trees for hints.
- Politely and concisely email close matches for additional information.
- Start building out trees—I tend to start another tree (or multiple extra trees) versus attaching to my larger one until I know the connection is correct.
- Don't get stuck in online resources—What do the local libraries, archives, museums, courthouses, funeral homes, have? (Example: Contacting the public library for obituaries)
- Don't get stuck on only your names or only the African American community—Again, you may eventually start to see the mirrored migration patterns between previous owners' families and the formerly enslaved.

Throughout all of this you should be researching the time and area you're working in.

Social Media, Google, and other available information

- Check to see if matches have created Ancestry profiles—that could give age range, location, look at public trees.
- Consider searching social media—Facebook, twitter, etc. could all give you information (ex. Facebook has a feature to identify family members). We post about life's highlights—birthdays, anniversaries, and deaths.
- Searching newspapers or even generally searching Google, could give hints as well. Ex. I have a fairly locked down Facebook page but you could get all kinds of hits for me in Google through work related stories.

I am **not** suggesting cyberstalking or contacting matches separately through social media if they haven't replied to you through the testing sites. My general thought is if they haven't answered you after a couple of messages—with a healthy space in between, then let it go.

DNA Research Resources

International Society of Genetic Genealogy Wiki: https://isogg.org/wiki/Wiki_Welcome_Page

Genetic Genealogy in Practice by Blaine T. Bettinger and Debbie Parker Wayne, 2016.

The Family Tree Guide to DNA Testing and Genetic Genealogy by Blaine Bettinger, 2016

The Genetic Genealogist (Blaine Bettinger)—<http://www.thegeneticgenealogist.com/13-2/>

- DNA Central—a subscription site created by Bettinger: <https://dna-central.com/>
- Facebook Group: Genetic Genealogy Tips & Techniques

The Shared cM Project 4.0 tool v4: <https://dnainter.com/tools/sharedcmv4>

The Lost Family: How DNA Testing is Upending Who We Are by Libby Copeland, 2020.

Your Genetic Genealogist (CeCe Moore)—<http://www.yourgeneticgenealogist.com/>

Advanced Genealogy Research Techniques by George G. Morgan and Drew Smith, 2013.

Your DNA Guide: <https://www.yourdnaguide.com/> the site of Dian Southard

Examples of Third Party Tools

- [GedMatch.com](#)
- [DNAGedcom.com](#)
- [DNA Painter](#)

More General Websites to Know

Enslaved: Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade: <https://enslaved.org/>

Family Search: <https://www.familysearch.org/>

Wiki pages: [African American Genealogy](#), [Freedmen's Bureau Records](#), [Freedman's Bank Records](#)

Fold3—Military, City Directories, Applications for Enrollment in Five Civilized Tribes:
<https://www.fold3.com/>

The Genealogy Center's African American Gateway: friendsofallencounty.org/africanamerican

Proquest's *African American Historical Newspapers*—Available through many universities (in-house) and Allen County Public Library.

The Ancestor Hunt—a newspaper resource that includes a research guide for African American Newspapers online:

<http://www.theancestorhunt.com/blog/african-american-online-historical-newspapers-summary>

The Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records database:
www.glorerecords.blm.gov/

Library of Congress's Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938:
www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938.

Mapping the Freedmen's Bureau—<https://mappingthefreedmensbureau.com/>

[WorldCat.org](#)—International Library Catalog—use it to track down books and archival records. Search on location, surnames, organizations, etc.

Learn More:

Midwest African American Genealogy Institute: <http://www.maagiinstitute.org/> (normally held at Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, Indiana)

Legacy Family Tree Webinars: <https://familytreewebinars.com/index.php>

Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society: <https://www.aahgs.org/>

Bloggers and Podcasts

Through the Trees—DNA Consultant Shannon Christmas:

<https://throughthetreesblog.tumblr.com/>

Who is Nicka Smith?—also home of Black ProGen Live: <http://www.whoisnickasmith.com/>

Bernice Bennet— <http://geniebroots.com/> & <https://www.blogtalkradio.com/bernicebennett>

African Roots Podcast— <http://africanrootspodcast.com/>

More questions? Contact me!

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Genie Road Trip: <http://genieroadtrip.com/>