

African American Genealogy Research
in Washington County, Tennessee
by
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With the popularity of DNA kits, more-and-more people are researching their roots. For African Americans, the research can be frustrating because early documents, including the U.S. Census Reports included only free individuals. This meant that slaves were not listed in the U. S. Census Reports until slavery ended in 1865. The U. S. Census Report of 1870 and afterwards includes all people. But if your family lived in the Buffalo Ridge District of Jonesboro, Washington County, Tennessee in 1860, you have a research bonus. Mr. William Crouch recorded the Census for Buffalo Ridge that year, but he did not follow the guidelines to document only free individuals. Instead, he listed white, black and free black individuals. The black individuals were later crossed out, but the information is still visible and provides the researcher with the name, age, gender, profession, and place of birth of enslaved individuals.

I began my family research because of a story my cousin related about my 3rd great grandmother who was a slave. I felt the story had been exaggerated through the years and I made it my goal to prove it false. Instead, I found that the story had a lot of nuggets of truth. That experience opened my mind and has led me to search for more about my family. Talking to family members, especially elders, can be your most valuable source of information. Listen and record their stories. Make copies of family photos and pages of family Bibles. Be sure to record the names of everyone in photos and ask if unusual names are nick names.

The Washington County TNGenWEB provides a wealth of information free of charge at <http://tngenweb.org/washington/>. The Marriage Index is information transcribed from marriage applications. Since Race was requested, Colored or Black was included on the applications. This designation will aid you in identifying your relatives since a lot of people of all races share the same name. Determining the maiden name of females on your family tree can be very difficult. The Marriage Index is a very helpful source for this information.

Another helpful source on the TNGenWEB is Obituaries. Listings from the Jonesboro Herald-Tribune are included from 1869-1871. The Comet, Johnson City, Tennessee includes listings from 1884-1909. The Washington County Tennessee Obituary Index is an alphabetical listing of obituaries contributed by individuals. Current obituaries are available on the websites of some funeral homes in the area. Birchette Mortuary of Johnson City services a large portion of the African American community. Their website at <https://www.birchettemortuary.com> includes obituaries of individuals serviced by the mortuary from 2015 to present.

The Watauga Association of Genealogists—Northern Tennessee (WAGS) has a listing of cemeteries in Washington County on the TNGenWEB. This valuable source includes the names of individuals buried in each cemetery and in some instances additional information about the deceased and the family is included. Even though African Americans are now buried in all cemeteries; West Lawn Cemetery, Johnson City and College Hill Cemetery, Jonesborough were the primary sources of burial for most African Americans before the area was integrated.

The most recent source for research in Washington County is the Washington County, TN Department of Records Management and Archives located at 103 West Main St., Jonesborough. An index to

Washington County wills and County Records from 1771 to the mid-20th Century are housed at this location. Consult the website at <https://wctnarchives.org/> for a complete list of records and digital collections available.

Some websites to aid your online research are: Family Search at <https://www.familysearch.org>; Ancestry at <https://www.ancestry.com>; and My Heritage at <https://myheritage.com>. Some sites are fee based but are provided free at libraries.

So even though researching your African American roots can be difficult, there are sources available to help. In Washington County, Tennessee the Jonesborough Genealogical Society and the Watauga Association of Genealogists Northeast Tennessee have members who are very helpful.