

African American Genealogy

Background

African Americans have been part of Kentucky's history since the earliest frontier settlements. Enslaved individuals were brought into Kentucky while it was still part of Virginia, and by statehood in 1792 slavery was firmly embedded in the social and economic structure. Throughout the 1800s enslaved Kentuckians worked in agriculture, hemp production, horse farms, ironworks, distilleries, tobacco processing, domestic service, and skilled trades. A small free African American community lived mainly in cities such as Louisville, Lexington, and Maysville, appearing in federal census records before the Civil War.

Although Kentucky remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War, it did not abolish slavery until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment at the end of 1865. More than 23,000 African American men from Kentucky, both enslaved and free, served in the United States Colored Troops and secured freedom for themselves and their families. After emancipation, African American communities built churches, schools, fraternal organizations, and mutual aid societies across the state. Segregated schools, the Lincoln Institute, African American newspapers, and the development of African American neighborhoods contributed to strong cultural and civic life despite the barriers of Jim Crow.

Because of this long history, African American genealogical records in Kentucky appear in many formats including slaveholding records, Freedmen era documents, vital statistics, court cases, and military files. Understanding this historical context helps researchers locate and interpret records that document African American lives in Kentucky from the eighteenth century through the twentieth century.

Records & Access

Records Relevant to African American Genealogy Available at KDLA:

Federal Records:

- 1790–1940 Federal Census (free African American populations and families)
- 1850 & 1860 Federal Slave Schedules (owners listed; enslaved people listed by age/sex)
- U.S. Colored Troops Records (23,000+ African American Kentuckians served)
- Freedmen's Bureau Records (marriages, labor contracts, education reports)
- WPA Records (community studies and interviews)

State Publications:

- Cabinet for Human Resources, Social 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 Governor's 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

*County Records: *records & dates available vary by county*

Birth Records (1852–1910):

- Enslaved births listed under the owner; mother named; father rarely recorded

Death Records (1852–1967):

- Enslaved individuals recorded under owner; often include age/cause of death

Probate Records:

- Wills (occasionally list emancipated slaves)
- Estate inventories & appraisals (may list enslaved individuals by name, age, family groupings)
- Estate settlements

Deed Books:

- Slave sales and transfers
- Deeds of gift
- Slave hiring contracts
- Mortgages involving enslaved people
- Manumission (emancipation) records

Other County Records:

- Records of Importation of Slaves
- Lists of slaves enlisted in the U.S. Colored Troops
- Dower-slave lists
- Tax Lists

Circuit Court Records:

Civil Cases:

- Inheritance and estate cases
- Property disputes
- Post-Civil War civil rights cases
- Guardianship and apprenticeship cases
- Freedom suits or challenges to enslaved status (when relevant)
- Complaints of non-payment for hired labor

Criminal Cases:

- Fugitive slave cases (pre-1865)
- Cases involving African Americans accused under Jim Crow laws or segregation ordinances (post-1865)

Freedmen-Era Records:

- Freedmen's Marriage Registers (legalized pre-1865 marriages)
- Apprenticeship/Indenture Books (formerly enslaved children bound to trades)

Newspapers:

KDLA holds three major Kentucky newspapers on microfilm: Louisville, Lexington, and Frankfort. These may include obituaries, community events, school news, and articles relevant to African American genealogy.

Accessing Records:

All these records are accessible in the Archives Research Room, either on microfilm or in original format. Researchers can request assistance remotely via email or phone, or order records through the KDLA website at kdla.ky.gov. Identifying the relevant county of residence is key to locating records and combining federal and county sources can help reconstruct the lives and relationships of enslaved and formerly enslaved individuals in Kentucky.

Other Sources

These institutions hold materials relevant to African American history and genealogy in Kentucky:

- **Kentucky Historical Society (KHS)** – Manuscripts, church records, oral histories, photographs
- **Local Historical Societies & Public Libraries** – Family files, funeral programs, cemetery indexes, community history
- **University Archives (UK, WKU, EKU)** – Plantation papers, personal collections, county materials
- **Kentucky African American Heritage Commission (KAAHC)** – Statewide heritage preservation
- **National Archives (NARA)** – USCT files, Freedmen's Bureau records, labor contracts
- **Library of Congress** – WPA narratives, photographs, manuscripts

Relevant Books:

- *Black Genealogy* by Charles Blockson
- *Black Genesis* by James Rose and Alice Eicholz