

**Testimony**  
**of**  
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**before**  
**The California Reparations Task Force**  
**29 March 2022**

Esteemed members of the Reparations Task Force, I am honored and thank you for inviting me to address this body as you consider the issue of reparations for the descendants of the formerly enslaved. I speak to you today as a family historian, who has been researching since 1984, a professional genealogist and certificate holder from Boston University Metropolitan College's Certificate in Genealogical Research. I have completed and hold a certificate from the GenProof program which focuses on mastering genealogical proof. I am currently completing ProGen's certificate program which prepares Genealogists for Board Certification in Genealogy (BCG) and am a current graduate certificate candidate in Forensic Genetic Genealogy at the Henry C. Lee College of Forensic Science at the University of New Haven. Perhaps most importantly, I also come before you today, as a descendant of the formerly enslaved. My personal research focuses on Virginia, southwestern Virginia, in fact, where the Blue Ridge Mountains control the skies. My client work has been broad but has almost exclusively focused on the descendants of the formerly enslaved from many states.

I believe we may all agree that the harms done to the enslaved and their reverberating effects on generation after generation command a repair, a restitution on par with the damage done to all those before and those who represent them today. It is my hope and objective to offer a genealogist's view of what type of documentation of the formerly enslaved is available; gaps we may encounter in recreating the lives of the formerly enslaved, and how we conduct

this research according to the Board of Certification of Genealogists(BCG) Genealogical Proof Standard, known as the (GPS). These insights may enable this body to apply a specific threshold or proof standards of descendency from the formerly enslaved that will allow the greatest number of descendants to meet the standard.

### **How Have We Arrived at This Moment?**

Expanded access to historical documents through digitization, online archives, and the ever popular and growing platforms such as Ancestry.com, FamilySearch and MyHeritage, have opened a world of documents now more easily accessible, at the fingertips of the researcher from the comfort of their homes. Written works such as the groundbreaking *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, by Alex Haley which introduced the world to the journey of his ancestor Kunta Kinte from West Africa through capture and enslavement in America, sparked the genealogical journeys of Black families around the nation and the world. Later *Sally Hemings*, a historical novel by Barbara Chase-Riboud, shook the foundation of American history by recreating the story of Thomas Jefferson and his relationship with Sally Hemings. Haley and Chase-Riboud both brought a fresh perspective and interpretation to historical records one might use to tell the story of the formerly enslaved. A more recent book *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* by Erica Armstrong Dunbar tells a little-known story of a woman enslaved by George and Martha Washington, who risked everything for her freedom.

Fueled by television programs such as *Finding Your Roots*, *African American Lives & African American Lives II* by Henry Louis Gates, his accompanying book *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past*, and *Who Do You Think You Are*, an American genealogy documentary, there is a heightened enthusiasm for genealogy, historical novels, documentaries, television shows and scholarly works that tell the stories of our ancestors including those that examine the formerly enslaved. What is not so obvious in these polished and persuasive products is the extensive work required, the dead ends, and the frequent brick walls that descendants of the formerly enslaved often encounter along the way.

To recreate the lives of the formerly enslaved we use many types of documents including manifests, property records, wills and probate records, manumission and emancipation papers, and newspapers -- all may mention our enslaved ancestors. Determining which combination of documents will produce the best results varies state to state, family to family, and jurisdiction to jurisdiction. There are also several key collections for researching formerly enslaved Americans including but not limited to:

- The Freedmen's Bureau Records (formally known as the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands)
- U.S., Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1863-1865
- U.S., African American Photo Collection, 1850-2000
- Cohabitation Registers

These collections complement the U.S. federal census records with which many are familiar.

### **A Word About the Freedmen's Bureau Records**

In the years following the Civil War, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen's Bureau) aided tens of thousands of former slaves and impoverished whites in Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and the District of Columbia. The Bureau was established in the War Department in 1865 to undertake the relief effort and the unprecedented social reconstruction that would bring freed people to full citizenship. These records are undoubtedly among some of the most revealing about the formerly enslaved. Yet, proper identification of any individual including the formerly enslaved requires careful correlation of many pieces of information as in the case of Rev. Lewis W. Holmes from southwestern Virginia. My mother had known him as little girl. She had recounted many stories about her and her grandmother's visits to his home for dinner after church. With the ready access of Ancestry.com, I quickly identified the Reverend in several U.S. federal censuses and a census of the Freedmen's Bureau. He was not, however, found in the 1870 U.S. federal census.

### **A Word About the U.S., Colored Troops Military Service Records, 1863-1865**

This database contains compiled military service records for United States Colored Troops that volunteered to serve with the Union in the American Civil War. We use this collection to discover details of the lives of the formerly enslaved.

### **A Word About the Cohabitation Records**

This register records the name of the husband, his age, place of birth, residence, occupation, last owner, last owner's residence, name of the wife, her age, place of birth, residence, last owner, last owner's residence, name of children with the ages of each, and the date of commencement of cohabitation. They provide critical insight into the formerly enslaved population's family connections and last slave owners. This record is likely one of the few documents to capture the marital relationships of newly freed enslaved persons whose relationships dated back to their years of enslavement. The information was provided the formerly enslaved themselves and is likely quite accurate. There still exist challenges with the information contained in the cohabitation records."

### **A Word About the 1870 Census**

As the debate rages as to who and how we should identify those eligible for reparations, many have turned to the 1870 U.S. federal census as a reliable document to identify the formally enslaved. The 1870 census was the first census to provide detailed information on the African American population, only a few years after the Civil War and Emancipation. It enumerated over 4.8 million African Americans at that time. For those who have enough information to identify and find their ancestors in 1870, the U.S. federal census of that year is invaluable. There are, however, many descendants who cannot get back that far.

I share the case of a client with whom I worked during the summer of 2018. She had known her grandfather who was born about 1877 in Petersburg, Virginia. She nor her relatives knew his parents' names or locations, which quickly became the focus of my research on her behalf. Her grandfather, by virtue of his age, would not have been enumerated on the 1870 U.S. Federal Census but the thought was that his parents would likely have been. Several documents were identified for her grandfather including a few which provided his parents' names. Unfortunately, they had first names that were very common coupled with surnames

that were highly prevalent in the region -- names such as Peter Smith and Mary Jones. For this client and many like her, a threshold of identifying her ancestor in the 1870 census might prohibit participation in a reparations program.

### **A Word About the Immigrant Person of African Descent**

While this Task Force is focused on those who are descendants of the formerly enslaved in the United States. I want to mention research I recently performed for a client regarding a Caribbean-American line of their family. Their ancestor arrived at Ellis Island in 1896 from Antigua. Their generations have lived in America as descendants of Africans in America since that time. They of course would not be able to trace their family line to the 1870 U.S. Federal Census. For our consideration, I ask, in those 126 years in America have they not also suffered the harms created by the economic, social, and political vestiges of slavery and racism in America? Fortunately for this family, they have a line that goes back to Virginia and the period of enslavement. It would be that line they would likely use to participate in reparations under the current construct.

This is an important consideration if the 1870 U.S. federal census is to be the main threshold for participation in a reparations program. The truth of the matter is... for many descendants of the formerly enslaved it will take a correlation of several documents to prove their ancestors' identities and status as formerly enslaved individuals. Thankfully, we are in a very different place as it relates to research of the formerly enslaved because of the availability of records related to the enslaved. Let us consider, however, that there are great variations in what each family can discover. Let us also ensure that each applicant will meet the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS).

### **A Word About the Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS)**

To reach a sound conclusion, genealogists need to meet all five components of the GPS.

1. Reasonably exhaustive research.
2. Complete and accurate source citations.

3. Thorough analysis and correlation.
4. Resolution of conflicting evidence.
5. Soundly written conclusion based on the strongest evidence.

I encourage this body to consider a broad threshold for participation in any proposed reparations remedy. Thank you again for inviting me and I look forward to the recommendations of the Task Force as you lead the way for the nation.