

IN SUPPORT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH: WHAT CAN ENSLAVER DESCENDANTS DO?

Developed by the Linked Descendants African American Program Advisory team for the Linked Descendants meeting, May 2022

African American family history and genealogy researchers often find their work made more difficult or blocked altogether by the institutional and individual legacies of slavery and the ways in which their ancestors were dehumanized – no names, no official documents, no census records, and so on.

Descendants of enslaver families who have a particular interest in research are perfectly positioned to act on their desire to take reparative action by providing support to researchers who are looking for their formerly enslaved (or former enslaver) ancestors. This list offers over 25 suggestions in several categories.

Privately Held Documents

1. **Find The Documents:** Search and ask for as many of the old documents kept or stored away by as many members of your family as possible. Make copies to be posted and for your own files.
2. **Post the Documents:** Deposit the documents in as many of the document repositories as possible.
 - a. Post documents in the online genealogy research sites, e.g., Wikitree, Family Search, Our Black Ancestry, etc.
 - b. Put them on genealogy “boards,” if you come across them.
 - c. Put them in an online storage location like Google docs and insert the link to that folder in newsletters, blogs, presentations – wherever you think African American researchers might see it.
3. **Deposit Documents Online and Offline:** Donate documents to
 - a. Historic African American churches in the areas where your enslaver ancestors lived
 - b. The history research collections of local colleges or universities near your ancestral home places
 - c. State and local archives, state and local historical societies, genealogical societies, if they have facilities for holding either hard copy or electronic copies.

Caveat: Make sure any organization you donate documents to has policies and confirmed practices allowing all researcher to have reasonable access to their document collections at little or no cost.

4. **Publicize Document Availability:** In online, print or in-person forums, make it known that you have documents related to given families and places and how those documents may be accessed.

Respond to Outreach & Inquiries

5. **Always Respond:** African American researchers may contact you about information related to their ancestors, through a DNA site, genealogy group, historical society, etc. As a descendant of an enslaver family, commit yourself to respond to all those inquiries, even if you do not have information. One of the most hurtful things that descendants of enslavers can do to African American researchers is disregard their inquiries. Get support from another Linked Descendant if you don't know what to say or are nervous about responding.
6. **Make An Effort:** If you receive an inquiry and you're not sure of the response, make an effort to look through your papers, go back online to double check something, or ask someone else for the information. Then share it with the person inquiring.
7. **Be Creative:** If you receive an inquiry and you think you know how to find the answer, i.e., where the answer might be or how to find it, at the very least respond with your suggestion. Better yet, follow your suggestion and see if you can find the information to send to the person inquiring.

Practices to Follow in Your Own Research

8. **Keep Track Of Your Sources:** Log your research work. Record the documents you have or have found including specifics about where the documents can be accessed. This opens up access for others researching the same family or property to also find documents you do not have in your possession but used in your research. For example, note the use of a photograph from "Find a Grave" to determine a spouse's name.
9. **Widen the Branches:** As you build your family tree, populate the branches in addition to the line back to your direct ancestor. Include siblings, e.g., your grandparents' brothers and sisters, your great grandparents' brothers and sisters. It may be that the enslavers of the ancestors of an African American family history researcher were not your ancestor but one of your ancestor's siblings. Or information about enslaved people may appear in your family's records because those people were rented by, borrowed by, or received as gifts from another family member, the original enslaver. It may also be that one ancestor of an African American researcher was enslaved by your ancestor and their partner or child was enslaved by someone else in your ancestor's family.
10. **Make It Public:** Some genealogy platforms have public/private settings. If at all possible, make sure the settings for your ancestors earlier than your grandparent generation are **public**. If you make your entire tree private, African American researchers can be prevented from finding their ancestors.

11. **Make Notes:** If the genealogy platform you use permits, make notes or create work-arounds to capture the names of enslaved people your enslaver ancestor had children with. Terms like “concubine,” “side family,” “second family,” or “outside child” convey the information. Whatever terms you use, think about their impact on an African American researcher who comes across your notes.
12. **Historical Context:** As much as possible, locate and record sources of historical information about the areas in which your ancestors lived, including economic history, natural history, and social history. Having context for how people lived and what impacted their lives in a given time and locale can be revealing for people researching enslaved and enslaver ancestors. Economic disasters can explain migrations; epidemics can explain the sudden narrowing of a family tree; war or local conflicts can reveal how people apparently unrelated to each other became and identified as a single family.

Support African American Researchers Through Direct Collaboration or Creating Access to Documents

13. **Become a Research Assistant:** Make it known through the Linked Descendants Group that you are available to help an African American researcher with their work, to reduce the time demand, lighten the workload, and give moral support. At the researcher’s request, you can
 - a. Go through boxes of papers they have at home or have found in an archive, in the local courthouse, or at the local historical society.
 - b. Read through collections of letters the researcher has located in a library or go through a set of old journals, looking for the designated information.
 - c. Or any other form of working through a large quantity of material.
14. **Locate Relevant Documents in Public Holdings:** Brainstorm the kinds of places in your area or in the area where your enslaver ancestors used to live that might be holding useful documents. For example, the Register of Deeds, the County Tax Office, a document collection in a smaller local library, etc. Search through the documents in that location to confirm that some of them pertain to enslavers and enslaved people. Record names. Then post the information about the location of these documents on as many of the information platforms as possible.
15. **Digitize, Digitize, Digitize:** As you explore what kinds of documents and records are being held in publicly accessible locations, government, academic, historical, etc., find out how much of their holdings have been digitized and made available online. In regard to whatever has not been digitized and made accessible, explore how you can help make digitization happen. Can you make a personal donation or grant to allow the institution to digitize? Can you initiate a digitization project? Once you have permission to proceed, on your own or with help from family members, friends, neighbors, students, retired people, use portable digitizers to capture those documents. Organize the material, publicize, post.

If you have the means, consider creating student projects or providing mini-grants to the document holders to enable digitization and online listing.

In addition to public records, make contact with historic African American churches, historical societies, African American history museums, historic community centers, even historic schools, and explore their interest in having their historic records digitized. Depending on the community, this project might need to be started in the company of an African American researcher.

16. **Be an Intermediary or Surrogate:** In some locations, African American researchers are unwelcome and cannot access document holdings or contact white descendants of the enslavers they're looking for. If that's the case in your area or the area where your enslaver ancestors lived, offer to go to the document repository on behalf of an African American researcher or to create a way to have an interview with a resistant local enslaver descendant.

Enslaver descendants can help to gain access to records. They can also shield African American researchers from having to "beg" or plead with white record holders by being the person who makes those requests.

Beyond Your Own Research

17. **Learn New Skills:** On your own or in response to an African American researcher's request, learn how to study and understand types of records you are unfamiliar with, such as GIS and plat records, or other types of land records.
18. **Clear a Cemetery:** Too many African American cemeteries have been abandoned or left to grow weeds. Look for a way to get the cemetery cleaned up – a church group, a community service group, Scouts. Document the cemetery and any family names and/or grave markers. Get a local paper to write articles. Put photos and documents in a historical society. Post about the project and its findings.
19. **Map a Cemetery:** Find out whether there is a cemetery or burial ground in your area that contains graves of African Americans, either antebellum or the post-bellum 19th century. Find out whether the list of people buried there is kept in an accessible location. Offer to digitize the list. Make a map of grave locations, with names. Make this a community service or Scouts project! Post and publicize the project and the findings.

Within the Linked Descendants Group

20. **LD Research Reparations Resource:** Step up to help Linked Descendants create a Research Reparations Resource fund. Some researchers are kept out by pay walls in genealogy sites, in newspaper archives, and elsewhere. Some get nicked and dimed by document holdings

sites that charge for copies, including birth certificates, marriage licenses and death certificates. Take the lead for the Linked Descendants Group to set up a pool of resources to support researchers as needed.

21. **LD Directory of Tools:** Take the lead in compiling a directory of both general and specific research tools, to be made available through the Linked Descendants page on the CTTT website. General tools: Farm books, newspaper archives or “Find a Grave.” Specific tools: “History of the First Families of Virginia” or “The Buyck Family.”
 - Website: Digital Library on Slavery, NC
22. **LD Database of Family Research:** With 150 or more members of the Linked Descendants group, two things are clear. Many of us are researching or have researched the same families or families in the same county or town. Furthermore, a surprising number of us are related to each other or are linked through slavery. If we knew who we were, we could help one another. We need someone(s) willing and able to create a database of the members of the Linked Descendants groups, their ancestral families, the enslaver families, and the states, counties, and property names.
23. **Experienced Researchers in LD:** Run a survey in the Linked Descendants group to identify the experienced or professional genealogy researchers and explore their availability to teach or advise others.
24. **LD Research Coaches:** To supplement the brilliant work of Sharon Morgan, take the lead to create a directory of experienced genealogy researchers within the Linked Descendants who can coach less experienced researchers in getting started or getting unstuck.

Supplement this directory with connections to other genealogy and research professionals any of us can recommend from experience.
25. **LD Directory of Genealogy Webinars or Courses:** Take the lead in compiling a directory of online or in-person resources for learning genealogy research skills and information.
26. **LD Genealogy Workshop:** Take the lead to explore among the most experienced LD genealogists who could support and expand the work being done by Charlotte Bocage, to conduct one or more genealogy workshops for LD members. Length, timing, logistics and other considerations to be worked out.

Beyond the Linked Descendants Group

27. **Connecting with Major Institutions:** Take the lead to explore with one or more major historical, archival or academic institutions their willingness to be repositories for enslaver family papers. Focus on museums of African American history and universities studying slavery or universities beginning reparations initiatives. Ideas include the National Museum of African American History & Culture (DC), the International Museum of African American

History (Charleston), Emory University (GA), Yale's Gilder Lehman Center (CT), the William Winter Institute (MS), Georgetown University (DC/MD/LA) and others.

Enslaver descendants from families in the same part of the country, e.g., Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, are well placed to band together and approach an institution about receiving their family papers and making them physically and digitally accessible.