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Genealogy:

How to Trace Your Roots

by Tony Burroughs

"My Grandma Truman died last year. She was 87 years old - the oldest member of our family. She had a fantastic memory, always telling stories of her grandparents and great-grandparents. I feel bad because I never recorded them and now our family history is gone forever."

I hear stories like this all the time. Unfortunately, we take our family members for granted, thinking they will last forever, knowing they won't. The biggest mistake I made in genealogy was expecting my mother to live to an advanced age. She developed an ulcer at the age of 61 and died unexpectedly in a hospital before I recorded her story.

Let's suppose that reparations passes Congress by a narrow margin. As part of the process, African Americans are required to fill out forms showing their direct lineage to a slave ancestor, in order to receive compensation.

If this happened next year, would you know the names of your ancestors who were slaves, and their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren leading to you?

These are just two of the many reasons to trace your roots. Genealogy in the Black community is very important. Much of the history of African Americans has been omitted from history books, distorted in some recounts, and concentrates only on well-known heroes in other stories. Genealogy is a way of discovering lost ancestors, recreating stories that were never told, and paying homage to our ancestors.

Researching your family history can be very rewarding, and very gratifying. It is also very important for your children and grandchildren. You want to preserve your family history for them, so they know where they came from. They need to know the struggles, successes and accomplishments of their ancestors, which develops pride, confidence, and self-esteem.

Start with yourself

If your parents and grandparents are deceased, you can still have great success tracing your family tree. Genealogy starts with yourself, and proceeds backward, one generation at a time. So you begin by thinking about your past, and writing your autobiography. Record your earliest memories of where you were born, who you lived with, what relatives you visited, what churches and schools you attended, what jobs you held, and everything about your life. You'll realize you know a lot

more about your family history than you realize; you just need to think about it, and record it.

You should not only record what you did in life, and who you remember, but also why you made the decisions you made in life; why you took that fork in the road; why you went to a particular college; why you majored in your field; why you were successful; why you failed; and what is your philosophy of life? Your family history will be passed down from generation to generation. So if you do not want your life misinterpreted, and want to help future generations be successful, record your story while it is fresh in your mind.

Start by typing notes in your computer, and even talking into a tape recorder or camcorder. How much would you give for a tape recording of your great-grandfather? Think about how much it will mean for your great-grandchildren to hear a recording of your life, your experiences, and your words of wisdom. You will become a tremendous influence on them.

Talk To The Elders

Next, identify all your living relatives, prioritize them by age, and interview each one. You need to interview your elders while they are active and alert in order to get their stories. Records in libraries, archives and courthouses will be around for a long time, but your relatives will not. They have a limited time on earth.

Don't make the mistake most novices make, only asking parents and grandparents about their grandparents and great-grandparents. Your first objective in an oral interview is to get a person's life story; what they remember about their lives. What they recall about their ancestors is a bonus. And don't just interview them once. If a person is 60, 70, or 80 years old, you can not get their life story in an hour or two. It will take repeated interviews.

Family papers

After interviewing family members, look for old documents around the house that mention family members. Look for things like: letters, post cards, newspaper clippings, obituaries, diplomas, insurance papers, discharge certificates, marriage certificates, the family bible, and photo albums. All of these will supply valuable bits of information. They can provide the names, dates, and places Uncle Joe couldn't remember. Search in basements, attics, and dresser drawers at your

house, and your relatives' houses.

Then go to the cemetery where your ancestors are buried. Look at the grave markers and photograph them. There will be dates of birth and death inscribed on them, and sometimes evidence of military service for males. This will be valuable because you can order military records from the Veterans Administration or from the National Archives. www.archives.gov/research_room/genealogy/research_topics/military.html

Remember, all relatives could not afford headstones, so check records in the cemetery office, which often yield names of additional ancestors. Ask for photocopies of the records and volunteer to pay for photocopying.

Also visit the family funeral home and search their records. Families tend to use the same funeral home and cemetery to hold services for and to bury family members. Searching their records can reveal names of additional ancestors.

Involve The Kids

Make genealogy a family affair. Use it as an opportunity to educate your children about their ancestors, and about African American history. Show your kids the family bible and photograph album and explain who their ancestors are. Label the photos on the rear with names, dates, places, and occasions. Take them to the cemetery and show them where their ancestors are buried; and tell stories of your loved ones after you lay flowers on their gravesite. While you're there, thank your ancestors for their struggle that enabled you to be where you are, for you stand on their shoulders.

Obtaining documents

After visiting the cemetery and funeral home, write to the vital records office where the ancestor died to get a death certificate. You can find the address in the book, *Where to Write for Vital Records*, which can be found in the library, or on the internet at: www.cdc.gov/nchs/howto/w2w/w2welcom/htm

The death certificate often lists the person's age, and the names of parents, which takes you back another generation. You should then write for birth certificates. Sometimes they tell the ages, birth places, and occupations of their parents. If you are lucky, you might find a Pullman Porter. The Pullman Company was the largest employer of African Americans at the turn of the 19th century. Pullman employee records are at the Newberry Library in Chicago. www.newberrylibrary.org

Resources

Most public libraries have books on genealogy, as well as a genealogy department, or a local and family history department. If you live in the area where your ancestors lived for generations, you are lucky. You have access to local records while other researchers will have to write or travel to search local records.

Start out with a how-to book on genealogy from the library, or

purchased from a bookstore. Genealogy books can help you learn the genealogical research process, show how to organize your research, analyze historical documents, and write the family history. Some can also help you find libraries that specialize in genealogy, local historical societies and African American genealogical societies where you can network with other African American genealogists around the country.

Internet

Notice I didn't suggest starting your genealogy research on the Internet. Whereas the Internet is a tremendous resource for researching genealogy, you don't start there. You start at home. But after you search the sources mentioned, you will know enough genealogy information about your family to research on the Internet.

Once you go online, www.Cyndislist.com has the largest number of links to genealogical information (176,000). It's a good starting place to find resources. www.Ancestry.com is the largest on-line genealogy database, claiming access to over 1 billion names. Some of their databases are free, others have paid subscriptions ranging from \$79 to \$400 a year. [Afrigeneas.com](http://www.Afrigeneas.com), [Christine's Genealogy](http://Christine'sGenealogy.com) <http://ccharity.com> and [Least We Forget](http://LeastWeForget.com) www.coax.net/people/lwf are free sites specializing in African American genealogy.

Be careful of any names you find on the internet. In a world-wide database, there are many people with the same name. If you find names you think might be ancestors, check to see where the information came from so you can examine the original source. Be suspicious if the source is not listed because the Internet is ripe with errors. Also be cautious of getting information from other genealogists, whose databases may also be full of errors.

Software

If you want to keep track of your research on your home computer, there are dozens of programs to organize your data. The Master Genealogist (TMG) www.whollygenes.com is the most sophisticated genealogy software, and better for the long haul. Family Tree Maker (FTM) www.genealogy.com.soft_ftm.html is the most popular program, and has many fancy trees. Both programs have features for transferring the basic data from one program to the other. Other programs can be found on the internet by checking www.Cyndislist.com and reading *Genealogical Computing* (Ancestry Publishing).

Warning

Genealogy is a lot of fun. It's like putting together a puzzle, or solving a mystery. But be careful; genealogy can be habit forming. I can't tell you how many people have told me they want to quit their jobs and do genealogy full time. So enjoy yourself with an important and fun hobby.

Tony Burroughs is a professional genealogist, teaches genealogy at Chicago State University, and is the best selling author of *Black Roots: A Beginners Guide to Tracing the Family Tree* (Fireside Division of Simon & Schuster, 2001). •