



# Get Excited About Your Pre-1870 African-American Research

Diane L. Richard offers numerous online sources for searching the pre-1870 era

**A**FRICAN-AMERICAN RESEARCH BEFORE 1870 CAN CHALLENGE US. After the Civil War, we find more equitable treatment in the records in the sense that those emancipated are now enumerated in the census by name, might qualify to vote, can purchase land, pay taxes, have probate, etc.

Previously, enslaved individuals were treated as property and such are not always well documented – often just enumerated by age group and sex. Even Free Persons of Color (FPC) were sometimes under-represented in the records.

Voyage identification number	Vessel name	Captain's name	Year arrived with slaves*	Principal region of slave purchase*	Principal region of slave landing**
1	Fátima de Lima	Dea. Marcel José	1617	Southwest Africa and Indian Ocean islands	Bahia
2	Tibaric	Maia, José Maria de	1617	Southwest Africa and Indian Ocean islands	Bahia
3	Pequillo Real	Fernes, José da Silva	1617	West Central Africa and St. Helena	Bahia
4	San Clemente	Dea. Domingos Francisco	1617	Southwest Africa and Indian Ocean islands	Bahia
5	Benignita		1617	West Central Africa and St. Helena	Bahia
6	Viduor		1617	Southwest Africa and Indian Ocean islands	Bahia
7	Formiga	Viana, Isidoro António	1617	West Central Africa and St. Helena	Bahia
8	Vigário Africano	Amorim, José Gomes de	1617	West Central Africa and St. Helena	Bahia
9	Constança	Naricio, António	1617	West Central Africa and St. Helena	Bahia
10	Comerciante	Braga, Isidoro Martins	1617	West Central Africa and St. Helena	Bahia

Main search page for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database containing almost 36,000 slaving voyages.

This article picks up where Online Freedmen's Bureau Records (published in *Internet Genealogy*, October/November 2016) leaves off. Freedmen's Bureau records are one great resource for the immediate post-emancipation years (1865-1868 and sometimes later). These records though only cover a small period of time and only sometimes mention familial relationships.

When trying to trace enslaved individuals in the pre-1870 records, we must first exhaust the post-Civil War Records. You need to have at your fingertips every bit of information about your ancestors and their extended family. For example, in North Carolina, detailed marriage records commence in 1868, regardless of race. These records list the parties to the marriage, their parents, whether the parents are alive/dead and where living. This invaluable information is excellent for

connecting your post-Civil War ancestor to parents. Alternately, in North Carolina and elsewhere, a permanent registration of voters was instituted in 1902, where for each qualifying voter, unless they themselves qualified, the list has who they qualify from (e.g., a father eligible to vote in 1867) – invaluable!

Once you've exhausted the more modern relevant records, it's time to delve into the pre-1870 ones. Before we talk about those, let's be reminded of some of the challenges to such research:

**1** African-Americans, even post-emancipation, were not well documented – since they often did not own land, were sometimes restricted from voting, their children often did not attend schools, early deaths, dearth of African-American newspapers, challenges finding/obtaining certificates, etc., there can be a paucity of records.

**2** Most slaves were not “traded” through deeds.

**3** Birth, marriage and other records were not required to be documented.

**4** If a plantation owner died after the Civil War and no estate file “naming” owned slaves survived, there may be no direct way to connect a slave to where he/she was born.



5 Many ex-slaves did not “know” who their parents were – if their marriage record does not identify parents (which is one document that the individual provides the information about themselves for), it can be challenging.

6 Again, if known or can be identified, you want to obtain marriage & death records for as many children or siblings (whichever is relevant) for the individual – collect all information on identified parents and birth places – the answers that are most commonly given are “probably” correct.

7 Sometimes DNA testing can help identify which “family” an ex-slave’s ancestors was genetically connected to.

8 A lot of “casual” arrangements for the care of family members existed – these did not involve the courts/authorities and so no paperwork was generated (e.g., no official adoptions, apprentice arrangements, extended family cohabitating, etc.).

Now that you know the challenges, let’s look at some of the records that might exist.

## Key records 1865-1867

- Freedmen’s Bureau (already discussed)
- Cohabitation Records

Cohabitation records reflect those “unions” that occurred before the end of the Civil War and were typically registered about the year 1866. In North Carolina, they are called Cohabitation Bonds and were handled by the county court system. In other southern states, the Freedmen’s Bureau, already discussed, handled these. They

MARS Manuscript and Archives Reference System							
Back To Search			Help				
Mars Id	Class	Title	Years	Container Type	Call Number	Child Count	Has Image?
203.103.1	CR	Miscellaneous Records	1852-1867	Box	CR.003.928.1 - CR.003.928.3	1	
203.103.1.1	CR	Cohabitation Records	1866	Folder	CR.003.928.1 - CR.003.928.3	63	
203.103.1.1.1	CR	Alexander, Lawson; Alexander, Caroline	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.5	CR	Bastian, Brown; [Bastian] Jane	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.8	CR	Bagie, John; [Bagie], Titus	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.11	CR	Boyd, Hannah; [Boyd], Eliza	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.12	CR	Crawford, Abraham; [Crawford], Harriet	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.13	CR	Crawford, Jack; [Crawford], Harriet	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.17	CR	Ellis, Jo; [Ellis], Amanda	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.18	CR	Flowers, Cyrus; [Flowers], Violet	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.19	CR	Goloth, Mat; [Goloth], Sarah	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.22	CR	Hines, James; [Hines], Mathe	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.26	CR	Little, Daniel; [Little], Barbra	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.31	CR	Murdock, Andrew; [Murdock], Tera	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.32	CR	Norton, Harry; [Norton], Mariah	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	
203.103.1.1.34	CR	Perry, Edmond; [Perry], Nelly	1866	Item	003.928.1	0	

MARS catalog search results on “cohabitation” records.

typically only provide information on the parties and the duration of their union (aka marriage). Rarely are parents provided and often both parties bear the same surname. Only marriages where both parties were still alive in 1866 could be registered.

The State Archives of North Carolina is increasingly including cohabitation records in its MARS catalog, <http://mars.archives.ncdcr.gov/BasicSearch.aspx> [search on cohabitation], and Virginia entities have placed a lot of cohabitation records online and this Wiki page seems to be the best portal to them, [http://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Virginia\\_Cohabitation\\_Records](http://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Virginia_Cohabitation_Records).

### ○ 1867 Voter Registration

This is the first voter registration that included those previously enslaved. The Reconstruction Acts of 1867 implemented regulations regarding voter registration; all freed individuals were allowed to vote along with white persons who took extended oaths. These records are discussed in more detail in Mining Post Civil War Records – More Than Pensions and Old Soldiers Homes! [Your Genealogy Today, November/December 2016], though I will

share that the following are some of the estates with online records access ...

Alabama 1867 Voter Registration Records Database, [www.archives.state.al.us/voterreg](http://www.archives.state.al.us/voterreg),

FL, [www.floridamemory.com/collections/election1867](http://www.floridamemory.com/collections/election1867),

TX, [www.tsl.texas.gov/arc/votersreg.html](http://www.tsl.texas.gov/arc/votersreg.html).

Ancestry.com also provides access to Georgia Returns of Qualified Voters and Reconstruction Oath Books, 1867-1869, the aforementioned Alabama records, etc.

## Key records pre-1865

**Probate (wills, estates, guardianships, etc.)**

This is a broad category of records that before the Civil War often provide us the greatest insight into slave holdings. The reasons for this include the inventory and valuation of all slaves (typical lists include first name, possibly age or indication of whether male, female, old/young, infirm, etc., and an assigned valuation). Slaves were often hired out and so estate records, guardian papers, court suits and more refer to who hired out which slaves for what period and at what rate.

## Select Bibliography of Online Pre-1870 African-American Research Resources

- Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, [www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/search](http://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/search)
- Unknown No Longer – A database of Virginia Slave Names, <http://unknownnolonger.vahistorical.org>
- Afrigeneas, [www.afrigeneas.com](http://www.afrigeneas.com) — A site devoted to African American genealogy, [www.afrigeneas.com/guide](http://www.afrigeneas.com/guide).
- NARA Prologue — This edition of Prologue (publication of NARA) talks about African-American Federal records and genealogy, [www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1997/summer/index.html)
- African-American Genealogy Records (via FamilySearch), <http://familysearch.org/african-american-genealogy>
- African American & Ethnic Newspapers & Magazines (USC Libraries Research Guide), <http://libguides.usc.edu/africanamericanstudies/blackpapers>
- Africans in America (PBS), [www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html)
- Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>, contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves.
- Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, [www.aahgs.org](http://www.aahgs.org)
- Slave Era Insurance Registry: List of Slaves, [www.insurance.ca.gov/01-consumers/150-other-prog/10-seir/slave-names.cfm](http://www.insurance.ca.gov/01-consumers/150-other-prog/10-seir/slave-names.cfm), and List of Slaveholders, [www.insurance.ca.gov/01-consumers/150-other-prog/10-seir/slaveholder-names.cfm](http://www.insurance.ca.gov/01-consumers/150-other-prog/10-seir/slaveholder-names.cfm)
- Race, Slavery and Free Blacks – Petitions to Southern Courts, 1775-1867, [academic.lexisnexis.com/documents/upa\\_cis/16454\\_RSFBslaveryPetitionsSerIIPtC.pdf](http://academic.lexisnexis.com/documents/upa_cis/16454_RSFBslaveryPetitionsSerIIPtC.pdf) and [academic.lexisnexis.com/documents/upa\\_cis/16456\\_RSFBslaveryPetitionsSerIIPt D.pdf](http://academic.lexisnexis.com/documents/upa_cis/16456_RSFBslaveryPetitionsSerIIPtD.pdf)
- African-American Migration experience, [www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm;jsessionid=f8303184111265916226517?bhcp=1](http://www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm;jsessionid=f8303184111265916226517?bhcp=1)
- African-American Reference Reports (NARA), [www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/reference-reports.html](http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/reference-reports.html)
- [Video] Avoid Traps in African American Genealogy, [www.familysearch.org/learningcenter/lesson/avoid-traps-in-african-american-genealogy/77](http://www.familysearch.org/learningcenter/lesson/avoid-traps-in-african-american-genealogy/77)
- [Video] Finding the Slave Generation, [www.familysearch.org/learningcenter/lesson/finding-the-slave-generation/37](http://www.familysearch.org/learningcenter/lesson/finding-the-slave-generation/37)
- History in the Trans Mississippi West, [www.familysearch.org/learningcenter/lesson/roots-west-african-american-history-in-the-trans-mississippi-west/150](http://www.familysearch.org/learningcenter/lesson/roots-west-african-american-history-in-the-trans-mississippi-west/150)
- LOC American Memory – African American History, [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/ListSome.php?category=African American History](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/ListSome.php?category=African%20American%20History)
- Digital Library on American Slavery (many sub-projects), [http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/about\\_DLAS.aspx](http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/about_DLAS.aspx)
- Runaway Slave Advertisements – Invaluable to descendants of the slaves & their former owners, <http://upfront.ngsgenealogy.org/2016/02/runaway-slave-advertisements-invaluable.html>
- Legacies of British Slave-ownership, [www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs)
- Slave Biographies: The Atlantic Database Network, <http://slavebiographies.org>
- The Church in the Southern Black Community, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/index.html>





Additionally, conflict over the valuation of slaves who are part of an estate, the handling of any “increase” (e.g., the children born to slaves after the will was written), slave deaths, the questionable sale of slaves, the movement of slaves out-of-state, and much more can also be found in probate (or court) records.

Many estate records are now found online (wills, loose estate papers, bound volumes, guardianships, etc.) via Ancestry and FamilySearch. Fold3 also has the collection Lowcountry Africana: South Carolina Slave Records, [www.fold3.com/documents/261801373/south\\_carolina\\_estate\\_inventories\\_and\\_bills](http://www.fold3.com/documents/261801373/south_carolina_estate_inventories_and_bills), which focuses on SC estate inventories and bills of sale, 1732-1872.

### Tax Records

We are often familiar with tax records that, depending on the period of time (and place), tell us how many acres, how many slaves, how many watches, how many town lots, how many carriages, etc.

Did you know that sometimes, especially in early tax records or in loose tax papers, the names of the taxable individuals in a household are listed, and these would include any taxable slaves? In NC, as the 19th century dawned, the tax lists often became summary documents. We are sometimes fortunate to find that paperwork submitted by the tax-paying citizens survives and lists in great detail both land and slave holdings (listing slaves by name).

Though few detailed tax lists listing slaves, seem to survive, the Johnston county (NC) Heritage Center – Slave Name Index, [www.johnstonnc.com/mainpage.cfm?content\\_id=2228&category\\_level\\_id=727](http://www.johnstonnc.com/mainpage.cfm?content_id=2228&category_level_id=727), includes details from

“Assessment of Slaves, 1863 Tax List of Johnston County” based on a North Carolina General Assembly requiring tax listers to include slaves by name. Unfortunately, records for only eight NC districts have survived.

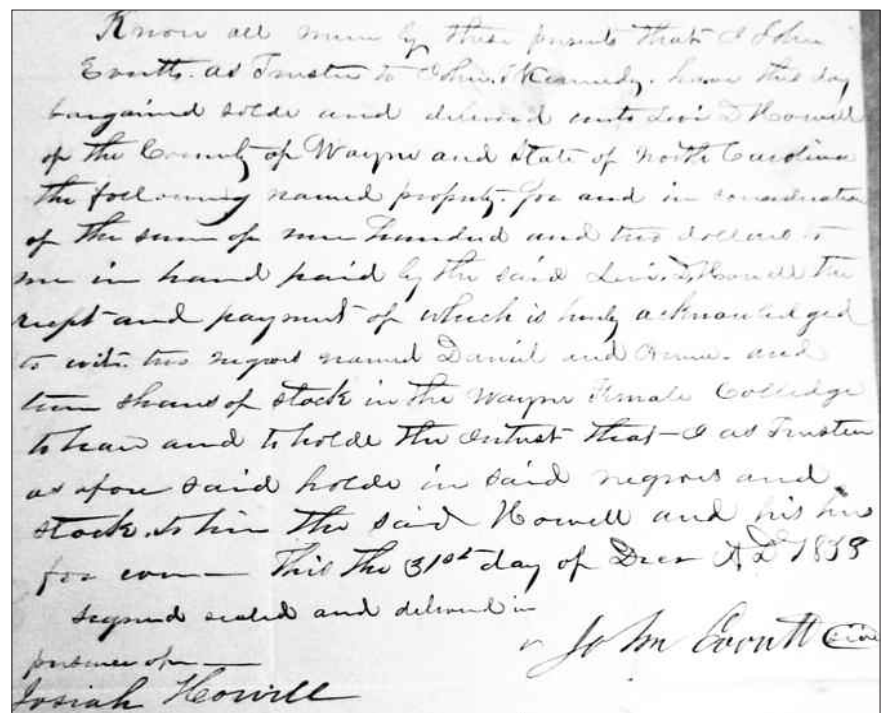
That said, this strongly suggests that pre-Civil War tax lists be consulted as you never know when original loose papers might survive or an extra diligent tax taker included more information (such as slave names) than might have absolutely been required.

### Bills of Sale

As property, slaves were bequeathed as part of probate (already discussed) or sold via bills of sale (or equivalent instruments). In NC, these are often commingled with deeds, mortgages, powers of attorney and other items documented by the register of deeds. Unfortunately, bills of sale are often NOT indexed along with land records in the indexes that were created.

Fortunately, because of that, there have been some projects to provide access to these records. There are a few examples of where you can access these bills of sale online:

- Duplin County (NC) Register of Deeds, [www.duplinrod.com](http://www.duplinrod.com),
- Johnston County (NC) Heritage Center – Slave Name index (includes tax records, bills of sale, and other records), [www.johnstonnc.com/mainpage.cfm?content\\_id=2228&category\\_level\\_id=727](http://www.johnstonnc.com/mainpage.cfm?content_id=2228&category_level_id=727),
- Guilford County (NC) Slave Deeds, [www.myguilford.com/slave-deeds](http://www.myguilford.com/slave-deeds),
- SC (Index to Multiple Record Series, [www.archivesindex.sc.gov/Default.html](http://www.archivesindex.sc.gov/Default.html), though first read more here, [www.archivesindex.sc.gov/onlinearchives/Terms/Series/SeriesDescriptions/s213050.html](http://www.archivesindex.sc.gov/onlinearchives/Terms/Series/SeriesDescriptions/s213050.html)).



Example of a Bill of Sale — see ninth line down, “negroes named David and Anna” (1859 Wayne Co., NC).

- Some Edgefield County (SC) Slave Records, 1774-1866 are also found on Ancestry, <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=60512>.

### Church Records

It was not unusual for southern churches to have both white and so-identified colored members. Though they have or may not have intermingled in worship, often, separate registers were kept of said members. Detailed information might include when they joined, what plantation they were connected to, marriages/unions, children, and even death.

It is not unusual, during reconstruction, to find that churches often separated into white and colored congregations.

Though not many church records themselves are online, in the South, it's not unusual to find records of Baptist Association meetings and similar records for other denominations. Such records and church histories can provide wonderful context for the evolution of association affiliations, new church formation, church consolidations and more. Religion in North Carolina, <http://archive.org/details/ncreligion>, is an Internet Archive-based project that includes over 6,200 texts on religion in North Carolina, much of it pre-Civil War.

Other online resources, such as the People of Color Preliminary Finding Aid (Congregational Library & Archives), [www.congregationallibrary.org/researchers/tools/POCbiblio](http://www.congregationallibrary.org/researchers/tools/POCbiblio), provide insight into relevant records for the New England states. Or, Digitized Sacramental Records in the Archives, Archdiocese of New Orleans, <http://archives.arch-no.org/sfpc>, includes registers of the slaves and free people of color from St. Louis Cathedral.

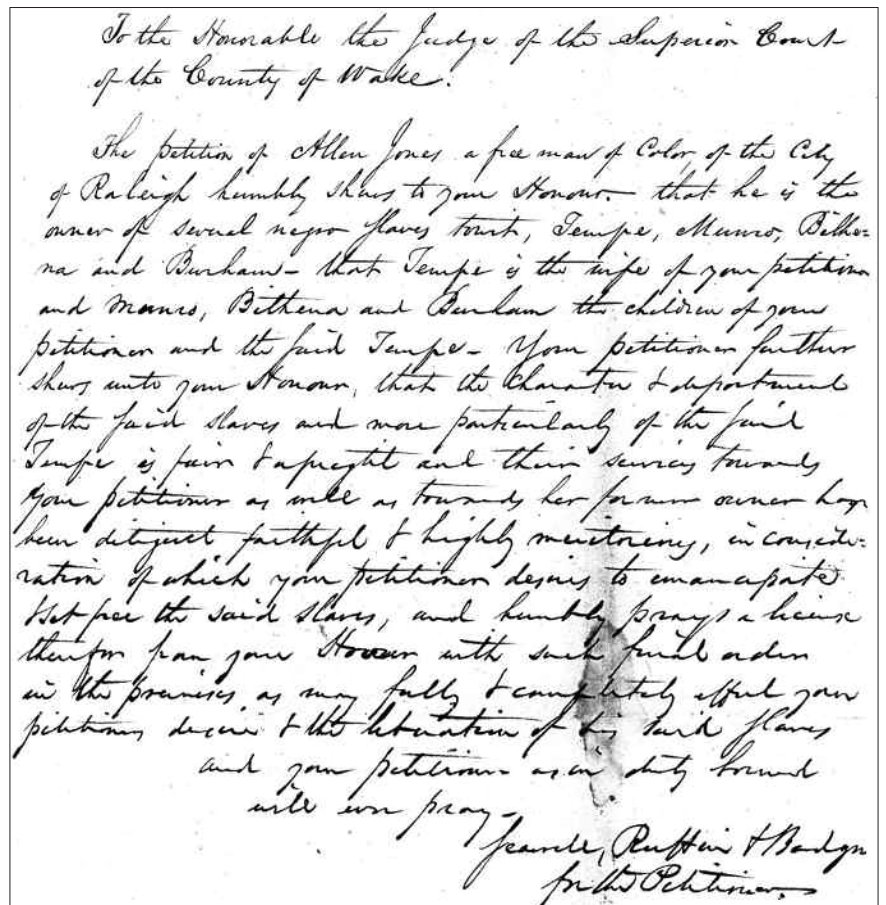
### Court Records — Slave & Free Black Papers/Records

An archive might create an artificial collection of such records; this is true for many North Carolina counties. Otherwise, these records might be scattered in the court minutes and loose papers for a variety of courts. These collections might also include some of the record types already discussed and additionally you might find these other records that might fall into this category — petitions to sell/divide slaves, civil actions, concealment of slaves, trading with slaves, patrol records, insurrection reports, negroes taken up (as the local authorities seek out the owner and/or verify that they're from another jurisdiction), criminal actions, attempts to emancipate slaves, valuation of slaves, payment

for civil service work performed by slaves, and so much more! Many types of records might document slaves and free persons of color in the year up through the end of the Civil War.

### Emancipation Records [local court, legislature, high court, etc.]

Through wills, petitions to the courts and other means, slaves were sometimes in a position to be considered for emancipation. I say considered as just because a will stipulated the emancipation of slaves, such did not always occur, though, it sometimes did. Additionally, many who were anti-slavery, such as Quakers, were not always able to institute their preferred policies. For example, in The January-February Session of the General Assembly of



Petition to emancipate wife and children of the free person of color, Allen Jones (1829 Wake Co., NC).





North Carolina, “petitioners [from Pasquotank] complain to the Assembly that Quakers are freeing slaves. The committee recommends that a bill be drafted pertaining to slaves, for independence has nullified portions of the relative colonial law.” The Quakers were forced to stop freeing slaves.

Many petitions though were successful, though often, one had to be patient as such paperwork worked its way through the courts and/or legislature.

Few of these records are online, though Ancestry.com does have Washington D.C., Slave Emancipation Records, 1851-1863, <http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2171>, while many Freedom Papers are found in The Freedom Papers (Free at Last? Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries), [www.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/papers\\_listing.html](http://www.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/papers_listing.html), or consider records of the Manumissions Society of North Carolina Records, 1773-1845, [www.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/papers\\_listing.html](http://www.library.pitt.edu/freetatlast/papers_listing.html) which are digitized and available online, as well as a great collection of Slave Manumissions in Alexandria (VA) Land Records, 1790-1863, [www.freedmenscemetery.org/resources/documents/manumissions.shtml](http://www.freedmenscemetery.org/resources/documents/manumissions.shtml).

### Private Collections

Many private collections include records about slaves whether births and deaths (plantation ledgers), the treatment of illness (physician ledgers), hiring of slaves (plantation records, probate records, etc.), lists of slaves, records of the provision of clothing or other supplies and much more.

We’ve already talked about the Johnston County (NC) Heritage Center – part of the mentioned Slave Name Index is based on

Names of Slaves	ages	valuation
Sancy	25	\$1150
Arabe	40	900
John	38	800
London	18	1200
Mary	16	1100
Major	10	850
Simon	10	750
Rachel	34	650

Slave list from estate file of John Bradsher (1857 Person Co. NC).

material from private collections.

A search in ArchiveGrid on “slave records”, <https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/?p=1&q=slave+records>, yielded over 1,100 entries. Many of these entries pertain to manuscript collections held by libraries and archives as received from private individuals and/or families. Much of this material is not digitized and online, and knowing of its existence puts you in a position to contact the repository about gaining access.

### Slave Birth/Death Records [Virginia]

Many southern states did NOT have a policy or mechanism for recording slave births and deaths; most actually did not record the births nor deaths of anyone, never mind slaves. An exception is Virginia, which in 1853, began an annual registration of births and deaths. These records include information on slaves — name of slave owner, infant’s name, mother’s name, birth date, and place of birth. These are invaluable records. Though these records are published in books widely available, they are not yet online.

### Conclusions

Check for the state or community that you are researching in. You just may find that there are records unique to the locale and

some of these may be available online.

As you can imagine, I could go on and on pointing out record types (Bible records, newspaper articles, family diaries, military records, and so much more) and online resources that might aid in your pre-1870 African-American research! Increasingly, so many indispensable records are being digitized and indexed and made available online. That said, there is so much more material that is available on-the-ground at repositories relevant to slave-era research. Please don’t limit yourself to online resources; they may provide you with some answers, or even clues and odds are that the majority of the documentation on your ancestors will be found in repositories. ©

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(Or scan the QR code with your mobile phone or tablet device.)

