

# OPERATION GRANNY FILES

## The African American Research Roadmap

*A companion to Operation Granny Files Mission 22 — Finding Freedom*

Field Guide & Research Roadmap

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Mission 22: Finding Freedom — African American Genealogy & the Freedmen's Bureau

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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## A note before you begin

This roadmap is built for two readers at once. The first is a researcher tracing their own African American ancestors — the work is personal, the records' violence is not abstract, and the methodology is liberating because it returns names that the records were designed to erase. The second is a researcher who is new to pre-1870 records and is learning how to do this carefully — perhaps for a friend, a community history project, a DNA match, or because the family tree they thought they knew turned out to include lines they had never been taught to look for.

The roadmap is written to work for both readers without flattening either. The terminology throughout is *enslaved person*, not *slave*; *enslaver*, not *owner*. These are not stylistic preferences. They name what the relationship actually was: an act done by one person to another, not a property arrangement between equals.

If you are returning to this work after a hard session at the archives, take a breath. The records are heavy. They reward patience. They are also, in a profound sense, what your people left behind for you to find. That is what this roadmap is for.

## Part 1 — The Five-Step Methodology

### Overview

The method described here is the working consensus of African American genealogical practice as developed across decades of research at the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS), the IAAM Center for Family History, the Freedmen's Bureau Project, and a body of methodology in *Tony Burroughs, Black Roots* (2001) and the National Genealogical Society's standards. It assumes nothing about your starting point except an interest in pre-1870 records and a willingness to read patiently.

Five steps. Most of the work happens in steps 1-3. Steps 4 and 5 are for when the first three have done what they can do.

### Step 1 — Anchor in 1870

The 1870 federal census is the first U.S. census in which every formerly enslaved person was enumerated as a named, full person. It is where almost every African American genealogy project before the twentieth century starts.

#### What to do:

- Locate your earliest known Black ancestor in the 1870 census.
- Record everything: full name as written on the page, age, sex, occupation, exact household composition (every member, in order), state and county of residence, and value of personal/real estate if shown.
- **Read the whole page, not just the line.** In 1870, freed people often lived clustered together — siblings, cousins, in-laws, neighbors from the same plantation. People listed within five or ten lines of your ancestor on the page are candidates for the family network.
- Note the surname carefully. Surnames in 1870 had a wide variety of origins: kept from the last enslaver, adopted from an earlier enslaver remembered better, taken from a free Black

neighbor or relative, or chosen freshly. None of these is "the right one." If your ancestor used different surnames at different points after 1870 (which happens often), record both.

### Worksheet entry — Step 1

| Field                                                  | Your ancestor |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Name (as on 1870 census)                               |               |
| Age in 1870                                            |               |
| Sex                                                    |               |
| Occupation                                             |               |
| State + county                                         |               |
| Township or post office                                |               |
| Other household members (name, age, relation if shown) |               |
| Neighbors on page (names)                              |               |
| Surname variants noted later                           |               |

## Step 2 — Search the Freedmen's Bureau records

The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands operated from 1865 to 1872. It left behind roughly four million records, the largest free index of which sits on FamilySearch.

### What to do:

1. Open FamilySearch and search for "Freedmen's Bureau." This will bring you to the Bureau records portal (the underlying URL has moved more than once; if the direct link does not resolve, use the search bar — the records are still free).
2. Search by **surname** in the same state as your 1870 anchor.
3. If the surname search returns nothing, search by **given name** in the same state. Bureau-record surnames sometimes do not match the 1870 surname.
4. If both name searches return nothing, search by **location alone** — the field office that served the county where your ancestor lived. Browse the records by date range, focusing 1865-1868 first.

### Record sets to prioritize, in order:

1. **Marriage register / cohabitation register.** Highest-yield.
2. **Labor contracts.** Often name the worker, the employer (frequently a former enslaver), the wages, and the duration.
3. **Complaints register.** Often the only record in which a family relationship is named explicitly (an aunt complains on behalf of a niece; a husband complains on behalf of a wife).
4. **School records.** If children are named.
5. **Hospital and ration records.** If illness, death, or family-unit registration is named.

### Worksheet entry — Step 2

| Field                                          | Your search |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| State searched                                 |             |
| Field office (if known)                        |             |
| Surname searched                               |             |
| Given name searched                            |             |
| Record sets browsed                            |             |
| Findings (record type, names, dates, citation) |             |

### Step 3 — Cross-reference the slave schedules

The 1850 and 1860 federal censuses include slave schedules — the population schedules that recorded enslaved people by age, sex, and color, organized under the enslaver. They are searchable on FamilySearch, Ancestry, and HeritageQuest.

**A note before you start this step.** This is the hardest emotional turn in the methodology. You are not finding your ancestor here. You are finding the household where the records were kept on her. It helps to say that out loud the first time you do it.

#### What to do:

1. Go to the 1860 slave schedule for the county where your ancestor lived in 1870.
2. Identify white families with enslaved people of approximately the right age and sex to be your ancestor in 1860 (so, ten years younger than they were in 1870, with sex matching).
3. Build a candidate list of three to five white families.
4. Repeat for the 1850 slave schedule, looking for the same candidate families and for younger people who could be your ancestor as a child.
5. Cross-reference the candidate enslaver surnames against the surname your ancestor used in 1870. Many freed people kept their last enslaver's surname; many did not. If there is a match, the candidate is stronger; if there is no match, the candidate is not yet eliminated.

#### Worksheet entry — Step 3

| Candidate enslaver family | County | Persons of right age/sex (1860 slave schedule) | Surname match to 1870 ancestor (Y/N) | Probate / deed records to pursue |
|---------------------------|--------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|                           |        |                                                |                                      |                                  |
|                           |        |                                                |                                      |                                  |
|                           |        |                                                |                                      |                                  |

### Step 4 — Probate, deeds, and bills of sale

When an enslaver died, the estate was inventoried. The inventories sometimes name enslaved people by first name, age, and family relationship. Example, from an 1856 Mississippi probate inventory:

"Sally and her three children: Tom, age 8; Hannah, age 5; baby Lucinda." The line is a record of a family.

#### What to do:

For each candidate enslaver family from Step 3:

1. Search FamilySearch and Ancestry for the candidate's probate records. (FamilySearch hosts many county probate collections; Ancestry hosts the rest.)
2. If the records are not online, locate the county courthouse for the relevant time period. Many courthouses respond to mail or email requests; some require a researcher visit.
3. Look specifically for: estate inventories, division of estate documents (when an enslaver died intestate, enslaved people were often divided among heirs and the division records list names), bills of sale, manumission records (where the enslaver freed people during their lifetime), wills.
4. Deeds: enslaved people were sometimes mentioned in deeds when land was sold with "the people thereon" — search the deed index for the candidate enslaver's name.
5. Bills of sale specifically: county-level archives, sometimes indexed separately from deeds.

The methodology here is the same as Mission 19's Genealogical Proof Standard and Mission 20's FAN club — apply both. The candidate is strengthened or weakened by the totality of the evidence. A single matching first name in an inventory is a lead, not a proof.

#### Worksheet entry — Step 4

| Candidate family | Records searched | First names appearing | Family relationships named | Strength of match (lead / probable / proven) |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
|                  |                  |                       |                            |                                              |
|                  |                  |                       |                            |                                              |

## Step 5 — DNA as the modern bridge

When the paper trail stops — and it will — autosomal DNA can carry the line forward. AncestryDNA's match pool is the largest for African American researchers; 23andMe, FamilyTreeDNA, and MyHeritage also hold useful databases. Mission 23 of this series covers shared-match clustering, the Leeds method, and chromosome mapping in detail. The summary here is what you need to integrate DNA with the paper-trail work in Steps 1-4.

#### What to do:

1. Test on at least one platform (AncestryDNA is the recommended starting point for African American researchers because of database size).
2. Once your matches arrive, sort by **shared centiMorgans (cM)** in descending order. Your closest matches will likely include known family; your matches in the 30-200 cM range are the genealogy-relevant ones — these are the second through fourth cousins, including matches whose paper-trail ancestor sits in the same county as your candidate enslaver families from Step 3.

3. For matches in that range, examine their family trees (where public). Look for surnames that match your Step-3 candidate enslaver families. A shared match in the right county with the right enslaver surname is corroborating evidence for the candidate.
4. Build a shared-match cluster (the Leeds method) for the matches that share that surname pattern. The cluster size, the cM ranges within it, and the geographic concentration are the data you bring back to the paper-trail work.

**This is sensitive ground.** A DNA match to a white family is often the result of rape, coercion, or a relationship the historical record erased. The DNA does not lie about the connection. The records lied about the relationship. Both things are true at once, and the methodology has to hold them both. The sensitivity guide in Part 3 of this roadmap addresses how to talk about these findings with family members.

#### Worksheet entry — Step 5

| Match (initials or pseudonym) | Shared cM | County of their tree | Surnames in their tree matching Step-3 candidates | Notes |
|-------------------------------|-----------|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------|
|                               |           |                      |                                                   |       |
|                               |           |                      |                                                   |       |

## Part 2 — The Freedmen's Bureau Record-Set Guide

Each major Bureau record category gets its own page. What it is. What it captures. How to find it. What to look for.

### Marriage and cohabitation registers

**What it is.** Records of marriages registered with the Bureau or with state and local authorities after emancipation. Bureau marriage registers cover 1865-1872; cohabitation registers are state-level and run 1865-1868 in most jurisdictions.

**What it captures.** Both spouses' names; ages; sometimes prior enslavers' names; frequently the length of the existing union before registration; sometimes the names of children; county and date of registration.

**Coverage.** Cohabitation registers exist for Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Bureau marriage registers cover most of the same geography plus West Virginia and Maryland.

**How to find it on FamilySearch.** Search the Freedmen's Bureau collections for "Marriages" or "Cohabitation"; filter by state. Most are indexed by surname; some are image-only and require browsing by field office and date.

**What to look for.** Length of marriage before registration. A line that reads "*married 22 years, registered 1866*" is a window into 1844. The previous enslaver's name (when noted) is a direct lead into the Step-3 / Step-4 white-family research.

## Labor contracts

**What it is.** Contracts negotiated by the Bureau between freed workers and (often) their former enslavers. The Bureau supervised the contracts in part to allow workers to sue employers who cheated them.

**What it captures.** Worker's name; employer's name; wages; duration of contract; sometimes the names of family members included in the contract (a woman whose husband was working a separate contract; children working under their parents); county and date.

**How to find it on FamilySearch.** Search Freedmen's Bureau collections for "Labor Contracts" filtered by state. Often image-only.

**What to look for.** Family groups working under the same contract. The employer is often the former enslaver — connecting the contract to the Step-3 candidate list.

## Complaint registers

**What it is.** Logs of complaints brought by freed people to Bureau agents. Usually disputes over unpaid wages, physical violence, or refusal to release children apprenticed to former enslavers.

**What it captures.** Complainant's name; respondent's name; nature of the complaint; sometimes a family relationship named explicitly ("complains on behalf of her daughter," "complains his brother is being held"); date.

**How to find it on FamilySearch.** Search the state collections for "Complaints," "Records of Complaints," or "Letters Received." Image-only is common.

**What to look for.** Named family relationships. The complaint registers are often the only contemporaneous document in which a specific family tie is recorded. A complaint that names a "sister" or a "father" is data — write it down.

## School records

**What it is.** Records of the more than four thousand schools the Bureau operated. Students; teachers; attendance; sometimes parents' names; sometimes ages.

**What it captures.** Children's names; ages; sometimes parents (especially mothers); school location; date range.

**How to find it on FamilySearch.** Search "Freedmen's Bureau Schools" filtered by state.

**What to look for.** Sibling groups (multiple children with the same surname attending the same school). Children's ages — useful for narrowing birth years that may not appear elsewhere.

## Hospital and ration records

**What it is.** Records of medical care and rations distributed by the Bureau. Records of death are also kept here.

**What it captures.** Patient's name; age; sometimes the name of next of kin; condition; date; sometimes residence.

**How to find it on FamilySearch.** Search "Freedmen's Bureau Hospital" or "Freedmen's Bureau Ration" filtered by state. Often image-only.

**What to look for.** Death dates that may not appear elsewhere. Next-of-kin notations.

## **U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) service records**

**What it is.** Service records for the approximately 180,000 Black soldiers who served in the Union Army during the Civil War. These are not technically Bureau records but are deeply connected and held alongside Bureau materials.

**What it captures.** Soldier's name; age at enlistment; place of birth; unit; sometimes the former enslaver's name (recorded at enlistment); physical description; pension file details if filed.

**How to find it on FamilySearch.** Search "U.S. Colored Troops" or "USCT" filtered by state of enlistment.

**What to look for.** Pension files specifically. These are often the genealogically richest documents — pension applications required affidavits from family members, which name them. The former enslaver's name in the enlistment record is a direct lead into the Step-3 / Step-4 white-family research.

## **Freedman's Savings Bank — signature registers**

**What it is.** The Freedman's Savings and Trust Company was a separate institution from the Bureau, operating 1865-1874. The bank failed in 1874. The signature registers — the forms customers filled out when opening accounts — survived.

**What it captures.** Full name; age; place of birth; current residence; occupation; employer; spouse's name; names of children; names of parents; names of siblings.

**How to find it on FamilySearch.** Search "Freedman's Savings Bank" or "Freedman's Bank Signature Registers."

**What to look for.** Everything. This is, in a single page, sometimes four generations of family information. The Freedman's Bank registers are among the most genealogically dense records in any American archive.

## **Part 3 — Sensitivity Guide**

This guide is offered as a starting point, not the last word. The conversations described here are often the hardest part of the research, and there is no single right way to have them. What follows is what has worked for researchers who have walked this ground before.

### **Talking with a relative who doesn't want to know**

Some family members may not want to know that the family was enslaved. The reasons vary: grief, shame, a previous generation's choice to leave the past behind, a present-day reluctance to revisit pain. Your research may surface information that a parent, an aunt, an uncle, or a cousin has spent decades not asking about.

**Suggested approaches:**

- Lead with what you have found that affirms, not just what you have found that disturbs. "I found Henry and Lucinda's marriage registered in 1866 — they were together for years before that. I want to tell you their story." That is a different conversation than "I found that our family was enslaved."
- Offer the information once. Do not press if the relative does not want it. Leave the door open by saying you will share more if asked.
- Respect generational difference. A relative who grew up in the segregation era may have spent decades building a life around not being defined by what their grandparents endured. Your research is not an obligation for them to engage with.

## Handling a DNA match to a white family

Autosomal DNA matches frequently include white people. The most common explanation in African American DNA matches is descent from a relationship between an enslaver (or an enslaver's son, brother, or other family member) and an enslaved woman. These relationships were not consensual under any modern definition.

### Suggested approaches:

- The DNA match is real. The relationship the DNA implies is also real. You do not have to soften either fact.
- Whether to contact the white match is your decision and yours alone. Some researchers find the conversation valuable; others find it exhausting; many simply note the match in their tree and move on.
- If you do reach out: lead with the genealogy, not the history. "We share 47 cM and our trees both point to Lowndes County, Alabama, in the 1850s. Are you familiar with the [Surname] family there?" That is a different opening than "Your ancestor enslaved my ancestor." Both statements are true. One opens a conversation; the other closes it.
- Be prepared for the response to range from welcoming to silence to hostility. None of these reactions are yours to fix.

## Writing about this work publicly

If you write a family history, blog about the research, or post findings to social media, the same sensitivity bar applies.

### Suggested approaches:

- Use the terminology *enslaved person* and *enslaver*. The shift from *slave* and *owner* is not stylistic; it names the relationship as an act, not a property arrangement.
- When you name an enslaved ancestor, name them as a full person — their work, their family, their resistance, their everyday choices — not only their status.
- When you name an enslaver, name them factually but without prurience. They were people who did a specific thing. The naming is part of the record; the dwelling is not necessary.
- If you write about a DNA match to a white family, do not name the living person without their consent. The fact of the relationship is yours to write about; their identity is not.
- Consider sharing your research with the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, the Freedmen's Bureau Project, or the IAAM Center for Family History. Many family histories of this era are sitting in private trees that researchers cannot find. Adding yours to the open record helps the next person.

## Closing

The methodology in this roadmap works because the people in the records refused to be invisible. The Bureau registered marriages because formerly-enslaved couples walked into Bureau offices and demanded that their unions be written down. The Freedman's Bank signature registers exist because freed people walked into the bank and listed their parents and siblings on the form, knowing the form was about to be filed somewhere safe. The complaints registers exist because freed people insisted, in writing, that the law owed them protection.

Your work — reading those records, writing down what you find, putting the names on the tree — is part of the same long act.

There is more work to do. There is always more work to do. The next mission in this series, Mission 23, picks up where this roadmap leaves off: the advanced DNA methods that can carry the line forward when the paper trail stops. Mission 24 turns the research into prose, so that the people you have found become legible as people, not as a list of names.

For now, sit with what you have found. Write down the citations. Tell somebody.

The records are waiting.

## Quick reference — One-page summary

### Five-step methodology:

1. Anchor in 1870 census.
2. Search Freedmen's Bureau records (FamilySearch).
3. Cross-reference 1850/1860 slave schedules for candidate enslaver families.
4. Pursue probate, deeds, bills of sale for candidate families.
5. DNA as modern bridge — AncestryDNA + shared-match clustering.

### Highest-yield record sets:

- Bureau marriage and cohabitation registers
- Freedman's Savings Bank signature registers
- USCT pension files
- Bureau complaints registers (for family relationships named explicitly)

### Key resources:

- FamilySearch — Freedmen's Bureau collections (free)
- AAHGS — Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society
- IAAM Center for Family History (Charleston)
- NARA Record Group 105 — Freedmen's Bureau originals
- Tony Burroughs, *Black Roots* (2001) — methodology handbook

### Terminology to use:

- *Enslaved person*, not *slave*
- *Enslaver*, not *owner*
- *Slave schedule* is the period-accurate name of the 1850/1860 census schedule; the people listed on it are *enslaved persons*, never *slaves*

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## **Notes**

*Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.*

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