

Introduction

This guide informs how records in the Caird Library and Archive at the National Maritime Museum can be used to support African Caribbean family history research.

Although maritime records are not usually a starting point for compiling a genealogy, the archive at the National Maritime Museum will enable you to better understand the cultural context of this period, allow you to validate research you may have already carried out and supplement your knowledge.

The formative research for this guide was centred on formerly British colonies in the Caribbean. Although the collection does feature documents relating to former Dutch and French colonies, these are fewer in number in comparison to material relating to former British colonies.

This is a working document that may change over time as further research is carried out. We have consulted with researchers and experts from the African Caribbean community in forming this guide. If you wish to suggest an amendment or addition to the guide please we would be delighted to hear from you.

Context of period

The majority of our material from the 1700s and 1800s relating to the Caribbean is linked to the transatlantic slave trade.

Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, between the 1500s and 1800s, saw the kidnapping and trafficking of millions of African people to the Americas and the Caribbean. People were sold into slavery, mainly to carry out unpaid labour on plantations in brutal conditions.

Chattel slavery, as adopted in Europe, the Americas and Caribbean, meant that enslaved people were treated as commodities that could be traded, sold and renamed according to the wishes of their owners across generations.

Due to the lack of recorded information about exactly who these people were, where they came from and where they went, it can be challenging for people of African Caribbean heritage to trace their family history and ancestry back from the Caribbean to a particular location in Africa.

This timeline offers a summary of events and British legislation from the late 1600s through to the mid-1800s relating to the transatlantic slave trade. It can be used to offer context to records that you may come across in the Caird Library and Archive.

1672	The Royal African Company is formed to set up military forts and monopolise trade along the West African coast. James, Duke of York (later King James II), is the largest shareholder.	1600 – 1700 Records suggest that approximately 1.9 million Africans are kidnapped and forced aboard ships to
1697	The Trade with Africa Act officially ends the Royal African Company's monopoly over the trade of enslaved peoples.	

	The right of free trade in enslaved peoples is recognised as a fundamental and natural right of Englishmen.	European colonies in the Caribbean, North and South America. Britain traffics almost half a million captive Africans across the Atlantic.*
1713	The Treaty of Utrecht is signed between Spain and Britain. Britain wins control of the Asiento, the contract for trafficking enslaved people from west Africa to Spanish south American and Caribbean colonies, for 30 years.	1701 – 1800 Records suggest that approximately 5.8 million Africans are kidnapped and forced aboard ships to European colonies in the Caribbean, North and South America. Britain traffics approximately 2.3 million captive Africans across the Atlantic.*
1729	Bristol overtakes London as Britain's main slave port with 48 recorded voyages in comparison with London's 29. Ships from Bristol are responsible for trafficking over 15,000 people, just over 53 per cent of total number of people Britain, as a nation is responsible for in 1729. Liverpool has 15 ships involved in the slave trade.	
1739	After years of fighting, a peace treaty is signed with the Maroons, a community of Africans who had escaped from slavers in Jamaica. The treaty acknowledges their freedom and right to self-govern their own land. In return the Maroons agree to capture runaways and support the British government in Jamaica.	
1771	The James Somerset case ruling declares that enslaved people in England cannot be forcibly sent to the Caribbean.	
1772	The opening of the Bridgewater Canal sees Manchester's previously negligible export trade in cotton goods rises inexorably. A third of its business goes to Africa to be exchanged for enslaved people, the rest to the West Indies and North American colonies.	
1783	British Quakers present a petition signed by 300 people for a "bill for the regulation of the African trade" that aims to stop transatlantic slave trade in Parliament.	
1786	The French increase their share of trade in Africa and are perceived as encroaching on British interests. France becomes the second largest trafficker of enslaved people, behind Britain, by 1800.	
1787	The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade formed in London.	
1790	Britain reports 250,000 people enslaved in Jamaica. Jamaica produces 60,000 tonnes of sugar for Britain.	
1793	Toussaint Louverture leads the Haitian Revolution in the French colony St Domingue. Britain attempts to invade St Domingue during the revolution but fails. St-Domingue is now the principal source of sugar for continental Europe.	
1796	Liverpool now controls 70 per cent of the British slave trade and 40 per cent off the whole European slave trade.	
1797	Britain reports 300,000 people enslaved in Jamaica.	

1800	The British economy is now dependent on goods produced by enslaved peoples such as sugar, tobacco, cotton. 60 per cent of all British exports are sent to Africa and America to further support and fuel transatlantic slavery. British ships make approximately 1,340 voyages with 400,000 captives landing in the Americas.	
1806	The population of enslaved peoples in the Caribbean has increased by 25 per cent since 1790. White people in the Caribbean are outnumbered by Africans 1:7.	1801– 1900 Records suggest that approximately 3.2 million are kidnapped and forced aboard ships to European colonies in the Caribbean, North and South America. Britain traffics approximately 280,000 captive Africans across the Atlantic ocean.
1807	The Abolition of the Slave Trade Act makes it illegal to engage in the trade of enslaved peoples throughout British Colonies. A Royal Navy squadron is stationed off the west African coast to intercept and capture slaving vessels. A majority of the captive Africans found on-board these vessels are taken to, and left in, Sierra Leone.	
1813	A slave register is introduced to Trinidad as an experiment. The slave registration order states that any enslaved person not registered is to be considered free.	
1815	A slave register is introduced to Saint Lucia and Mauritius. William Wilberforce, abolitionist campaigner and MP, introduces a bill to impose the registration system on all the colonies.	
1817	Slave registers are introduced to the majority of British colonies.	
1823	Following the failure of the Demerara uprising in British Guiana, 200 resistance fighters are beheaded as a warning and deterrent to enslaved people.	
1831	Samuel Sharpe, an enslaved Baptist deacon, leads an uprising in Jamaica. Over 200 plantations are attacked causing over £1,000,000 worth of damage.	
1833	A reformed parliament votes for the Slave Emancipation Act abolishing slavery throughout the British empire	
1834	The Slave Emancipation Act comes into effect. Although legally 'free', people are made to work as apprentices on the lands of European owners for little or no money.	
1838	On 1 August, apprenticeships are abolished. Enslaved people of British colonies are freed from enslavement Asian migration to the Caribbean rises as indentured workers are brought into the region, predominantly from India, and in lesser numbers from China and Indonesia.	
1848	Slavery is abolished in all French territories including Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyana. Denmark ends slavery in all its territories including the Virgin Islands (St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John)	
1863	The Netherlands ends slavery in all its territories.	

*Data from the Trans-Atlantic Slavery Database.

These figures only indicate the number of captive Africans that were forced aboard slaving vessels. These figures do not take into account the people that were smuggled aboard illicitly or those that died during the journey. Nor do these figures highlight those that died in, or on their way to, slave forts along the coast of Africa.

Research parameters and constraints

This section will inform you of some of the constraints you should be aware of when carrying out family history research using the records in the Caird Library and Archive.

Individuals looking to carry out family history research often begin with the following information:

- Geographical location
- Name of a person
- Specified time period

Time periods represented in the collection

The majority of the documents within the collection that can be applied to research into African Caribbean family heritage are from the 1700s and 1800s.

The collection also contains 1915 crew lists that show the names of individuals that served on merchant navy vessels during the period of 1914 and 1915.

The Museum does not currently hold many records relating to the migration of peoples from the Caribbean that took place between 1940 and 1970. Passenger lists and information about the individuals that arrived in the UK during this period can be found in The National Archives.

Geographical locations and forced migration

Enslaved, as well as free people of African descent often lived and worked on plantations in their own designated areas. Plantations are large estates or areas of land where crops are grown or harvested for the purpose of trade and business. It is here that community ties and relationships were often established and maintained.

Enslaved peoples were considered property and were sold as per the wishes of their owners. When this happened, families were split up and uprooted. The person who was sold was forcibly moved to another plantation. Newspaper cuttings have shown that in some cases, entire families were put up for sale together but we do not necessarily have bills of sale relating to these cases and it is not certain whether these families remained together or were split up.

Bills of sales do not indicate whether or not an enslaved person had a family, but do indicate the location/address of the buyer and their respective plantation. Free peoples would also have travelled to find suitable employment across plantations.

The names of plantations and estates may also have changed over time; this however can be cross-referenced via the [UCL Legacies of British Slave Ownership database online](#).

Researchers should be aware of these factors in case they do not find an ancestor or person of interest in a geographical location they had initially expected.

Names

In the case of African Caribbean family history research, surnames can offer an insight into the location and status of an individual as well as the complexities of life on plantations during the period of transatlantic slavery.

Enslaved or freed people of African descent on a plantation would not have necessarily had the same surname across a plantation (that of the slave owner). Some individuals may have kept a name from their previous plantations, adopted their spouse's surname, adopted a new name upon emancipation or kept the surname of their mother or father.

Upon the introduction of slave registers, people who did not already have a surname would have been given the surname of the slave owner.

The spelling of names also may have undergone change throughout generations for a variety of reasons: there may have been an error in documentation; the phonetic spelling of a name may have been given; a choice may have been made by the person to disassociate themselves from their former owners, and many other reasons. Because of this, researchers should be aware that a family name may not be found in its current form.

A majority of the slave registers are digitised and can be accessed on Ancestry.com via the Caird Library and Archive's institutional account.

To better understand what documents in the Caird Library and Archive can be used to support your research, please see the collections document.

Further research and reading lists

Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain – Peter Fryer

A Tree Without Roots: The Guide to Tracing British, African, and Asian Caribbean Ancestry – Paul Crooks

The Family Tree Toolkit: A Comprehensive Guide to Uncovering Your Ancestry and Researching Genealogy – Kenyatta D. Berry

Tracing your Caribbean Ancestors: A National Archives Guide – Guy Grannum

How Europe Underdeveloped Africa – Walter Rodney

Black and British: A Forgotten History – David Olusoga

Useful links:

[National Archives – Family History](#)

[Researching African-Caribbean Family History - BBC](#)

[UCL Legacies of British Slave Ownership](#)

[The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database](#)

[Former British Colonial Dependencies, Slave Registers, 1813-1834](#)

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