



Discover Your African American Roots

From plantation records to DNA testing, there is a wealth of genealogy tools at your disposal

by: Judi Hasson | from: [AARP](#) | June 3, 2011

Bobbi Bowman had been on the hunt for her African American roots for a long time. One day, she drove to a courthouse in rural Virginia and hit the jackpot.

See also: [Find your Civil War ancestors.](#)

She knew her family had deep roots in Campbell County near Lynchburg, Va., and she knew a family name — Williamson. She waded through mountains of deeds and wills in the county courthouse to find her great-great grandmother — Maria Williamson (1825-1903), a former slave who inherited 100 acres after the Civil War from her husband, a white landowner. The family connections were spelled out in a deed.



After the Civil War, the U.S. Census started counting African American families. — Library of Congress

"If you are willing to spend a little time in your family courthouse, and have an unusual last name, you would be surprised. I was bowled over," said Bowman, a journalist from McLean, Va.

If you have toyed with the idea of tracing your own African Americans roots or are stumped by a branch in your family tree, here are some research tools to consider.

- The U.S. Census began counting African Americans by name in 1870. It's a rich resource to

get you started on your journey. The census is available online at FamilySearch.org through 1930. Look for details about families, occupations and place of birth.

- Ancestry.com, a subscription site that can be accessed for free at many libraries, has the world's largest collection of [African American family history records](#), including slave census records, U.S. Colored Troops records, slave manifests and emancipation records.

See the database of records from the Freeman's Bureau, which was set up after the Civil War to assist slaves in making the transition to freedom and finding employment, and to help soldiers get back pay and pensions. Another Ancestry.com resource is its database for the Southern Claims Commission, to review the claims of people who had property confiscated during the Civil War. It includes military records of claimants, letters, diaries and family Bible records. And it has also has Civil War records, including the U.S. Colored Troops documents.

- Plantation records at universities and state historical societies are another good resource. Usually on microfilm, these records detail how plantations operated, the names of slaves and their children and daily business operations. "It's a horrible record to look at because you see a listing of horses next to a listing of slaves," said Anastasia Harman, lead family historian for Ancestry.com. Tip: Check out universities near the site of an old plantation.
- Check county courthouses if you know where your family homestead was located. Look for wills, deeds and plantation account books that include slave births and deaths. Most are not online. Tips: Former slaves often took the slave owner's last name. Deeds include slave sales.
- Explore narratives of former slaves recorded by the [Works Projects Administration](#) in the 1930s.
- See this online directory of [African American cemeteries](#) in the United States to help find your ancestors and check out [African American churches](#) nationwide.
- Investigate organizations, such as [The Making of the Tuskegee Airmen](#), for information on black soldiers in the United States.
- If you are in Washington, D.C., attend the [Natural Archives and Records Administration](#) (NARA) lectures on using their records for black family research.

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The NARA has a wealth of resources, most not online, including pension applications and records of pension payments for veterans, their widows and other heirs. Pension application files usually provide the most genealogical information, including pages from family Bibles, family letters and discharge papers. One shortcut: Check out military service records and pension files online at Footnote.com, a subscription database, or see [NARA's tips for searching military records](#).

- DNA testing is one sure way to connect with family, but it costs hundreds of dollars. Go to [FamilyTreeDNA.com](#) and [23andme.com](#) for details. These sites contain hundreds of names of people who have been tested and databases to connect with people who match your DNA.

national genealogy expert

- Signed copies of Megan Smolenyak's books, *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *Trace Your Roots With DNA*
- One-year subscription to Ancestry.com
- Onetime DNA ancestry testing

The African American Experience

There are many books on the market that talk about the African-American experience, the family and the search for one's roots. Here are a few we like:

- *Roots: The Saga by an American Family* by Alex Haley
- Two books by historian Edward Ball: *Slaves in the Family* (1998) and *The Genetic Strand: Exploring Family History Through DNA* (2007).
- *Isle of Canes* by Elizabeth Shown Mills (2006)
- *Cane River* by Lalita Tademy (2001)
- *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* by Annette Gordon Reed (2008)
- *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson (2008)
- *Dreams from My Father: A story of race and inheritance* by Barack Obama (1996)
- *Some Sing, Some Cry* by Ntozake Shange and Ifa Bayeza (2010)