



COMING TO THE TABLE

Genealogy: Researching Your Family History

Here are some tips for getting started with researching your family's history. On the back of this sheet are some special tips for researching a family connection to slavery. For more ideas, see our handouts "Genealogy Resources," "Researching Enslaved African American Ancestors," "Researching Slaveholding and Slave Trading Ancestors," and our case studies on researching Northern and Southern slaveholding ancestry.

1. **Family Tree.** Make copies of a blank Family Tree form and start filling it out. You can use ours or find one on the Internet. Start with yourself, and then fill in anything you know about your parents, grandparents, even great-grandparents.
2. **Listen and document.** After you've filled out all you can, start talking to family members, listening to their stories, taking notes, and recording them with a tape recorder, digital recorder or video camera. Find the "keepers" of family stories and names of ancestors. Interview them by phone or in-person visits. A good list of questions for conducting oral interviews is available at <http://genealogy.about.com/cs/oralhistory/a/interview.htm>. You never know when a family member might start to remember, so keep a notebook or small recorder handy.
3. **Research.** Use the genealogy resources listed in our handout to search for Federal and

State Census records, birth, death, marriage, and military records. Family Bibles and other private records can have important information.

4. **Learn.** Learn about the history of the region where your ancestors lived.
5. **Review.** Review notes and recordings often. You will be amazed at how reviewing helps you to fit your family story puzzle together, and can give you ideas for other avenues of research.
6. **Take a class.** If you are new to genealogical research, consider taking a class to learn some basics techniques and resources. Contact state, county or local genealogical organizations or your local library about classes.
7. **Organize.** Keep filling out your family tree. Free charts of different kinds are available at about.com. Keep track of all the resources and records that you have examined. Take careful notes and make copies whenever you can. If possible, buy genealogical software to help you organize what you find.
8. **Share.** Share what you find with your family and local historical societies, and on the Internet, where others who need what you have discovered may find it. Most families love seeing their stories in print and having a tangible, hands-on product to share and pass on to future generations.

More and more people are choosing to explore this part of their family history. There are extra challenges to this research. Records identifying enslaved people can be hard or impossible to find. Some curators and historians may be reluctant to help because they are uncomfortable acknowledging the history of slavery in their communities. Also, those of us who suspect we are descended from slaves or slaveholders may fear what we will find. Here are some special tips we hope will help. You can find more tips, resources, and case studies on our website at www.comingtothetable.org.

1. **Get support.** Try not to do this alone! It can really help to talk to family members or friends who can give you new ideas and moral support. Join the Coming to the Table Community Network for support.
2. **Try.** It might feel intimidating to begin with, but that will change once you get started. Don't believe anyone who says it can't be done.
3. **Sources.** Look for Slave Schedules from the 1850 and 1860 Federal Censuses, slaveholder wills, probate records, inventories, manuscripts, published genealogies, letters, account books, plantation records, family Bibles and other private records. Be aware that Slave Schedules did not list enslaved people by name, only age, gender and "race." Other records may only show a first name, if any. Finding slavery-related records in the North can be challenging because the institution of slavery was less organized than in the South. Finding records in the South can be hit or miss due to the extensive burning of Southern homes, courthouses and other structures during the Civil War.
4. **Learn history.** Learn about the history of the area where your ancestors lived, especially the history of slavery there. Be aware that most local histories have been written by white historians with biases and blind spots around slavery and the lives of African Americans. Look for African American resources, which will fill in crucial information gaps.
5. **Visit.** If possible, plan to visit the place where your ancestors lived. This can be a powerful part of the process and can lead to new discoveries.
6. **Prepare.** If you are able to visit, do as much preparation in advance as possible. Try to develop a research strategy.
7. **Don't give up!** Remember, this will take time, so pace yourself.
8. **Search for a "linked descendant."** If you want to locate a living descendant of someone connected to your family through slavery, see our handout "Contacting 'Linked Descendants,'" or feel free to contact us for ideas and support, at 877-540-2888 or cttt@emu.edu.

Mission

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

www.comingtothetable.org • (877) 540-2888

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