Recovering the Names
of America's Enslaved People

10MillionNames.org

During the planning stages of this project, someone referred to 10 Million Names as a "genealogical moonshot." We rather liked this comparison. Indeed, we choose to do this not because it is easy, nor because it is hard, but because it is right.

A founding member of our organization said, "Those who do not look upon themselves as a link, connecting the past with the future, do not perform their duty to the world." We are all just temporary stewards of a time and place. Each of us is a part of all that has come before us and, by grace and providence, we might have a positive impact here and now, and on what is to come after us.

The 10 Million Names Project proposes to recover the names of the ten million people enslaved in America, and to restore those names to their families and to history. The yearning to know one's ancestors and their influences is innately human. Long before the 10 Million Names Project was conceived, many others had dedicated themselves to this cause. We are grateful for their tireless work and, through 10 Million Names, we strive to uplift their efforts. Some of the central aims of the 10 Million Names Project are to amplify the voices of those who have been telling their family stories for centuries, connect researchers and partners with those seeking answers to family history questions, and to expand access to resources and information about enslaved African Americans and their descendants.

I am descended from men and women who were enslaved in this country and so my children are also descendants of enslaved peoples. Just as my children know of their *Mayflower* ancestry, their colonial New York Dutch past, and their American Revolution patriots, so too should they know of the Crisp family of Mississippi and the Jones family of Alabama. These ancestors of ours were born into bondage, and their descendants served their country as Black soldiers in World War I and the Korean Conflict. They were postal carriers, teachers, nurses, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. We are the result of many and varied American Stories and American Lives.

With a deep appreciation of the past and an abiding commitment to the future, we are proud to embark on this vital undertaking to recover these lost names and stories, and restore this lost history to many American families.

— President and CEO Ryan J. Woods
Adapted from remarks given at our "Celebrating American Stories, American Lives" Gala in Boston

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REFLECTIONS ON 10 Million Names

When I first moved to Boston, a city defined by its memorialization of the American past, I taught an undergraduate seminar on slavery in North America. I discovered that many of my students had personal ties to the material, and several had access to intriguing family stories and bits and pieces of oral history. The year was 2014, nearly a decade ago now, and because I owed my career as a historian, in large part, to the family stories I heard from my grandmother as a child, I offered my students the option to explore their own family histories.[1] At the time, I was finishing up a first book about my family history—about the lives of my Black and Creek ancestors after emancipation—and the book's major questions began as family stories.

For the final paper, some of my students researched their enslaved ancestors, others researched their slaveholding ancestors, and still others researched the house histories within their family narratives—including southern plantations and northern stops on the Underground Railroad. Most importantly, I asked students to share their experiences with one another in class. They quickly appreciated the vast disparities within the archive, the infinite absences and silences, and the uneven access that we have to our family histories—in this case, an unevenness directly created by the history and legacies of American slavery. And with the support of our small team of historians, librarians, and genealogists, even those students who started out with very little "hard" evidence came to know their ancestors in new ways. This kind of research is a deeply rewarding experience that shapes how we move through the world as descendants.

Odevia Helen Brown (the author's grandmother), front row, second from left, is pictured with siblings, ca. 1941. Author's collection.

The 10 Million Names Project—an ambitious new American Ancestors undertaking—aims to harness this power for millions of descendants. The 10 million people who were enslaved between the sixteenth century and the American Civil War within the boundaries of what became the United States have approximately forty-four million descendants living here today. And

Kendra Taira Field, PhD, *the Chief Historian of the 10 Million Names Project, is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy at Tufts University. She is the author of* Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War *(Yale, 2018). Field's current book project,* The Stories We Tell *(W.W. Norton), is a history of African American genealogy from the Middle Passage to the present.*

PHOTO BY ALONSO NICHOLS/TUFTS UNIVERSITY.

those forty-four million are more likely to encounter significant challenges tracing their ancestry. Slavery separated families and obscured family history. Before the mid-twentieth century, data about enslaved Africans and their descendants was often deliberately obscured or altered, or simply unrecorded in the first place. This lasting legacy of slavery—the erasure of family history—remains with us today. So, while those Americans attempting to claim *Mayflower* ancestry have had extensive records to consult, African Americans who have been collecting their family histories and genealogies for centuries have not generally had easy access to collective repositories of genealogical data. This divergence is a stark reminder of our unequal and uneven access to our familial past.

The 10 Million Names Project aims to recover names and stories of the estimated 10 million women, men, and children of African descent who were enslaved in the U.S. before 1865, through a collaborative network of expert genealogists, historians, cultural organizations, and descendant communities. It aims to establish a document-based research repository and to amplify the voices of people who have been telling their family stories for centuries.

The project's research areas encompass the majority of sources we will use to locate these names:

- Making America: Records of Enslaved Laborers within and beyond the Plantation
- On the Battlefield: Records of Soldiers, Veterans, and Refugees
- Freedom Journeys: Records of Mariners, Migrants, and Fugitives
- Community Building: Records of Black Institutions (including especially Black churches and schools)
- Remembering Slavery: Testimonials after Emancipation

Covering three and a half centuries, the project attends to the vastly diverse origins of what later became known as "African American" or "Black" in the United States. Enslaved people of shared African and indigenous ancestry are included, as well as ancestors who were enslaved in the Caribbean before relocation to the United States.

Above: Frederick Douglass, ca. 1855. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Rubel Collection, Gift of William Rubel, 2001.

While historians and genealogists have long known and engaged with the *individual* names of enslaved ancestors—or often a group of names joined by a single family or single plantation—the notion of a free and publicly available database where these names might live came as a revelation to this historian. I am accustomed, like most historians of slavery, to rifling quietly through manuscript papers and census records, hand-written family trees and family reunion records, in a process that is often solitary, singular, and sometimes sacred. But it is also a process that is relatively inaccessible to many descendants. Many face the understandably stark challenges of transcending from free to enslaved ancestors in the antebellum period—what is sometimes called the notorious "brick wall" of 1870.

And yet the will to remember among African American descendants lives and grows. One need think only of the explosion of genetic genealogy and DNA tracing over the last two decades, or that one in three Black families tuned in to Henry Louis Gates's *Many Rivers to Cross: The African Americans* in 2013. Nearly half a century prior, thirty million families watched Alex Haley's *Roots* when it aired on ABC in 1977, and tens of thousands joined the African American Historical Genealogical Society that formed later that same year.[2]

Had the resources, technology, and collective will existed at the time, I know this type of database project would have begun the moment *Roots* aired. Or, it might have begun eight decades prior, when, in his 1892 autobiography, Frederick Douglass wrote: "The reader must not expect me to say much of my family. Genealogical trees did not flourish among slaves."[3] Our ancestors were not only separated from their family members but separated, to varying degrees, from their family histories and family names.[4] While descendants today continue to grapple with the deprivation of family history, we now know better than ever that names and fragments of family histories—spanning Africa, the Caribbean, and the U.S.—did circulate, hold value, and survive.

In many cases, this knowledge became all the more powerful *because* it was denied or obscured. Douglass's contemporary, Henry Highland Garnet—who was, like Douglass, enslaved as a child in Maryland and became a

leading abolitionist of the nineteenth century—knew the name of his African-born grandfather and knew his African heritage—and carried this knowledge proudly into his work as an abolitionist and Pan Africanist.

Indeed, African and African American naming and genealogical practices were a powerful and often-veiled form of resistance and identity throughout the history of slavery—and, more broadly, African American history.

Alex Haley, 1977. Keystone Press / Alamy Stock Photo.

I recall an interview with Adelaide Sanford, a leading educator who grew up with her formerly enslaved grandmother. Her grandmother relayed that whenever her mother could get her "quietly to herself, which was not often," she would reiterate, "Always remember that you are an Ibo. And someday you will be an Ibo woman." As a child, Adelaide's grandmother was not certain what this meant, but because of how this knowledge was shared—"with whispering, with holding, with affection,"—she "kept that in her heart."[5] For many, knowing the names, origins, and life stories of one's ancestors has been life changing. As Alex Haley wrote, "In every conceivable manner, family is link to our past, bridge to our future."[6]

Today, the resources, technology, and collective will exist to recover and restore many of these names to their families and to U.S. history. In the last several decades, large historic datasets about African Americans have begun to be digitized and made available to scholars and researchers. Overseen by genealogists and historians in partnership with Black-led genealogical societies and families, the 10 Million Names Project will leverage the latest technology and resources so that data from smaller archives and libraries can be digitized. The result may be the largest database of African American names from more than 350 years, and the ability to connect these names to present-day descendants.

The digitization infrastructure and capacity to leverage cutting-edge technology—including recent advancements in optical character recognition, allowing researchers to identify names in handwritten records—will allow the project to quickly locate names in very large data sets. This project aims to use these resources to knit together the longstanding generational work of African American families, communities, and institutions. In short, the project has the potential to offer a bold and capacious response to our historically uneven and unequal access to family history in this country.

In recent years, psychologists have begun to examine the importance of a strong "intergenerational self": children knowing they "belong to something bigger than themselves." One study revealed that in the face of conflict and uncertainty, "the more children know about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem."[7] Such findings have powerful implications, both urgent and hopeful, for the African American experience. As the writer Ronne Hartfield has noted, "Our mother's stories have given us the maps by which our tribe locates its journeying, its streams and rivers, its stony places, its sometimes astonishing, more often incredibly affirming twists and turns."[8] ◆

Find out more at 10MillionNames.org

NOTES

1. See Kendra Taira Field, *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018).
2. On viewership, see Bethonie Butler, "Everyone Was Talking about 'Roots' in 1977," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2016. On the founding of AAHGS, see aahgs.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&pageId=597.
3. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Boston, 1892), 25.
4. Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
5. Adelaide Sanford interviewed by Cathy Sandler (The HistoryMakers A2003.219), September 19, 2003, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 2, story 4.
6. Alex Haley, "The Joy of Reunions," *Families*, fall 1980.
7. R. Fivush, J. G. Bohanek, and M. Duke, "The Intergenerational Self: Subjective Perspective and Family History," in *Self Continuity: Individual and Collective Perspectives*, ed. Fabio Sani (New York: Psychology Press, 2008), 131–143.
8. Ronne Hartfield, *Another Way Home: The Tangled Roots of Race in One Chicago Family* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

10 Million Names

FLAGSHIP PROJECTS

The 10 Million Names Project is dedicated to finding the names of the estimated ten million men, women, and children of African descent who were enslaved in pre- and post-colonial America (specifically, the territory that would become the United States) between the late 1500s and 1865. For this ambitious undertaking, Dr. Kendra Field serves as our Chief Historian, and we have split the work into five manageable flagship projects, each with a clear and defined scope.

1. Making America: Records of Enslaved Laborers within and beyond the Plantation

Millions of enslaved people lived on plantations, in private homes, and on university property before emancipation. Enslavers often created financial and personal records to track, count, and inventory families and individuals laboring on their land. And while these records were initially created for the benefit of the enslaver, genealogists can use these records to reconstruct family groups and rediscover names of the enslaved.

Examples of records:

- Antebellum censuses (1850 and 1860 US federal censuses, 1867 Maryland slave statistics, other state and local censuses, etc.)
- Plantation records (presidential properties—Monticello, Mount Vernon, Montpelier, private estate papers, Bible records, etc.)
- College and university records (Georgetown University, the College of William & Mary, University of Virginia, etc.)
- Probate records and land deeds

2. On the Battlefield: Records of Soldiers, Veterans, and Refugees

Prior to emancipation, Black soldiers served both voluntarily and involuntarily in conflicts on land that is now the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean. Enslaved and free men took part in colonial wars (1609–1775), the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), the War of 1812 (1812–1815), and the Civil War (1861–1865). Later, free Black soldiers—most of whom were descended from enslaved people—participated in the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899–1902). This project will rely not just on the rich records created for soldiers, but also for veterans and wartime refugees.

Examples of records:

- Military records (muster rolls, pay rolls, drafts, enlistment records, etc.)
- Veteran records (pension records, bounty land warrants, veteran headstone inscription records, etc.)
- Documentation from the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands—more commonly known as "the Freedmen's Bureau"

3. Journeys to Liberation: Records of Mariners, Migrants, and Freedom Seekers

All throughout the slavery era in pre- and post-colonial America, individuals and families of African descent pursued paths to freedom. Most famously, people used the Underground Railroad to escape, but other enslaved people pursued "freedom suits" through legal challenges, paid for self-manumission, or experienced emancipation through African emigration. Invaluable collections of historical records provide opportunities to read accounts (sometimes firsthand) of formerly enslaved individuals and gain insights into their extraordinary paths to emancipation.

Lindsay Fulton *is Chief Research Officer at American Ancestors/NEHGS.*

Examples of records:

- Records of abolitionist groups, such as the American Colonization Society
- Court records (federal, state, and local court records)
- Crew lists, seamen's registers, and passenger lists
- First-person accounts from the Underground Railroad
- "Runaway" advertisements in newspapers

4. Community Building: Records of Black Institutions

While historically Black institutions, organizations, and churches have played a pivotal role in the lives of men, women, and children of African descent after emancipation, some of these organizations were also central to enslaved people in pre- and post-colonial America. In general, the people served by these institutions created records for the benefit of fellow constituents. Researchers can use these records to learn more about the first generation of free people, as well as their ancestors and descendants.

Examples of records:

- Records from schools for freed people (sponsored by private aid and benevolent societies), and records of the Freedmen's Bureau
- Church records (African Methodist Episcopal Church, National Baptist Convention, Church of God in Christ, Oblate Sisters of Providence, etc.)
- Records of historically Black colleges and universities (Howard University, Spelman College, Morehouse College, Lincoln University, etc.)
- Fraternities and sororities (Alpha Kappa Alpha, Omega Psi Phi, Iota Phi Theta, Delta Sigma Theta, Sigma Gamma Rho, etc.)

5. Remembering Slavery: Testimonials after Emancipation

The most powerful, poignant, and detailed records of formerly enslaved persons are first-person accounts collected in the pre- and post-emancipation eras. The oral tradition of persons of African descent and enslaved persons helped Black family history and culture survive. Like the records of historically Black institutions, these testimonials can help genealogists learn more about the first generation of free people, as well as their ancestors and descendants.

Examples of records:

- Narratives collected by Fisk University, the Virginia Writers Project, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA)
- Oral histories collected by individual families and institutions
- Information wanted/lost friends newspaper advertisements (*Black Republican* [New Orleans, Louisiana], *Charleston* [S.C.] *Courier*, *Colored Citizen* [Cincinnati, Ohio], *Free Man's Press* [Galveston, Texas], *The Liberator* [Boston], etc.) ◆

Opposite: "Group of scholars on St. Helena Is., SC," 1863. Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/2016645525. *Above left:* Eastman Johnson (American, 1824-1906). *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* (recto), ca. 1862. Oil on paperboard, 21 15/16 x 26 1/8 in. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Gwendolyn O. L. Conkling, 40.59a-b. *Above right:* "Some of our brave colored boys who helped to free Cuba," ca. 1899. Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/2007682340.

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PROJECT ADVISORY BOARD

Making the Impossible Possible

Every once in a while there's a project so meaningful that even the busiest executives and philanthropists want to be part of it. 10 Million Names—an initiative designed to help forty-four million descendants trace their ancestry back to the ten million enslaved men, women, and children who lived on American soil between the late 1500s and 1865—is exactly that kind of big idea, and has elicited eager participation from engaged leaders.

We are proud to introduce the members of the 10 Million Names Project Advisory Board: Richard Cellini, Faculty Fellow at Harvard University's Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., professor, historian, and filmmaker, nationally known for his immensely popular PBS television show, *Finding Your Roots*; Gwill York, co-founder and managing director for Lighthouse Capital Partners and American Ancestors/NEHGS Council Member; and Paula Williams Madison, journalist, writer, and former NBC Universal executive. Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman to sit on the nation's highest court, is an honorary member of the Advisory Board.

The 10 Million Names Project unites these Advisory Board members in one purpose: to restore the full narrative of American history by helping forty-four million people connect with their ancestors. To accomplish this goal, these leaders have committed their time, industry knowledge, credibility, influence, and ability to secure financial resources in order to see this work thrive.

The 10 Million Names Project emerged from a series of conversations between then American Ancestors/NEHGS Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer Ryan Woods, Cellini, and York. Cellini, then an American Ancestors Council Member, had successfully established and led the Georgetown Memory Project (GU272). GU272 identified more than 10,600 descendants of the approximately 314 enslaved men, women, and children sold in 1838 by the Jesuit priests who ran Georgetown University to raise money for the institution. As GU272 was being established at American Ancestors, Cellini saw the much wider scope of 10 Million Names as the next logical step in Black genealogy.

The idea was quickly embraced by Woods and York, who saw this initiative as a powerful opportunity to finally break down the genealogical "brick wall" that makes it difficult for African Americans to trace their families before the 1870 census. In the early stages, Cellini reached out to his Harvard colleague Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for his perspective. Today, Gates is a proud and enthusiastic member of the Advisory Board.

Asked why he decided to join the Board, Gates vividly recalls his introduction to the project. "When Richard shared his idea for 10 Million Names with me, I was thunderstruck by his revolutionary method for researching the history of Black families in America: start with the names of the enslaved and work forward. This approach is elegant, efficient, and frankly, unprecedented."

Those working in the field of Black genealogy have long acknowledged that the "brick wall" is real. But according to Cellini's theory, the divide is more like a semi-permeable membrane. He explains, "Tracing the genealogy of enslaved ancestors depends on which side of the wall you start from! This way is ten times easier, faster, cheaper, and far more productive. It's hard to start with the haystack (modern-day descendants) and connect to needles (enslaved ancestors). It's much better to

Dionne V. Jackson *is Assistant Vice President for Inspirational Giving at American Ancestors/NEHGS.*

start with the needles and connect to the haystack! This has certainly been the experience of the Georgetown Memory Project."

Recognizing the potential impact of 10 Million Names, Gates added, "With the appropriate resources, guidance, and support, this project will completely reshape the way we trace African American ancestry. I've dedicated my entire career to revealing long hidden histories of Black families in America and am honored to contribute to the project's success."

Gwill York was equally enthusiastic to become the Advisory Board's Chair. Growing up in Cleveland, she watched her parents serve as active members of the Urban League and participate in Mayor Stokes's election campaigns. They also worked to secure membership for prominent Black leaders in all-white social groups.

York explains, "I love American history and this project will ensure that a fuller, more revealing version of that history will be told. How could I not be honored to help our country develop a better understanding of itself?" York also shared that leading the project will be a natural fit for her. "Advocacy is in my blood. My parents were very involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and I am heavily influenced by their sense of what's right. My mother was the President of the Cleveland chapter of the Junior League, and she led its integration. I feel blessed to have this opportunity."

Research into Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's family history is one of the templates for this work. After Jackson was confirmed as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court in April 2022, the *Boston Globe* contacted us to trace the genealogy of her husband, Patrick Jackson, a *Mayflower* descendant. Manager of Research and Library Services Sarah Dery had been investigating Justice Jackson's ancestors for more than a month. When the *Globe* learned about Sarah's research, the paper chose to feature Justice Jackson's genealogy alongside her husband's. The resulting article, based on our research, documented several generations of Justice Jackson's ancestors, including some who lived prior to the Civil War. Justice Jackson later brought several family members to the American Ancestors Research Center to meet with our experts. Not long after that visit, Justice Jackson agreed to serve as an honorary board member and advisor for the project.

Richard Cellini

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson

FRED SCHILLING, COLLECTION OF THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES.

Paula Williams Madison

Gwill York

A recent addition to the advisory group is Paula Williams Madison, once named one of the "75 Most Powerful African Americans in Corporate America" by *Black Enterprise* magazine. Madison, who has Jamaican and Chinese ancestry, enthusiastically agreed to serve because of her experience tracing her family's story back 3,000 years to her ancestral village in Shanghai. Her award-winning book and documentary film, *Finding Samuel Lowe: China, Jamaica, Harlem*, tell the story of her family's journey. But while Madison had success tracing her own genealogy, she acknowledges that many in the Black community are not as fortunate.

"So many people of the African Diaspora here in the Americas don't have any clue as to their ancestry beyond three or perhaps four generations. Forty-four million of us in the U.S. are descended from ten million enslaved Africans. Initiating a genealogical search to find our ancestral lineage is so daunting that many of us don't even consider doing so, and give up before getting started." Madison goes on to say, "The 10 Million Names Project will unite our past, present, and future by tracing the direct descendants of 10 million enslaved Africans, free Blacks, and Afro-Caribbean immigrants. Knowing who we are and where we're from grounds us and restores our knowledge of ourselves. I'm proud to serve on the Advisory Board because helping to connect us with our ancestors has been my lifelong personal commitment and journey." In her first week on the Advisory Board, Madison helped design an impressive national media strategy for the program's roll out.

Our 10 Million Names Project is off to a strong start, thanks in large part to the commitment, engagement, and talents of our Advisory Group. The work associated with 10 Million Names is expected to last decades, and building a strong foundation for this initiative is critical. As York explained, "The Advisory Board's biggest responsibility is to leverage our resources and practical talents to ensure that this work happens according to the highest standards in the field quickly and efficiently. It is not insurmountable. When passionate people take pride in a common purpose, they can make the impossible possible." ◆

To learn how to engage with the 10 Million Names Project, contact Meghan Hallock, Chief Relationships Officer, at meghan.hallock@nehgs.org.

Supporter spotlight: Brenda Johnson

Brenda Johnson describes herself as "just a regular person, a retired banker originally from Wisconsin." But as the top donor to the 10 Million Names Project, Brenda is far from regular—to us she's extraordinary!

When Brenda, an American Ancestors Trustee, learned about 10 Million Names, her support for the initiative was instantaneous. "I knew immediately this was something I wanted to be a part of." Her one-million-dollar commitment jump-started the project.

Brenda's dedication and sense of urgency stems from her own experience. "As I've traced my own genealogy over the years, my wonder has grown at ancestors I'd never heard about and their stories of challenges and perseverance. History has become real to me as I've learned about the times in which they lived. Through my DNA research, I have come to realize that all my ancestors are part of me and who I am. My sense of self has been broadened by genealogy."

"By helping to fund the creation of 10 Million Names, I can make a difference with genealogical research that has long been difficult, if not impossible, for many Black Americans," said Brenda. "10 Million Names offers new opportunities for descendants of enslaved Americans to connect with their ancestors by learning about their unique and valuable life stories."

Brenda Johnson with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., April 27, 2023.
Photo © Pierce Harman, 2023.

Brenda's gift has helped American Ancestors to produce impressive early results and attract new major funders for the project. "Brenda's support for 10 Million Names is transformative," explains Meghan Hallock, Chief Relationships Officer. "Her generosity at the outset positioned this groundbreaking project for success."

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10 Million Names

Resilient Roots: A Celebration of the 10 Million Names Project

On Sunday, August 13, 2023, American Ancestors hosted "Resilient Roots: A Celebration of the 10 Million Names Project" at the Martha's Vineyard Museum on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. Approximately 75 residents, long-time stakeholders, and new friends attended this brunch and panel discussion.

Dionne Jackson, Assistant Vice President for Inspirational Giving, greeted attendees and unveiled the 10 Million Names Project documentary film. She then asked guests to write the name of an ancestor and place the paper in a jar. She explained: "As we join to celebrate this endeavor to recover, restore, and remember, we encourage you to remember your ancestors by name." She noted that centerpiece remembrances incorporating these names would be assembled later as a visual representation of the group's interwoven existence.

Lindsay Fulton, Chief Research Officer, introduced the panel of 10 Million Names Project experts. The panelists were Richard J. Cellini, Director, 10 Million Names project; Dr. Kendra Taira Field, Chief Historian; Kerri Greenidge, Scholars' Council Member; and Paula Madison, Advisory Board Member. The ensuing conversation was rich with stories, illustrating how strongly this project resonates with the African-American community.

Learn more about the project at 10MillionNames.org.

1 **Dorothy Tucker**, broadcast journalist; **Dr. Kerri Greenidge**, historian, author, and Associate Professor of History at Tufts; **Dr. Kendra Taira Field**, Associate Professor of History and Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy at Tufts University; **Dr. Kellie Carter Jackson**, Chair of Africana Studies at Wellesley College; **Paula Madison**, journalist, author, and Chief Executive Officer at Madison Media Management LLC; **Callie Crossley**, host of GBH Radio's *Under the Radar with Callie Crossley*; **Sandra Sims-Williams**, Chief Diversity Officer at Nielsen; and **Audra Bohannon**, Senior Client-Partner at Korn Ferry. 2 **Tanya Dance Kelley**, Deloitte Consulting; **Rosalyn Dance**, Virginia State Senator (Ret.), and **Dr. Kerri Greenidge**. 3 Panelists **Paula Madison**, **Dr. Kendra Taira Field**, **Dr. Kerri Greenidge**, and **Richard J. Cellini**. 4 **Dr. Kellie Carter Jackson**. 5 **Diatou Gueye**, Executive Director, Head of Client Tech Integration Solutions for Morgan Stanley, with **Dr. Michael Ralph**, Chair of the Afro-American Studies Department at Howard University.

10 Myths about Slavery in the United States

10 Million Names

The history of slavery in what would become the United States did not begin with African enslavement. In many regions, the earliest American colonists initially enslaved local indigenous people. Widespread enslavement of African and African-descended individuals took hold in the 1630s. Gradually, the labor of indentured servants—utilized extensively across the colonies during this period—was replaced with the labor of enslaved Africans.[1] The experience of enslavement throughout American history was complex and varied.

After many years of genealogical research on enslaved ancestors, I have noted that our Research Services clients frequently ask questions based on some common myths regarding slavery in America. This article presents ten of these myths and counters them with facts. A clear understanding of the past, rooted in available historical evidence, is essential to navigating genealogical records and appreciating the historical context of our ancestors' lives. Historically grounded knowledge about slavery and the experiences of enslaved and enslaving individuals also broadens and deepens our understanding of American history.

Below: D. B. Woodbury, photographer, "Arrival of Negro family in the lines," U.S., January 1, 1863. Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/2018671495. *Opposite above:* "Uncle Moreau [Omar ibn Said]," a Muslim scholar born in Africa and enslaved in North Carolina, ca. 1850. Randolph Linsly Simpson African-American Collection. James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. *Opposite below:* "Picking cotton on a Georgia Plantation," ca. 1858. Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/2002698525.

Meaghan E. H. Siekman, PhD, *a Genealogist of the Newbury Street Press, specializes in African American genealogy, Indigenous American history, house histories, the American South, and westward migration.*

MYTH #1 "Freedpeople always adopted the surnames of their former enslavers."

The adoption of post-emancipation surnames is a complicated issue. In some cases, individuals did choose to adopt a former enslaver's name, or a former enslaver's name was assigned by the earliest record takers after emancipation. In other cases, enslaved families had used surnames consistently over generations during slavery, only some of which were the surnames of a former enslaver. For some people who were not allowed to use surnames during slavery, choosing a surname after emancipation was a powerful way to exercise their new freedom and forge their own paths for themselves and their descendants. This practice was extended beyond surnames to first names. Frequently, when I piece together a family with enslaved roots, it becomes apparent that first names were chosen to create a legacy, with a name passed down through generations. In some cases, nicknames or secret names known only within a family were used to create and maintain connections, even if family members were split apart.[2]

MYTH #2 "Slavery—and enslaved people's lives—looked relatively the same across American history, regardless of time or place."

Enslaved people's experiences were extraordinarily diverse and differed dramatically depending on many factors, including where one was enslaved (geographic region, urban vs. rural, coastal vs. interior, etc.), when one was enslaved, how one was enslaved (born into slavery, sold or stolen into slavery, separated from one's relatives), family composition and family history, type of labor (domestic work, trades/artisan work, field work and crop cultivated, conditions, etc.), and the circumstances of one's enslaver (material resources, number of enslaved peoples, access to education or travel).

Moreover, the U.S. system of racial slavery developed over time. Both free and enslaved Africans arrived in Spanish Florida in the early 1500s, a century before the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia. The history of Africans in colonial North America is not synonymous with slavery. In the colonial period, a wide range of labor systems coexisted, including indentured servitude, slavery, and, in some regions, indigenous slavery that predated arrival of Africans. During this period, people of African descent were sometimes enslaved, other times free or indentured. The racialization of slave labor took place over the seventeenth century but was not fully established until the eighteenth century, developing differently in different regions. In the southern United States, historian Ira Berlin describes a shift from a "society with slaves" to a "slave society."[3]

By the time the United States was established, the system of "chattel slavery" relegated all enslaved people to the legal status of property, and very few laws granted any rights to the people enslaved. Laws in all "slave states" allowed enslaved people to be assaulted, abused, sold away from loved ones, and denied access to their children. The enslaved were also prevented from gathering, traveling, testifying in court, worshiping, and reading—among other prohibitions. Those who resisted, fought back, or tried to escape could be punished at the discretion of the enslaver.[4]

MYTH #3 **"Most enslaved Africans were sent directly to the United States. The United States was the center of the Atlantic slave trade."**

Throughout the duration of legal slavery in what became the United States, between 1525 and 1866, 12.5 million Africans were transported out of Africa, with 10.7 million surviving the overseas voyages to land in North America, South America, and the Caribbean. Of those 10.7 million, however, only about 388,000 people were shipped directly to North America—a small percentage of the total slave trade to the Americas.[5]

Many enslaved Africans were brought first to the Caribbean before being brought into the United States. The New England economy had a direct relationship to slave labor in the Caribbean. Due to this connection, if one is able to trace a family back generations through slavery, the research may bring one first to Haiti, Jamaica, Barbados, and the other islands of the Caribbean before going back to Africa.[6] An act of Congress in 1800 made it illegal for the United States to engage in the slave trade with other nations. By 1808, the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves took effect, and the legal trafficking of slaves from Africa to the United States then ceased.

While the U.S. was not the center of the international slave trade, the participation of the United States in the domestic slave trade greatly expanded after the American Revolution and the Louisiana Purchase, resulting in the dramatic growth of the enslaved population.[7]

MYTH #4 **"Slavery in the North ended decades before the Civil War. "**

After the American Revolution, some northern states banned slavery in their state constitutions—although this did not happen in every state, and these laws did not prevent northern industries from profiting from slavery elsewhere. In 1777, Vermont was the first state to abolish slavery. Massachusetts followed in 1783, after the Quock Walker case successfully established that his enslavement was inconsistent with the state constitution.[8] Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania all instituted acts that provided for gradual abolition. These incremental measures continued slavery for people who were already enslaved or who were born to enslaved people for varying terms—generally twenty years or more—depending on the state. These laws extended slavery in some northern states well into the nineteenth century. All residents only became officially free in New York in 1827, in Connecticut in 1848, and in New Hampshire in 1865, when the thirteenth amendment was ratified.[9]

$150
REWARD

Ran away from the subscriber, on Wednesday, July 11, Negro Man, Nace Dorsey. He is about 5 feet 11 inches in height--may be 6 feet--large and muscular, black, and with a few grey hairs. Is about 40 years old.

I will give the above reward for his apprehension and delivery to me in Charles County, Maryland.

A. JACKSON SMOOT.

July 15, 1860.

Opposite: Thomas Clay, "Cutting the Sugar-Cane," *Ten Views in the Island of Antigua*, 1823. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. *Left:* Broadside advertisement, Charles County, Maryland, July 15, 1860. Missouri Historical Society, mohistory.org/collections/item/D01359. *Below:* "Sale in New York," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division. The New York Public Library, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-bc51-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

For Sale,

A LIKELY, HEALTHY, YOUNG
NEGRO WENCH,

BETWEEN fifteen and fixteen Years old: She has been ufed to the Farming Bufinefs. Sold for want of Employ.—Enquire at No. 81, William-ftreet.

New-York, March 30, 1789.

MYTH #5 "Enslaved people were never listed or named on records prior to 1865."

It can be a challenge to locate enslaved ancestors by name in records prior to 1865, but several types of record sets offer such opportunities. Court records or records created due to slave laws may include information on individuals and families. Although enslaved people across the United States were relegated to the status of human property, some limited avenues existed for these individuals to argue for their rights in court. For example, a 1778 Virginia law banning the importation of slaves from outside the state allowed some enslaved persons who could prove that their enslavers had broken this law to make a case for their freedom. Some lawsuits contended that enslaved people born to free mothers should also be free.[10] In Massachusetts, court cases such as *Brom and Bett v. Ashley* and *Commonwealth v. Jennison* (representing the interests of Quock Walker) used the state's new constitution to argue for freedom. Rulings for enslaved people in both of these cases ultimately ended slavery in the state.[11]

Because some enslaved individuals can be found listed by name in probates, deeds, and account records under the enslaver's name, researching enslaved ancestors also requires researching enslaver families. For instance, enslaved people were commonly included in doweries or left to wives and daughters in wills, so records that name women of enslaver families may reveal records that include the names of the people they enslaved.

The names of enslaved people can also be found in records of resistance such as "runaway ads"—advertisements placed in newspapers searching for individuals who had escaped their enslavement. Likewise, post-emancipation newspaper ads seeking family members might reveal information about an individual's life during slavery.

MYTH #6 "There were very few free Black people in the South."

Statistics from the first federal census in 1790 through the 1830 census reveal that about 56% of the total U.S. population of free Black people lived in the South. This percentage dropped only slightly to 52% in the South in 1860. Prior to emancipation, then, a slight majority of the country's free African Americans lived in southern states.[12] The multitude of laws in the antebellum South aimed at restricting the rights of free people of color suggests the significance of the free Black population at the time.[13] For example, an 1806 Virginia law stated that any freed person of color who remained in Virginia for more than a year would forfeit their right to freedom and could be sold by the Overseer of the Poor for the benefit of the parish. Free individuals could petition the state to remain longer than a year, but the state clearly did not consider the potential magnitude of the number of petitions they would receive. By 1837, the General Assembly changed the law so petitions could go to local courts.[14]

MYTH #7 "Enslavers commonly kept families together."

Because enslaved people were legally the movable property of their enslavers, they could be bought and sold at will. Not all enslaved people experienced separations, but many did. Approximately one in three enslaved individuals were separated from immediate family members by the U.S. domestic slave trade. Many of these separations occurred across state lines, with an estimated 200,000 people being sold or moved from the Upper South to the Lower South and West each year between 1820 and 1860.[15]

Disruptions to family units also occurred within state lines, and a distance of just a few miles could prevent families from seeing each other if their mobility was restricted. Parents endured wrenching separations as their children (often while nursing babies or toddlers) were sold to new owners. (After the Civil War many freedpeople placed advertisements in newspapers, attempting to locate family members who had been sold away during slavery and to restore their family units.[16]) Enslavers and overseers also used

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the threat of separation as a weapon against enslaved children and adults; those who did not experience a family separation lived with the constant fear of it.

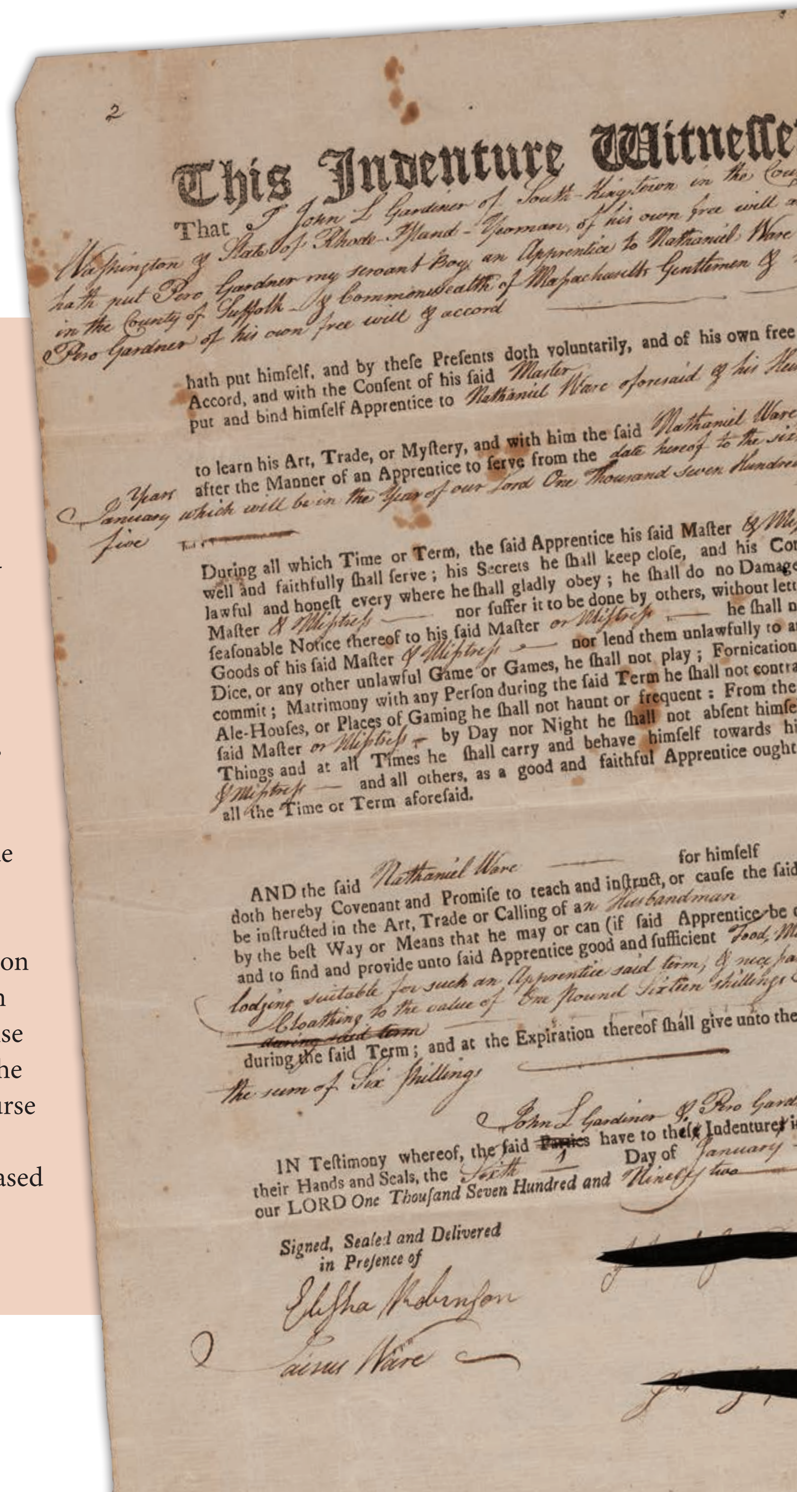
Despite these heartbreaking separations, enslaved people worked hard to maintain family bonds and to pass down knowledge of family history. Accounts of former enslaved persons often detail how family knowledge was shared through generations, with recollections of specific information imparted by a parent or grandparent.[17] The composition of post-emancipation households demonstrates the importance of extended family networks when separations during slavery occurred. For example, after emancipation, if children had been separated from their parents, grandchildren might live with grandparents, or aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews. Following emancipation, a great effort was made to rebuild or recreate the connections that families had been denied during their enslavement.[18]

Opposite above: Hannah Richards of Athens, Tennessee, an enslaved woman who was freed in 1826. Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/2016645954. *Opposite below:* H. L. Stephens, *The Parting—Buy Us Too*, ca. 1863. Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/93503990. *Below:* Indenture for Pero Gardiner of South Kingstown, Rhode Island, apprenticed to Nathaniel Ware of Wrentham, Massachusetts, January 6, 1792. Jonathan Edwards Collection. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

MYTH #8 "White indentured servants were treated identically to enslaved people."

While the type of labor performed by indentured servants and enslaved persons in the colonial period often was similar, the terms of their bondage were drastically different. Indentured servitude was a type of debt bondage, an agreement to work for a set amount of time to satisfy a debt. In America, indentured servants often had to repay the cost of their passage across the Atlantic. Sometimes indentured servitude was punishment for a crime, but such sentences still had an end. Depending on the terms of the agreement, servants might also receive some form of payment at the end of their term. Indentured servants also had laws that protected some of their rights. While their time in servitude may have been restrictive and harsh, these servants could look forward to a life in freedom after their service.

Enslaved status in the United States was inherited based on the mother's status, while indentures were not passed down to the next generation. Enslaved people had no such promise of future freedom for themselves or for their children. As the legal property of their enslavers, they rarely had legal recourse against injustices. In the colonies through the eighteenth century, indentured servitude decreased, and slavery increased with clear racial definitions of who could be enslaved.[19]


2

This Indenture Witneſſe

That I John L Gardiner of South-Kingstown in the Cou
Washington & State of Rhode-Island - Yeoman, of his own free will a
hath put Pero Gardner my servant Boy an Apprentice to Nathaniel Ware
in the County of Suffolk & Commonwealth of Massachusetts Gentlemen &
Pero Gardner of his own free will & accord

hath put himſelf, and by theſe Preſents doth voluntarily, and of his own free
Accord, and with the Conſent of his ſaid Master Nathaniel Ware aforesaid & his
put and bind himſelf Apprentice to Nathaniel Ware

to learn his Art, Trade, or Myſtery, and with him the ſaid Nathaniel Ware
after the Manner of an Apprentice to ſerve from the date hereof to the
Years
January which will be in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Seven Hundred
five

During all which Time or Term, the ſaid Apprentice his ſaid Maſter & Mi
well and faithfully ſhall ſerve; his Secrets he ſhall keep cloſe, and his Co
lawful and honeſt every where he ſhall gladly obey; he ſhall do no Damag
Maſter & Mistress nor ſuffer it to be done by others, without lett
ſeaſonable Notice thereof to his ſaid Maſter or Mistress he ſhall n
Goods of his ſaid Maſter & Mistress nor lend them unlawfully to a
Dice, or any other unlawful Game or Games, he ſhall not play; Fornication
commit; Matrimony with any Perſon during the ſaid Term he ſhall not contra
Ale-Houſes, or Places of Gaming he ſhall not haunt or frequent: From the
ſaid Maſter or Mistress by Day nor Night he ſhall not abſent himſe
Things and at all Times he ſhall carry and behave himſelf towards hi
& Mistress and all others, as a good and faithful Apprentice ought
all the Time or Term aforeſaid.

AND the ſaid Nathaniel Ware for himſelf
doth hereby Covenant and Promiſe to teach and inſtruct, or cauſe the ſaid
be inſtructed in the Art, Trade or Calling of an Husbandman
by the beſt Way or Means that he may or can (if ſaid Apprentice be
and to find and provide unto ſaid Apprentice good and ſufficient Food, M
lodging suitable for such an Apprentice said term, & necessa
Cloathing to the value of One Pound Sixteen shillings
during the ſaid Term; and at the Expiration thereof ſhall give unto the
the sum of Six Shillings

John L Gardiner & Pero Gard
IN Teſtimony whereof, the ſaid ~~Parties~~ have to thei Indentures i
their Hands and Seals, the Sixth Day of January
our LORD One Thouſand Seven Hundred and Ninety two

Signed, Sealed and Delivered in Preſence of
Elisha Robinson
Cyrus Ware

MYTH #9 "Slave labor was only used on large southern plantations or rural farms, and most enslavers owned large numbers of enslaved people."

The labor of enslaved people was used in a variety of capacities, not just on sprawling rural plantations or farms. The 1850 and 1860 Federal Slave Schedules—lists of enslaved people created in addition to the general federal census—provide extensive evidence on this point. Searching these records for any major city in the South will return thousands of entries of enslaved people working in urban households and industries. During the eighteenth century, enslaved labor was used in northern states in almost every sector of the economy—in shipyards, building trades, artisanal shops, and commerce. Many enslavers had only one or two enslaved people in their households, and enslaver and enslaved likely worked alongside each other on smaller properties or in a specialized trade, such as in blacksmithing.[20]

Many enslavers were not wealthy and enslaved fewer than five people. In these cases, enslaved people were much more likely to live in the same house as their enslavers—perhaps in the attic or a back room, but still in relative proximity. Large plantations generally had "slave quarters" set apart from the main house. Enslaved people were also less likely to interact with enslavers due to a plantation-based hierarchy that created a chain of command with overseers as intermediaries between the enslaver and the labor on their plantations. A planter's interaction with the daily workings of the plantation was much more indirect; a planter was likely to have more knowledge of the accounting books than the daily labor. In this respect, the relationship between enslaver and enslaved was more direct in smaller homes or industries, given the higher likelihood that the two would work alongside one other.[21]

MYTH #10 "Most African Americans in the U.S. today are not descended from enslaved people."

The vast majority of people of African descent in the United States today are descended from enslaved ancestors—whether they were enslaved in the U.S., Caribbean, or Latin America. The demographics of the United States just before the end of slavery present a compelling case for why most Americans of African descent have enslaved ancestry,

(continued on next page)

Top: African American woman, probably enslaved, with a girl and a boy from a Petersburg, Virginia, family, ca. 1860. Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/2021650590. *Above:* R. W. Harrison, photographer, "Six Generations," Selma, Alabama, ca. 1893. Library of Congress, loc.gov/resource/cph.3c04928.

if their forebears were here prior to emancipation. In 1860, enslaved people represented about 13% of the total U.S. population, while free Blacks comprised about 1.5%. Of the African American population, 89% were enslaved and 11% were free.[22] Furthermore, even those people of color who were free by 1860 would likely have had some enslaved ancestors, since very few Africans came to the Americas as free people and maintained that status. Each decade leading to emancipation did see the number of free people of color grow in both the North and the South. Prior to the Civil War, with some family members gaining their freedom and others still enslaved, many families had relatives who were enslaved and some who were free.[23]

While all the complexities of slavery in the United States cannot be examined in a single article, dismantling these myths increases our historical knowledge and brings us closer to the experiences of Americans who lived through this era. Countless scholars have studied slavery using a variety of methods and approaches, and I encourage readers to continue to explore this crucial topic. ◆

NOTES

1 See Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015).

2 For some examples, see Meaghan E. H. Siekman, "Slave Surnames," *Vita Brevis* blog, May 26, 2021, vitabrevis.americanancestors.org/2021/05/slave-surnames.

3 Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 8–9.

4 See ibid.

5 "Summary Statistics," Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, at Slavevoyages.org.

6 See Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

7 See Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017).

8 "Instructions to the Jury in the Quock Walker Case, Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. Nathaniel Jennison (1783)," National Constitution Center website, constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library; search for "Quock Walker."

9 For more information about gradual emancipation acts in northern states, see Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1890* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Amherst, Mass.: Bright Leaf, 2019); and Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

10 See the "Freedom Suits" collection at Library of Virginia, "Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative," lva-virginia.libguides.com/virginia-untold.

11 Original court records are in the custody of the Supreme Judicial Court, Division of Archives and Records Preservation. Information about the Quock Walker cases is available at The Long Road to Justice: The African American Experience in the Massachusetts Courts, longroadtojustice.org/topics/slavery/quock-walker.php.

12 Erin Bradford, "Free African American Population in the U.S.: 1790–1860," from the University of Virginia Library, ncpedia.org/sites/default/files/census_stats_1790-1860.pdf.

13 See Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

14 See A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race & the American Legal Process, the Colonial Period,* 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

15 Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 5.

16 See Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

17 Ibid., 195.

18 Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010), 80–87.

19 Warren M. Billings, "The Law of Servants and Slaves in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 99:1 (January 1991), 45–62.

20 See Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), especially 177–194.

21 Berlin, *Generations of* Captivity [note 3], 76–77.

22 "Data Analysis: African Americans on the Eve of the Civil War," in Patrick Rael, *Black Activism in the Antebellum North: A Lesson Plan* (Brunswick, Me.: Bowdoin College, 2005), bowdoin.edu/~prael/lesson/tables.htm.

23 See Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019).

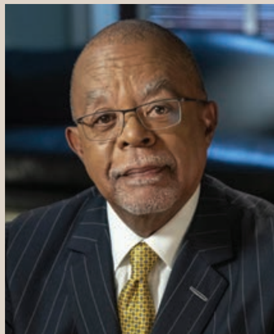
Mission

10 Million Names is a collaborative project dedicated to recovering the names of the estimated 10 million men, women, and children of African descent who were enslaved in pre- and post-colonial America between the 1500s and 1865.

The project seeks to amplify the voices of people who have been telling their family stories for centuries, connect researchers and data partners with people seeking answers to family history questions, and expand access to data, resources, and information about enslaved African Americans.

"Not having a name dehumanizes an individual and separates families. 10 Million Names will help reconnect us with our past and with each other. We owe a debt to our ancestors and to our children to make sure the world knows our story."

— Henry Louis Gates, Jr., host of the PBS show Finding Your Roots *and member of the 10 Million Names Advisory Board*



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