

# Consulting the Past Through the Archival Record: A Guide for Episcopal Church Research into the Impact of Slavery on Church Life and African Americans

---

## I. Introduction

The Episcopal Church has been engaged in an historical process of reclaiming its theological and moral compass after years of institutional advantage, ignorance, and complacency in the treatment of African Americans. The 2006 General Convention has asked Church institutions in resolution A123 to take the next step in this journey by initiating a comprehensive program to collect, document, and analyze information relative to the complicity and benefit the Church and its members have derived from slavery and its aftermath. This brief guide offers some direction in approaching how to gather and research the documentation and archival aspects of this task.

There is no single narrative that could encompass the experiences of all enslaved persons, just as there is no one approach to understanding how different communities benefitted from slavery. Researching the connections between your diocese, parish, or school and slavery, therefore, requires an understanding of your community's particular history and a willingness to uncover the archival resources that exist to document these connections.

## II. Measuring the Economic Benefit of Slavery

Slavery existed in many forms throughout colonial and post-colonial American history. Although slave labor is most often associated with the plantation economy of the American South, slaves were held as property and exploited in a variety of different economic and social conditions. Slave labor, for example, was used in domestic situations, in specialized trades, in public works projects, and as day labor. Slavery became so fully integrated into the American and international economy that it would be difficult to find an individual or institution that did not benefit either directly or indirectly from the work of enslaved persons. The following questions are posed to provide researchers differing ways of considering the economic benefits to your diocese or parish from slavery.

- Did the clergy in your parish own slaves? Did pew owners and renters own slaves?
- Were the founders, benefactors, or major donors of your diocese or parish slave owners? Did they generate their wealth through a trade or industries that benefitted from slave labor, the slave trade, or other forms of oppressive labor?
- Did these benefactors establish trust funds that continue to support the diocese or parish?
- Was the income and support of parish clergy tied to their renting or production of glebe lands worked by slaves?
- Were glebe or parish lands leased by the parish to individuals who used slave labor?
- Were the parish church buildings constructed by slave labor?
- Does the church building contain craft work, building materials, or liturgical features and objects that were produced by tradesmen who utilized slaves in their work?
- Did your parish rely on slaves to clean or maintain church buildings, rectories, and grounds?
- Did the Church in your area operate any mission, school, or other educational institution that owned slaves, made use of enslaved labor, or economically disadvantage the descendants of slaves?

## III. Archival Resources

### A. Diocesan and Parish Records

The first place to look for information on your parish's history is in the parish and diocesan archives. If these resources have been kept up, they may provide either direct evidence or indirect clues about the extent of the parish's participation in activities and social circles where slavery was accepted. While the date of

organization (after emancipation) and geographic location (Northern states) of the parish or diocese might seem to eliminate such associations, there were many instances in which the building, supplying, evangelizing, and caring of the community could have taken advantage of slave labor or the disenfranchisement of African Americans and other oppressed people.

Vestry minute books from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century are filled with details about the purchase of materials, source of labor, and contractors and people who built and supplied furnishings. They give detail on glebe lands and their use, and the payment of clergy. Some parishes may still have early cashbooks and journals that will detail these transactions more precisely. Account books will record pew rents from owners of slaves. Reading your standard parish and community histories is helpful as a first step so that you can pick out names and make associations. Wills and trust fund records reveal donor information that can be checked against local biographies to determine how the donor accumulated the funds.

The best source for locating names of benefactors and members is the parish registers. Baptismal records and communicant lists will identify families, often naming slave owners and their slave dependents. Cross referencing a sample of these names with local histories and census records is a reliable way to test the level at which the parish may have benefitted from an segregated environment and slave economy.

Diocesan records are a secondary research layer. Financial and property records will be helpful in identifying donors and other benefactors to diocesan trusts and endowments. Central records (standard parish files and journals) will record the donation of property and buildings, which were often given by wealthy land owners and Northern merchants who benefitted in some way from the commercial slave trade. Standing Committee records will record the status and treatment of parishes and missions, especially those admitted or excluded because of race. Diocesan Journals are standard sources for identifying clergy who can be cross-referenced to census records to ascertain property holdings, income sources and ownership of slaves. The Bishop's annual report will often detail the poor condition and lack of response by the Church to local congregations of those enslaved and the newly emancipated.

Do not overlook the published pamphlets and histories that may be in the parish or diocesan archives, and the local histories that can be found at the public library, and the local and state historical societies. Family histories and genealogies abound and can open up the sources of wealth and human property of prominent donor families.

## **B. Secular Records**

Although there is no single comprehensive source of government information about slavery, in the colonies and states where slavery remained legal, there are several sources of information that document both slave holders and enslaved persons. Public records for your community might be available through municipalities, state government agencies, historical societies, or genealogical libraries. Some of the records that could be useful to your research include:

### **Federal Records**

**Census Records:** Federal census records were compiled every decade beginning in 1790. They include information about each household, and often contain slave counts. Separate slave schedules were produced for the 1850 and 1860 censuses, and organized by the name of the slave holder.

**The Freedman's Bureau:** This federal agency was created in 1865 to assist refugees displaced by the Civil War. Its programs were administered in the former Confederate states, border states, District of Columbia, and Indian Territory. Records vary by district but can include censuses of freed persons and cohabitation registers that legitimized slave marriages.

**Where to locate these resources:** Census data is available through the National Archives, and is often available in state archives, historical societies, and genealogical libraries. Check with a local research

library about the availability of these materials. Freedman's Bureau records might be have been maintained in the district in which the Bureau was operating. Consult your state archives about whether this material exists in a local collection. Some of these records are on deposit in the National Archives. More census data and some Freedman's Bureau material can be accessed through the subscription databases Ancestry Library and Heritage Quest.

### **State and Local Records**

**Court Records:** These records can provide a wealth of historical information, often submitted as forms of evidence in a trial or litigation. Some of the pertinent records available include testimony, court proceedings ("minute" or "order books"), judgments, chancery records, clerk's correspondence, and docket books that can be searched for important names. Evidence submitted can contain property listings, witness accounts, and account books.

**Probate and Property Records:** These records are particularly helpful for researching the economic benefits of slavery. In states where slavery was legal, enslaved persons were treated as property and will be often be documented in property records. Probate records relate to the administration and settlement of an estate by a court. These materials can include wills, appraisals, inventories, estate accounts and audits, estate sales, guardian accounts and bonds, and administrator's and executor's bonds. Land records are a large and important part of government information and include documents like deeds, processioners' returns, plats, and surveys.

**Free Negro and Slave Records:** Slave states often required African Americans who were not enslaved to register with the government. Some of the records that document these communities are freedmen registers, lists, and certificates.

**Tax and Fiscal Records:** Copies of land and personal property tax books and lists of tithable property.

**Vital Statistics:** Municipalities and county records offices hold copies of birth, marriage, and death registers.

**Personal and Family Papers.** Noted benefactors and property owners who were contributors to the parish or diocese may have left family papers with local or state historical society. These papers will often have personal account books and journals that offer a richer level of detail on the relationship of slave and owner.

**Where to locate these resources:** Check with your state archives about the availability of these historical materials. Some local government records might have remained in the custody of county or municipal governments, while others might have been transferred to a state library or archives. Copies of these records might also be available through an historical society or genealogical library. State and local historical societies and the state library will have separate listings of personal and family papers. University and college special collections libraries may also have specialized collections of records relating to slavery. A local city librarian can help you identify these holdings.

### **C. Selected Resources for Archival Research**

The National Archives and Records Administration: [www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov)

The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC 20059

<http://www.howard.edu/Library/moorland-spingarn/default.htm>

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 515 Malcolm X Boulevard, New York, NY 10037-

1801 <http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html>

## V. The Legacies of Segregation and Discrimination

The effects of segregation and discrimination, while apparent in hindsight, can be difficult for many people to fully conceptualize or measure. Bishop William A. Guerry of South Carolina (1908-1928) once stated in regard to the limitations of missionary efforts among African Americans that,

No white man can work effectively or satisfactorily among a race that he can not visit socially. A large part of a Bishop's influence and success comes through social contact with his people. How then can he represent a race or understand their needs unless he can enter their homes and come into personal contact with them? (George F. Bragg, *History of the Afro-American Group*, 1922)

This statement is remarkable in the way that it captures the nuances of life under segregation, a system of social, cultural, and legal barriers that prevented African Americans from full participation in the Episcopal Church and American life. Segregation ensured that different races were limited in their ability to interact and prevented many Americans from being aware of the true costs of segregation. The ultimate effect of social exclusion was to create a permanent African American underclass restricted from full access to legal, educational, economic, and religious opportunities. As one class was further dispossessed because of their race, other Americans benefitted.

Full participation in the life of The Episcopal Church has historically included many benefits. An active church involvement enhanced the lives of its members in a variety of ways: advancement through its Church-supported schools, universities and seminaries, sponsorship in a network of social and business contacts among members, and opportunities for leadership training and improved social standing. When African Americans were denied or limited in their ability to participate in the Episcopal Church, they were also prevented from receiving these advantages of community life.

The following questions are posed to allow researchers to reflect on the legacy of segregation and discrimination in their own diocese and parish.

Does your diocese currently support Episcopal schools or has your diocese done so historically? If so, how did these institutions confront integration? How do they presently reflect racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity in the student body?

Were African American parishes treated differently from other parishes within your diocese? Were these congregations maintained as missions longer than was typical for your diocese?

Did your parish conduct outreach efforts that included African Americans? Was the effect of these efforts to integrate African Americans into the church as full participants? Could your parish's work have isolated African Americans in programs that limited their participation in the life of the church? How does your parish support ministry to poor or urban communities?

Did your parish contribute to geographic segregation? Did your parish relocate from an urban center to a suburban or ex-urban community? Has your parish done outreach work to persons or groups under-represented in your congregation? Has your parish ignored adjacent communities or allowed small predominantly white congregations to remain in areas that are more demographically diverse?

Has your parish presented African Americans for leadership positions in the church? Does your parish provide African Americans equal access to church facilities, seating, or special services?

*This guide to archival research is prepared by The Archives of the Episcopal Church for the use of parishes, dioceses and Episcopal Church organizations. For further information or guidance, please contact: [research@episcopalarchives.org](mailto:research@episcopalarchives.org).*