

# Strategies for Finding African American Ancestors Pre-1866

Stuart Doyle looks at ways to overcome the problems you may encounter when trying to locate your African American ancestors in the usual places

**MARRIAGE LICENSE.**  
Virginia, *Supper County* to wit:  
TO ANY PERSON LICENSED TO CELEBRATE MARRIAGES.  
You are hereby authorized to join together in the Holy State of Matrimony, according to the rites and ceremonies of your Church, or religious denomination, and the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia,  
and *Arnold Brown*  
and *Patience Vaughan*  
GIVEN under my hand, as Clerk of the *Supper County* Court  
of *Supper* this *12* day *May* 1873  
*J. D. Thornton* Clerk

**CERTIFICATE TO OBTAIN A MARRIAGE LICENSE.**  
To be Annexed to the License, required by Acts passed 12th March, 1861 and February 27th, 1866.

Time of Marriage *17th May 1873.*  
Place of Marriage *Supper*  
Full Names of Parties Married *Arnold Brown & Patience Vaughan*  
Color *Coloured*  
Age of Husband *22 years*  
Age of Wife *27*  
Condition of Husband (widowed or single) *Single*  
Condition of Wife (widowed or single) *"*  
Place of Husband's Birth *Supper*  
Place of Wife's Birth *Supper*  
Place of Husband's Residence *"*  
Place of Wife's Residence *"*  
Names of Husband's Parents *Unknown*  
Names of Wife's Parents *"*  
Occupation of Husband *Farming*  
Given under my hand this *12* day of *May* 1873.  
*J. D. Thornton* Clerk.

**MINISTERS RETURN OF MARRIAGE.**  
I CERTIFY, That on the *17th* day of *May* 1873 at *Stewart*  
*Virginia*  
I united in Marriage the above-named and described parties,  
under authority of the annexed License.  
*J. G. Bailey*

This 1873 marriage license exemplifies the typical practice of omitting parent names of African Americans During Reconstruction (1865-77), public officials commonly neglected to present complete and accurate biographical records of African Americans in documents such as marriage registrations and licenses. They misrecorded birthplaces as well, most likely assuming the bride or groom was born locally if their family had longevity in the area. What is not provided in the example pictured are the names of the parents of the bride and groom. Each had a living mother and father residing together locally at the time of the marriage. Even more, the groom and his family actually were "free Negroes" for decades before slavery ended. And, the bride's actual birthplace was Stewart County, Georgia. (Photo by J. D. Moore, Black Diamonds Photography and Video, Daytona Beach, Fla.)

the problem by:

- Commonly omitting slaves' surnames in public records – Before 1866, documents such as wills and estate inventories usually listed first names only although slaves had surnames. (e.g., Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, Nat Turner). Slaves only appeared in the 1850 and 1860 slave indices by description, not name.
- Not documenting slave marriages because they were not deemed to be legal unions
- Forgoing publicly recording slave births and deaths unless they were part of a general census. Even then, however, officials opted not to provide surnames and the name of biological fathers and husbands

President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed on 1 January 1863 that "all persons held as slaves ... shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." Nevertheless, almost three years passed before the ratification of the 13th Amendment made freedom a reality for more than 3 million slaves toiling in the southern states. Because these states or communities within them legally forbade slaves from

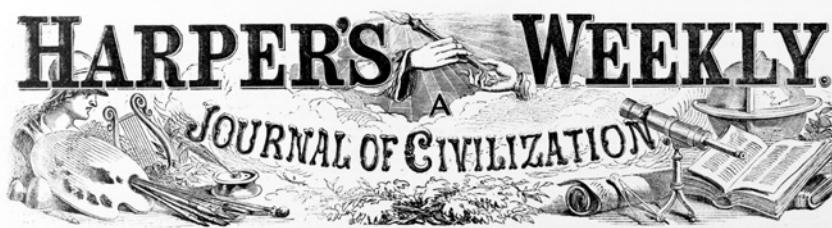
becoming literate, most southern blacks could not record their vital data — e.g., births, deaths, marriages — let alone their lineage. Therefore, if slaves risked criminal punishment by simply learning to tell their own story, local and state officials could have resolved the problem by assuming the task, even if only to better document local inhabitants — and "property." But these officials compounded

As late as 15 years after slavery ended, public officials still provided limited data on black Americans whether or not they were former slaves or free prior to 1866. For example, Virginia marriage registrations and licenses frequently excluded names of the parents of blacks. Furthermore, because of high illiteracy among blacks, former slave or not, and the pre-1866 crime of reading and writing, complete accuracy in family data they relayed was not the norm. (e.g., misspoken and misspelled names and locations, “guesstimates” or logical reasoning of dates, etc.)

Consequently, their descendants today who are doing ancestral research face a formidable challenge in finding and documenting heritage prior to 1866. The good news is that there are strategies that can help a researcher move past that barrier.

### Master’s Records

When a researcher is able to determine a slave owner, the chance exists to find valuable tidbits if not volumes of information on ancestors. Family Bibles can be a revealing source. Whereas blacks — typically matriarchs — post slavery tended to record vital information in their Bible, so did whites, even to the point of recording data on slaves considered to be an extension of their own family. This situation would occur if the slave families had served them for generations. Case in point: the African American Goodwin family of rural Hilda, Sussex County, Va. The Goodwins exercised this option in December 1955 when their age 90-plus matriarch Eva Scott Goodwin died. No record of her birthdate

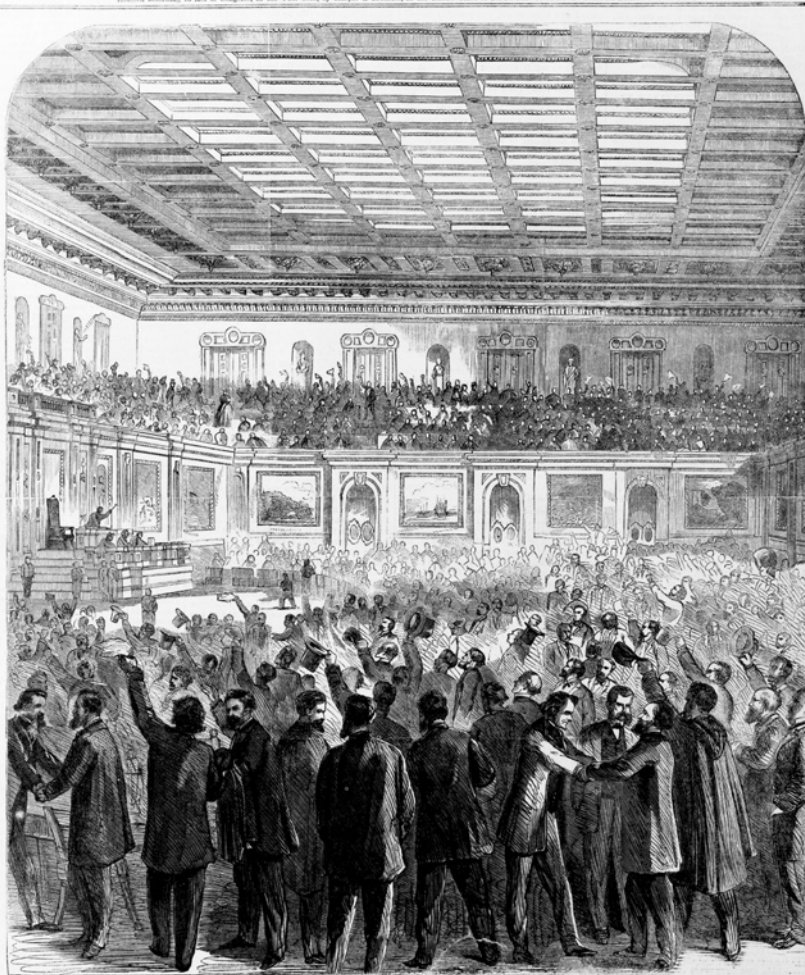


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NEW YORK, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 1865.

[SINGLE COPIES TEN CENTS.]

[AND PER YEAR IN ADVANCE.]



SCENE IN THE HOUSE ON THE PASSAGE OF THE PROPOSITION TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION, JANUARY 31, 1865.

*Scene in the House on the passage of the proposition to amend the Constitution, January 31, 1865. (Library of Congress)*

could be found in anyone’s files, public or family. The family needed it to complete the death certificate and obituary. “Miss Addie Robinson had it in her Bible,” said Annie Reese, 73, a great-granddaughter of Goodwin. Reese explained that Sarah “Addie” Flowers Robinson and the white Robinson and Flowers families, lived very close by, on

the same road. Goodwin and other black locals had worked for them, as farmers or house servants, for as far back as Reese can remember. In fact, Eva Goodwin worked specifically for Addie Robinson. Most likely, Goodwin’s birth family in the 1860s had been slaves of the Flowers, Robinsons or their local relatives.

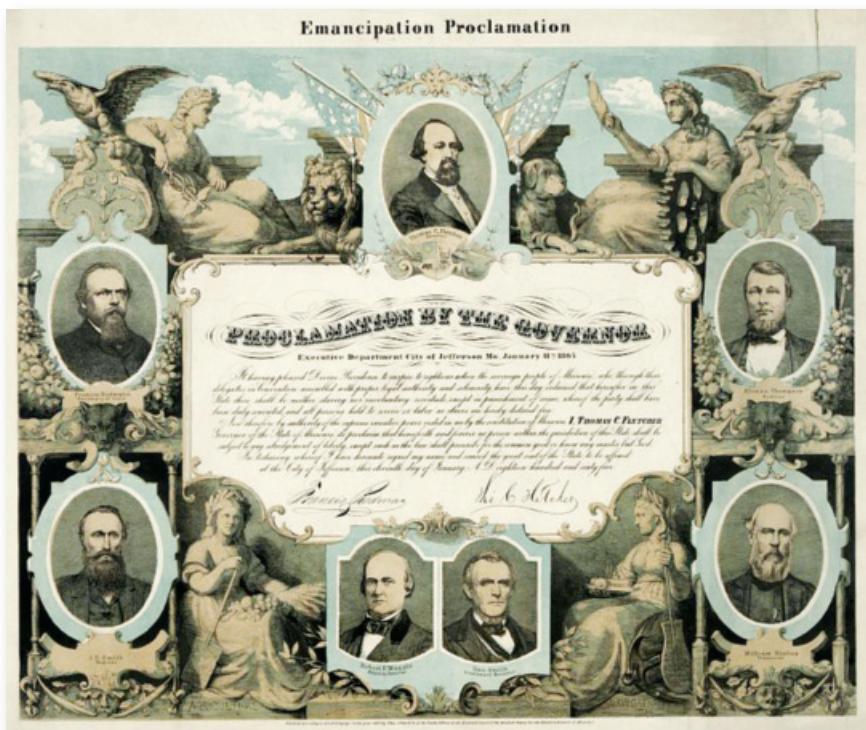
Other records to seek include farm/plantation ledgers, wills, deeds and bills of sale. Local and state archives are repositories for these types of documents. A notable example is the Mason Family Papers, which the Virginia Historical Society houses. Comprising records from Fortsville, the home of 19th century US Representative and Navy Secretary John Y. Mason (1799-1859), VHS' Mason Papers include numerous plantation ledgers that list:

- slaves in family groupings, which can be compared with the 1870 and 1880 federal census listings to match parents and siblings while mapping complete family units
- ages and birth months along with names
- infant deaths, the event date, and the slave mother's name
- types of labor that specific slaves performed and particular trades and skill sets of individual servants
- other owners who hired out slaves to Fortsville, naming the slaves

Such records now are accessible online.

### Newspaper Clippings

If a newspaper ran any item about a slave, 9.999 times out of 10, the news was not good. Usually, the slave had bolted, and the article or ad announced a reward for a capture. With that came not only a full physical and personality description of the runaway but also a Christian name, surname, current and former owners, trade and skills. Sometimes, the ads identified close relatives of the runaway, specifying the exact relationship.



One of two large commemorative prints marking the ordinance issued by Missouri governor Thomas C. Fletcher, proclaiming the immediate emancipation of slaves in that state. The Missouri ordinance was issued on January 11, 1865, three weeks before the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was proposed by Congress. (Library of Congress)

“Owners seeking fugitives knew that it was to their advantage to give as complete a description of the person being sought as possible ... Often a biographical sketch was included. This gave highlights about the fugitive’s friends and familial connections in other parts of the state or region,” according to the web site US Slave (<http://usslave.blogspot.com>)

Upon emancipation, many newspapers published ads on behalf of former slaves and freedmen who were seeking loved ones separated from them by sale. Researchers should view these ads in the communities they are exploring because the descriptions can provide a wealth of good leads if not a direct find. Note these examples from the July 18, 1866 edition of *The Colored Tennessean* in Davidson County, Tennessee.

#### JOHN MELTON of Huntsville, AL

- Looking for DICK RICHARDSON, my father, who formerly belonged to MASON ANDERSON of Pontotoc County, Mississippi, my brother EDWARD and my sisters, LUCY AND POLLY, who all belonged to the same man. My uncle, JOHN ANDERSON and his wife, FANNY ANDERSON.

#### REQUESTORIS NAME NOT GIVEN, ONLY A BOX NUMBER

- Looking for MICHAEL KINNARD, my son, 12 years of age, who was hired to a man named GRIFFIN at a pinewood factory in Hickman County, Tennessee.

#### SUSAN HUDDLESTON of Murfreesboro, TN

- Looking for JETSON, my son who was sold 16 years ago by a MR. DOLHITE of Oxford, Mississippi to a MR. THOMAS FORD of the same place. I have not heard from him since.

## CASE OF ARNOLD ENOCH BROWN (1846-1915)

### ARMISTEAD BOGLE of London, TN

- Looking for EDMONIA BOGLE, who formerly belonged to JOHN SCRUGGS in McMinn County, Tennessee and who was taken to Texas some years ago. Her brother wishes to hear from her.

Newspapers from 1865 through the first few decades of the 20th century are another vital resource. Both the Negro and mainstream press would mention the slave origin of prominent or highly respected African Americans when reporting the death of these citizens in obituaries and other articles.

Scouring newspaper accounts can pay off royally.

### Naming Patterns

Large families — up to 20 children, even — were fairly common in America through the mid-20th century, particularly among people categorized as black, mulatto or Negro. These populations employed standard practices for naming their offspring, many times with the junior labels given to the sixth or seventh son rather than the firstborn. What researchers should observe regarding ancestors living in the 1800s and early 1900s are the names of an oldest son and daughter. Particularly attention should be paid to the decades following emancipation as to the names of parents and grandparents if a child's birth order is known. Traditionally, couples named their first son after his maternal grandfather and the eldest daughter after her paternal grandmother. Often, the second and third children would carry first and middle names of their grandparents. Looking carefully at such names can offer clues for

- Died April 24, 1916 in Dinwiddie County, Va. His death certificate does not indicate the names of his parents.
- Brown married in 1873. His cited Sussex County, Va. as his birthplace. (Sussex borders Dinwiddie.)
- Brown's obituary appeared in the Petersburg (Va.) Progress Index on April 28, 1915. It revealed: "'Uncle' Arnold Brown, a worthy colored man of the antebellum type, died this week at his home near Reams, Dinwiddie county. He was a slave, owned by John Y. Mason ..." Fortsville, the plantation of John Y. Mason (1799-1859), former judge, US Navy secretary and minister to France, was located in Sussex, a county neighboring Dinwiddie.
- An April 14, 1858 roster of slaves belonging to Mason shows Arnold as the son of Rachel in a category of slaves "above 12 years" in age. In an 1860, a list of slaves belonging to the children of the late John Y. Mason, Arnold is listed as the 9-year-old son of Rachel. Mother and son also appear in other Fortsville documents pre 1865.

names to focus on when reviewing documents listing only slaves' Christian names. The odds are more in the researcher's favor when a name is unique. (A James, John, Sara, Mary or Jane can present a big challenge.)

### Census Clues

Before 1866, one's citizenship status depended on that of a mother: If she were free, her children would be born free; if a slave, so would be her offspring. Many free women, however, had slave spouses. Therefore, because this type of marriage was not considered legitimate and, therefore, was undocumented, a woman could not adopt her husband's surname. Her free children officially would be recognized by her maiden or surname. Consequently, it is important that the researcher carefully analyze the 1850 and 1860 federal censuses of state populations, and local ones as well. A family may be listed but under the surname of the free mother, who could not begin using her

former slave husband's name until after 1865.

The African American Hunnicutt family of Sussex County, Virginia's Henry District exemplifies this scenario. In 1870 and 1880, they appear under that surname including James H. Hunnicutt. Born in April 1861, J. H. Hunnicutt had a free father and slave mother, which is revealed in his biography published in the early 1900s by The United Order of True Reformers. In 1881, a former Alabama slave, William Washington Browne, founded this nationally prominent African American benevolence society. In January 1920, Hunnicutt reported the death of his father, also named James Hunnicutt and a native of the county. The younger Hunnicutt identified his grandparents in the death record as "Christopher" (a.k.a. Chrispin) and Martha Maine Hunnicutt.

The Maines were a free family as far back as the early 1800s, and county records show that those living prior to 1866 were born free. James H. Hunnicutt

nor his slave mother appear in the 1850 and 1860 censuses; however, Martha Maine does, along with her free children including James “Maine,” the father of James H. Hunnicutt. In other words, James Hunnicutt who died in January 1920 was known legally as James Maine until the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in 1865.

Again, when research or oral history reveals that an ancestor was a free woman, seek her out in the 1850 and 1860 censuses under her maiden name. If that name is unknown, look for a family grouping based on given/first names that align with the names you know or those in the 1870 census.

### Racial Classifications

Through the early 1920s, county, state and US government representatives determined racial and ethnic classifications for people now self-designated as African Americans. Then, descriptions other than black or Negro tended to occur based usually on a community’s racial and ethnic labeling practices. Individuals and entire families could be described as something other than black or Negro, or African American by today’s norms. In federal census records, for example, listings for relatives, friends, neighbors and others of the same community and ethnic heritage record those groups as black, Negro, mulatto, Indian, in Virginia, even Portuguese on occasion. During slavery, circulars and other printed materials frequently described people of African and Native American descent as mulattoes. Those descriptions changed each decade for some people when census-takers



*Benevolence societies and fraternal orders can be a valuable source in roots-tracing. Records from fraternal orders and benevolence societies (e.g., Masonic orders, Odd Fellows, United Order of True Reformers) in which African Americans held memberships in the 19th and 20th centuries can be a treasure trove of biographical data on ancestors. Look hard enough and the result may be membership rosters, sick lists, dues collections and emblems such as those pictured. (Photo by J. D. Moore, Black Diamonds Photography and Video, Daytona Beach, Fla.)*

created demographic rosters of all a household’s members.

This practice remained effective for the most part until mid-1920s with the passing of the controversial Virginia Racial Integrity Act, better known as the “One-drop Rule,” which classified anyone with a drop of “Negro” blood as black. No more would complexion, hair type, or racial and ethnic heritage be a consideration. And, any freedom of public self-identification exercised by people with a colored complexion went further out the window. Eventually, the diversity of people within the one-drop category accepted the Rule as a descriptor of anyone who shared their history and cultural experiences in America since the arrival of the first African slaves in 1619. How light-skinned, straight-haired or keen-featured a person was

generally did not matter if that “drop” existed.

Well, it does matter when one aims to find slave ancestors. Following a pattern of racial classifications can help in distinguishing some families from others, enabling the researcher to concentrate on those most relevant to the search. This strategy is particularly valuable when surnames are overly common in a focus region. If oral and documented history indicates that one’s ancestors in a certain line tended to be lighter skinned or, perhaps, of Indian descent, the researcher may be able to filter out some families of “Jones,” “Smith,” “Brown” or “Williams.”

### Churches

People may be surprised a large number of today’s black churches started decades before emancipation. Descendants of early members now worship at these churches, and researchers should target them for records. A lot more than fire and brimstone preaching and soulful odes of gospel happened at black churches. They served also as schools and venues for lodge meetings. If the churches themselves do not have documents on births, baptisms, funerals and memberships from their early days, longstanding affiliated families may have them. ■

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STUART DOYLE is a past president of the Central Florida Chapter of the Afro American Historical & Genealogical Society. His own genealogy is entitled *Roots Exposed: The Lineage and Interrelationships of 15 Family Branches from Virginia's Sussex, Southampton and Greensville Counties*.