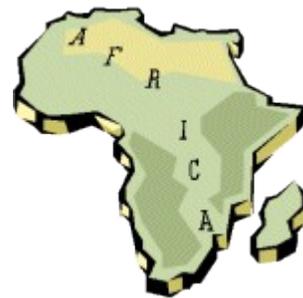


GENTREK: African-American Research

by *Alva Griffith*

updated by *Dae Powell*

presented by *Jayne McCormick*



Preface: Many of us have known Alva for some time. Her reputation as a genealogist is widespread and she is the author of the book, *Pittsylvania County Virginia Free Negro Register, and Related Documentation*. It can be obtained from www.HeritageBooks.com. She wrote this presentation for **GENTREK**.

While many people seem to think we do something different, African-Americans (AfriAms) do their research the same as everyone else.

The same basic records and methods are used, and the same basic rules apply. With some hard work and a little luck, some excellent results can be obtained.

Two very helpful books I recommend:

Finding a Place Called Home, by Dee Parmer Woodtor, and Tony Burroughs' book, ***Black Roots***.

Tony's book is strictly for beginners, while Dee's book will carry you onward through advanced research. You may also wish to check the following links: rootsweb.com/~rwguide/lesson25.htm
www.afrigeneas.com/guide

De 'MYTH'ify the process! (I-zat a word ???)

Four myths to throw out the window EARLY:

MYTH #1 - All African-Americans were slaves.

Some AfriAms came here as indentured servants, and were free from the beginning. Others were born free because their mothers were free. (An early law stated that the status of the child was to be the same as its mother.) Free Negroes are listed as taxpayers in some colonial tax records, and as members of some early white churches. There are also a number of Free Negro Registers, and Lists of Free Blacks starting after the 1790s.

On early census records, Free AfriAm heads of household are enumerated by name. If they lived on the property of others, a count is given in a column to the far right of the page with the heading AOF (All Others Free). On some censuses, these are counted by age and sex on page 2 for each householder. By 1860 there were almost 250,000 Free Blacks living in the south.

Don't **ASSUME** when you trace your ancestor that he **MUST** have been a slave. The following web site has excellent information: www.FreeAfricanAmericans.com

MYTH #2 - Most slaves lived on plantations.

Just as in current times, the percentage of truly wealthy people (who could afford to own large plantations) was comparatively small. Many whites did not own slaves at all. Of those who did own slaves, most held 5 slaves or less.

• There are a number of compiled lists of plantations, but none is complete. If you can document your ancestors to a specific plantation, there may be many records available, such as slave births, hiring arrangements, blanket and clothing lists, doctor bills, account books, diaries, letters, overseers records, and the like. One of the most comprehensive lists was created by Kenneth Stampp, and it can be found at the **LDS Library** on microfilm.

• **MYTH #3 - All slaves took their owners' surnames when slavery ended.**

While some slaves did so, many had surnames of their own which were passed on to their children. I have seen numerous Wills and Deeds where, for example, John Jones freed James Smith. We may never learn why our ancestor "changed" his "name," but don't be surprised to learn that he did so. Maybe he re-claimed his REAL name — what his family had called themselves.

• Many people did not accept an AfriAm's surname as legitimate. If you were someone's slave, you were "given" his name. Record-keepers sometimes assigned names! That didn't mean they didn't have one of their own. This was true even for some Free AfriAms. I found my great grandfather's maternal line to be free at least back to 1800; but as the Clerk "knew" who his "father" was, and did not ask his name while filling in the form for him, his 1882 marriage license was issued to him in his step-father's surname. Pap couldn't read or write, so he didn't know of the error.

• **MYTH #4 - The end of slavery is as far back as you can go.**

See MYTH #1 above regarding Free Blacks. There are MILLIONS of records about slaves. Slaves were valuable property! EVERYONE keeps track of their money! The biggest problem in doing slave research is not the lack of records, but in identifying our ancestor's slave owner, so we will know WHOSE records to trace! Once we reach the era of slavery, we must trace the records of the family that owned ours. THAT is where we will find our people.

• Often slave owner descendants hold the only clues to help us put our family puzzle together. This is why we ask them to share any data they may have in their ancestors' private papers, diaries, or letters that mention AfriAms. PLEASE don't be shy about posting these to sites so we may view them, and answer queries you may find. AfriAms need to know from whom our ancestor was purchased or inherited; to whom he was mortgaged, sold, or given as a wedding gift; with whom he traveled to another state. Sometimes owners' descendants may get a bonus tidbit of data to flesh out their ancestor's life from the slave descendants, who have looked into an off-beat resource! A good place to post this information, with "how-to-post" directions, can be found at www.Afrigeneas.com/SlaveData/

• **AfriAm oral history is valuable, since our ancestors often couldn't read or write**

• If we ask the right questions at interviews of elders and listen to their answers, and "old timey" stories, we may learn much factual data. (Remember we DO have an African *griot*-oriented tradition.) The facts may have gotten a bit muddled over the years, but often they are right on target. There are several books, including Hasker Nelson's *Listening for Our Past*, which gives good interviewing tips and lists of questions.

• Marilyn W. was able to reunite 2 branches of her family that had been separated for over 125 years because part of the family migrated west in the 1800s. In talking to a gentleman whose number she got from one of those "white-pages websites," they discovered that they both had the identical family oral history of the capture of a teenaged ancestor in Africa, and the ship captain's surname! What a reunion! It gives me chills to think about it!

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My hubby's grandfather was born a slave in NC in 1859. We were told that he was sent "up nawth" to college. I wrote to Lincoln University in PA, inquiring about a possible transcript c. 1880. They did not find the transcript, but they sent me copies of a previously unknown photograph of Grandpa while he was a student there, and a letter he had written to the office after his 1881 graduation! These were far more precious than any transcript!

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AfriAms cannot rely on older indexed compilations of records, or on Internet indices that are generated from them. Most of these do NOT contain data about our families — we were simply left out! Remember that AfriAms, as a rule, weren't doing genealogy 30 years ago, and that books are published for a select audience. More recently published books are much better about including us, but your best bet is to view original source material or microfilms of the originals.

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When she retired, Ruth S. drove her camper to her ancestral county in TX. Some years earlier, the local genealogy society had produced a marvelous compilation of extractions of ALL the cemeteries in the county. Ruth's family had lived there for many years, but none of them was in the book. She figured SOMEone had to have died there. It took Ruth 6 months to locate, extract and compile records for the 36 AfriAm cemeteries in the county! She also found that there were slaves buried in a number of the white cemeteries too — right beside their owners! The compilers had simply skipped over them and gone on to the next beautiful headstone.

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While there, Ruth met a local AfriAm woman who had collected funeral programs for every deceased AfriAm in the general region for over 35 years! They were able to identify some of the unmarked burials with her funeral programs. Several members of the genealogy society knew the woman, but no one had ever asked her about deaths, cemeteries, or funeral programs for AfriAms. This wasn't intended to be malicious. It just didn't occur to them.

• • **Learn "Black History"**

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STUDY the different phases of American History to see how they affected AfriAms. There are many excellent, well-written, even award-winning accounts of Black History to help you understand. In the segregated school system of my youth, we were taught Black History in school along with American History, and celebrated OUR heroes. I was in high school when the Supreme Court desegregated the schools in 1954. Black History was phased out in the integrated schools, so if you didn't hear about it at church or from your parents, you didn't get it anymore.

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Nowadays one only hears about AfriAm Heroes during Black History Month, and then only about the really famous ones. "He who writes the story determines what part of history will be remembered!" AfriAms (and other minorities) must seek out opportunities to ensure that the WHOLE story is told. Here are some things you can do:

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Learn about "Segregation." The RECORDS were segregated during the Jim Crow era, too. If you are seeking a marriage record during that time frame, ask for Colored Marriages. If you can't find your people in the City Directory, maybe they're in a separate section at the back of the book (like the back of the bus). You may find us in books with an asterisk or a tiny "c" beside our names. You do understand that this "c" does NOT mean "copyright?"

Learn how military life and wars impacted AfriAms. Did your family relocate as a result of WW2? Mine did. Do you have copies of draft records for WW1? Marjorie H. found relatives still listing their ancestral plantation name as their address on their draft records! They were still farming in the area! Many of us have ancestors among the 235,000 USCTs who fought in the Civil War, or among the 20,000 Sailors. Lots of these men or their widows applied for and received pensions. Marilyn W found that her USCT had a pension file of 135 pages full of genealogical data. There are also records for the Revolutionary War that include AfriAms.

Learn about Reconstruction. Some states have Voter Registration Lists for 1867, which can place our ancestor in a specific place and time, between the end of the Civil War and the 1870 census. (It doesn't mean he actually got to vote -*LOL*- the law just said he had to be registered.) Like the census itself, these registrations were also used to determine the number of eligible males for military service. Many such lists are missing — but maybe yours still exists. The Agricultural Schedules of the census began in 1870; they can give you information about your ancestor if he owned a little land (3 acres) — or if he was a tenant farmer, along with the name of the landowner (who was sometimes the former slave owner).

The LDS Church has issued a CD Index to the Freedmen's Savings and Loan deposit records. Perhaps your genealogical society is willing to purchase the 27 or so rolls of microfilm of the original records for your local FHC branch (pay as if for permanent loan). Then if AfriAms find ancestors on the new CD, they can go directly to the microfilm and view the actual record. Our society (California African American Genealogical Society, in Los Angeles) felt this was a worthwhile donation, so the Westwood branch now has the whole set.

The Freedman's Bank deposit slips are fragile manuscripts and therefore are not filmed for general distribution. Consequently, you must request them directly from the National Archives; Records of the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, Record Group 101; Freedman's Savings and Loan Records. To learn more about the deposit slips, go to: <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/freedmans-savings-and-trust.html> and <http://www.archives.gov/publications/ref-info-papers/108/index.html#savings>.

A huge set of records found at NARA are those of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, commonly known as Freedmen's Bureau Records. (Very few AfriAms had lands to abandon... guess who else may be found in these records?) Pearl-Alice Marsh worked diligently behind the scenes in 2000 for a Bill to fund the microfilming and indexing of these voluminous, fading, very hard to use documents. Such things as labor contracts, cohabitation lists, care of destitutes, outrages against former slaves, even the transportation of school teachers are included. (How many AfriAms do you think taught school??) Pearl-Alice is ensured the highest esteem of the AfriAm genealogical community for her role in getting this Bill signed by President Clinton. A few of these records were already microfilmed or privately extracted and published in book form; some can be viewed at: www.freedmensbureau.com

Learn about large-scale migrations, and their effect on AfriAm life. How and when did your family arrive at the place you call "home?" Families have always sought a better life when allowed to do so. In the early-mid 1800s, many Free AfriAms headed west to escape southern laws that were becoming more restrictive toward them. It is no wonder that Prof. Ira Berlin entitled one of his books *Slaves Without Masters*. Many of these migrants ended up in OH, KY, KS, IN, MI and WI. Some went to CA as '49ers. In the late 1800's "Exodusters" from the south headed for KS, IN, IL and MO, settling in all-Black towns created by earlier AfriAm immigrants, and sometimes creating new towns. Read about these towns at: http://www.soulofamerica.com/index.php?black_towns

"The Domestic Slave Trade" also began in the early-mid 1800s. Many slave owning families migrated to the deep south where cotton was becoming a good cash crop, taking their slaves in large groups. Others did not leave, but sold off their slaves in small lots to Slave Traders for economic reasons. These were re-sold further south to those needing more workers. Passports through GA into AL, MS, LA, AR and TX were often granted, and can be found. Some slaves were marched overland in *coffles*, while others were sent by ship to New Orleans and up and down the Mississippi River. Learn about this in Frederic Bancroft's book, ***Slave Trading in the Old South***. Some Trading House records still exist. Many ships' manifests to New Orleans are being transcribed and published at: www.afrigeneas.com/slavedata/manifests.html

"The Great Migration" northward took place around the time of World War I. Many southern AfriAms migrated to Detroit, Columbus, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Chicago and New York in search of better jobs and better lives. Between 1914 and 1920, almost a million AfriAms left the south. Among these were my maternal grandparents, who lived briefly in New York. Finding New York City "too 'fast' for raising chillun," they returned to NC. There they eventually bought a small house in a community on the outskirts of town, where Quakers had affordable property available for purchase by AfriAms. Learn about this migration at: www.northbysouth.org

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- **AfriAms often need to work harder on collateral research**

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- As a group, we often leave less of a paper trail, so we may need to search through the records of every sibling, cousin, aunt and uncle to make a necessary link. Try to learn everyone's name during your interviews, and gather the names of probable relatives from documents you find. Research them all, if need be. Just because you descend from one wife is not a good reason to skip the records of the other wives or their children. Mary T had been unable to learn the names of her ancestor's parents. Descended from the first wife, the names she sought were finally found listed on her ancestor's marriage license involving the third wife! Leave no stone unturned...

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- **Join the nearest African-American genealogical society**

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- Local groups usually know of resources that are specific to your locale, and often will go out of their way to help out-of-town members. Other AfriAm researchers can often suggest tips, hints and perspectives you may not have thought of, since they have probably experienced similar challenges. Post queries in their newsletters and journals. Write and submit articles to them (with citations) about your family.

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- **The computer is NOT the greatest thing since sliced bread**, when it comes to AfriAm research. Not enough data is online for us yet, but we are working hard to put it there. It is great, however, for networking! Go to Chats, and post queries to ALL available bulletin boards, mail lists and newsgroups. Be patient! My absolute best response came 3 years after I posted such a query. That response and subsequent emails resulted in 6 of us learning that we are 5th cousins. We all live in different states and have never met in person, but WE ARE FAMILY! We have formed a Research Group, and share whatever we find. AfriAm-specific message boards are also available, for example the following: www.afrigeneas.com/forum/

Some counties at the USGenWeb now have a page devoted to AfriAm records and data. There are also Lists of Links that will take you to sites where you may view AfriAm historical and genealogical data. Please remember that such data is only as good as the researcher who provided it, and it should serve as only a guide. Do your own research, and DOCUMENT what you find so that others can find it, too. My favorites are as follows: www.ccharity.com www.afrigeneas.com/ www.cyndislist.com/african.htm/

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READ, READ, READ!

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Don't be afraid to use obscure records, or scholarly journals and PhD theses which are not labeled as "genealogical" in nature. Often these may be found in the bibliographies of helpful books you read. **(I often copy bibliographies to look over later.)** Visit a large university library near you and plug your "topic" into their computer catalog. You'll be amazed at what may pop up. You may be able to get a copy on microfilm through InterLibrary Loan at your public library. An ancestor or a known neighbor may turn up in one of the Slave Narratives (now also online and CD). Read the Run-A-Way Slave ads found in antebellum newspapers for your ancestral area.

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Don't forget that there were hundred and hundreds of Black newspapers throughout the years. A concerted effort has been underway for some time to compile the locations of the various scattered collections and to ascertain which issues of which papers are extant. A great book (now out-of-print) is Barbara Henritze's ***Bibliographic Checklist of African American Newspapers***. Try to learn what happened to the ones for your area.

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Have you heard of a Native American connection?

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This is certainly not impossible. The "connection" may be through a bloodline, or from having been enslaved to a tribe member. Some Native Americans (NAs) were enslaved, living and working alongside enslaved Africans. Some run-a-way African slaves and Free Blacks were accepted among and hidden by NAs. Other NAs bought African slaves to work their land. There are records that may help you verify a connection if the tribe involved was large enough and well documented, and if it survived over time as an entity. You will have great difficulty proving a relationship if you connect to a smaller, less well known tribe or group. And even if you can document a "relationship," many such tribes have their own criteria as to what constitutes acceptability as a tribal member. For a better understanding of this, see Angela Walton-Raji's book, ***Black Indian Research***.

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What about Canada? Mexico? The Caribbean?

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Yes, yes, and *yes!* There are books, journals and \ or web sites, and documentation devoted to each of these. For example, did you know that over half of the founders of the city of Los Angeles in 1781 were of African descent ... or that records may be found in England, Denmark, and other European countries that owned various Caribbean islands (and parts of the U.S.)? For starters, check out:

<http://Museum.gov.ns.ca/arch/BlkData.htm>

Peter Carr, ***Caribbean Historical & Genealogical Journal, TCI Resources (quarterly)***

Finding your First African

• When you finally find your first African, don't immediately consider the "tribal" or regional name given in the record as gospel. Even today many Americans tend to think of Africa almost as if it is a country with an assortment of states, like the United States. NOT! Africa is a continent! All those small subdivisions that look to us like states on the map are separate countries! In each of those countries may live several different ethnic groups (often referred to as tribes). Each of these groups usually has its own distinct culture, language, traditions, enemies, and the like! If we, who consider ourselves fairly sophisticated, have difficulty with this sort of "global" concept, imagine what it must have been like in generations past when an African was simply considered "an African." Such ethnic identification requires a great deal of study, and some of us may never know with certainty that it is accurate.

Honor your ancestors by giving something back.

• Contribute something to make research easier for those who come after you. People are working on all sorts of projects — so much work is needed! A number of groups and individuals throughout the country are now collecting funeral programs, since they serve as obits for many AfriAms and contain a lot of information (but care must be taken on privacy and copyright issues regarding them). Create a website on a topic that interests you, or donate data to an existing website. Donate a copy of your research to the LDS and the local library in your ancestral locale. Transcribe or extract some records. There are MANY ways each of us can help as individuals and as groups — FIND A WAY!

• I hope this information has been helpful. Your interest is much appreciated.

Online Resources - [Freedmen's Bureau Records: An Overview](#)

A look at an invaluable resource for African American history. An article published in the Summer 1997 issue of *Prologue Magazine*, Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration.

African American Genealogy Examiner -

<http://www.Examiner.com/x-8873-African-American-Genealogy-Examiner>

Instructional articles on proper genealogy methodology, with a focus on African-American genealogical research from an excellent researcher, Michael Hait.

African American Newspaper Archives -

<http://www.FreeGenealogyTools.com/2010/01/African-American-Newspaper-Archives.html>

An number of newspaper archives focused on black history are available online. These are tremendously valuable tools for African American family history research.

African-American Family History - Slaves and Slavery -

<http://www.FreeGenealogyTools.com/2009/09/African-American-Family-History-Slaves.html>

A growing number of valuable resources for African American family history research are becoming available, including slavery records, slave ship manifests, and various court records. These provide insight not only on slave families, but on the slave-holding families as well.

Black History Genealogy and DNA Technology -

<http://Black-History.fimark.net/DNA-Technology-Genealogy-Research.html>

This site provides fascinating information regarding technological advancement in tracing the roots of African-Americans past the 1800's to their place of origin on the American European and African continents.

Roots Project -

www.bumc.BU.edu/Departments/PageMain.asp?Page=5167&DepartmentID=350

Recent newspaper headlines are replete with announcements of groundbreaking DNA projects promising to identify specific African tribes from which living African-Americans descend. For nominal fees, usually around \$200, these tests detect the mitochondrial sequence that subjects have inherited from an ancestral African tribe, effectively proving the person's genetic heritage from that tribe. One example is the study currently underway at Boston University, called the

Roots Project.

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