



# COMING TO THE TABLE

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## Researching Slaveholding and Slave Trading Ancestry

*by Rev. David Pettee*

This article offers suggestions for researching slave holding and slave trading ancestry. Edward Ball, a white descendant of the wealthy Ball family of SC and author of *Slaves In the Family* comments, “the heirs of slave holders are not responsible for the past; but in a better world, they would be accountable for that past. They would make an effort to deal with the slave story, talk about it, and try to come to terms with it.” Ball also suggests that there are perhaps as many fifteen million living white Americans who can trace their roots to the long-gone master class.

The opportunity for personal reckoning that becomes possible in researching slave holding and slave trading ancestry is considerable. The research itself, however, can be a challenging endeavor. While more and more people are choosing to explore this neglected dimension of their family history, many report difficulty in knowing exactly where to start. There are no guides available to help people uncover this kind of history. Some curators and historians are reluctant to support this sort of research because they are personally or professionally uncomfortable acknowledging the history and aftermath of slavery in their communities. Perhaps most significantly, those of us who suspect we have this heritage may fear becoming emotionally burdened or overwhelmed by what we might find.

Below are ten tips that will hopefully make your genealogical journey more successful.

1. **Get support.** Try to avoid taking on this challenge alone! Sharing in the wisdom of others will give you new ideas and the moral support to keep digging. Use the social networking available through this web site to develop your community. (While I was preparing this article, I received a phone call from a white member of the Coming to the Table community who finally made contact with the descendant of an African American man that had been enslaved by her ancestor. Their visit was powerful and inspiring!)
2. **Try.** Do not be discouraged by people who claim that this kind of research is impossible. While few descendants of slave holders and slave traders have inherited specific information, public and private primary source records often reveal a detailed and complex story. Finding reference to slavery in Northern records can be challenging because of the overall smaller number of slaves and slave holders and 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. Documents in both

the North and the South were sometimes intentionally mutilated to hide references and complicity with slavery.

3. **Visit.** If possible, plan to visit the place where your slave holding ancestors lived. Having a direct encounter with the land, the property, or the community can be a powerful part of the reckoning process and can lead to new discoveries.
4. **Prepare.** If you are able to visit, do as much preparation in advance as possible. The Internet is an extraordinary tool, with vast and unexpected information available at your fingertips. If you need assistance, consider contacting a local genealogical society. Try to develop a research strategy. Talk to as many older relatives or 'keepers' of family lore as you can. A good list of questions for conducting oral interviews is available at about.com. Consider digitally recording each conversation for posterity and for your later reference – it will likely take hearing the information several times for you to digest all of it. Make sure all the places you wish to visit will be open when you are there and make appointments as necessary. Learn in advance what is expected of you. Always treat local historians and curators with respect. They are the local culture carriers who you will contact time and time again. Thank them repeatedly for their help! A small donation to show your appreciation is always welcome.
5. **Take a class.** If you are relatively new to genealogical research, consider taking a class to learn about basic techniques and resources. State, county and local genealogical organizations are an excellent place to begin.
6. **Research.** Public records worth researching include the slave schedules that were added to the Federal Census in 1850 and 1860. The slave holder's name, state and sometimes

county was recorded. However, slaves were not recorded by name, only by age, sex, and color (typically B for black, and M for "mulatto"). State census records, wills, probate records, personal estates, inventories, sheriffs sales, county clerk of court deeds, manumission records, county tax records, administrator records and judgments are the other more common public documents most likely to record slaves. Check with local historical societies, county clerks, family members, and the Internet for manuscripts, letters, account books, plantation records, family Bibles and other private records. Prominent families often hired historians to prepare family genealogies, and many were the subject of books – both likely to be found with Internet searches. Be creative in your research, seeking any records in the time period when your ancestors enslaved others.

7. **Organize.** As you research, keep track of all the resources and records that you have examined and ruled out. You will want to avoid covering the same ground twice. It is quite easy to forget what you have already reviewed. Take careful notes and make copies if it is permissible. Consider an investment in genealogical software to help you organize what you find, copy photographs, and view and print information in different formats, such as pedigree charts, family group records, descendant charts, fan charts and ahnentafels. (Ahnentafel is a word frequently used by genealogists and is a German word that literally translated means "ancestor table." Using a strict numbering scheme, it is essentially a list of all the known ancestors of a person and includes the name of each ancestor as well as dates and places of birth, marriage, and death.) Charts are available on line through [accessgenealogy.com](http://accessgenealogy.com). In addition to helping you make sense of what you gather, these tools will help you share your discoveries with other people.

8. **Learn.** Take time to become familiar with the history of slavery in the region where your ancestor lived. Local histories are worth reading, but be aware that most 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 likely offer important counter narratives and fill in crucial information gaps.
9. **Share.** As you learn about your history, be sure to share what you find with others. In particular, with any slavery-related private family records, wills, inventories, probate records, account books, or manuscripts you discover, please seriously consider writing for publication, and/or donate copies, transcripts or original material to local historical societies or African American genealogy sites where others who need what you have discovered may find it.
10. **Search for a “linked descendant.”** If you want to locate a living descendant of someone your family enslaved, you may want to read our handout “Contacting ‘Linked

Descendants” before starting your research. Once you are ready to research, a simple straightforward way to start is to search on [www.peoplefinder.com](http://www.peoplefinder.com), [www.whitepages.com](http://www.whitepages.com) or similar sites for your ancestor’s surname if the name was not terribly common. (Some emancipated slaves were given or took their enslaver’s surname, and some of their descendants may still carry the name.) You can search nationally, or zero in your ancestor’s area, depending on how common the name and how numerous the results. Another strategy is to track African Americans living in the same area as your slave holding ancestor using the 1870 Federal Census, the first census that included the names of African Americans. Let’s say, for example, in the 1850 slave schedule you find a boy age 10, enslaved by Jeremiah Simmons. He may be still be recorded with Simmons in the 1860 slave schedule, now age 20, and in the 1870 Census he may appear with the surname of Simmons, age 30, living in the same county/state. You may then be able to follow a trail of names, ages and relationships through later census records and other public records, forward in time to the relatively recent past.

## 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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