

# How Genealogy Gave Me Back Pieces of My Family's History

I learned that not everything you discover will match what you've been told, but that's part of the journey

By [Marcea Cazel](#) | June 11, 2025 | [History and Memories](#)

For a long time, I thought I had a solid grasp of my family's history. As an African American, I knew how rare that was and felt lucky to have documented knowledge about my mother's side of the family going back to the 1800s. But after I became a parent, I started seeing missing pieces from both sides that I hadn't thought to question before.

As shows like PBS's '[Finding Your Roots](#)' gained popularity, so did my sense of urgency. I realized that if I didn't start digging now, parts of our story could disappear entirely.



A family leaving Florida for the North during the Great Migration, where six million African Americans left their homes in the South for Northern and Western states from 1910-1970 | Credit: Getty

## Trying to Close the Gaps

Many people struggle with holes in their family history, but for descendants of the enslaved, those gaps can feel more like canyons because records are often incomplete or missing entirely. Considered chattel, enslaved people's names weren't always recorded in the household records of those who owned them. Church and state archives for enslaved individuals do not exist, and connections to parents or siblings who were sold or separated can become impossible to trace.

**For Black families in particular, events like the Great Migration and the**

My mother's family has deep roots in the small town where she grew up, which helped preserve stories and physical records. But even then, the oral history passed down can morph over generations. For Black families in particular, events like the Great

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Migration and the silencing effects of segregation meant stories were often buried, sometimes for survival, sometimes out of [grief](#).

Feeling confident in the accuracy of most of my mother's family history, I decided to dig deeper by visiting one of the top genealogy centers in the country, located in a place most people wouldn't expect.

### **A Library in Fort Wayne, a Door to the Past**

Tucked away on the second floor of the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana, is the [ACPL Genealogy Center](#). The largest public genealogy library in the U.S., the center has more than 1.34 million physical items along with 800,000 pieces of microtext and provides access to a wide range of resources, including yearbooks, military records, African American newspapers, church documents, family Bibles and even materials on Indigenous peoples and Caribbean nations.

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Senior librarian Christina Clary guided me through the process. Her first advice? Write down everything you know, from names to hometowns. Beginners can start with [Ancestry.com](#) or the free [FamilySearch.org](#), but Clary emphasized that not everything is online.

**"We have become so accustomed to everything we need being online ... (so it's) easy to assume that if it's not online, it doesn't exist."**

"These archives have so many materials that have not been indexed, digitized or publicized in any way. We have become so accustomed to everything we need being online ... (so it's) easy to assume that if it's not online, it doesn't exist," she said.

"When you get down to the county level," she added, "the people in charge of these archives are often well acquainted with the history of the area and the families there."

She also warned that relying on names alone can be deceiving. Especially when multiple people with the same name may have lived in the same region, instead of starting with your mystery ancestor whose facts might be harder to verify, start with someone you know well and work backward.

## **Piecing Together My Father's Jamaican Roots**

My biggest worry going to the library was whether I'd find anything on my father's side. Born and raised in Jamaica, he moved to the U.S. in his late 20s and rarely spoke about his family outside of my grandmother. After he passed, all we had were his parents' and siblings' names, a rough idea of birth years and the parish where he was born.

**My own father unofficially went by two different first names, one of which was on his birth**

I expected a dead end. However, the library had access to Caribbean records through FamilySearch.org. While we couldn't confirm a family rumor about a Scottish ancestor, we did uncover connections to a Jamaican town my family lived in for generations that shares a name with a

## **certificate and the other unrelated to his government name.**

town in Scotland, possibly a clue to the legacy of colonization and slavery.

There were challenges: records in the Caribbean are often incomplete for multiple reasons, including humidity and natural disasters, such as hurricanes and volcanic eruptions.

Many items aren't digitized yet. Names can be especially tricky. The name that you may have heard a relative referred to might not be the name on their official birth certificate. Jamaicans have a long history of using what those in the U.S. refer to as a nickname. My own father unofficially went by two different first names, one of which was on his birth certificate and the other unrelated to his government name.

And then there is the point of marriage. Unbeknownst to me, common-law marriage was and is still popular in the Caribbean, so the children in these relationships may be registered under the mother's last name, not the father's. I discovered that my grandparents had a common-law marriage and two children for several years before marrying and having my father.

The takeaway? Keep an open mind. Not everything you discover will match what you've been told, but that's part of the journey.

### **Finding the Missing Link in My Mother's Story**

My mother's maternal family line is rich with documentation. Her great-great-grandfather was said to have escaped slavery before settling in the same area of southern New York where my mother was born. Although we couldn't confirm a lot of details, like why his place of birth changed on several official documents (was he really hiding from someone?), we had tombstones, town records, deeds and a consistent local presence that helped support much of his story.

## **Reclaiming family history isn't just about filling in boxes on a tree.**

With the library's help, I even discovered more about her maternal grandmother's father, who migrated from a county in Pennsylvania that is a known hub of Underground Railroad activity. His mother had been born in Delaware, which could suggest she escaped slavery and made

her way north.

But then there was my mom's father. She had only a few scattered memories of him. I shared those with the library staff, but Clary initially came up empty. She couldn't locate his birth record or find any census matches. For a moment, it felt like he had vanished from history.

But then I mentioned what seemed to me a small detail: my mom said he lived in the Sugar Hill neighborhood of Harlem. Clary did some extra digging as a favor (this is not a regular service of ACPL) and found a man with his name in the 1940 census. That led to a WWII draft card that included an address in that area of New York City.

When I shared this with my mom, she confirmed it. Her father had lived at that address and had the physical features indicated on the card. We had found my maternal grandfather after decades of not knowing what had happened to him! And with that one connection, my great-grandfather's obituary was located, along with information that my mom's father had worked for the U.S. Postal Service after the war and a photo of his gravestone.

Why hadn't we been able to find him in the earlier search? The birth year was off by a few years and the birthplace was the wrong state. My mom had been told by her mother that he was from Massachusetts, but he was born in Pennsylvania. Those simple errors almost cost us the chance to bring him back into our family narrative, and is a reminder of the point that

sometimes family narratives are off, not for any other reason than people's memories fade.

## **From Paper Trails to Personal Meaning**

Reclaiming family history isn't just about filling in boxes on a tree. It's about finding names, places and stories that shape who we are. It's about honoring survival and seeing the bigger picture of how our ancestors endured, migrated, built and raised families against unimaginable odds.

There's still more I want to uncover. I plan to research the WWII service records of my grandfather and great-uncle. I'd love to travel to Edinburgh to visit the Jock's Lodge neighborhood that played a significant role in Scotland's slave trade history and is possibly linked to my Jamaican ancestors. And I want to walk the trails of southeastern Pennsylvania, where the Underground Railroad once offered a lifeline to people like my great-great-great-grandparents.

For years, I thought I knew my history. Now, I understand that what I had was just the beginning. Completing more of my family tree has not only answered questions, but it's raised new ones.

It's also given me more of a sense of pride. Because my lineage didn't just survive; it grew, moved, resisted and created. And I'm committed to carrying those stories forward for future generations.



**Marcea Cazell** is a freelance travel writer who loves writing about culturally immersive travel. Whether finding murals or attending festivals, learning more about local life is always on her to-do list. A contributor to publications such as TripSavvy, Tinybeans and Hop Culture Magazine, she's been traveling her entire life, with her first international trip taking place before her 1st birthday. When not writing or traveling, she enjoys kayaking,

hiking in the state parks and relaxing at one of the craft breweries in her area. [Read More](#)

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