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Basic African American Research: Oregon and Other Resources

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Basic African American Family Research Oregon and Other Resources

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Editor's Note: We often assume that a specialized topic, such as African American genealogy, must use specialized materials from the beginning of the process. Certified Genealogical Researcher Jacqueline E. A. Lawson takes us through this research process from the beginning, and then recommends titles that would augment a reference collection—or a personal research library.

Construct a very basic ancestor tree, beginning with YOU and going backwards to your *furthest-back* (a term used by the late James Dent Walker, who was an African American archivist at the National Archives), known ancestor. This basic tree should include as many dates and places as known, but should include *only* the information that does *not* have to be researched. That is, for this beginning step, simply include what you know right now.

It is advised that beginning researchers select one ancestral line at a time for researching. Decide which ancestral line you want to research first. Beginning with the furthest-back ancestor of that line, construct a descendant tree or outline. This should include the brothers and sisters of each person in each generation. Hopefully, you have a genealogy computer program, such as *FamilyTreeMaker*[™], to input your information. This program will automatically produce ancestor and descendant trees, among other charts and lists.

Your research purpose now should be to fill in the blank spaces regarding:

- dates and places of birth
- marriage
- death
- names of spouses and children

Make a list of the individuals included in the descendant tree or outline, and indicate what documents are needed—birth, marriage, and death records. (Such a list can be produced from *FamilyTreeMaker*[™].)

Send for the documents needed. While waiting for these documents, conduct research of Federal censuses. These are available at the National Archives in Seattle. If this site is not convenient, census microfilm should be available at the local public library or historical society library (or via interlibrary loan), or they may be ordered from Salt Lake City through the local Family History Center.

Federal censuses have been taken every ten years, beginning in 1790. Microfilm of all Federal censuses is available except for the year 1890, most of which was burned in a fire in the 1920s. The most recent Federal census currently open to the public is the 1920. The 1930 census will be available to the public in April 2002.

Begin with the 1920 Federal census and work backwards. The reason for beginning with 1920 is that, regardless of what we think we know about our family, the census often reveals additional children and even second and third marriages about which we had not known. You must know the surname (last name) of the individual who would have been the head of a household in that year. You must also know the state in which that individual was living in 1920. The 1920 census will reveal places (states) of birth so that we know where to look for the family in preceding census years.

Once you have identified the family in that year, you will search for them in the previous census year (1910), then in 1900, etc.

A point to consider: If you have a male ancestor who was 72 years old or older in 1920, he may have volunteered to serve during the Civil War and applied for a pension. The Civil War pension files are a great resource for family history information.

A second point to consider: If you have an ancestor who died, as an adult, after 1960, that ancestor may be included in the Social Security Death Index. This index is available at Family History Centers and may also be available in the Genealogy Section of your local library [Editor's note: The Social Security Death Index, as well as the Oregon Death Index, may be available through your regional reference library, such as SOLIC in Southern Oregon]. Information contained on the Social Security Death Index will provide you with the date of birth (for birth certificates) and the date and place of death (for death certificates).



Publications Pertaining
Specifically to Oregon

Bosco-Milligan Foundation. *Cornerstones of Community: Buildings of Portland's African American History*. The Foundation, August 1995.

Contains a master list of individuals, institutions, and businesses as well as ten area maps. Describes the changes in the community throughout the years.

Davis, Lenwood G., comp. *Blacks in the State of Oregon, 1788–1971 [A Bibliography of Published Works and of Unpublished Source Materials on the Life and Achievements of Black People in the Beaver State]*. Monticello Il: Council of Planning Librarians, 1974.

Little, William A., & James E. Weiss, ed. *Blacks in Oregon: A Statistical and Historical Report*. Portland State University: Black Studies Center and Center for Population Research and Census, 1978

McLagan, Elizabeth. *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788–1940*. Portland, Oregon: Georgian Press, 1980

Portland Bureau of Planning. *The History of Portland's African American Community (1805 to the Present)*. Portland: City of Portland Planning Bureau, February 1993. *Contains maps and many photographs, and three pages of related articles and books.*

Reference Books Used Personally
Burroughs, Tony. *Black Roots. A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree*. New York : Fire-side, 2001.

Byers, Paula K., Ed. *African American Genealogical Sourcebook*. Gale Research Inc., 1995.

Kemp, Thomas Jay. *International Vital Records Handbook*. Genealogical Publishing co., Inc.

This publication is updated periodically, so no publication date is given here. It contains forms (which may be photocopied) for requesting birth, marriage and death records for each state. Also includes addresses and telephone numbers, as well as prices of documents. Researcher should call first to find out current prices.

Because I conduct research for all parts of the United States, one of my favorite resources is the *National Zip Code Directory*, a two-volume set. Near the end of the second volume is a "Numerical List of Post Offices By Zip Code..." I use this to determine the location at the time of death of an individual who is listed on the Social Security Death Index. That index usually shows the zip code of the last residence and the zip code where benefits were sent.

Research Sites

Federal

National Archives—Pacific Alaska Region
(Seattle)

6125 Sand Point Way NE
Seattle, WA 98115
Phone: 206-526-6507

Local

Family History Centers

(Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).

The Family History Centers have indexes (on computer as well as microfiche) to the holdings in Salt Lake City. Use this resource for finding and ordering early birth, marriage, and death certificates which may not be available at the specific county or state offices. They also include city directories, court records (wills, probate), and many other sources of information not found elsewhere.

City

Public Library

Most larger city libraries include a Genealogy Section. Such a section would hold reference books of births,



marriages, and deaths, genealogies of specific families, information on histories of cities and counties, etc.

State

State Archives

State archives hold publications and other material relating specifically to that state and may include indexes to local births, marriages, divorces, and deaths.

Genealogical and Historical Societies

Check for locations in the specific cities and counties being researched. It may be helpful to join the society of your research site.

Internet

My personal family history was conducted years before Internet became popular for

genealogical research. During the past three years, however, I have become an advocate of “surfing the net” and have found innumerable resources this way. My current favorite is Ancestry.com, where I have located marriage records, city directory listings, and census citations that would have taken me weeks to obtain. I do caution the reader, however: Unless the material has been digitized using the original document, any use of internet-retrieved information should be documented personally. For example, if you should find a marriage listed in an index, send for the actual marriage document for authenticity.

These resources should give you and your genealogical customers an idea of possible resources available to them, to begin the rewarding process of finding their African American ancestors. 

