



FINDING SLAVE RECORDS

How to Start

Efforts to find records of ancestors believed to have been enslaved require thorough preparation before beginning research prior to 1865. The 1870 federal population census schedule, the first on which the former slave is listed by name, must be studied carefully for other individuals of that surname who may be possible family members and potential former owners. Even if one knows that an ancestor was born during slavery, one must study all subsequent census schedules carefully and systematically from the latest available (currently 1930) backwards. Births, deaths, and marriages should be searched for all known and suspected family members. Co-habitation records not only indicate the number of years a couple have lived together as husband and wife but also confirm the family tradition that the ancestor “was born in slavery.” The family researcher should look for other county records such as deeds, estates, and tax lists; cemetery records; Bible records; and church records. Freedmen’s Bureau, Freedman’s Savings and Trust Company records, and WPA slave narratives may also prove useful.

Census Records

Slaves were enumerated on all federal census records, 1790-1860, but not by name. From the 1870 census, the researcher should proceed backwards to the 1860 and 1850 separate slave schedules that list, under the name of the owner, each slave by sex, specific age, and color only; no slave names are given. The researcher will be looking for a male or female, and his family if appropriate, who is 10 and 20 years younger than the individual(s) previously identified on the 1870 census schedule. The 1790, 1800, and 1810 census schedules indicate only the total number of slaves; 1820, 1830, and 1840 schedules list them by sex and age range.

This information presents possible former slave owners, for it is the records of the slave owners that descendants of enslaved ancestors must search and analyze for information about slaves before 1865. The researcher will need to learn as much as possible about the owner and his family: his wife and in-laws, his children and whom each married, even the church he attended. One could acquire slaves through purchase, inheritance, marriage, and natural increase (children, grandchildren, etc., of slaves acquired earlier).

County Records

Records of the ownership of slaves are found in both public and private records. Public records are those created by the owner as required by local, state, and national governments. Local records, i.e., the county records in North Carolina, are the most fruitful for genealogists. These are the records that record marriages of owners, deeds of gift or deeds of trust of slaves, purchase or sale of slaves, transfers of land among family members, property, and records of actions in the local county courts. The miscellaneous records of some North Carolina counties include some slave records. William L. Byrd III and John H. Smith have transcribed miscellaneous records for a number of counties in the series *North Carolina Slaves and Free Persons of Color*, published by Heritage Books.

Most early North Carolina county records are housed in the North Carolina State Archives. *Guide to Research Materials in the North Carolina State Archives: County Records* (11th rev. ed., Division of Archives and History, 1997) lists for each county those records, original and microfilmed, which are available for research in the Archives Search Room. The guide is downloadable at http://www.archives.ncdcr.gov/FindingAids/co_guide.pdf. *Preliminary Guide to Records Relating to Blacks in the North Carolina State Archives* (Archives Information Circular No. 17) is available at <http://www.archives.ncdcr.gov/FindingAids/Circulars/AIC17.pdf>.

Private Records

Private records are those kept by the owner or owners (family Bibles recording their births or deaths, business ledgers, contracts, leases, and other records relating to the health and work of their slaves). Since these are personal records kept by the owner for his own use, they may be difficult to find. Those that have survived may still be in the possession of the family, in a manuscript collection, or in an archives.

Guide to Private Manuscript Collections in the North Carolina State Archives, edited by Barbara T. Cain, Ellen Z. McGrew, and Charles E. Morris (3rd ed., Raleigh: NC Division of Archives and History, c1981) is a guide to collections of private papers deposited there. The Southern Historical Collection at UNC—Chapel Hill and Perkins Library at Duke University also have outstanding manuscript collections.

Records of white churches, generally held in their respective church repositories, are another category of private record that should be sought, as slaves often were members of the local white churches or were permitted to worship at their owners' churches.