Using Indirect Evidence to Identify Enslaved Parents*

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INTRODUCTION

> *Cluster Research involves researching family, associates, and neighbors (the "FAN Club") to answer a genealogical question regarding identity or familial relationships.*[1]

Cluster research is particularly helpful when researching "Freedmen,[2]" due to the dearth of antebellum records that provide direct evidence of their identity or relationships. There are a host of reasons for the scarcity of records, including that the enslaved were not always identified by given names and rarely documented with surnames.

Despite the obstacles to researching the ancestry of Freedmen, the standards for achieving genealogical proof are not different—this lecture is based on a published case study that illustrates the point.[3] The article's proof argument is based largely on indirect evidence derived from both traditional and genetic sources that identify the research subject's FAN Club.

STARTING POINT INFORMATION

The direct descendants of a Freedman named Isaac Garrett had no information about his natal family—parents or siblings. Isaac was born about 1836-38 in Laurens County, South Carolina, and died there in 1911. Descents from Isaac are documented in a public *Ancestry* tree.[4]

A 1919 biographical sketch of a Laurens native named Casper George Garrett (1865–1947) identified his parents and grandparents as follows:

> "His parents were Samuel and Martha (Hyde) Garrett…. He says: 'My grandparents were Samuel and Nancy Garrett. My mother, Martha Hyde, was

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* All websites were last accessed on 25 January 2025

[1] Elizabeth Shown Mills, *QuickSheet: The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (the FAN Principle)* (Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012).

[2] "Freedmen," singular or plural, refers to both male and female African Americans who were enslaved until the postbellum period. Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* (New York and Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988) 267.

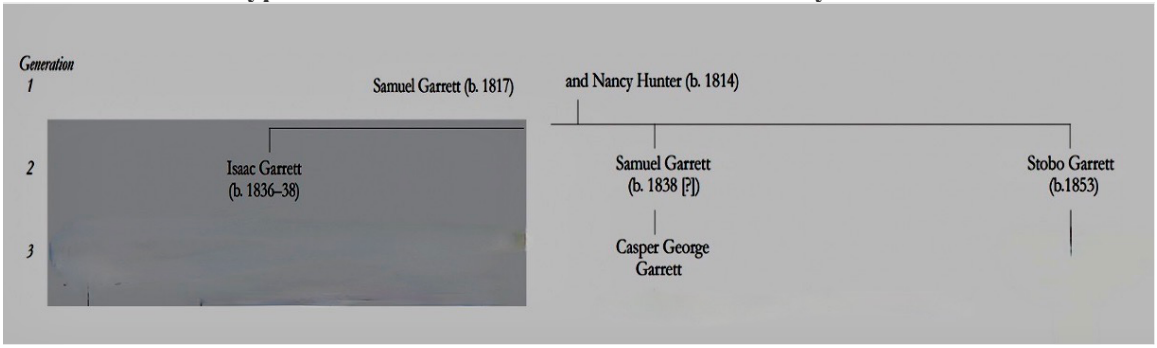
[3] LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, "Parents for Isaac Garrett of Laurens County, South Carolina: DNA Corroborates Oral Tradition," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly,* 108 (June 2020) 85.

[4] LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, "Garrett-Nelson Family Tree," Public Member Tree, *Ancestry* (https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/tree/85023590/family/familyview).

brought from Virginia as a slave when small . . . . Grandfather's parents were strong and hearty Virginians.'[5]"

Casper's granddaughter reported that Casper's father was Isaac's brother and his daughter remembered a third brother named Stobo;[6] however, no other *direct* evidence of Isaac's relationship to either man was found. Moreover, there are gaps in the documentation for the location of the ancestral couple and the three brothers in both the antebellum and postbellum periods.

Hypothesized Descents From Samuel and Nancy Garrett



THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The Fan principle is not used in isolation. One must first engage in the normal process of developing a research plan to answer a focused genealogical question. This would include:

- A survey of literature regarding the history of the geographic location (*e.g.,* dates of settlement, origins of major migrant groups, and boundary changes).
- A review of applicable laws for the time and place (*e.g.*, the legal aspects of the treatment of enslaved people as property).
- The availability and (physical or online) location of potentially relevant federal, state, and local records.

Identified sources were prioritized and research was conducted to glean as much information as possible about Isaac himself and potential members of his FAN Club.

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[5] Arthur Bunyan Caldwell, editor, "Gasper George Garrett," *History of the American Negro and his Institutions* (Atlanta, Georgia: A.B. Caldwell Publishing Co., 1919) 316-319, 316; viewed on *Google Books* (https://www.books.google.com).

[6] Ruth Esther (Simons) Nicholson (1922–1986), interview by author, August 1986, Washington, D.C.; notes in author's files, Washington, D.C., 2020. The interview is memorialized in LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, *The Source of Our Pride* (Washington, D.C.: Privately printed, 1996), 13. Also, Naomi Mills Garrett, PhD (2210 Lady Street; Columbia, S.C.), ca. 1997–98, interview by Beryl Dakers Burton; transcript in interviewer's files, Columbia, S.C., 2008. Burton gave a copy of the interview transcript to the author. See Beryl Dakers Burton, e-mail to LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, 21 February 2008, "Naomi Mills Garrett Transcript"; author's files, Washington, D.C., 2020. The interview is memorialized in LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, *The Source: The Garrett, Neely, and Sullivan Families* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Family Heritage Publishers, 2008), 79.

Because the research subject was a Freedman, the following five interpretive guidelines informed the research process.

1. *A reasonable starting place to seek records is a Freedman's geographic location on the date of emancipation or as close to that date as possible.* The 1870 U.S. census is a principal resource for locating a Freedman in the postbellum era, as it was the first to require the enumeration of all African Americans with surnames. Keep in mind, however, that a subject might be located in federal or state records that pre-date the 1870 U.S. census. For example, there is an 1869 South Carolina state census, as well as 1868 Voter Registration Abstracts Reported to the Military Government.[7] Research of Freedmen generally calls for a review of other pre-1870 Federal records such as those created by the U.S. Colored Troops and the Field Office of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau),[8] but those records did not yield relevant information in the instant case study.
2. *Effective research of an enslaved ancestor requires inclusion of the slaveholding family in the FAN Club.* The surname used by an ancestor in a census may point to the identity of an enslaver. By extension, The Fan Club would also include those connected to the enslavers, such as in-laws, legatees, or creditors. A connection between members of the FAN (including related enslavers) could provide the basis for linking enslaved people. Other people enslaved by the same person could be kin.

   Freedmen did not necessarily use the name of the very last enslaver. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the same family of Freedmen may have been enumerated with different surnames from census to census.[9] Regarding pre-1870 census records, tick marks alone are not sufficient to identify a Freedman but may provide indirect evidence.
3. *Consider the possibility that an ancestor of African descent lived as a Free person of color before slavery was abolished.* Such an ancestor may have shown up in a pre-1870 U.S. census or generated other records such as deeds. Note that an

[7] *FamilySearch* (https://www.familysearch.org/search/film/008194978), digital film 008194978, image 174, South Carolina, Secretary of State, South Carolina State Population Census Schedules, 1869, Laurens Co., Laurens Twp., 35th unnumbered page, line 1, Isaac Garrett. Also, South Carolina, Secretary of State, Abstract of Voter Registrations Reported to the Military Government, 1868, Laurens Co., First Registration Precinct, Laurens Court House Election Precinct, p. 185, Colored, Isaac Garrett; images, *South Carolina Digital Library* (https://digital.tcl.sc.edu/digital/collection/voterreg/id/1475).

[8] LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, "Researching African American Families that Came out of Slavery," *Board for Certification of Genealogists, Springboard Blog*, 5 January 2016. (http://bcgcertification.org/researching-african-american-families-that-came-out-of-slavery/).

[9] See Tony Burroughs, "Finding African Americans on the 1870 Census." Heritage Quest (January/February 2001): 50–56; Online edition (http://www.tonyburroughs.com/uploads/1/3/2/8/13281200/finding_african_americans_on_the_1870_census.pdf).

ancestor may have been enumerated as a free person where there is no other evidence of emancipation.

4. *Churches played a central role in the social life of African American communities immediately after the Civil War.* Genealogical data can be found on grave markers in churchyards, in anniversary programs, or deeds of property to the church.
5. *Onomastic evidence is also important.* "Children were frequently given the names of blood kin from outside the immediate family." A "significant percentage of slaves everywhere also carried the names of aunts and uncles (sometimes even great-aunts and great uncles)." [10]

EVIDENCE GLEANED FROM TRADITIONAL (NON-GENETIC) SOURCES

Many of the same antebellum sources are potentially relevant to both the enslaved and the enslaver. In this case, probate files provided information about legatees who took ownership of enslaved people, connections between slaveholding families, and the given names of the enslaved. An equity court case that arose out of a probate proceeding provided detailed genealogical information about an enslaved family group.

The identities of enslavers were also memorialized in sale bills found in county deed books or among loose papers in estate files. A mortgage based on slaveholdings listed the enslaved with given names.

Postbellum sources also contributed to the proof argument. Cross-generational associations between hypothesized kin helped to prove the case. Tax lists helped to distinguish among same-named men and narrow the window for the birth or death dates of men in the FAN Club.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Garrett-Nelson, LaBrenda. *A Guide To Researching African American Ancestors in Laurens County, South Carolina, and Selected Finding Aids.* Bloomington, Indiana: Xlibris, 2016. This is a model for research in South Carolina and other historical slave states.

Jones, Thomas W. *Mastering Genealogical Proof.* Arlington, Virginia: National Genealogical Society, 2013.

Rose, James M., and Eichholz, Alice. *Black Genesis: A Resource Book for African American Genealogy.* Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2003.

[10] Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family In Slavery And Freedom 1750*-1925 (New York: Random House, 1976) 45, 200.