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Black History Month 2020

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FamilySearch's new archives expose more African American roots

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Many African Americans who begin the quest to find their ancestors are psyched when they view, for the first time, the names of their people in the 1870 Census, the first one in which all blacks in the United States were legally free.

I can attest to that soul-stirring experience because years ago, I found my ancestors Henry and Julia Giles in Walton County, Georgia, with their children, including one who would become my great grandmother Maggie Giles Holden. And I felt chills in early December when I found Wash and Jane Allison in Morehouse Parish, Louisiana, in 1870. Until then, I'd seen their names only in North Carolina records: They were married in Rowan County on Jan. 18, 1870, and appeared in the 1880 Census with their children – one of whom would become another of my great grandmothers, Caroline Isabella Allison Moore Williams.

Beginning with the first official census in 1790, some blacks appeared here and there as free men and women. But most were enslaved and therefore not listed as human beings; they were chattel property counted in inventories among the pigs, farming tools and household furnishings. Thus their names are missing from records white family researchers can rely on: family Bibles chronicling generations, historical society archives, newspapers, local histories, and digests culled from public records, to name a few.

“African Americans have been absent from inclusion in the records for too long, and there was a lot of intentionality in that,” said Cassandra Newby-Alexander, a professor of history and dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Norfolk State University.

Until recently, 1870 was the wall through which few African Americans could pass. The few who have include Alex Haley, whose acclaimed novel "Roots" told the story of his family descended from Gambian-born Kunte Kinte, who was kidnapped and enslaved in Maryland

and Virginia. More recently, the Tucker family's connection to the first captive Africans who landed in the Virginia colony in 1619 has been a source of wonderment and envy.

1619: The US is grappling with its history of slavery. The blueprint for dealing with it? Some say Brown University

1619: Hundreds of thousands of Africans were enslaved in America. Wanda Tucker believes her relatives were the first

As interest in genealogy expands, the greater availability of digitized public documents makes it possible "to begin the process of African Americans being able to recapture what was taken from them," Newby-Alexander said.

In February, FamilySearch International, which bills itself as the largest genealogical organization in the world, will help further that process by highlight one of its collections each day at FamilySearch.org.

FamilySearch is affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints — he Mormons. The black history initiative is part of a concerted effort to move on from a past that included blatant racism and, until 1978, the restriction of black participation in the church. Over the last decade, FamilySearch has become an influential resource for African American genealogy. In 2016, for instance, it presented an indexed database of Freedman's Bureau records to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Some 25,000 volunteers worked on the project, uncovering 1.8 million names of formerly enslaved people.

Regardless of race or ethnicity, the 16 million Mormons worldwide are expected to follow church tenets about strengthening family relationships with relatives, both living and dead. To accomplish this, they "do family history," as some put it. The Genealogical Society of Utah, out of which FamilySearch has grown, recently marked its 125th anniversary of collecting, preserving and making available billions of records. In addition to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, there are more than 5,000 family history centers open to the general public.

To those who wonder if this generosity is a subtle way to proselytize, Thom Reed, deputy chief genealogical officer for FamilySearch, said there is a strict prohibition against that. "It's not about religious affiliation; it's about connecting generations," he said.

Reed is overseeing efforts to collect oral histories and digitize public records in Africa, and seeking ways in the USA to make more resources available for African Americans. Among the

newly searchable records that will be highlighted in February are Virginia slave births, 1853-1866; U.S. military pensions, 1861-1934; Freedmen's Bureau marriage records, 1861-1872; and voter registration records from 1867 to 1869 for Florida, North Carolina and Texas. The records are samples of what is available; however Sydney Bjork, another member of the team, advises: "No collection in and of itself is going to be the cure-all for all your genealogical questions, but we're hoping that what we highlight will provide a lot of leads for people to make some discoveries for their families."

FamilySearch's partner in this initiative is the Center for Family History, the operational part of the International African American Museum that is scheduled to open in winter 2021 in Charleston, South Carolina. Toni Carrier, the center's director, is in charge of daily blog posts about each featured collection. "Our role is to give an overview of the collections and then help people learn how to use them." She is working with another genealogy group, Black ProGen, to provide YouTube video how-tos for researchers.

"There are so many legacies of slavery in our country that we can't do anything about, but not knowing the names and life stories of your ancestors doesn't have to be one of them — because the records do exist," Carrier said.

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Visit **familysearch.org/blackhistorymonth** to gain access to FamilySearch materials. Accounts are free. To locate a FamilySearch physical location near you, visit <https://www.familysearch.org/help/fhcenters/locations>. For more on the International African American Museum, go to <https://iaamuseum.org>.