

Poor & Landless Ancestors

A Beginner's Guide from the Heritage Research Center

C O U R T E S Y O F T H E H I G H P O I N T P U B L I C L I B R A R Y

WHAT YOU'LL FIND WITHIN:

- Problems, problems
- A warning to the casual
- Establishing neighborhood
- Become a name collector
- Vital statistics
- Records rich in poverty
- Picking up the pieces

HERITAGE RESEARCH CENTER

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MON: 9:00–6:00
TUE-THU: 9:00–8:00
FRI: 9:00–6:00
SAT: 9:00–1:00,
2:00–6:00
SUN: CLOSED

THE PROBLEM WITH POVERTY.

Poverty is a big problem in family history research. In fact, most of the dead ends people have brought to us over the years can be attributed to ancestral poverty. Of course, people don't seek out professionals when the answers are readily available to them, and where poor forebears are concerned, answers are anything but easy to discover!

The issue boils down to this. Many of the records that we appeal to as a matter of course in our family research don't pertain to those who are without property. These include things like wills and estate records, deeds, bills of sale,



and tax lists. There are other kinds of records that apply to poor people, just as they do to others, but are, nevertheless, seriously hampered by the characteristics of poverty.

For instance, in North Carolina, poor people had to follow procedures just like anyone else to get married, but in the period before 1868, they often skipped the marriage bond process because they

couldn't afford the fees involved. They merely had a local parson declare the banns in church. This left no public record of any kind and many churches kept no marriage records.

Poor people often moved around a lot and lived in backwater places on other people's lands. As a result, they were frequently missed in census records. They often purposefully gave misinformation to officials because they mistrusted them. Many were illiterate or nearly so, and left few personal records of any kind (letters, Bible records, etc.). Most couldn't even afford gravestones. And this is just for starters.

A WARNING TO THE CASUAL

There is one thing you need to ask yourself before you even get started trying to uncover the parentage or the maiden name of a poor ancestor. Do I have what it takes to get this job done?

The main thing you need to accept is that you are not going to be able to solve the problem overnight. In fact, it may take many years for you even to put together a plausible theory.

Decide right now that your answers are not going to be on the Internet. Much of the work will involve leafing through many pages of unindexed records. Sometimes that will require traveling to a distant archive, not once, but many times. Sometimes, it will involve ordering the records on microfilm and sitting whole days in front of a reader, visually scanning pages for an ancestor's name. Are

you patient enough for that kind of process? Are you committed enough not to give up? Are you willing to accept that you may never be able to do more than build a good case about the identity of your ancestor? Can you live with a conclusion that can't be proved beyond a reasonable doubt? This is absolutely not the kind of research a beginner should undertake!

PLACING YOUR ANCESTOR

One tactic that will serve you well in tracing your poor ancestors is trying to localize them to a particular area — a particular county, a particular township, a particular church community or neighborhood. The fact that they didn't own land complicates this problem. Land is easy to trace through deed research. People who live on other people's property as tenants or laborers are not. Very few land-related records mention these folks. Occasionally, they may appear in a deed incidentally, perhaps as a witness. They may even be identified as the person living on a tract of land that is sold. But because they didn't own it, they won't be buying or selling. Therefore, they won't appear in the official grantee or grantor indexes. Unless the deeds have been abstracted and indexed or unless you are willing to look through entire deed books

page by page, reading each deed, you won't chance upon mentions of this kind.

There are documents that appear in deed books (or even in their own separate volumes) called deeds of trust, crop liens, or chattel mortgages. People could use moveable property like household goods, tools, and livestock to secure loans of cash, seed, or equipment. They could promise part of their crops in exchange for the use of land. Sometimes these records are not indexed in the grantor/grantee indexes we mentioned because they involve personal property not real property (land). But they are useful and the hand-written indexes in the individual deed books themselves (usually the first or last few pages) usually include these instruments. However, many such agree-

ments were never recorded.

Census records and tax lists, if not alphabetical, are usually organized geographically. You can place your ancestor often by looking at land-owning neighbors in these lists and determining where their land was located through deed lookups. Although the landless did not pay land taxes, they often did pay levies on males over sixteen called **poll taxes**. All free persons of color, whether male or female, also had to pay poll taxes. Remember that tax lists were made yearly. Each person assigned to take a list would return the values due from those living in their district. The sheriff would also report people who didn't pay taxes within the various districts—known as insolvents. Most tax lists do not survive, but some counties have more complete sets than others. Next, we'll explore why geography is so important in this process.

STAY COMMUNITY-FOCUSED

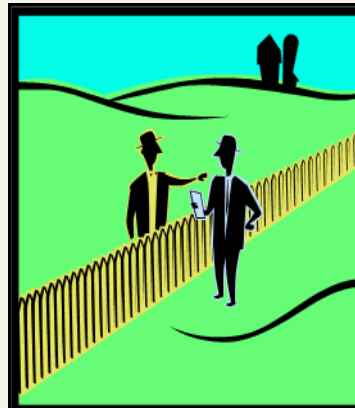
Once you've pinpointed the neighborhood and the names of those who lived there over the same years your ancestor did, the next step is to study the community as a whole. Naturally, you will want to collect information on all the people who have the same last name as your ancestor in that community. Some of them could well be relatives. Others may not be. But by knowing them better, you'll eventually be able to separate those who may be related to you from those who are not. Don't exclude anyone. The point is, at this stage in the process, you can't safely say who is related to you and who isn't.

You'll also want to ask yourself some basic questions about the community. What were the churches in the vicinity at that time? Did they keep records? If so, do they survive today? Usually, church records are either in a state archive, a church-related archive, or they may still belong to the church, if it still exists. Many have been

lost and some sects were not very good at keeping records. But the poor went to church like everyone else, so they are likely to appear.

Another question might be, who were the largest landowners in the community? Who was the chief money lender? Who were the distillers, merchants, peddlers, blacksmiths, saddlers, ministers, lawyers, wagonwrights, etc.? Some of these folks were likely to have had an interaction with your ancestor at some point. You can find evidence of this in their personal accounts, letters or diaries, if such exist.

In terms of public records, you might look for the estate files of people who died in the neighborhood. These will often mention outstanding debts that were due at the time the person passed away. Your ancestor could have owed the estate money. They often contain records of the sales of the personal goods belonging to deceased persons at public auc-



tion complete with lists of buyers. People in the neighborhood, rich, poor and in-between, flocked to these sales to buy second-hand goods. Perhaps you'll discover that your ancestor bought personal items on the same day as someone with the same surname or someone who married into it. These purchasers may have come to the sale together. They may be related!

Studying other documents related to people living in the community may yield dividends. Your ancestor may have been

summoned to court to give testimony in a neighbor's case. He may have witnessed one of his deeds or helped to bear the chain in measuring out a land grant. You'll never know unless you check. The records you need are often not indexed by your ancestor's name, but by those of his neighbors — if, indeed, they are indexed at all.

The key point is you cannot expect to focus exclusively on your ancestor's name or even just on his family name if you expect to find a significant number of records relating to him. What you'll come up with eventually is a set of names with which your ancestor is associated. Some of those people will be his kin — perhaps through his father, but also through his mother or through his spouse or the marriages of his children. Always keep your eyes on the community as a whole!

VITALLY IMPORTANT

One of the best sources for research about the impoverished and landless is vital records: particularly records of marriage, divorce and death. Death certificates are usually restricted to the 20th century in the Southeast with the exception of Virginia and Kentucky. But early 20th century records can tell you a great deal about folks who lived in the mid 19th century. Death dates, not found in cemeteries, may be gleaned here. Late 19th century marriage licenses

are equally revealing and may open up early 19th century information about parents of bride or groom. Pay particular attention to places of birth and the names of parents cited on these documents, including the mother's maiden name. Though not to be accepted uncritically, their witness is important in uncovering otherwise undocumented parentage and maternal surnames. For slave research, searching marriage licenses of the late 19th century and death certifi-



cates of the early 20th is an essential beginning. Remember to look for all the people in the neighborhood of the same surname and race and take meticulous notes on each discovery. Records of family breakdown are equally important

when it comes to the poor and landless. Lack of means often placed a strain on family life. If bastardy (documenting illegitimate children) or apprentice records exist, search them for your surname. If divorce records have survived (usually granted by legislatures or superior courts), scan the list of those granted. These could be a goldmine for you. I, for instance, once found a whole list of potential relatives signing the petition for divorce of a suspected ancestor in support of the facts he alleged against his wife.

RECORDS RICH IN POVERTY

While many property-based public records exclude the poor, there are other records which are likely to contain references to them.

In North Carolina, and many other states, each county made provisions to collect special taxes and distribute the proceeds for the upkeep of the poor and destitute. Most often these were people who were afflicted in some way, elderly and abandoned individuals (including abandoned slaves), destitute mothers and their often, illegitimate, children, mentally and physically challenged individuals, etc. Sometimes the money was given directly to the pauper for his own support, but sometimes it was allowed to a family member or an unrelated caretaker. Other poor people actually lived in the poor house. The

records of the **wardens of the poor** are an obvious place to extend your research.

Another common place to find poor young men in particular (as well as others in their age category) are the **road records** of a county. All able-bodied young men living near a road could be assigned to its upkeep. Tracing the workers on the roads from year to year either in the court minutes or in loose road records can provide the names of related individuals, if carefully studied.

Insolvency records are also a treasure trove. People who couldn't pay their debts were often clapped into jail. They had to declare their property and notify their creditors, in order to be released. These records are obviously full of poor

and landless people. Sometimes, witnesses to these records are family members.

Finally, **court papers** (civil and criminal) are a crucial source. Always check coroner's inquests to see if poor ancestors met an untimely death. Check civil papers to see if they were sued for not paying their debts promptly. Check criminal records because the poor were more likely to be prosecuted for criminal activity. The witnesses and securities in these documents provide vital clues. Illegitimacy was commonly prosecuted in poor families because the counties feared the children would become a charge on the public coffers.

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PICKING UP THE PIECES

In the end, dealing with poor and landless ancestors can be a lot like digging up remnants of ancient civilizations and trying to describe what they were like from shards of pottery or rusted tools or looking to reconstruct whole dinosaurs from fragments of dinosaur bone. You are very *unlikely* to find records that flatly state A was the son of B, or that the wife of A was the daughter of C.

What you end up with instead is a large collection of mentions of your ancestors taken from different sets of records across broad spans of time. You'll also have found many mentions of people from the same area who may or may not be related to your ancestor. The best of these records are the ones that mention your known grandparent in conjunction with someone you suspect may be related to him, perhaps because that person married into the same family or shared the same surname. Perhaps you suspect him or her because your ancestor named a child the same given name as this older person.

You may wish to rate the significance of the accumulated evidence indicating that each suspected person is indeed related. You might sort each suspected person into (A) "certainly related," (B) "probably related," (C) "possibly related" and (D) "definitely not related" categories. Of course, the more situations in which you find the

two people together, the more likely it is that you've found a pattern and that they are indeed related. You should take into account whether the person fits into the correct age category to make him the father, brother, or brother-in-law of your ancestor. Does he share some of the same social characteristics? All of that can strengthen the certainty of your conclusion.

Constructing a chart, such as the one to the left illustrating connections between potentially related Johnsons of Alamance Co., can help you visualize the connections between people and analyze the evidence you've accumulated. It is possible then for you to construct a theory about how the associated people are related. As you continue to gather more fragments, you can ask whether the new evidence supports your theory or not. If it doesn't, you may need to think of another way to explain the data. It is a lot like forming a theory to explain scientific observations. It is challenging and fun but also time-consuming. Above all, don't give up!

Johnson Family Web of Association

