

African-American Research at the New Jersey State Archives

African-Americans have a long history in New Jersey. African-Americans were in New Jersey as slaves starting in the 17th Century.

In the colonial era and the early history of the state, a majority of the African-Americans living in New Jersey were enslaved. According to the 1790 Census, 79% of the African-Americans in New Jersey were slaves. Slaves appear in wills and inventories of owners throughout this period.

In 1804, a law was passed allowing for the abolition of slavery. It was a gradual process. Children of slaves had their births recorded by each of the County Clerks. Once they reached the specified age they received their freedom. By the 1860 Census there were only 18 slaves in New Jersey.

New Jersey was a destination for many during the Great Migration of African-Americans from the South during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. By the 1930 Census, there are many African-Americans not born in New Jersey. By 2010, African-Americans made up over 14.8% of New Jersey's population.

Undertaking African-American research in New Jersey is very similar to non-African American family research. Many of the record sets utilized are the same. Family researchers face many of the same challenges as other researchers, such as the non-reporting of events or the misspelling of names.

Undertaking research into an African-American family who lived in New Jersey may take you back to slavery in the early days of New Jersey, to the immigrant experience of migrants from the Caribbean, or draw you to the Southern United States with individuals who moved North as part of the Great Migration in the 20th Century.

Types of records that will indicate race

Vital Records:

May 1, 1848- May 31, 1878

- Originals owned by the New Jersey State Archives
- Individual entries on large ledger pages returned to the state by local municipalities
- No designated space to indicate race
- Race is indicated as a notation above a name and normally as “Col” or “Col’d” for colored

June 1, 1878 – December 31, 1922 for births and June 1, 1878 – December 31, 1940 for marriages and deaths

- Originals owned by New Jersey State Archives
- Individual certificates for birth, marriage or death
- Designated space to indicate race (not always filled in)

Post January 1, 1923 births or 1941 for marriages and deaths

- Originals owned by the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services
- Individual certificates for birth, marriage or death
- Designated space to indicate race (not always filled in)

The New Jersey State Archives has the following for in-person research:

- Births – May 1, 1848 to December 31, 1923
- Marriages – May 1, 1848 to December 31, 1949
- Deaths – May 1, 1848 to December 31, 1962

Census Records:

Federal Census:

- Full schedules are available from 1830 – 1880 and 1900 – 1950 [the full schedule for 1890 was destroyed]
- Race is always indicated
- The 1830 and 1840 Censuses only list the head of household’s name, but there are columns for free blacks and slaves
- 1850 Census is the first to list everyone in the household as well as giving places of birth and ages
- More questions are asked as you move forward in time (i.e. in 1880 the census asks for the first time where the individuals mother and father were born, 1900 gives month and year of birth)
- Race can be given as:
 - B or Black
 - M or Mulatto
 - C or Colored
 - Neg or Negro
 - African

Types of records that will indicate race

State Census:

- Taken every 10 years on years ending with a 5 from 1855 to 1915
- First complete census is 1885 – previous years have complete counties missing
- Does indicate race
- Indexed on-line
 - Searchable databases on www.ancestry.com [pay] and www.familysearch.org [free]
 - Atlantic City and Passaic County 1885 are available on our website www.archives.nj.gov
 - 1875 Monmouth and Hunterdon Counties indexes are available in our search room
 - 1885 Camden County (not Camden City) index is available in our search room
 - 1895 Hunterdon County has been published

Military:

- Revolutionary War
 - Very few records
 - A researcher needs the name of the soldier to find them.
 - Most slaves are listed without a surname
- Civil War
 - There are more records
 - New Jersey did not support an African-American regiment
 - Men who served went out of state and joined the United States Colored Troops
 - Received federal pensions just like white troops
 - USCT Service Files have been scanned are available on our web site
- World War I
 - A few men from New Jersey served and are listed in the World War I Unofficial Service Cards
 - Information cards and some photographs of soldiers who died during the war are in our collection. Scans are available on our web site www.archives.nj.gov
 - World War I Draft Registrations are indexed on www.ancestry.com or available from the Church of Latter Day Saints
- World War II
 - Most records are still unavailable unless requested by the soldier or a direct descendant from the National Archives in St. Louis, MO [www.archives.gov]
 - World War II Draft Registration cards for older men are available on www.ancestry.com

Types of records that will indicate race

Other:

- Prison records
 - The Archives holds the inmate registers for the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton from ca. 1898 to the 1960s
- Newspapers
- Some court records
 - Naturalizations will give a physical description along with a place of birth after September 1906

Slavery Related Records:

- Manumissions - legal recording with the local County Clerk of when a slave is freed by an owner
 - The Archives has the original records for:
 - Burlington County Book B of Manumissions (1820-1853)
 - Essex County Book A of Manumissions (1804-1817)
 - Hunterdon County loose manumissions (1788-1836) [57 files] *scanned on our web site*
 - Sussex County loose manumissions (1802-1838) [5 items]
 - The Archives has on microfilm:
 - Bergen County manumissions (1804-1841)
 - Burlington Deeds, Book A (1785-1788) has manumissions recorded in it
 - Gloucester County manumissions (1788-1826)
 - Middlesex County manumissions (1800-1825)
 - Salem County manumissions (1800-1841)
 - Somerset County manumissions (1823-1862)
- Records of the births of slaves as a result of the 1804 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery
 - The Archives has the original records for:
 - Burlington County (1804-1826) [15 items]
 - Essex County (1804-1843)
 - Hunterdon County (1804-1835) *scanned on our web site* www.archives.nj.gov
 - Somerset County (1805-1830) [5 items]
 - Sussex County (1801-1835) [15 items]
 - The Archives has on microfilm:
 - Bergen County (1804-1846)
 - Salem County (1800-1841)
- Court records
 - Cases in the Supreme Court relating to ownership of slaves
 - Currently being indexed. What has been indexed is searchable on our web site www.archives.nj.gov
- Wills and Inventories of estates of slave owners
 - Slaves can be given to family members or freed in wills
 - Listed in inventories as property with a monetary value assigned

Records that do not indicate race

Wills:

- The New Jersey State Archives has the all the original wills from the 1660s to 1952
- We also have all the original inventories from the 1660s to 1900. Inventories from 1901-1952 were not consistently filed with the state.
- Additional paperwork related to estates is filed with each County Surrogate

Deeds:

- Colonial era deeds can be found at the Archives
- Deeds from 1785 to the present are filed with the county in which the property is located

Any of the records discussed before!

Selected Published Resources

Below is a short list of published original records for New Jersey.

Bergen County Clerk's Office, *Book of Black Births in Bergen County, New Jersey between 1804 and 1844 as Recorded in the Bergen County Clerk's Office in Hackensack* (1999)

Historical Records Survey, *Transcriptions of Early Records of New Jersey: Gloucester County Series* (1940)

Hodges, Graham Russell, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County New Jersey 1665-1865* (1997)

Mitros, David, *Slave Records of Morris County, New Jersey 1756-1841* (2nd edition, 2002)

Moss, George H. Jr., *Manumission Book of Monmouth County, New Jersey (1791-1844)* (1992)

Moss, George H. Jr., *Black Birth Book of Monmouth County, New Jersey (1804-1848)* (1989)

Price, Clement Alexander, *Freedom Papers 1776-1781* (1984) [Burlington County related]