



# COMING TO THE TABLE

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## Researching African American Family History

*By Patricia Moncure Thomas*

Every African American family has a history but not every African American family knows much about their family history. Slavery tore black families apart and thus made a continuous history linked with one particular family line very difficult to track. Stories linked to the past are most often oral stories passed down through generations by family members who are “keepers of the stories.” On my family history journey, I discovered the importance of listening to those old family stories as told by the “keepers,” using those stories as road maps to find my way in connecting the dots of my family’s history.

Have you ever heard the same family story or at least varying versions of the same story so many times that you think you will scream? Well, that describes my beginning with the Moncure Family Story. Over and over, I heard the “Moncure Roots” story. I listened politely, never realizing the importance of those oral tales of years gone by. My sole mission during my younger years was to get to the end of the story without screaming. This remained my mission until several years ago. Today, I eagerly seek the stories, conduct interviews, research, and write about my Moncure Family.

Our family story began with the somewhat hushed disclosure of a nameless black woman, who had seven children fathered by the white Moncure man whose family were large slaveholders in Dry Grove, Hinds County, Mississippi. This story linked to other tales of farmlands being wrongfully taken from my black ancestors as well as the loss of their lives at the hands of whites due to lynching, shooting, and being chased out of town.

At our 1998 reunion after several years of not meeting, family members gathered and the old stories began to flow. We were all given a booklet filled with photos of family members, only black and white photos on copy paper without names. As I sat looking through the booklet, I asked my dad if he could give me the names of the family members in the photos. He could not; nor could anyone at our table. Taking my booklet, I went to other family members to see if anyone could identify the people in the photos. The family who put the booklet together, of course, knew all the names. I wrote names with correct spellings and family connections next to all the photos as they were given to me. I took my findings back to show my dad. He quietly pushed his booklet without names over to me, asking me to write the names

of the family members in his booklet. At that moment, I realized the importance of names and connecting those names to where they belonged in our family. How many photos do we discard or dismiss simply because we do not recognize the people or places as relevant in our lives? How many family members do we really know by name?

How much of our own family story do we know?

Though the family stories can be painful at times, there is joy in learning how my family moved forward from the 1870's, how they kept their families together, forged ahead buying land, farming/ranching, and instilling the importance of being family. Between 1870 and 1920 most of my family lived near each other, but as years passed many family members lost track of each other as they moved to other cities and states.

How do you bring a family together and connect that family to its history? My family made the following plan:

- To have a reunion every year at the same time of the year in a different city where there were family connections.
- Avoid having the same family member hosting the reunion; get folks from the hosting city to be in charge.
- Create an extensive contact list; detailed names, addresses, emails.
- Document, document – written and digitally.
- Keep in mind we are doing this for our children and their children, etc.
- Focus on getting our youth involved for they need to know that their family history is important.

We have met yearly since 1998.

The official title, given to me by my family, is "The Moncure Family Historian." After our

1998 reunion, my goal was and continues to be to provide information for family members to keep. I maintain a family website and have written a book entitled *Moncure Place... Connecting Family and Friends* which contains stories, interviews, photos, family trees, and history of the times and places in which my Moncure family lived.

For decades, my black great-great grandmother remained nameless, but today my family knows her name. Charlotte Shakespeare was born during slavery in Mississippi. She gave birth to seven black and white children and six all-black children. I can proudly say that I know the names of all thirteen children, but my journey continues as I seek to find out more about Charlotte Shakespeare. The years and years of slavery leave her life during slavery a mystery to me. For that I am saddened, but I will still research and seek to uncover more about her existence. I carry Grandma Charlotte in my heart and feel her presence and guidance as I journey down the path of family history.

Here are some pointers I have learned along my journey:

1. LISTEN to the stories when you are visiting family.
2. DOCUMENT. Be ready to take notes, and keep a small digital voice or video recorder handy. You never know when a family member might start to remember.
3. REVIEW notes, digital recordings, etc often. You will be amazed at how reviewing helps you to fit your family story puzzle together, providing leads to other research avenues.
4. INTERVIEW older family members, but remember not all older members will have the stories or information you need. However they might be able to refer you

to another family member to interview. Conduct interviews by phone and/or visits to cities/states where family members live. Family can be suspicious of your intentions, so make sure that they understand your motives are purely to document the history and stories of our great family.

5. IDENTIFY THE “KEEPERS,” or family members who know the names of ancestors and have memories of old family stories. You can return to them to clarify or add to information you have found.
6. ASK CLARIFYING QUESTIONS when names come up that might be nicknames, or when references to locations are unclear. What is the person’s real name? Census records list names in a variety of ways.
7. SEARCH THE INTERNET. There are many genealogy/ancestry search providers, some free and some not.
8. Research can require visitation to local courthouses, archives, and historical groups. National Archives are a must visit for research. Remember not all National Archives have the exact same information. Their collections can contain local history and personal books, journals, land deeds, etc. by past and/or present local residents not found in all archives. Visit and/or contact local area historical societies to review their historical documents. Explore the holdings of local courthouses where family legal documents can be found, such as births, deaths, land purchases or sales, and other legal matters which give insight to the life and times of your family.
9. Get to know the history of the area where your family lived. Read books and other historical material written during and about the times your family members lived. Reading the histories of other local families can give great insight into the lives and times in which your relatives lived
10. Talk with other local people, both black and white, who might have had stories passed down via their ancestors about your family.
11. Find ways to keep, organize, and share your information. I maintain a public and very large family website at MyFamily.com filled with photos, history, current news, family trees, and a huge family email data base. I use Family Tree Maker to manage family data, stories, and family trees. Both are great organizational programs.
12. Most families love to see their stories in print and love to have a tangible, hands-on product to share and pass on to others. Give your family something to pass on to future generations of your family.
13. Consider donating copies of your family collections to local historical groups and archives where they can be cataloged and made available on their shelves and/or online.
14. REMEMBER...that there are often none or few records documenting black families. This will take time. Pace yourself. There will be dead ends. DO NOT GIVE UP!

## Mission

Seeking to acknowledge, understand and heal the persistent wounds of the U.S. institution of race-based slavery and its legacies.

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