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Why retracing our African roots is so difficult

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Many African Americans have longed to know their African roots, especially because our language and heritage have been destroyed by colonizers.

Historians have long documented that large numbers of Blacks were brought from different areas in Africa to what is now the United States. But in genealogy research, researchers have to prove the identity of specific individuals, and then document and prove relationships of them to their ancestors.



Burroughs Family in Chattanooga, TN - courtesy of author

Genealogical proof is similar to that required in a probate court where relatives of the deceased have to be identified in order to distribute assets of the deceased. But the Board for Certification of Genealogists actually has a higher standard of proof for genealogy than a probate court.

There are several challenges to connect one's ancestral genealogy back to Africa. Here's why:

Identifying slave owners

One of the most difficult challenges in African American genealogy is to positively identify the last slave owner. This is essential for researching the slavery period. Unfortunately most researchers assume they are looking for an owner with the same

surname as their ancestor. That led me astray for 20 years. It was only after I realized the name was probably different that I finally located the right person.

Tracing slaves with only a first name

So much of genealogy is contingent upon knowing an ancestor's first and last names. This is why women are often so challenging to research because they replace their maiden name with their married name. With African Americans, the vast majority of enslaved people are only listed in owner's records with a first name. It is difficult enough trying to prove someone is your ancestor, and not just someone with the same name. There were many people with the same first and last names, even in small communities. So the challenge of identifying individuals with only first names is monumental.

Scarcity of slave records

There are probably tens of thousands of slave records. However, finding the ones for your individual ancestor often depends on luck. The odds are better if your ancestor lived on a plantation. But what most people don't realize is that only 50 percent of enslaved people lived on plantations. The other 50 percent worked in mines, factories, offices or small family farms.

Most slave ship records don't include names

Europeans came from Europe to America and are listed by names on ship passenger lists, records at Ellis Island, and records where they boarded vessels in Europe. Very few such records exist for Africans, who were treated as cargo during the Middle Passage. There are names of Africans listed on some of the vessels captured during the illegal slave trade after 1807, but good luck transforming an African name to an American name.

It's not all about sources

Part of the challenge of African American genealogy is methodology – how do you research African American genealogy? The process is sometimes similar to standard American genealogy, but many times it differs. Ancestors must be placed into historical context and myths have to be destroyed to achieve genealogical success.

When I discovered my enslaved ancestor did not use the same surname of his last slave owner, I discovered I was not alone. I learned this was actually more common. To solve the problem, I came up with new techniques to researching African American genealogy.

Despite the challenges, the future holds promise

There are some historical and genealogical sources of African origins. Currently, the best source of African origins are for African Americans with roots in Colonial Louisiana. Retired Rutgers University history professor Dr. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall identified records for 100,000 enslaved peoples in Louisiana, many of which indicate their native African

country and tribe, and 10,000 list their African name along side their American slave name. These are now digitized and on the web. However, genealogists have to advance their genealogy research to the colonial period to take advantage of these records, and hope their ancestors didn't migrate to New Orleans from the Chesapeake region.

Some slave owners took note of a slave's ethnicity or country of origin when listing him or her in a runaway slave notice. Thousands of newspapers are currently being digitized. Additionally, ten million handwritten pages of Spanish records are being digitized, some of which are 500 years old and contain information on slaves from Africa.

And lastly, new records are continually being discovered, catalogued, transcribed, and digitized. In spite of what some have said, the paper trail never ends. Many are unaware of the vast amount of records that exist, and the scarcity of those that are digitized or even catalogued. One institution alone, the National Archives, has only 125,000 scanned images on their website out of 4 billion documents in their collection. That's one page for every 34,000 documents. It lets you know what you are missing if you limit your search to the internet alone.

The National Archives has another 85 million electronic records from databases on their website, but these are out of 10 billion electronic records, and none of these are scanned images or photographs. Private companies are now digitizing records from the National Archives. So genealogists will be able to do things in the future they can't do now.

Even if you don't get your family tree back to Africa, the genealogical journey is fun, exciting, filled with information, and richly rewarding.

Through my own research I've met dozens of new relatives and scanned thousands of photos and documents of ancestors I'd never seen. I learned of an ancestor who was president of a county bar association, one who attended Spelman College in 1885, four years after the school was founded. I learned about a Pullman Porter who organized porters 24 years before A. Philip Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. There was also a relative who was one of the few Blacks to fight with Commodore Oliver Perry in the Battle of Lake Erie. Several more fought in the Civil War, as well as some who were cooks, farmers, barbers, and bank robbers.

All have made me who I am. I stand on their shoulders and I am forever indebted to their hard work and sacrifice.

Editor's Note: Tony Burroughs taught genealogy at Chicago State University for 15 years and is the author "Black Roots: A Beginners Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree" (Simon & Schuster). He was a guest expert in the television

documentaries Remembering Roots; (BBC); The Real Family of Jesus (The Discovery Channel); African American Lives; Oprah's Roots and Ancestors (all PBS). Find more about his work at www.tonyburroughs.com.

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