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Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives

Kentucky Slave Records

Kentucky Slavery Timeline:

1775–1792 – Enslaved people are brought to Kentucky while it is part of Virginia.

1792 – Kentucky becomes a state and legalizes slavery in its first constitution.

1800s – Slavery expands, especially in central Kentucky.

1802- Slave Patrols are created by law to control enslaved people's movements.

1833 – Kentucky bans the importation of slaves for sale, but not slavery itself.

1830s–1850s – Antislavery efforts grow, but the slave trade continues.

1850 – New constitution further protects slavery and restricts emancipation.

1861–1865 – Kentucky stays in the Union; slavery continues during the Civil War.

1863 – Emancipation Proclamation takes effect but doesn't apply to Kentucky.

December 6, 1865 – Slavery ends with the ratification of the 13th Amendment by three-fourths of the US States.

1976 – Kentucky ratifies the 13th Amendment—111 years after it became law.

Background:

Slavery was deeply rooted in Kentucky's early history. As settlers moved westward, they brought enslaved African Americans with them, especially from Virginia and North Carolina. Though Kentucky stayed in the Union during the Civil War, it remained a slaveholding state, and slavery was legal until the end of 1865. Enslaved people in Kentucky worked in agriculture, domestic service, skilled trades, and more. Because emancipation came later than in many other places, records related to slavery—such as wills, tax lists, and court documents—can be found throughout the 19th century. These records are essential for tracing the lives of enslaved individuals and understanding the legacy of slavery in the state.

Records & Access:

Federal Records:

- 1850 & 1860 Federal Slave Schedules

- Freedmen's Bureau Records (including school reports, teacher lists, deposit lists, and correspondence)
- WPA Records

County-Level Records:

- Vital Records (recorded under the slaveholder's name)
- Deed Books (slave sales and chattel mortgages)
- Estate Inventories (often list enslaved individuals by name)
- Wills
- Importation Lists of Enslaved People
- Dower-Slave Lists (record enslaved individuals allocated to a widow as part of her legal right to a portion of her deceased husband's estate)
- Circuit Court Records (civil and criminal cases involving enslaved individuals)
- Post–Civil War Records (including marriage registers, indenture agreements, and apprenticeship agreements documenting the lives of formerly enslaved individuals)

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:

Consider contacting the following institutions for more information when researching slave records in Kentucky:

- **Kentucky Historical Society (KHS)**
  Located in Frankfort, KHS holds manuscripts, church records, and oral histories. Its library and exhibits support African American historical research.
- **Local Historical Societies & Public Libraries**
  These often maintain family files, funeral programs, local newspapers, and cemetery indexes. Staff may offer valuable regional research assistance.
- **University Archives**
  Archives at the University of Kentucky (UK), Western Kentucky University (WKU), and Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) may include plantation records, personal papers, and county collections referencing enslaved individuals.
- **Kentucky African American Heritage Commission (KAAHC)**
  Promotes the preservation of African American historic sites and supports local heritage projects throughout Kentucky.
- **National Archives (NARA) & Library of Congress**
  NARA holds Freedmen's Bureau records, U.S. Colored Troops files, and labor contracts—some digitized via NARA or FamilySearch. The Library of Congress houses WPA slave narratives & more, available here: https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection.