

# 10 Steps to Reclaiming Your African Roots

**A Guide to Navigating African American Genealogy**

The desire to navigate one's identity and heritage can be easily overwhelmed by an onslaught of information and resources.

Tackling your family history does not have to be complicated if you follow the right steps.

This handout is designed to help you follow a step-by-step process to get started.



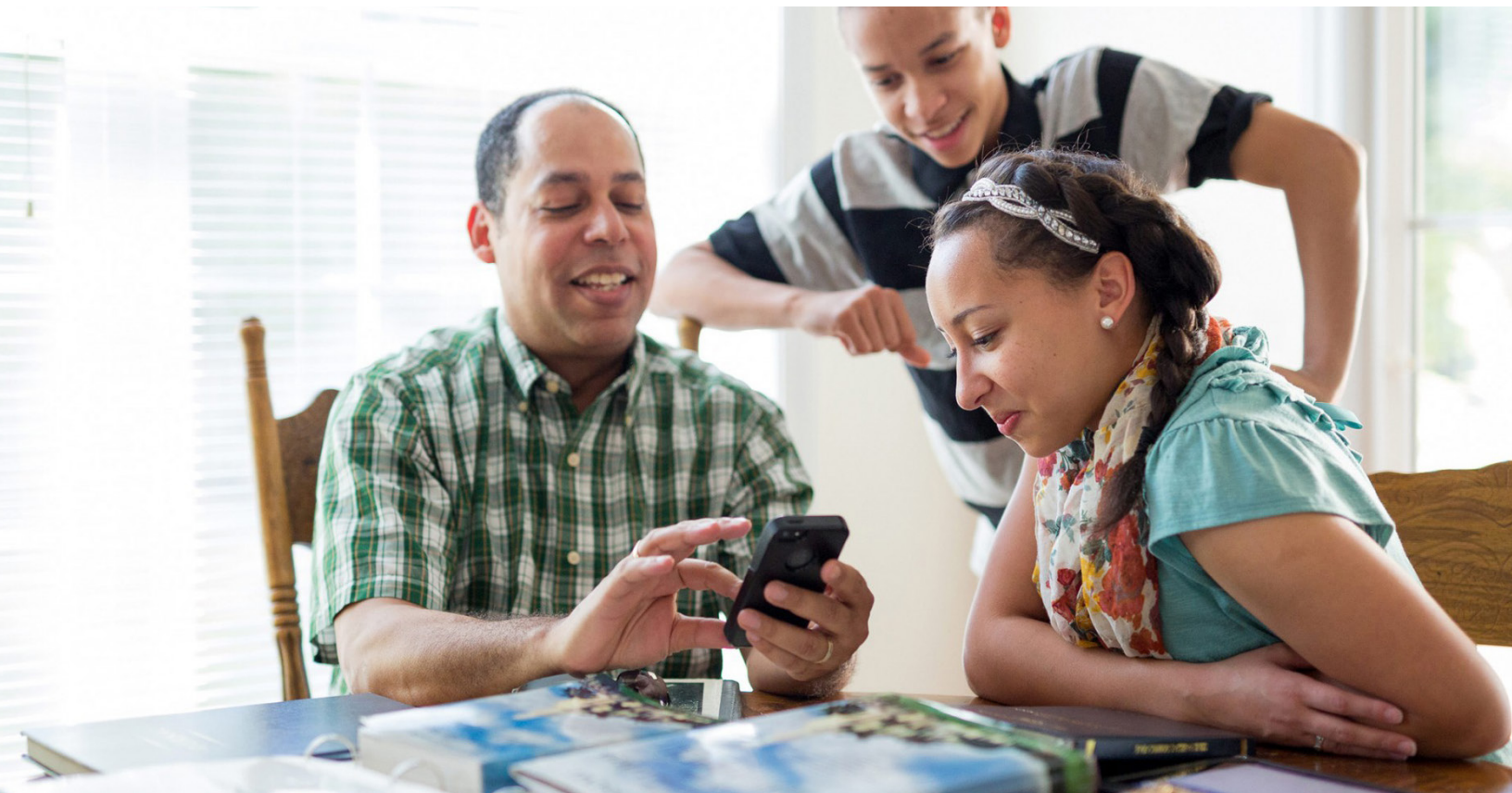
## ① Write Down What You Know

Contrary to modern instinct, capturing your family history doesn't begin online—it begins with you! Before you head online, write down everything you know about your family. Print out a pedigree chart to help keep track of everyone. Doing so will help you to easily spot any holes or gaps in information. At the back of this guide, you will find an example pedigree chart to use and fill out.

## ② Find Artifacts around the Home

Look for any possible information about your family and ancestors in records you may have in your home or in a relative's home. The more information you gather, the easier it will be to locate and recognize individuals in other records. Records to look for include obituaries, funeral programs, death records, birth records, journals, diaries, family Bibles, family letters, and photographs. Though not always easy to access, the cemeteries where relatives are buried can help you collect useful information as well.

Label and organize the documents and photos you have discovered, and thoroughly review them for additional information.



## ③ Interview Relatives

After you have exhausted your own personal knowledge, it's time to reach out to your parents, siblings, and extended relatives to document the people and facts that you've yet to uncover. Ask them for your help in filling in the blanks of your pedigree chart or *My Family: Stories That Bring Us Together* booklet.

Beyond asking for basic information, conducting interviews with your relatives will help you in compiling an oral history. Oral histories add an invaluable layer with stories, personalities, and details that bring your ancestors to life. The FamilySearch Family Tree and the FamilySearch Memories app can help you to record those interviews.

For tips on how to successfully conduct an interview, head to the FamilySearch wiki page: [familysearch.org/wiki/en/Creating\\_Oral\\_Histories](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Creating_Oral_Histories)

For more information on the FamilySearch Family Tree and FamilySearch Memories app, check out: [familysearch.org/blog/en/familysearch-apps-oral-histories/](https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/familysearch-apps-oral-histories/)



## ④ Create a FamilySearch Account

Once you've laid the proper foundation, now is the time to get online and input the information you've collected. Head to FamilySearch.org and sign up for a free account. You will need an email address or an SMS phone number in order to create one.



Creating a FamilySearch account will allow you to preserve your family's information. On FamilySearch, you can collaborate with others who have common ancestors. With your permission, others can also access your information to provide you with additional help if needed.

Sign up for a free account here: [familysearch.org/register/](https://familysearch.org/register/)

## ⑤ Create Your Own Family Tree

As you complete the steps to sign up for a FamilySearch account, FamilySearch will direct you to begin inputting the information you've collected on your own and with other family members. Begin adding the names, dates, and locations as instructed.

**OR**

Once you've created an account, log in, click the "Family Tree" tab, and begin adding names to your family tree. Input the names, dates, and locations you've collected.

You do not need all of an ancestor's information to add them to the tree. Simply input as much as you can, and then come back later to add more or correct the information. You can always edit and update an ancestor's profile at any time.

For more information on adding names to the tree, head here:

[familysearch.org/blog/en/how-to-start-a-family-tree/](https://familysearch.org/blog/en/how-to-start-a-family-tree/)



In all of us there is a  
hunger, marrow-deep,  
to know our heritage—  
to know who we are  
and where we have  
come from.

**Alex Haley**

“What Roots Means to Me,” Reader’s Digest, May 1977, 73



## ⑥ Search for Existing Ancestors

Look to see if your ancestors are already in the tree by accessing FamilySearch Family Tree. With a database of more than 1.2 billion ancestors, the FamilySearch shared tree is a cooperative public tree where FamilySearch users can see how they connect to each other. Instead of concentrating efforts on privately constructing individual trees, FamilySearch users work together to build a single shared tree that helps everyone discover more about their ancestors and other family members.

In many instances, people are already working on your tree unbeknownst to you. Search the FamilySearch shared tree to see if ancestors have already been captured on the tree, saving you a lot of time and unnecessary work.

For instructions on how to search the shared family tree and connect it to your profile, head here: [familysearch.org/blog/en/find-my-ancestors-familysearch-family-tree/](https://familysearch.org/blog/en/find-my-ancestors-familysearch-family-tree/)

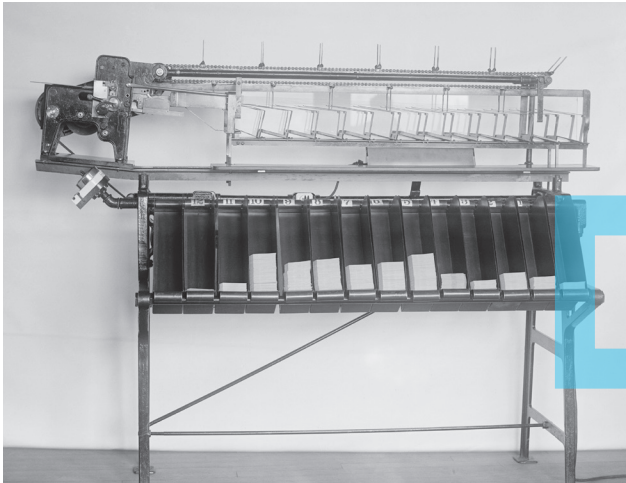
## ⑦ Look for Blanks

Look for empty spots in your family tree by examining it in various formats. Formats such as the fan chart can help you to more clearly see where you're missing family information, giving you a starting point for where to continue searching. Once you've identified blanks, search for additional information on existing ancestors, or begin searching records as defined in the next step.

To discover the various ways of looking at your family tree, head here: [familysearch.org/blog/en/new-discovery-fan-chart-family-tree/](https://familysearch.org/blog/en/new-discovery-fan-chart-family-tree/)

## ⑧ Search for Historical Records

There are a host of records available to search on both the federal and state levels. While we are unable to review every kind of record in this guide, here are the following record types that will best help you as you get started:



### Census Records

Census records are a great place to start your research. They can quickly tell you where a family is residing, which is vital information for effectively locating them in other records. United States census records began in 1790 and were taken (and still are) every 10 years. The most recent census available is the 1940 census. The first census that lists all African Americans by name is the 1870 census. Free African Americans were enumerated on earlier censuses.

Census records are helpful in estimating dates and events such as death, marriage, birth, and migration. Locate your ancestor in every possible census, as well as their parents and all their siblings. This is especially helpful if your ancestor disappears from the censuses. They may have been living with other family members.

To begin searching the census records, head here:

[familysearch.org/blog/en/us-census-records/#uscensusrecords](https://familysearch.org/blog/en/us-census-records/#uscensusrecords)

## Vital Records

Vital records include birth registers and certificates, marriage licenses and certificates, and death registers and certificates. These are called “vital” records because they contain essential information about our ancestors’ lives, which can help link us to them. Such records may be difficult to locate but are among the most helpful.

Search the collection here:

[familysearch.org/search/collection/list?fcs=recordType%3AVITAL&ec=recordType%3AVITAL](https://familysearch.org/search/collection/list?fcs=recordType%3AVITAL&ec=recordType%3AVITAL)

## Military Records

### World War I Draft Registration Cards

All males born between September 13, 1873, and September 12, 1900, were required to register for the World War I draft. There were three different registrations for different ages, all asking for different information. A registration card may include the registrant’s birth date, birthplace, and next of kin. These cards are valuable because they were filled out by the registrants—and sometimes this is all the information we have that they completed themselves.

Search the collection here: [familysearch.org/search/collection/1968530](https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1968530)

### World War II Draft Registration Cards

Nicknamed the “old man’s draft,” this registration was taken in April 1942 for men born between April 27, 1877, and February 16, 1897. These cards can be found in Familysearch.org’s historical records.

Search the collection here: [familysearch.org/search/collection/1861144](https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1861144)

For additional military records, search our complete collection here:

[familysearch.org/search/collectionlist?fcs=recordType%3AMILITARY](https://familysearch.org/search/collectionlist?fcs=recordType%3AMILITARY)



## Unique African American Records after 1865

### Freedman's Bank Records

The Freedman's Savings and Trust Company (often called the Freedman's Bank) was created to assist newly freed slaves and African American soldiers at the end of the Civil War. The bank failed in 1874 and many depositors lost their savings, but the records of the bank remain. Among the records are the registers of signatures of depositors. The registers from 29 branches from 1864 to 1871 show the name, residence, and description of each depositor. They may also include the depositor's genealogical information, birth date, birthplace, former owner, employer, occupation, relatives, and so on.

The registers of signatures of depositors have several easy-to-use indexes that include about 480,000 personal names (61,131 depositors and their relatives). They cover a time period when many African Americans were newly freed, and they offer information about people's transition from slavery to freedom.

Search the collection here: [familysearch.org/searchcollection/1417695](https://familysearch.org/searchcollection/1417695)

### Freedmen's Bureau Records

The official government title of this record set is "The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands." The Bureau was created during Reconstruction to help with relief efforts for freed slaves and poor whites. It was active from 1865 to 1872, and its records contain a wide variety of data about the African American experience in both slavery and freedom. The collection contains 1.5 million digital images of items such as labor contracts, education records, and court and marriage records.

Similar to the Freedman's Bank records, the Freedmen's Bureau Records can provide a critical link in finding ancestors who were once enslaved, thus breaking the infamous 1870 "wall."

Search for names within FamilySearch's collection of Freedmen's Bureau records here: [discoverfreedmen.org](https://discoverfreedmen.org)

For an in-depth webinar reviewing the importance of the Freedmen's Bureau records, as well as a tutorial to search the records, head here:

[familysearch.org/ask/learningViewer/1001](https://familysearch.org/ask/learningViewer/1001)



## U.S. Colored Troops

The United States Army began to organize African Americans into regimental units known as the United States Colored Troops (USCT) in 1863. The enlistment of free blacks and slaves was considered a key to winning the war. Approximately 186,000 African Americans served in the USCT volunteer units during the Civil War.

Search the collection here: [familysearch.org/search/collection/1932431](https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1932431)

All these record collections are critical for researching African American ancestors, and many more collections are available as well.

For more information, head to the FamilySearch wiki page dedicated to African American genealogy: [familysearch.org/wiki/en/African\\_American\\_Genealogy](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/African_American_Genealogy)

## ⑨ Add Photos and Stories

Breathe life and personality into your genealogy by uploading photos and adding stories in the Memories section of FamilySearch. This is a perfect way to preserve artifacts, photos, stories, and oral interviews in a location where all of your family members can access it for free.

Begin adding your memories here: [familysearch.org/photos/](https://familysearch.org/photos/)

## ⑩ Work Together as a Family

Throughout your entire journey, lean on the support of your family. Enlist your immediate and extended family in searching for names, collecting artifacts, and adding people to the family tree. Doing so will bring you joy and strengthen your family ties.





### Talk

Talk with your parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents about your family stories. Gather any photos or documents you and your relatives may already have.



### Complete

Fill in this family tree.



### Add

Include family photos and stories in the space provided.

# My Family Tree

Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....
Marriage date .....
Place .....
Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....

Great-Grandmother | Great-Grandfather

Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....
Marriage date .....
Place .....
Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....

Great-Grandmother | Great-Grandfather

Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....
Marriage date .....
Place .....
Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....

Great-Grandmother | Great-Grandfather

Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....
Marriage date .....
Place .....
Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....

Great-Grandmother | Great-Grandfather

Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....
Marriage date .....
Place .....
Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....

Grandmother | Grandfather

Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....
Marriage date .....
Place .....
Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....

Father | Mother

Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....
Marriage date .....
Place .....
Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....

Grandmother | Grandfather

Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Marriage date .....
Place .....
Name .....
Birthplace .....
Birth date .....
Death date .....
Death place .....

Me | Spouse

