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The Ultimate Jigsaw Puzzle

How African-Americans are Reconstructing Their Roots

By Donna C. Gregory

It's a story of death, divorce and two wives warring over their dead husband's fortune, but you won't see it on any network television drama or read about it on the pages of a cheap paperback. No, this tale can only be found in the dusty, often forgotten files of the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. – a common stop for genealogists. It was uncovered by Richmond resident Bessida White as she researched her husband's lineage.

White is one of a growing number of African-Americans reconstructing their pasts through genealogy. Her search began in 1984 while she was gathering history for a family reunion; today it encompasses 10 ancestry lines, including two for her husband.

"My husband's great-grandfather [named Richard Bladen] was a Civil War veteran and he was in the Maryland Colored Troops. I found his veteran's registration card on the Internet. That led me to the National Archives in Washington," explains White. "[I found that] not only did he get a pension, but his widows were battling it out to see who was going to get the widow's pension.

"He died around 1915, and then the widows both applied. He had been married to one and then the second one actually had a marriage license, but there was no evidence of divorce from the first one. I was totally amazed by this battle. Richard Bladen's file at the National Archives is probably four inches thick."

Ultimately, the first wife prevailed since no one could ever find where she and Bladen had divorced. And, the second wife had another mark against her. She was white, and interracial marriage was illegal in those days. "Although they believed she was white, they never reached that question because they ruled the marriage was invalid because there was no evidence of divorce from the first wife," explains White.

"Just the trail of finding someone's ancestors has been fascinating," adds White.

For White and others, genealogy is like the ultimate jigsaw puzzle – only it's never solved.

"None of us are ever finished," explains Pat Watson, director of the Family History Center of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on Monument Avenue. "Something is always going to come up. There's always a new line or a new person."

And for African-Americans, the search can be particularly challenging if their ancestors were enslaved. But it's a challenge that many in the black community are taking on, says Derek Gray, a research archivist at the Library of Virginia.

"It's been an interest in the African-American community for the past 30 years ever since Alex Hailey's publication of 'Roots,' " explains Gray. "African-Americans want to find out who they are, where they came from, and it has a lot to do with feelings of pride and connection to Africa. They want to answer the question, 'Who am I?' "


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But getting started can be a difficult decision for some African-Americans, says Gray. "It's very hard for African-Americans to do this because they feel ashamed, ashamed of their past and their history. African-Americans are the only group that came to America involuntarily, and some are ashamed of that. But they also have that determination to delve deeper into their

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(**"The Ultimate Jigsaw Puzzle"** *cont'd from pg. 1)*

background because they understand that they were not just slaves. That is part of the history of African-Americans, but it is not the history."

Ann Creighton-Zollar, associate professor of sociology with Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs and the Department of African-American Studies, sees this same shame among her African-American students.

"Every year for the past 26 years, I have been teaching courses on African-American families at VCU, and every year, I encounter college students who don't know about their family history, who don't know African-American history, who don't know American history, and who think in their past is something shameful, partially because they grow up in households where family history is not discussed," says Creighton-Zollar.

"When I get them started in looking at their family histories, they discover that there is nothing to be ashamed of. They discover fascinating things about themselves and their families that connects them to the larger African-American community. It sort of gives them grounding. It also creates meaningful dialogue between generations and we have a big generation gap that can only be bridged by some dialogue."

Talking to family elders is usually the first step in genealogy research, regardless of race. Fortunately, White grew up in a family where it was the norm to share family stories. Listening to her mother talk about her family's ancestors prompted White to want to know more.

After gathering all she could from family members about her lineage, White made her first trips to the courthouses in King and Queen and Essex counties where her grandparents lived.

"During those first visits, I was able to get birthdates that I had not previously had. I was able to get marriage dates that I really didn't have. I was even able in some instances to find children that I had not known of because they died in infancy," says White.

It can be nearly impossible to trace the histories of slave ancestors since they were regarded as property, not humans who would have been counted during a census.

But the search hasn't always been easy. Records are virtually nonexistent for African-Americans before the 1870 census unless they were free. It can be nearly impossible to trace the histories of slave ancestors since they were regarded as property, not humans who would have been counted during a census.

However, a new pilot project between the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, the Genealogical Society of Utah and Howard University could help flesh out post-slavery research. Last October, Governor Timothy M. Kaine announced that Virginia will be the first state in the nation to index and digitize Freedmen's Bureau records from 1865 to 1872. Established in 1865 to provide relief for freed slaves and help them become self-sufficient, the Freedmen's

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DNA Testing: The Next Genealogy Tool

An enormous resource for those who have limited information about their heritage – such as the descendents of slaves or adopted children – DNA testing has recently been used to trace ancestral history.

On a recent Public Broadcasting Station special, Oprah Winfrey used this groundbreaking technology to trace her matrilineal ancestry which, as the tests revealed, were among the Kpelle people of Liberia, on the western coast of Africa.

Ancestral DNA testing enables men to trace both their maternal and paternal ancestry. Because the paternal line can only be traced through the Y chromosome, however, women can only test their maternal lines – unless a male relative, such as a brother is tested for them.

As ancestral DNA testing becomes more popular, many businesses work to make it more available to the public. DNA Consulting offers a variety of testing and services, including a a surname report on the meaning, historical connections and online genealogy of your family name, which can be ordered through the mail and costs between $310 and $400.

Family Tree DNA offers ancestral information of the maternal or paternal gentic line; a single test allows you to verify if two females are related, if you are of African ancestry and your suggested geographic region of origin. Testing costs between $129 and $495.

For more information or to order a DNA testing kit contact:

Family Tree DNA
Phone: (713) 868-1438

Or

DNA Consultants
Phone: (505) 473-5155
Toll Free: (877) 473-5155

COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA

Virginia will be the first state in the nation to index and digitize the approximately 1,100 linear feet of Freedmen's Bureau records; established in 1865 to provide relief for freed slaves, the Bureau documented matters such as marriages, education and work contracts for African-Americans, and will now provide valuable information to genealogists.

Bureau documented marriages, education, work contracts and other important matters for African-Americans in the years after the abolishment of slavery.

"We call these the 'genesis records,' because these are the first recordings of slaves. I cannot overemphasize how big this is, because if you're African-American [and your ancestors were enslaved], your family basically stops with the 1870 census. Up to the point of being freed, they were not even citizens of this country. It was the first time that they had the opportunity to say, 'I am someone' and these records provide evidence of that," explains Dr. W. Darrell Walden, associate professor of accounting and information systems at the University of Richmond and a co-founder of the Virginia Freedmen Project Team, which played an instrumental part in bringing the Freedmen's Bureau records to public attention.

The Black History Museum is currently recruiting volunteers to transcribe data from Virginia Freedmen's Bureau documents that have been microfilmed by the National Archives. Based on the Virginia pilot program, records from other states will then be transcribed and digitized. In the future, Howard University will post the data online where it can be easily accessed by genealogical researchers.

Getting Started

While every genealogical search is unique, there are some basic steps to getting started regardless of race.

First, start with what you know.

"You know your name and date of birth. You know your children and then, most of us know our immediate ancestors' names," explains Bessida White, who has been researching her family lineage for the past two decades. "When you start to write it down, most people are surprised at how much they know. Then, talk to family members and get down what they know."

"Sometimes the best way [to get started] is to sit down with an elder in the family and just talk," adds Dr. W. Darrell Walden, associate professor of accounting and information systems at the University of Richmond and co-founder of the Virginia Freedmen Project. "It's amazing how much people can find out by just talking to an elder in their family."

From there, the real research begins. "I like to start with the Census records and then branch out from there to the vital records – birth, death and marriage," says White. "Then, there are other records – land records, probate, chancery, the Social Security death index and the military records."

The Library of Virginia and the Family History Center of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on Monument Avenue are both good starting places for genealogical records.

African-American research follows the same path of other races until the slavery years. At that point, it becomes more difficult, since slaves weren't accounted for in Census and other records.

"You would have to find out if they were free or enslaved," says Derek Gray, a research archivist at the Library of Virginia. "One way you can tell is to check free black registers that were kept at the county level that recorded all free persons. If the person is not there, the family was probably enslaved."

If ancestors were enslaved, the genealogical search becomes much harder, explains Gray. "What you would really have to look in are the records of the family who owned the slaves. A lot of archives have private papers collections that include family ledgers, correspondence, journals and diaries that record that information. The Library of Virginia has a large collection of those records," says Gray.

The Internet can be an invaluable resource for genealogical research. "Twenty years ago, you would have had to get on a train and go somewhere and sift through boxes in a basement. What could have taken years can now take seconds," says Ann Creighton-Zollar, associate professor of sociology with Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs and the Department of African-American Studies.

In addition to online records and databases, there's free software researchers can download to keep organized. And, in some cases, researchers are even able to connect with others who are working on the same surname.

"Often times you will find that someone somewhere has done some work for you," says Walden.

At the Family History Center, researchers can access online records via Ancestry.com for free. The Web site includes Census records prior to 1930.

"The 1870 Census can be a key for African-Americans because that's when everybody was listed," said Pat Watson, the center's director.

White has already volunteered for the Virginia Freedmen's Bureau pilot project.

"Anyone who has roots in Virginia and does African-American research is hoping that maybe their ancestors will appear in those Freedmen's records," says White. "The Freedmen Bureau records have the potential to help us get past that point [of slavery] with some of these families."

It's unknown whether the records might help White in her own research, but that matters little to her.

"I don't know whether it will help my research personally, but all of these tens of thousands of pages in the Virginia Freedmen's records … they're about people, so somebody's folks are there," says White.

The Freedmen's records will add yet another source to an already growing number of resources available for African-American genealogical researchers. For White and others, the Internet has opened up the world for genealogists – regardless of race.

"When I first started out in the 1980s, if I wanted to look at Census records, I would have to go to the Family History Center or the Library of Virginia," recalls White.

Now, as a subscriber to Ancestry.com, White is able to work on her family tree day or night from the comfort of home. It's also helped her locate family members who previously couldn't be found.

"Everybody needs to know where they come from."

"You can do any kind of search you want, and that has really made a huge difference in finding someone that once you couldn't find. I knew my great-grandmother's name was Harriet Croxton, but I could not find her in the Census records and I was looking for her for years," recalls White. "Once I was able to search electronically, I just looked for Harriets who were black in Essex County. The reason I had not been able to find her earlier is that her [last] name was misspelled on the Census."

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Here presenting "Whispers from the Dust: The Freedmen Records and African-American Family History," Dr. Darrell Walden says of the Freedmen's Bureau records, "It was the first time that [African-Americans] had the opportunity to say, 'I am someone.'"

Many genealogical Web sites like Ancestry.com charge a fee for searches, but genealogists can access that site and other online resources for free at the Family History Center, says Watson. "It would cost you $100 to have it in your own home," explains Watson. Online tools are just one of the many resources available at the center.

"There are plenty of records available, particularly when they're just beginning to research," says Watson. Through the center, researchers also have access to more than two million microfilm stored at the main Family History Center in Salt Lake City, Utah. For a small fee, researchers can also rent microfilms from the center.

The Richmond Family History Center also provides human resources. "We have librarians who are trained to help them," says Watson.

The Library of Virginia is also improving its resources for African-American researchers.

"There is an effort to promote what the library's collections include. A lot of our records are being cataloged so that visitors can look on our Web site and see what we have here," says Gray.

Additionally, the library is currently revamping its brochure on African-American genealogy.

"We're actually going to do a more comprehensive guide that will be put on our Web site," explains Gray.

All of this will make genealogical research a bit easier for African-Americans, inspiring them to keep trying to solve the mystery of their history.

"There are not as many obstacles as we have been led to believe. There are more opportunities, more resources available," encourages Creighton-Zollar. "When they start looking at the past and seeing that it's not shameful, it connects them to the broader world. Everybody needs to know where they come from."

On That Note

Richmond Genealogical Resources:

Library of Virginia
800 E. Broad St.
www.lva.lib.va.us
(804) 692-3500

Family History Center
5600 Monument Ave.
(804) 288-8134

Online resources:

AfriGeneas
Ancestry.com's Web site for African-American genealogy
www.afrigeneas.com

Family Search
Provides research advice specific to African-Americans
www.familysearch.org

Virginia Freemen Extraction and Indexing Project:

Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia
www.blackhistorymuseum.org
(804) 780-9097