African-American Genealogy Resource Guide

The Georgia Historical Society (GHS) Research Center holds a vast collection of material useful to genealogists or anyone conducting family history research. Resources such as the U.S. census, vital records, tax records, military records, cemetery records, and newspapers are some of the most commonly used material, but keep in mind that information about ancestors can be found in many other places. Researchers will find a broad collection of useful resources for the entire state of Georgia – as well as other southern states.

This is not an exhaustive list of all GHS genealogy resources. It is designed to serve as an introduction and to identify several categories of resources. For specific titles and shelf locations, as well as to identify additional resources, we suggest you search our Research Center catalogs for other archival collections, books, pamphlets, and serials related to African-American genealogy (www.georgiahistory.com) or ask the reference staff for further information.

Published Resources: GHS’s Main Collection of books includes resources that provide instruction in African-American genealogy research. For additional titles please search our Research Center Catalog.


*Immigrants to Liberia, 1865-1904: An Alphabetical Listing* by Peter D. Murdza, Jr (1975). CS1728 .A1 M8. This work is the second in a series of publications by the Liberian Studies Association in America of data describing over fifteen thousand African-Americans who immigrated to Liberia post-Civil War 1865-1899 under the auspices of the American Colonization Society. The contents provide rolls containing vital information of immigrants such as name, family position, religion, place of residence, ship of departure, and destination.


Ancestry.com:
GHS subscribes to Ancestry.com which is available for use in the Research Center. Ancestry.com is a resource for a variety of genealogical information including vital records, census records, military records, immigration records, and tax records, for example:

*Georgia Property Tax Digests, 1793-1892.* This resource is located in Ancestry.com and allows researchers to locate an ancestor by county, where other important records may also be located (note, the digests list taxes according to where property was owned rather than where the payee lived). The digests don’t often indicate family relationships, but they do offer details about a taxpayer and his (or her) estate. Free persons of color were logged separately on a one-page form that recorded: name of freeman, name of employer, polls, acres (and location) value of land, value of city or town property, personal property, household items, stock, tools, and merchandise.

Census Records: United States Census records are available for Georgia and other southern states for the years 1790 (reconstructed), 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1930. The Georgia federal censuses for 1790, 1800, and 1810 were destroyed by fire. Records are available in print, on microfilm, or by using Ancestry.com. Georgia county census indices are also available at the Research Center.

Before 1865, census material pertaining to slaves is available in the form of United States Census Slave Schedules, as well as the United States Census Mortality Schedule. For free persons of color, information is available in the United States Census.

*Georgia Slave Schedule Index (1850, 1860):* These schedules include registers of alphabetical names listed in the original record, the county from which the record comes, state name, and city. Some materials are available on microfilm. See reference staff for assistance.

Vertical Files: GHS’s Genealogy and Biographical vertical files contain miscellaneous genealogical information, including family trees, Bible records, county cemetery indices, unpublished family histories, newspaper clippings, research notes, and bibliographies. Subject vertical files cover a variety of subjects relating to African-American history (focused on Chatham County) including: Civil Rights, race relations, economic conditions, education, holidays, religion, societies and clubs, the NAACP, slavery, and African-American suffrage. Indices to the vertical files are available in the Research Center. See reference staff for assistance.

Vital Records: Georgia did not keep a statewide official registry of births or deaths until 1919, or official marriage records until 1805. GHS has some published records of births, deaths, and marriages for Chatham County that predate 1919, as well as records, abstracts, and indices from other counties. GHS also holds the Chatham County Health Department death cards (MS 1712), 1803-1893, and Chatham County Coroner’s Inquests (MS 5125), 1845, 1877-1965. Researchers should search the Research Center Catalog for published county records. GHS also has an index of Georgia death certificates, 1919-1994, on microfiche.

The City of Savannah Research Library and Municipal Archives holds original Savannah-Chatham County vital records that predate 1919; the Georgia Archives in Morrow also
holds microfilm copies of some county records prior to 1919. Certified copies of vital records after 1919 can be obtained either from the Georgia Department of Human Resources or the county where the event occurred. Ancestry.com is also a resource for vital records.

Cemetery Indices: GHS has printed indices for the four large Savannah cemeteries, as well as records from cemeteries from numerous other counties. Researchers should search the Research Center Catalog to identify these items.

African-American Cemeteries Newspaper Article Notebook
This resource is located with GHS’s Ward Notebooks (see reference staff for assistance). This notebook contains newspaper articles relating to Laurel Grove Cemetery in Savannah as well as selected obituaries as early as 1818 up until 1998. This resource also contains a short index of newspaper articles in the Savannah Morning News from 1818–2000 referencing Laurel Grove South.

Laurel Grove South
Historically separated from the white Laurel Grove-North Cemetery in 1853, Laurel Grove South consists of four acres set aside at Laurel Grove Cemetery for African-American burials; many graves were moved from an earlier African-American cemetery. In 1857, an additional 11 acres were reserved. In 1859 the city council increased the size of Laurel Grove South to 30 acres. Tombstones range from small markers with little or no ornamentation, to monumental markers with elaborately carved figures. Inscriptions on many of the tombstones record African-American history not included in written histories of the region. For grave listings see Laurel Grove Cemetery General Index F294.S2 L282 1993 or the City of Savannah Burial Information System (see listing of Other Resources at the end of this document).

Savannah Area Neighborhood Documentation Resources: GHS’s Main Collection of books includes resources that provide neighborhood documentation and cultural history, including the items below. Maps also provide information about the geographical location and size of neighborhoods. Researchers should search the Research Center Catalog to identify other items or see reference staff for assistance.


**City Directories:** Savannah City Directories are available in hardcopy and on microfiche for most years from 1848 to 2001. Information can include name, name of spouse, occupation, and work and home address. Early city directories are available on microfiche for Atlanta, Augusta, Columbus, and Charleston, South Carolina. Researchers searching for African-American households and businesses should be advised that early to mid-20th century directories included separate listings for “Whites” and African-Americans. African-American sections are titled with period racial terminology.

**Land and Tax Records:** These include print, microfilm, and manuscript sources from Savannah, Chatham County, and other Georgia counties. Researchers should search the Research Center Catalog or Archival Collections Finding Aid Database to identify these items. Ancestry.com is also a source for land and tax records.

**Newspapers:** Georgia and Savannah-area newspapers from 1763 to the present are available on microfilm. Indices are available for Savannah newspapers for the periods 1763-1845, 1850-1891, 1891-1895 on microfilm, and June 1929-1985. Please note: there is no index for the years 1895-1929. Newspapers often ran advertisements for the sale and recapture of enslaved people before 1865.

**Church Records:** There are a variety of church records available in archival collections searchable by denomination, geographic location, and under the subject heading “African American Churches”. Researchers should be advised that many church congregations in Georgia consisted of both Black and White members. Church minutes often list members to include race and or legal status (free/enslaved). Researchers should consult the Research Center Catalog or Archival Collections Finding Aid Database to identify these items.

**Wills:** GHS holds few original wills, but we have several volumes of will abstracts and indices from various counties. The ownership of enslaved people was often transferred from one generation to the next in wills. GHS’s Main Collection contains several books of will abstracts. Researchers should conduct an Advanced Search in the Research Center Catalog with the subject term “Wills” and county name as a keyword or other identifying information to search these items.

**Archival Collections:**
Please see GHS’s African-American Collections Resource Guide for additional listings of archival collections containing slave bill of sales, plantation journals, correspondence, pamphlets, photographs, scrapbooks, ship manifests, and other materials or search the Archival Collections Finding Aid Database. Search the Digital Image Catalog for photographs and other archival materials that have been digitized.

Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands records, MS 5915 (1865-1869). This collection contains photocopies of letters and lists from the Bureau of Refugee, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands' branch in Savannah, Georgia from 1865 to 1869. These records detail the efforts of this agency to assist the newly freed slaves throughout coastal Georgia including Chatham County, McIntosh County, Glynn County, Liberty County,
Ossabaw Island, and St. Catherine's Island. The originals of these documents may be accessed at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Chatham County (Ga) records, Series 1: Board of Registers, 5125 BR (1904–1959, 563 volumes). This collection contains voter oath books containing oaths signed by residents of Chatham County affirming that they were qualified to vote in that county. Each voter wrote their name, district, ward of residence, address, occupation, age, and on most forms from 1931-1949, date of birth. Books are arranged first chronologically and then by race, voting district, and finally alphabetically, by surname. Please include these four components when requesting voter oath books.

City of Savannah (Ga) records, Series 1: Clerk of City Council, 5600CL-130 (1837–1864). This collection contains the Registers of Free Persons of Color on microfilm. According to a city ordinance of 1839, owners of slaves and guardians of free persons of color were required to register and obtain badges from the clerk of council before hiring out or permitting the employment of their charges. The collection contains two volumes of information which includes name, place of birth, date of arrival, occupation, name of guardian, and date appointed.

Georgia Infirmary records, MS 0301 (1833–1973). The Georgia Infirmary records contain minute books, patient registers, birth records, and miscellaneous administrative materials. The minute books (5 volumes), January 15, 1833–October 10, 1960, contain minutes, treasurer reports, resolutions, and newspaper clippings. Patient registers (13 volumes) contain the names, addresses, date of admission, date of discharge, age, nativity, occupation, diagnosis, doctor, births, and deaths of patients admitted to the hospital from 1911 to 1973. Birth records are contained in one volume that dates from 1945 to 1956.

Victor G. Schreck collection of Chatham County property records, MS 1906 (1730s–1920s). This collection contains chains of title prepared by Lawyers Association of Savannah, abstracts of title, court proceedings, correspondence, marriage settlements, wills, and other records related to property in Chatham County, Georgia. The records were collected by Victor G. Schreck when preparing a history of Chatham County land records.

Other Resources:
- Digital Public Library of America: Digitized archival collections from around the nation, including African-American collections. http://dp.la/
- Umbra: Digitized African-American archival collections from around the nation. https://www.umbrasearch.org/