

Guide to African American Genealogy in Guilford



Introduction

African-American genealogy poses unique obstacles to researchers. In part, this is because (prior to emancipation) many ancestors were likely to have been enslaved. Enslaved individuals did not enjoy the privileges of full citizenship, such as land ownership and legal marriage. Enslaved ancestors therefore do not typically show up in the historical record in the same way, or as frequently, as free people.

This dilemma requires genealogists to be especially thorough in their research, and to make more creative use of the records that are available. Often, researching an enslaved ancestor or family requires researching the owning family.

Researchers are cautioned not to go too far in thinking of African-American research as something fundamentally different from any other genealogical project. All the tools of genealogy that are normally available -- censuses, deeds, wills, marriages, court minutes, cemeteries, newspapers, military records, etc. -- should be explored. Some of these records are not much different with regards to the ethnicity of the ancestor, while with others they are quite different.

The following guide presents resources of particular relevance to African-American ancestry in Guilford County, and should not be taken to be a comprehensive guide to genealogy in general.

Manumission, Slavery & Related

Much of Guilford County's large Quaker population was opposed to slavery and sought to free slaves through legal channels. When there were petitions for manumission, very detailed information about enslaved people can emerge. In general, detailed records

about enslaved people tend not to be plentiful. The following sources are among those worth exploring.

[In Full Force and Virtue: North Carolina Emancipation Records, 1713-1860](#) by William L. Byrd III.

This book abstracts petitions and emancipations related to Guilford County on pages 157-166.

[Race & Slavery Petitions Project](#)

The site provides access to petitions to southern legislatures and county courts filed between 1775 and 1867 in the 15 slave-holding states in the United States and District of Columbia, though relatively few relate to Guilford (about 10).

[NC Runaway Slave Advertisements](#)

Browse scanned images from NC newspapers by county and decade that ran ads for runaway slaves, covering the period 1751-1840. Of 2,300 items in the collection, relatively few relate to Guilford (about 20).

Freedman's Bank

The Freedman's Bank was established for newly freed slaves (often without access to white banks) to be able to make deposits. It operated from 1865-1874. There were three branches in NC, all east of Guilford. Still, there were some depositors from Guilford and the Piedmont. These records can be accessed online via [HeritageQuest](#), abstracted in [book form](#), or on [microfilm](#).

Deeds, Wills, Estates, Marriages

Post-emancipation, African-Americans show up in county records more or less like other citizens, at least in principle. Often, their records were recorded separately or parallel to those of whites, but that does not mean the records are fundamentally different. Since African-Americans were less likely to own land, they were less likely to have had deeds and wills. Still, after 1865, many [county records](#) exist on African-American families as with any other family.

Pre-emancipation, some records must be approached and used quite differently. For example, instead of looking for land bought and sold by an ancestor in a deed book, a researcher might look in deeds of the *owning family* hoping to find records of the enslaved ancestor being bought or sold. Likewise, enslaved people did not have wills, but they might have been left as an inheritance in an owner's will.

The Guilford County Register of Deeds has identified [254 deeds of slaves sold as property](#) in Guilford County from 1774-1826.

The book [Guilford County, North Carolina Will Abstracts, 1771-1841](#) lists devisors naming slaves on pages 210-211.

Another book [An Annotated Digest of Will Book A, Guilford County, North Carolina, 1771-May Court, 1816](#) lists slaves on page 182.

Marriages of enslaved people were not legally recognized until after emancipation, at which time many NC counties recorded marriages retroactively as Cohabitation Records.

Review [Somebody Knows My Name: Marriages of Freed People in North Carolina County by County](#) by Barnetta McGhee White. Volume 1 of this three-volume series abstracts Guilford County cohabitation bonds.

The Library also has Guilford Cohabitation Bonds and other marriage records on [microfilm](#).

Cemeteries

[Union Cemetery](#) is one of the most important burial sites for African-Americans in Guilford County, in use since the 1880s.

These books abstract a fair number of the older African-American cemeteries in Guilford county:

[Family Burying Grounds](#) and Abandoned Church Cemeteries in Guilford County, NC and Immediate Environs African-American cemeteries abstracted are Providence Baptist Church, Celia Phelps AME Church, Union Cemetery, Wyrch Cemetery no. 2, and Shoefner-Bream Cemetery (aka St. Elizabeth AME Church).

[Guilford County Cemeteries](#) 2 volumes -- West and East. African-American cemeteries abstracted in the Western Section are New Goshen United Methodist Church, Collins Grove United Methodist Church, Peace United Methodist Church, and Fairgrove Baptist Church. Those in the Eastern Section are Clapp's Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bethany United Church of Christ, and Saint James United Methodist Church.

Research Method & How-To Guides

[African-American Genealogical Sourcebook](#) by Paula K. Byers

[Black Genesis: A Resource Book for African-American Genealogy](#) by James M. Rose & Alice Eichholz

[Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African-American Family Tree](#) by Tony Burroughs

[Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity](#) by Dee Parmer Woodtor

[Finding Your People: An African-American Guide to Discovering Your Roots](#) by Sandra

Lee Jamison

[A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors: How to Find and Record Your Unique Heritage](#) by Franklin Carter Smith & Emily Anne Croom

[A Student's Guide to African-American Genealogy](#) by Anne E. Johnson & Adam Merton Cooper