

Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives

Archives and Records Management Division
Archival Services Branch

RESEARCHING AFRICAN AMERICAN ANCESTORS

Prior to the Civil War, a small population of free blacks lived in Kentucky in primarily urban areas. **Federal census** records 1810-1860 document this population via recording free blacks by household. By 1860, however, over 95% of Kentucky's black population was held in bondage.

Kentucky Slave Censuses of 1850 and 1860 are organized by county and enumerate the state's slave population. Unfortunately, these records generally only provide the name of the owner along with the age, sex, and color of the slaves themselves. Researchers may discover a free ancestor enumerated as a slave owner.

Kentucky's earliest **birth and death records** (1852-1862) contain information on both the free and slave populations. Organized by county, birth records only identify the mothers of children born as slaves. The name of the child's father was not required by law. Both birth and death records identify the owner of the slave. Kentucky's Vital Statistics (1911-present) can also provide links to ancestors.

The Kentucky Slave Code stated that, "Slaves shall be deemed...personal estate." Therefore, research can become focused on **county records** relating to a slave-owner's "property". Records specific to slaves may not be available for every county; the availability of the following records will vary by county.

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| Probate Records of interest: | Will Books |
| | Inventories |
| | Settlements / Estate Settlements |
| County Deed Books may contain: | Records of Slave Sales |
| | "Deeds of Gift" |
| | "Slave Hirings" |
| | "Mortgage" of Slave Property |
| | "Manumission" (emancipation) of Slaves |
| County Records of interest: | "Records of Importation of Slaves" |
| | "Lists of Slaves" Enlisted in the Union Army |
| | "Manumission Reports" |
| | "Lists of Dower Slaves" |

Helpful **State Records and Publications** include:

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| Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Commissioner's Files |
| Department for Health Services, Commissioner's Office |
| Kentucky Commission on Human Rights |
| Kentucky Council of Defense, World War I |
| Board of Medical Licensure |
| Kentucky Governors' Papers |
| Superintendent of Public Instruction |
| Lincoln Institute – Simpsonville |
| Works Progress Administration |
| Kentucky Court of Appeals and Kentucky Supreme Court |
| Annual Reports of State Agencies |
| Published Reports of State Institutions |

Freedmen's Marriage Registers legalized marital unions that existed prior to 1865. These registers record the name of both parties.

Freedmen's Indentures of Apprenticeships Books record the age and name of the individual appointed by the court to teach a trade to black children who were without a guardian or whose parents were unable to provide care.

Circuit Court Civil Cases can involve legal disputes concerning:

- inheritance and/or legal ownership of "slave property"
- complaints of non-payment for leased slaves
- complaints of damages incurred through the injury or abuse of leased slaves
- protection under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments

Cases may provide the ages, physical descriptions, given names, and/or testimony of African Americans held in slavery. Parentage and other information about slave families may be revealed and enable a researcher to link several generations. Although the majority of African Americans did not adopt surnames until after the Civil War, the identification of the former owner might provide a clue.

Though Congress ratified the Thirteenth Amendment in December, 1865, the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to neutral Kentucky. Therefore, African Americans could only find freedom through flight or military service. Over 23,000 Kentucky blacks fought for freedom with the U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War. Military Service Records for these soldiers can be found online at **Ancestry.com**. Regimental records may include rosters, descriptive lists, and muster rolls providing the age, residence, physical description of volunteers, and whether or not he was a slave or free-born at time of enlistment. These sources occasionally include the names of owners and/or the wives of those volunteers seeking refuge with the military authorities. Other resources of information on these units are held at the **Military Records and Research Library**.

Archives Research Room
Kentucky Dept. for Libraries & Archives
P.O. Box 537, 300 Coffee Tree Road
Frankfort, KY 40602



(502)564-8300
<http://kdla.ky.gov>