African American Genealogical Society - Cleveland, Ohio

NEWSLETTER

Then: **Decoration Day / Remembrance Day**

Now: **Memorial Day**

Though different name | Reflection is the same

To honor military personnel who died while serving in the armed forces

The tradition began in the years after the American Civil War and culminated into a national holiday.

From early days to present day, our ancestors have served, fought and perished to preserve our way of life.

Some of us, as researchers, have yet to find records of those ancestors.

Still, we honor their sacrifice.

And their memory.

As we devotedly continue the genealogy journey ❍❍❍ *(page 3)*

AAGS MEETINGS

• Held on **4th Saturday** (exc. December)
(In-person and Zoom)

Shaker Heights Library
16500 Van Aken Blvd.
Shaker Hts., OH 44120

• 10:00-10:15 a.m. – socialization
10:15-10:30 a.m. – info/announcements
10:30 a.m. – presentations/discussions

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ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP

Per calendar year
Fees due by Jan. 31st

Students (to age 21) $15 • Individual $30
Couple $40 • Family $45 • Organization $50

NEWSLETTER

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To Discover Your Ancestors Is to Discover a Part of You!

GENEALOGY NEWS

- In early 2026, **NARA** (National Archives & Records Administration) **discontinued its History Hub** platform as a cost savings measure; History Hub allowed NARA staff and others to directly communicate with and respond to researchers through discussion boards, blogs and community pages
- **Newberry Library**, Chicago, **is scouting transcribers to demystify its handwritten collection** - https://**lithub.com**/if-you-read-cursive-the-newberry-has-a-job-for-you/?utm_source=firefox-newtab-en-us
- **"Black divers make pilgrimage to underwater memorial for wrecked slave ship"** - https://**apnews**.com/article/slave-ship-shipwreck-pilgrimage-black-divers-florida-a02e92c53955675db142cae24eba43a4
- The **National Archives Museum**, Washington DC, redesigned two permanent exhibits: *The American Story* and the *Discovery Center* (more visitor interaction and immersive media) - https://visit.**archives.gov**/whats-on/explore-exhibits/american-story
- **Ancestry** transitioned to a new API—the system **RootsMagic** uses to communicate with Ancestry trees. To sync, RootsMagic version 11.2.0 is now needed. Upgrade info at: http://blog.**rootsmagic.com**/?p=4065

2026-2027 AAGS Officers

President..... Joseph Houser, Sr.
1st Vice President..... Deborah Abbott
2nd Vice President..... Joseph Jordan

Treasurer..... Ellecia Gant
Financial Secretary..... Adrienne Waugh
Corresponding Sec'y... Maxine Hairston
Recording Sec'y.....Moneak Jones
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Military Resources

To fully recognize our family members, the challenge is to find their records and understand the history involved with their service. The following are popular "go-to" resources for a reason.

- **National Archives** – Although commonly used to request *pension files*, there's plenty more to dig into; start with https://www.archives.gov/research/military/genealogy

- At **Fold3,** interest is typically with *draft registration cards*. There's so much more in its vast collection, including Black History records - https://www.fold3.com/collection/**african-american#publications** (some are free/some require website sign in), as well as a variety of blogs from contributors such as Michael Strauss - https://www.fold3.com/blog/**identifying-military-personnel-decoding-serial-numbers**/

- The **U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs** website is not only a means to explain and obtain veteran benefits. Looking for U.S. national cemeteries? The map at https://www.cem.va.gov/**find-cemetery** provides interactive options to find a location, contact a cemetery, get directions and find veteran memorial pages. Know a person's name, not the burial site? https://www.cem.va.gov/**nationwide-gravesite-locator**/ can help pinpoint by state.

  The VA site also has cemetery history, e.g., https://www.cem.va.gov/cems/nchp/**campnelson**.asp "In 1864 **Camp Nelson** became Kentucky's largest, and nation's third largest, recruitment center for African-American soldiers, the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT). The USCT were emancipated from slavery upon enlistment and many brought their wives and children into camp, who were freed after a March 1865 Congressional Act…"
  (More on Camp Nelson: **National Park Service -** https://www.nps.gov/cane/index.htm?parkID=572 or the **NARA** site - Records of Death and Interment at Camp Nelson, KY, 1864–1865)

U.S. Military Holiday Differences

Armed Forces Day (Third Saturday of May) Honors those who are currently serving	**Memorial Day** (Last Monday of May) Memorializes members who died during active duty	**Veteran's Day** (November 11) Acknowledges those who served and are still alive

AAGS Member Spotlight on…

Norma Wadley

Adoption access:
A view from both sides

The availability of adoption information has changed a lot over the years.

My name is Norma Lacy Wadley and I was adopted. Unlike some others who were adopted in infancy, it was known to me because I was age nine at the time. I was born in 1941 in Louisville, **Kentucky**, followed by my sister Mary Louise two years later. Due to conditions at the time, my birth mother Caroline was not in a good position to keep her children, so we were placed in foster care under the Louisville/Jefferson County court system. Later, we permanently joined the Lacy household in **West Virginia**. At the adoption hearing, I remember moving among seats several times. Each time my mother-to-be's name was called, she instantly got up and shifted places--so we (my sister and I) instantly got up and shifted with her. Finally, it was our turn and the process was complete. I recall that the piece of paper she held up that day made it official--the adoption decree.

I had a stable, loving upbringing and my adopted mother offered to share birth info at any time. Before I went away to college, she gave me the documents in her possession.

I later moved to **Ohio** and learned that obtaining more documentation would be tricky. I sent off for my original Kentucky birth certificate. Up to age nine, records were under my biological surname. Afterwards, records showed "Lacy." (It's common for parents to change the name of their adopted children when brought into a new environment. In my case, my adopted mother ***asked me*** what I wanted my new name to be. That's right--I chose my own name. While in foster care during the 1940s, our social worker's first name was Norma. She had a college education, nice car, pretty make-up, nice clothes, stylish hair and wore cologne. I thought "That's the way I want to be." How many Black women in that era had that going for them? At age nine, the people around me seemed 1000 years old, never went to the hairdresser and wore outdated clothes. That's how my new name became Norma.) During that time period, many original birth certificates that were requested by adoptees had their parent information "blocked out." Mine did not.

I wanted records about the whole adoption process, not just the final decree. When looking for the court files in West Virginia, I was informed that the records were closed/sealed. I have not been successful with Louisville court records either. I also wanted to find out about my relatives (the birth certificate couldn't fill in that gap). Since my maternal grandmother was involved in my early life, I knew her; I wanted to track down others. In the early 1980s there was no Ancestry, FamilySearch or online social networking--no easy way to search for people. Back then, we had hard copy telephone books. Back then, postage stamps were about 15 cents. So that's what I used to look up surnames in the local area and to mail out individual letters to people that seemed to fit (whittling down names from the same household). I reached out to several and got a reply from one.

That one person who responded (to my surprise) turned out to be a half-sibling, Tonya, about 12 years younger than I was. She cleared up for me the reason I could not find my mother in the local phone books: she had a different last name and was living in a nursing facility in Scottsburg, Indiana, which was "over the bridge" from Kentucky. By that time, I had adopted daughters of my own and we all took the trip to reconnect with my biological mother.

One of my daughters was born in West Virginia; the other in Ohio. By the early 1980s, **Ohio** had passed a law granting adoptees access to "open" birth certificates showing parent names and other info. I was interested in/involved with adoption rights during the time when Betsie Norris (founder of the Adoption Network Cleveland) fought to get this breakthrough law passed. Access to **West Virginia** records was harder (closed records). By the time my daughter was of legal age, Ancestry.com had come along--so we "went around" the county court system and ended up finding the names of the birth parents by analyzing online DNA matches.

Although it was not high-tech like the research methods of today, my "old school" research paid off. To this day, my half-sibling and I have a very good relationship. We stay in contact on a monthly basis.

Adoption Policies by State

From https://**www.usbirthcertificates.com**/articles/states-with-open-adoption-records
Last updated March 12, 2025

For a long time, adoptees in the U.S. have had a hard time obtaining access to adoption records and their **original birth certificates (OBCs)**. To protect the privacy of biological parents, identifying information (and in some cases, non-identifying information) was sealed and not open to the general public.

Access to an adult adoptees' OBC is regulated at the state level -- depending on the state you were born and adopted in and its state laws.

Unrestricted access from Age 18	**Court order required**	**May require a court order for some adoptees to access their OBC**
Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont. Age 19 for Alabama. Age 24 for Louisiana.	Arizona, Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming.	Michigan, Nebraska. Ohio People adopted before Jan 1, 1964, or between Sep 18, 1996 and Mar 19, 2015, can access OBCs. Those adopted between 1964 and 1996 require a court order.
States with **specific policies*** related to the **age of adoptee** and **birth parent disclosure vetoes** (to redact, prevent release or file a contact preference form): Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Washington. (*See website)	Some states, like Georgia, are in the process of updating the legal rights for adoptees to access their original birth certificate. Check the latest rules with official vital records offices in the state.	

From https://**legalclarity.org**/how-do-birth-certificates-work-if-you-are-adopted/

- When an adoption is finalized, the court orders the state vital records office to issue a new birth certificate. This **amended certificate** replaces the biological parents' names with the adoptive parents' names, includes the child's new legal name, and keeps the original date and place of birth.
- **Court adoption records**: Legal case files from the adoption proceeding, held by the court that finalized the adoption. Includes adoption decree, any home study reports, and documents identifying the birth parents.

AAGS ACTIVITIES

Supporting Genealogy In-House & In the Community

March 28
AAGS Meeting

Presenter:
C. Ann Sealey

Topic:

"**Climate Clues** –
Our Ancestors
Weathering Their Lives"

Being associated with the Genealogical Speakers Guild, Florida Genealogical Society, IGHR, Association of Professional Genealogists and other organizations, it's clear that Ann knows a thing or two about a variety of topics. She definitely had a lot to offer on the subject of how ancestors were impacted by the weather (on a day-to-day basis and due to major weather events), plus where to find resources.

Knowing about such conditions adds context to family stories and could answer important questions related to why family members might have moved. Her presentation aligned extremely well with her reference handout and covered:

- Folklore (weather wisdom, proverbs, superstitions and signs)
- Climate-driven migration and weather phenomena (e.g., the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927)
- National Archives & weather bureaus (where massive amounts of historical data can be retrieved)
- Interviews, biographies, family/county histories & diaries (great sources include Google Books, JSTOR, Internet Archive, Joe Beine)
- Newspapers and periodicals (PERSI and numerous "off-the beaten path" sites)
- Photographs and scrapbooks (Library of Congress, Google image search, Dead Fred, etc.)
- National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)

Much more was listed in her handout, which contained not-so-common places to look.

April 25 AAGS Meeting

Open Forum

Discussing Research Obstacles

Dr. Deborah Abbott guided AAGS members in examining censuses and other documents step by step, communicating pitfalls and oversights. The interaction revealed where a keen eye is needed to *interpret* the record, an open mind is needed to *analyze* the content and a sharp focus is needed to *determine where to go next*.

We had good dialogue. As individual questions came up, Debbie and other members responded with actions they have taken to address an obstacle and offered other potential solutions.

Researchers have differing thoughts about storage of genealogical data (via online trees such as Ancestry vs. through personal software such as RootsMagic). The group discussed pros/cons: convenience, privacy, availability, etc. Most leaned toward a personally owned database providing the most secure access and versatility, even if also keeping online.

May 25 AAGS Meeting
Presenter: **J. Mark Lowe**

Topic: "Using Court Records, Wills, Estate Settlements and More to Locate Slaves and Slaveholders"

Right away, Mark emphasized that laws are different based on the state. Even so, there are some commonalities researchers should keep in mind. Interweaving research strategies with substantiated info and specific examples, he led attendees in a purposeful direction to tackle the imposing task of court research. A *few* points:

- Examine slave codes, acts and laws
- The type of record matters: **chattel** (personal/movable property) or **real** property (such as land/buildings) -- lets you know where to look
- Estate books can include dower slave lists
- Inventories and appraisals are invaluable
- Spreadsheets are helpful to track the documents found; timelines help, too
- Manuscript collections have excellent finding aids; don't forget loose court records
- Use full-text search on FamilySearch

Mark wrapped up by reiterating: Always work from the known to the unknown and prove each piece of evidence.

His reminder: For court research, take your time and don't rush.

This comes from the man well known for the following advice:

At the Shaker Public Library, **Dr. Deborah Abbott** conducts a local series of genealogies of "Famous Shakerites" (newsworthy citizens of Shaker Heights, Ohio).

On March 28, she explored award-winning broadcaster **Leon Bibb**'s history from a genealogist's perspective. Leon Bibb is a journalist, long-time WEWS news anchor and offspring of a service-oriented family (including his cousin Justin Bibb, Cleveland's mayor). During the fascinating presentation, attendees heard details of his personal family history, pieces of which Leon had not been aware of himself.

Tech and You

Cleaning Your Digital Attic – Hire a File Search Software Housekeeper

By Cecelia McFadden

If your genealogy desktop has been in use for an extended period of time, it has an extensive landscape of file types. Evenings spent downloading census records, saving ship manifests, and typing up transcriptions leads to a vast accumulation of PDFs, word documents and image files. But what happens when you need to find that one specific obituary that you saved three years ago and you can't remember the file name? Default searching on your computer may lead to a spinning loading wheel, incomplete results or pure frustration. This is where a specialized tool becomes your personal butler or maid: **File Search Software**.

What is File Search Software? File search software refers to desktop utilities created to locate files, folders and documents on your computer at blazing speed. They allow you to search using specific parameters like file size, creation date or Boolean logic to pinpoint the exact file you need.

Your File Search Toolkit. There are several excellent tools in this space, each offering unique strength for family history tasks. Below are some options for both **Windows and Mac users**.

- **Everything:** True to its name, this lightweight program instantly locates any file or folder by name. Because it indexes your drive's root file table, the results populate the very millisecond you start typing.
- **Agent Ransack & FileSeek:** These are powerhouses for searching the contents of your files. If you know you typed "Jefferson" in a research note but forgot the filename, these tools will scour the text of every document, PDF, and spreadsheet on your drive and show you the exact line where the name appears.
- **Wise JetSearch** & **Quick Search:** These tools are lightning-fast alternatives for locating files by name when your standard computer search is limited to RAM CPU power.
- **SearchMyFiles:** A highly detailed tool that offers laser-focused search criteria. If you know you saved an image of a birth certificate between Tuesday and Thursday of last week, and it was a large file, this tool lets you search by those exact attributes.

Because the tools above are designed for Windows, **Mac users** who find Apple's built-in "Spotlight" search lacking have some powerful alternative choices:

- **EasyFind:** This is the ultimate free alternative to Agent Ransack for Mac. It does not rely on Mac's Spotlight index, meaning it can deep-scan your hard drive to find hidden files or search inside the text of your documents.

- **HoudahSpot:** If you want a premium, highly detailed search, this is the tool. It acts as an advanced front-end for your Mac, allowing you to build complex search queries (e.g., "Find a PDF created in 2021 that contains the word 'Cemetery' but NOT the word 'Ohio'").

- **Find Any File** (FAF)**:** This is the Mac equivalent to Windows' Everything. If Spotlight refuses to find a misnamed file, FAF bypasses the index entirely and searches your Mac's file system directly, uncovering even hidden files.

The former tools are available at nominal cost, but don't cover all of your needs in this space. Consider investing in a good **Duplicate File Finder**. We all have accidentally downloaded the same military draft card or vital index multiple times. This type of utility will reclaim your hard drive space by identifying and safely removing duplicate files. Consider AllDup, DupGuru (Windows & Mac) or SearchMyFiles.

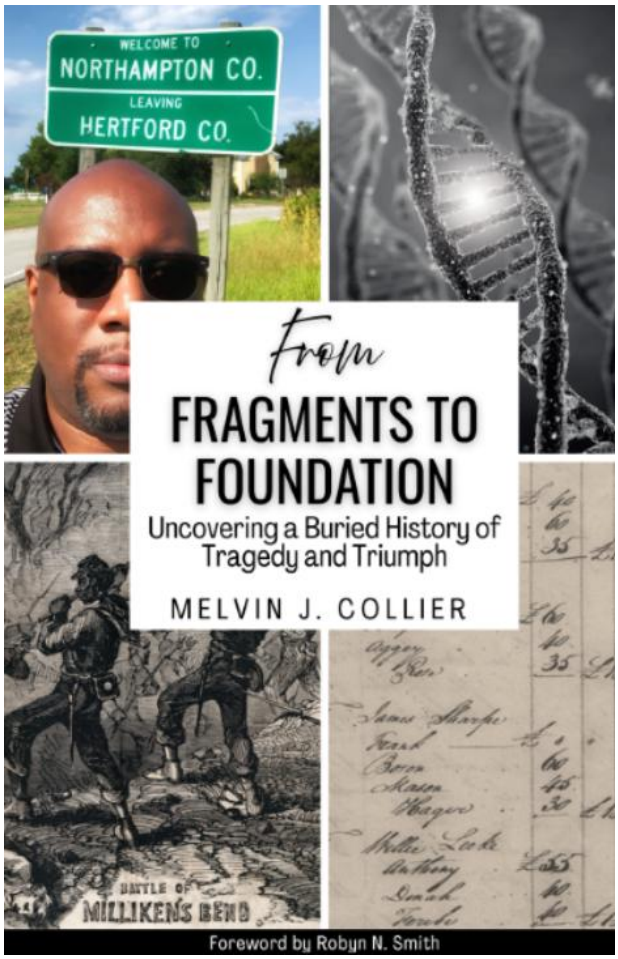
Case Study: The Hunt for James Hawkins' Deed

The Problem. I was recently preparing a presentation on my great-great grandfather. I remembered that a few years ago, I had transcribed a land deed from 1872 into a Word document, prior to developing a file naming system or structure. The document was buried in my Genealogy folder – a directory with over 8000 files and over 100 sub folders. A standard search on his name netted hundreds of results and manual sifting would have taken hours.

The Solution. I opened Agent Ransack and requested a file content search, because I remembered some geography and the name of a witness. In less than four seconds, the software retrieved a single file named Transcription_Notes_v2, with the highlighted words in a preview pane. I had my transcription and had free time for more research.

Conclusion. Our work requires us to piece together the past from fragments of data. Your computer shouldn't make that job harder. By adding file search software to your genealogy toolkit, you tidy up your digital attic and get back to what really matters: telling the stories of the ancestors waiting to be found.

Let us know how you're doing.
Contact us at **newslchair@aagsclev.org**.



BOOK REVIEW

(**Excerpted** from https://reclaimingkin.com/genealogy-book/)

A Master Class in Genealogy

Written by Robyn Smith | November 11, 2025

Melvin Collier's powerful new book, *From Fragments to Foundation: Uncovering a Buried History of Tragedy and Triumph,* is officially out. When I received my book, I asked my son to answer the door for trick-or-treaters, grabbed a hot tea, and curled up with the good read I knew it would be.

Melvin does not disappoint and let me be clear: this is a book for ALL genealogists. Please don't assume this book isn't for you if your research isn't focused on African Americans.

Genealogy success is about analysis, critical thinking, correlation of evidence, and methodology, no matter who you are or where your ancestors were from. Sure, the sources and the historical context may differ, but at its heart, genealogical skills are the same across the board.

I have long planned to write a book-length treatment of my genealogy journey, and Melvin's book taught me several lessons about how to approach that goal.

I want to list a few things that particularly resonated with me in the book, but I'm not going to tell it all because my hope is that you will buy the book.

Adoption

Melvin's father was adopted, and in his introduction, Melvin shares that this circumstance became a driving force for this line of research.

Melvin shows the deep empathy and understanding we can develop for people who make this painful choice, in many cases, in the child's best interest. It is a poignant reminder of the ways this research benefits us and expands our worldview.

Analysis

Melvin walks us through every step of critical thinking with each problem his research presents. This is important to understand, since the presence of online databases sometimes masks our need to do this.

Melvin makes this process transparent: he makes hypotheses and tests them. Many problems stay a problem for years. Some hypotheses don't pan out. Again, these are *universal* experiences for genealogists. But Melvin's ability to communicate concisely and clearly about his process makes this book especially instructive.

Social and Historical Context

Melvin's book amply illustrates how adding social and historical context can make our stories come alive for our audience. Researchers must be willing to read books and articles that you won't typically find on *Ancestry* or *FamilySearch* in order to learn more about the time and place where their ancestors lived. I call this "outside reading." It takes a lot of time to do, but it is always necessary.

We can't ever fully understand the genealogical sources we use without context.

Melvin takes us into the Civil War battle of Milliken's Bend, effectively using oral history to put us into the center of the battle. He details the formation of the United States Colored Troops, and adds context on subjects such as domestic employees of the Army, and the illnesses troops suffered during the war.

Melvin describes the Vicksburg massacres, the Freedmen's Bureau, the practice of binding out recently emancipated children, the Exoduster movement, and more. He took the time to do outside reading, and in the process, to better understand his ancestors' lives.

DNA

Melvin's DNA research stands shoulder to shoulder with the most popular DNA voices in genealogy, any day of the week plus twice on Tuesday.

The way that he explains these very complicated techniques with beautiful graphics is both accessible and inspirational. He ends the book with 23 detailed research tips to help each reader incorporate the benefits of DNA into their own journeys.

He has used DNA in a way and to a depth few others have achieved, especially within this historical context.

Heart

In a nutshell, *From Fragments to Foundations* is full of heart, written with passion and precision, by a master of research and craft. It's a thoroughly enjoyable read that will take you through all the emotions that genealogy at its best provides.

I laughed, cried, felt angry and sad, curious and hopeful, confused and joyous—all the emotions genealogy at its best can evoke. Melvin is an amazing storyteller, and this book will not disappoint.

(Book image from rootsrevealed.com)

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