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SLAVE FAMILY HISTORY RECORDS:
AN ABUNDANCE OF MATERIALS

Carole Merritt

Although it is no longer tenable to deny that the history of Blacks is an essential part of the history of Americans, it has now become acceptable to assume that the specific circumstances of much of the Black experience cannot be known. Because slaves, for the most part, left no written records, it is assumed that much of slave life must remain obscure, that there is little or no information on the system's social impact on the enslaved, and that the specific ways in which slave life shared in and contributed to the dominant culture cannot be determined. The assumption that the Black past is unknowable, has a devastating effect since it discourages investigation and results in continued ignorance of African-American history.

Contrary to the current assumption, records exist through which certain aspects of African-American history can fruitfully be explored. There are records, for example, which document basic social characteristics of Black life in this country, particularly during slavery. Social structure and demographic characteristics can be reconstructed through available records for Black Americans as well as for White. None of these records are obscure or of recent discovery. They include public and private papers that have long been traditional primary sources for historians and genealogists. Only fairly recently, however, has systematic use been made of them in the study of African-American history. Some historians have recognized that traditional historical studies have failed to capture the lives of common folk, whose aggregate stores comprise the country's history. Fortunately, the records have not been so exclusive; they document even slaves—their presence, their identity, their role, and their significance.

Historians may study slave social forms through the same records as the genealogist, albeit for slightly different purposes. Like the genealogist, the historian of slave family structure must use such records as birth registers, marriage certificates, estate records, and census schedules to identify individual family or house-hold units whose kinship and marriage ties he is studying in aggregate.

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At times, the historian of the Black family is as dependent as the genealogist on the identity of specific individuals and families. Unless vital records are compiled by household characteristic, and as long as such matters as kinship and marriage ties between separate households are studied over time, the historian may have to link individual people from record to record systematically.

Perhaps it is in the reconstruction of family forms that history and genealogy meet on common ground. Reconstitution of single families and groups of families is a critical element of the history of social structure. The kinds of record linkages necessary for reconstituting Black families, slave and free, are discussed in this paper.

The most obvious record for reconstruction of the Black family is the federal manuscript census. The names it lists are perhaps the most accessible reference to the membership of Black families after 1865. What is often underestimated, however, is the census' use as an index to Black family composition during slavery. Even the 1900 census, which is the most recent one available, records one or more generations of slave-born persons. At the very least, it records the last generation born have been recorded in 1900. How close the slave experience is to twentieth century America! The lives of individuals span both slavery and freedom. And one can begin to trace the continuity between the two periods through the individuals and generations recorded in the censuses.

The 1870 census provides perhaps the most direct access to the slave family just before the Civil War ended. The composition of Black households in 1870 would have closely reflected the composition of Black families prior to 1865. The 1870 census would have been among the first public documents to record how ex-slaves chose to organize their families. A family of ex-slaves arranged in a single household in 1870 may have five years earlier been a family of slaves divided among two or more plantations due to multiple ownership. The census, then, provides more than individual names. It organizes names into households whose kinship and marriage ties were for the most part established during slavery.

Household composition recorded in the census provides clusters of names of people who for the most part are related by blood and marriage. These name clusters can be traced from census records to records generated during slavery. Although some persons, when slavery ended, adopted surnames unrelated to a former master, many had surnames which they had taken from a slave owner, not generally the most recent, and which they retained as freedmen.1 The surnames of ex-slaves recorded in the census, therefore, are often the surnames of former slave masters.

Some of the records by which these slave masters kept an accounting of their property identify slaves. Estate records are among the most valuable of such accounts. Wills, inventories, appraisements, and annual returns name slaves, give their age and sex, sometimes describe physical characteristics, and
may indicate occupation and blood and marriage ties. Annual returns documenting business transactions on behalf of an unsettled estate sometimes report events affecting slaves, such as hired labor, receipt of shoes and blankets, illnesses attended by a doctor, or sale. Although the returns are disorganized and often incomplete, they suggest the range of activities in which the slave interfaced with the system.

It has been assumed that slave status always conferred anonymity. On the contrary, because slaves were property, they were identified and recorded when transferred by inheritance or sale. Since slave surnames were either unknown or unrecognized by the slave master, it is the clusters of first names found in estate records of former masters that must be linked with first names from the censuses. If family reconstitution is not the research objective, the lists of slaves by age, sex, and other characteristics, place slaves in social context at a particular time. The full significance of estate documents is more fully appreciated when it is realized how large a number of slaves they record. Most slaves were concentrated on larger plantations whose owners were likely to have generated such records. The period during which these records would mention slaves extends from 1865 back to a county’s early years. The probability is strong that during that time many slave families would have been transferred by inheritance.

There are less familiar public records which identify slaves, such as the registers of slaves entering a state for the first time. In accordance with a Georgia law passed in 1817, a person was prohibited from bringing slaves into the state for any purpose other than labor for that person or his heirs. Importation for sale or hire, and other forms of transfer, were explicitly forbidden. The affidavits subscribed before the clerk of the superior court stated the importer’s intention and described each slave imported by name, age, complexion, and occupation. Names and clusters of names in these registers can be linked with the names in estate and other records for family reconstitution. The registers are among the few records which would indicate the fact and approximate date of a slave’s previous residence in another state. They would also be of particular value in studying patterns of slave migration.

Court records involving slaves are also relevant research tools. They are common sources of information for the examination of slavery’s legal impact, but generally have not been used for tracing specific slaves.

The records collected by the United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands provide another source of information on family relationships established during slavery. Marriage registration, which was required in many southern counties, recorded the length of unions begun during slavery. One historian, Herbert Gutman, has used these registers to demonstrate that, contrary to traditional belief, many slaves had long and stable marriages. The savings and trust companies created by the Freedmen’s Bureau generated thousands of depositor applications which provide biographical information on ex-slaves: age, birthplace, previous and current
residence, complexion, occupation, name of employer, name and sometimes the age of spouse, children, parents, brothers, and sisters. There are over four thousand such accounts for the Atlanta company alone.³

Although private papers are generally less accessible than public records, they are no less rich as sources of information on slave life. Plantation ledgers, account books, business receipts, medical notes, birth registers, diaries, and letters all record major events and serve to chart the day-to-day activities of slaves. They often provide information that is not contained in public documents. As is the case for the free population at that time, slave births and deaths are not noted in public records. Although birth dates can often be inferred from the ages given in census, estate and other public records, direct documentation of slave births is contained largely in the few surviving plantation birth registers and other private papers. Death also is more likely to be recorded in private records. Since slaves ceased to be property upon death and had no property of their own to transfer, their passing was not of public note. What remains for the most part are miscellaneous private papers which record the deaths of a few slaves.

Perhaps the most valuable private documents for tracing slaves are bills of sale. As property records, these provide a wealth of information: name, age, and sometimes distinguishing physical characteristics such as complexion, scarring, speech impediments, or pregnancy. If kin or married persons were sold in the same transaction, the bill will sometimes identify these relationships. It will also place the slave in time and space. The date of the sale and the age of the slave establish the slave’s approximate birth date. Many bills indicate the county where the sale took place. In identifying the buyer and seller, and sometimes their counties of residence, the bill reconstructs part of the slave’s ownership history. The sale price recorded in the bill gives a more accurate measure of market value than an estate appraisal.

What records the slave as a person, as more than property? Where are the intimacies of family relationships described? The written records are sparse on such detail. Slave testimony in published autobiographies and oral accounts of ex-slaves and their descendants are perhaps the best sources. For many Black persons seeking specific references to their slave ancestors, however, only fragments of information may remain on record. The private letters of a slaveholding family may yield no more than a brief reference to a slave, such as the following: “Mariah is quite well, but misses her children.”⁴ Here, because a slavemaster’s daughter, in a letter to her father, made an observation of a slave’s mood, the affection of a woman for her children is duly recorded and becomes history.

The wealth of information in private papers may be of little value for much of historical research if the treasures are too deeply buried. The history of social structure, which addresses the study of the family perhaps more directly than other branches of history, is particularly dependent on data which are difficult and tedious to collect and analyze. These obstacles to

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research are due not so much to the availability of the data as to their accessibility. Information exists on ordinary people, their births, marriages, deaths, and the structure of their families. However, the forms in which the data are usually organized almost defy numerical and qualitative analysis. This is particularly true for the study of slave families.

The vital records on slaves are contained in documents whose primary purpose was to account for the property of other families. In public records such as estate records, access is indirect via the slaveowning families. And since the history of families is the study of generations of people, it is necessary to reconstruct families over time. Reconstitution of slave families is more difficult, of course, but not impossible. Although slave surnames are not recorded, systematic record linkage can be done with first names to determine intergenerational ties of specific families. From these record linkages the patterns of slave families in aggregate can be derived. The genealogist of Black families has demonstrated the possibilities. And current historical research has begun to explore these possibilities for American social history.

Of real value in these research efforts would be the development of finding aids to facilitate record access. Public documents such as estate records are usually organized by date, geographic area and/or type of record. It is possible to proceed fairly systematically through such documents if they are indexed. In addition to indices, abstracts of document texts can reduce research time considerably. Unfortunately, few abstracts and indices presently available include references to slaves even when they are named in the full texts of the records. The witnesses to a will, for example, may be identified in an abstract but not the slaves transferred. This exclusion of slave references from finding aids is an obstacle to researchers seeking sources documenting slave families. It misrepresents the records and perpetuates the assumption that the Black past is unknowable.

Private documents are among the least accessible records. They contain an abundance of vital information on slave life, but their sheer bulk and variety make them unwieldy for family research. Many inventories of private papers, for example, are incomplete and generally of little or no value in locating information on slaves. The data are there, but in many cases the researcher must go through each item of a file regardless of the content indicated on the inventory. In a project currently being conducted to index and abstract bills of sale of slaves contained in private papers at the Georgia Department of Archives and History, it has been noted that inventories have often failed to list such records.5

Surely the archivist is a key participant in any attempts to improve record access. More detailed inventories of private papers, for example, are a critical need of genealogists and historians of the Black family. Already, increasing interest in Black genealogy, which was triggered in large part by Alex Haley’s Roots, is making new demands on records that traditionally have been of interest to other groups of people. The challenge this new interest makes to archivists is not necessarily to their basic responsibilities.
and functions. But the growing interest in African-American family history does demand of archivists that documents be ordered more carefully and impartially to facilitate equitable access for all potential client groups. The task is prodigious, but archivists need not perform it alone. As the demands for improved finding aids increase, so may the opportunities for meeting them. The growing interest of new client groups may yield a corps of persons willing to prepare finding aids for those documents which they consider of high priority. Efficient records management, which would maximize access to the abundance of historical materials, may very well call for a partnership between skilled archivists and committed clients.

**FOOTNOTES**


2 Ibid., pp. 11-24.


4 Letter of Anna Durham to Lindsey Durham, September 7, 1853, in Lindsey Durham Papers (University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia), Box 2.

5 This project is being conducted by the African-American Family History Association, an Atlanta group organized in mid-1977 to promote Black family history and genealogy.