



AGS Ezine

*Newsletter of the Arkansas Genealogical Society
Vol. 21, No. 2, February 2026
Sara White, Editor*

Note from the Editor:

Greetings, fellow genealogists and family historians! It's February, 2026, which means it's the centennial celebration of Black History Month. In this issue, we are featuring some articles about how African American Arkansans can trace their heritage and histories through census research, as well as breaking down that ugly 1870 brick wall that many genealogists hit. Lots of events this month! Many societies and libraries are featuring Black History seminars and installations, so check out this month's events.

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Arkansas Genealogical Society

February 2026

Kitchen Roundtable Talk



Russell Baker: Exploring Resources for Civil War Research

Our Zoom discussion will be presented on **Tuesday, February 17, at 6:30 p.m.**, free of charge.

Please join us for our free Zoom presentation! In this session, our Octogenarian Genealogist, Russell Baker, will take you through the many resources for Civil War Research. Some are timeless, and others are recently released and discovered. Don't miss the opportunity to experience a presentation from a tried and true researcher on both Arkansas and the Civil War. This event is a must-attend!

For those within the Arkansas genealogical community, **Russell Baker** is a familiar figure. Affectionately known as "The Octogenarian Historian," he has a remarkable 50 years of service on the AGS board and a background as the retired archival supervisor and former acting director of the Arkansas State Archives in Little Rock. He is the author of two of AGS's most popular publications, the *Arkansas Township Atlas* and *Arkansas Post Offices: From Memdag to Norsk, A Historical Directory 1832-1900*. Over the years, he has frequently lectured nationally on genealogical research and theory. He is continually working on new publications and is continuing to make meaningful contributions as an esteemed board member.

[Join us online via Zoom.](#)

Our monthly **Kitchen Roundtable Talks** cover diverse genealogical topics and methodologies, sparking lively online discussions among our engaged participants. This platform is a unique opportunity to establish meaningful connections with fellow genealogy enthusiasts, cultivate new friendships within the community, and link up with kindred spirits who share our passion for research.

We enthusiastically welcome suggestions from all participants for topics of interest and encourage volunteers to step forward as discussion leaders for subjects close to their hearts. As this initiative evolves, we anticipate refining it based on our collective experiences. Your active participation and invaluable feedback remain pivotal in shaping the future of our endeavors. For more information on our discussion topics, go to argensoc.org/kitchen.

February Events

Tuesday, February 10

Chronicling America for Historical Research

12:00 p.m.–1:00 p.m.

Library of Congress

[Virtual](#)

Mission: Genealogy, Atlantic Roundtable

12:00 p.m.–1:00 p.m.

MissionGenealogy

[Virtual](#)

Tracing Your Scottish Ancestors: Online Resources with Chris Paton

12:30 p.m.–1:30 p.m.

Family Tree (UK)

[Virtual](#)

Discovering your Eastern European Ancestors on MyHeritage, with James L. Tanner

1:00 p.m.–2:00 p.m.

Legacy Family Tree Webinars

[Virtual](#)

Tuesday Explorers presents Tracing My Roots

2:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m.

AARP Virtual Community Center

[Virtual](#)

Geography and Map Division Virtual Orientation: Nautical Charts

2:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m.

Library of Congress

[Virtual](#)

Slave Status & Inheritance We Rise: Challenging His(story) in Turbulent Times

5:30 p.m.–6:30 p.m.

African American Genealogy Group

[Virtual](#)

February Events

Tuesday, February 10

African American Heritage Dolls - Museum at the Library

5:30 p.m.-7:30 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library, Mountain Street Lobby (3rd Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

No registration required

Genealogy Class: African American Research

5:30 p.m.-7:30 p.m.

Fort Smith Library

3201 Rogers Avenue, Fort Smith, AR 72903

No registration required

Wednesday, February 11

Genealogy Writing Workshop—Monthly Writing & Critique Group

10:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library - First Security Bank Board Room (2nd Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

No registration required

AncestryDNA® 101

12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.

Ancestry.com

[Virtual](#)

DNA Testing for African Ethnicities, Updated 2026

12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.

Birmingham Public Library

[Virtual](#)

The Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen

12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m.

Presented by AARP Virtual Community Center

[Virtual](#)

February Events

Wednesday, February 11

No, Your Ancestors' Names Were Not Changed at Ellis Island

1:00 p.m.–2:30 p.m.

Presented by JewishGen

[Virtual](#)

Black Genealogy: Moving Beyond the 1870 Census

5:00 p.m.–6:00 p.m.

Presented by Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

[Virtual](#)

Saturday, February 14

Event Education–Finding The Last Enslaver: Guidance & Case Studies

10:00 a.m.–11:30 a.m.

Tennessee Genealogical Society

[Virtual](#)

Sunday, February 15

Black History: Reclaiming Our Roots with Rooted Movement Collective

2:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m.

Fort Smith Library

3201 Rogers Avenue, Fort Smith, AR

No registration required

Monday, February 16

Volunteer Genealogy Assistance with D.A.R. Members

5:00 p.m.–7:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library, Genealogy Library

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

No registration required

February Events

Tuesday, February 17

Black History Month Readers Advisory Kit

All day

Argenta Public Library

420 Main St., Little Rock, AR

No registration required

Wednesday, February 18

Navigate Your Tree Like a Pro

12:00 p.m.–1:00 p.m.

Ancestry.com

[Virtual](#)

Thursday, February 19

Preserving Old Family Photos, Videos, and More

12:00 p.m.–1:00 p.m.

Ancestry.com

[Virtual](#)

Sunday, February 22

Tales & Traditions - Story Time for Grown-ups

2:00 p.m.–3:30 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library - Adult Classroom 408 (4th Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

No registration required

Monday, February 23

Volunteer Genealogy Assistance with D.A.R. Members

5:00 p.m.–7:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library, Genealogy Library

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

No registration required

Southern Ancestors—Black and White in the Freedmen's Bureau: A Rich Resource for Researching Southern Ancestors

6:30 p.m.–8:00 p.m.

Heritage Seekers

[Virtual](#)

February Events

Wednesday, February 25

Break Down Genealogy Brick Walls

3:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m.

Fayetteville Public Library, Genealogy Library (4th Floor)

401 W. Mountain Street, Fayetteville, AR

No registration required

Thursday February 26

Personal Archiving

12:00 p.m.–1:30 p.m.

Presented by Roberts Library of Arkansas History and Art

[Virtual](#)



Photo Courtesy of the Fayetteville Public Library

NAGS Writing Contest

The Northwest Arkansas Genealogical Society has worked for over 50 years to help researchers build their trees and discover the stories of their ancestors. We are excited to host our third annual writing contest with a new prompt to inspire your research.

Prompt: “New Discoveries”

Have you recently uncovered a surprising ancestor, broken through a brick wall, or solved a family mystery? Perhaps you found an old cache of letters or connected with a distant cousin through DNA. We’d love to hear the story and how it reshaped your understanding of your family.

Deadline: March 31, 2026

Judging Criteria

Submissions will be evaluated in four categories, each scored on a scale from 1 to 5:

- 1 = Does not meet the standard
- 5 = Exceeds expectations

Evaluation Criteria

- **Relevance to Prompt** – Clearly connects to the “New Discoveries” theme, showing a meaningful breakthrough or insight.
- **Quality of Writing** – Well-written, engaging, and organized; the narrative flows smoothly and holds the reader’s interest.
- **Quality of Research** – Demonstrates strong research skills with accurate details, historical context, and (where applicable) sources or citations.
- **Creativity** – Uses originality and thoughtful storytelling to bring genealogical research to life in a compelling way.

Email your submission to backtracker@nwagenealogicalsociety.org with “2026 NAGS Writing Contest” written in the subject line.

NAGS Writing Contest

Rules

Eligibility: Open to all genealogists and family historians, regardless of experience. No entry fee or membership required. NAGS board members and judges are not eligible.

Length: Stories should be no longer than 2,000 words in length. Source citations, family group sheets/pedigree charts, and photos (with captions) are encouraged but not required. Citations, charts, and photo descriptions will not be included in the word count.

Format

- Submit your entry as a Microsoft Word document (.doc or .docx)
- Optional: Attach photos, charts, or graphics separately as high-resolution JPEG files
- All submissions must be original work. Please avoid content involving living individuals.

Legal

By submitting, you grant the Northwest Arkansas Genealogical Society one-time print and digital rights. Submissions may be edited for grammar or clarity. Copyright remains with the author. Entries must be unpublished at the time of submission.

Identification

In your email, include: Your full name, story title, mailing address, phone number, and approximate word count (Your contact information is only used to identify and notify winners.)

Awards

1st prize: 6 month U.S. Ancestry membership and 1 year membership to NAGS

2nd prize: Ancestry DNA test + 1 year membership to NAGS

3rd prize: 1 year membership to NAGS

Winning entries will be published in future issues of The Backtracker

Winners will be announced at our April 2026 meeting. We will also publish the winners on our Facebook page www.facebook.com/groups/nwags and our website www.nwagenealogicalsociety.org.

Breaking Down that Ugly 1870 Brick Wall: Tracing Your Enslaved Ancestors

By Melvin Collier



You've traced your African American ancestry back to the 1870 U.S. Census, only to hit what genealogists often call the "1870 brick wall." You've read books and articles about slavery in America and now face the question: How do I research my family's history beyond emancipation? How do I identify and document my enslaved ancestors?

Step One: Determine If Your Ancestors Were Enslaved

Before diving into records, first confirm whether your ancestors were enslaved. Start by checking the 1860 U.S. Census. If you locate your family living in a slave state and listed by name, they were Free People of Color (FPOC). Although over 200,000 African Americans were free before the Civil War, the vast majority (more than 4 million) were enslaved, particularly in the South.

If your family was enslaved, identifying the last slave owner is essential. Enslaved people were considered property, and their names typically appear only in records belonging to their enslavers. Without knowing who enslaved your ancestors, you cannot move further into slavery-era records.

Early in my own journey, I assumed all African Americans adopted the surnames of their last slave owners. But I discovered this wasn't always true. While some did, many chose entirely different names or had surnames that were used secretly before emancipation.

Breaking Down that Ugly 1870 Brick Wall

Key Realities to Keep in Mind

- Slavery ended in 1865 in most of the South.
- Spouses were often enslaved on different farms/plantations.
- Enslavement by the same family across generations was common.
- Some enslaved people had multiple owners—including women.
- Some African Americans adopted surnames unrelated to slave owners.
- “Mulatto” ancestry doesn’t always indicate the slave owner was the father.
- Slave owners obtained enslaved people through:
 - Inheritance
 - Public auctions and slave markets
 - Sheriff sales
 - Estate liquidations

Step Two: Revisit Family Conversations

Reinterview your elders. Ask if your family always used the same surname or if it changed after slavery. Record any stories about ancestors who lived during or immediately after the slavery era. Clarify where the family lived post-emancipation; they often remained near the plantation. Take note of surnames of other local families that could indicate kinship.

Step Three: Study the 1870 Neighborhood – Cluster Research

Once you find your family in the 1870 Census, examine the entire neighborhood. Pay close attention to white families living nearby. Scroll at least ten pages before and after your ancestors’ household. Formerly enslaved people often remained in proximity to their enslavers or fellow freed people from the same farm or plantation. This method, known as cluster genealogy, can help identify potential slave owners and community networks.

Step Four: Investigate the 1850 and 1860 Slave Schedules

Use clues from cluster research to explore the 1850 and 1860 Slave Schedules. Most U.S. federal slave schedules from 1850 and 1860 do not include the names of enslaved people, only their age, sex, and color, listed under the name of the enslaver. However, there are a few notable exceptions where the names of enslaved people do appear. Compare this data with what you know about your ancestors, but be cautious not to draw conclusions without corroborating records.

Also consult the 1850 and 1860 population censuses. These can help identify white families with matching surnames or households linked to the names from the slave schedules.

Breaking Down that Ugly 1870 Brick Wall

Step Five: Research the Slaveholding Family

Deeply investigate the potential slaveholding family. Their records will likely contain references to your ancestors. Focus on:

- Migration patterns and places of birth (slave owners and your ancestors)
- Death records and wills
- Maiden names, children, and sons-in-law
- Parents of the slave owner and parents of his wife/wives

If a woman appears as the slave owner in slave schedules, probate, or other records, she may have inherited slaves from her husband or father. Trace their histories as well.

Plantation records, if they survive, can be goldmines of information. Check with local historical societies or state archives. Check out some online resources [here](#).

Step Six: Search County Court Records

Since enslaved people were legally treated as property, court records often reference them by first name. The most valuable records include:

- Wills and Probate Files: Often list enslaved people by name, age, or value.
- Estate Inventories and Appraisals: Detail property, enslaved people included.
- Deeds: Bills of sale and transfers may list names and transactions.
- Civil Lawsuits: May involve enslaved people in disputes.
- Tax Records: Occasionally list enslaved people.

These documents are typically held at county courthouses, but many are also microfilmed at state archives or digitized on sites like FamilySearch.org, Ancestry.com, and Fold3.com. Also, check your state for any online records. A good example is the Library of Virginia's Chancery Records site that can be accessed [here](#).

Step Seven: Use Other Resources

Explore additional collections and databases:

- Civil War Pension Records – www.nara.gov
- Freedman's Bank Records – [Ancestry](#), [FamilySearch](#)
- Freedmen's Bureau Records – www.discoverfreedmen.org
- Southern Claims Commission Files – [Ancestry](#), [Fold3](#)
- Slave Narratives, Church Records, Donated Family Papers
- FamilySearch Full-Text Search – familysearch.org/en/search/full-text

Breaking Down that Ugly 1870 Brick Wall

State archives and historical societies often hold additional unique materials. Everything is not online.

Step Eight: Learn from Case Studies and Others' Journeys

Reading blogs, books, and case studies by other genealogists can provide direction and encouragement. Enslaved ancestor research is not a linear or easy process; it's a challenging journey that requires time, persistence, and critical thinking. But many others have done it, and their roadmaps can guide you.

I've shared many successful cases on my own blog and encourage others to read widely and never give up. Our ancestors deserve to be found — and remembered.



Printed with permission from [Roots Revealed](#), a blog by Melvin Collier, July 17, 2025. Melvin holds a Master of Arts in African American Studies from Clark Atlanta University. He has published three books on African American genealogy and history, as well as appeared on Who Do You Think You Are, as one of the expert genealogists in the Spike Lee episode (2010). He gives presentations on AA genealogical and DNA topics and was awarded the 2016 Paul Edward Sluby, Sr. /Jean Sampson-Scott Meritorious Achievement Award, the 2nd highest award bestowed by the Afro-American Historical and Genealogy Society (AAHGS).

The Agricultural Census

By Gena Philibert-Ortega

This article is part of an ongoing "Introduction to Genealogy" series – Gena Philibert-Ortega shows how an additional census conducted by the government every ten years, the Agricultural Census, can help you with your family history research. Gena is a genealogist and author of the book "From the Family Kitchen."

In family history research, one of our go-to resources is the population schedules of the U.S. federal census. These decennial schedules, which we are most familiar with, provide important information about our ancestors such as name, age, residence – and, in later years, familial relationships, occupations, and state where born.

It's helpful to know that, while the population schedules are an important genealogy resource, there is other information that the Census Bureau collected that can be equally valuable to family historians. One such source is the Agricultural Schedule (sometimes called the Agricultural Census).

**FARMERS URGED
TO AID CENSUS**

Enumerators Will Visit 7,000,000
Farms in January to Get
Important Data; Help
Them, Is Plea

FIGURING IS NECESSARY

In an advisory capacity, the United States Department of Agriculture is assisting the Bureau of Census in preparations for taking the 1920 census. Because the farmer usually is busy in the early spring and also because the farm herds and flocks are not as replete at this period as at some other season, the date, of the census has been changed to January 1, 1920, instead of April 1. Hence, on January 1 in all sections of the country enumerators will begin the

What Are the Agricultural Schedules?

The Agricultural Census is an enumeration of farmers and their farms. Though the Agricultural Schedule has been a part of census enumerations since 1850, the years available to us are 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880.

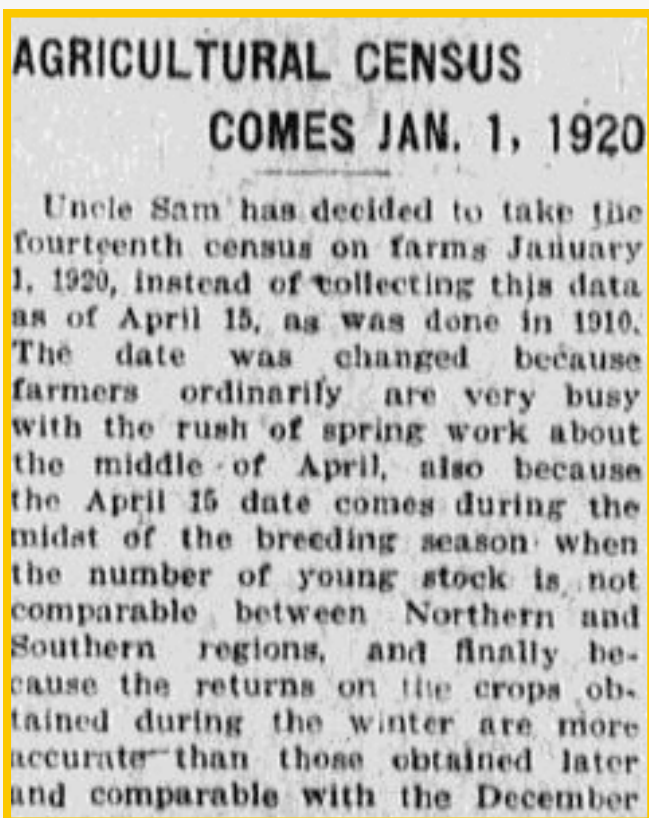
These schedules provide the following information: name of owner or manager, number of improved and unimproved acres, and the cash value of the farm, farming machinery, livestock, animals slaughtered during the past year, and "homemade manufactures." The schedules also indicate the number of horses, mules, "milch cows," working oxen, other cattle, sheep, and swine owned by the farmer.

Lexington Herald (Lexington, Kentucky), 3 November 1919, page 13

The Agricultural Census

The amount of oats, rice, tobacco, cotton, wool, peas and beans, Irish potatoes, sweet potatoes, barley, buckwheat, orchard products, wine, butter, cheese, hay, clover seed, other grass seeds, hops, hemp, flax, flaxseed, silk cocoons, maple sugar, cane sugar, molasses, and beeswax and honey produced during the preceding year is also noted. The 1880 schedules provide additional details, such as the amount of acreage used for each kind of crop, the number of poultry, and the number of eggs produced.*

Not every farm was included in the Agricultural Schedule. The 1850 schedule did not include farms that produced less than \$100. The 1870 enumeration did not include farms less than three acres or ones that produced less than \$500 worth of products.**



*Baltimore American (Baltimore, Maryland),
4 July 1919, page 7*

Why Is the Agricultural Census Important to My Genealogy?

Do you have farming ancestors? Are you working on a farmhouse history? Want to write more about your great-grandfather who owned a farm? The Agricultural Schedule can help.

My ancestor, Moses Henry Chatham, was murdered in November 1879 in Austin County, Texas, at the young age of 38 years. He left behind a wife and eight children, including a newly born son. I wondered what life was like during those early years of widowhood with small children for Jane Chatham. Surprisingly, the Agricultural Schedule was one of the places that helped me learn that answer. The 1880 Agricultural Schedule for Austin County, Texas, was taken in June 1880, about seven months after her husband's death.

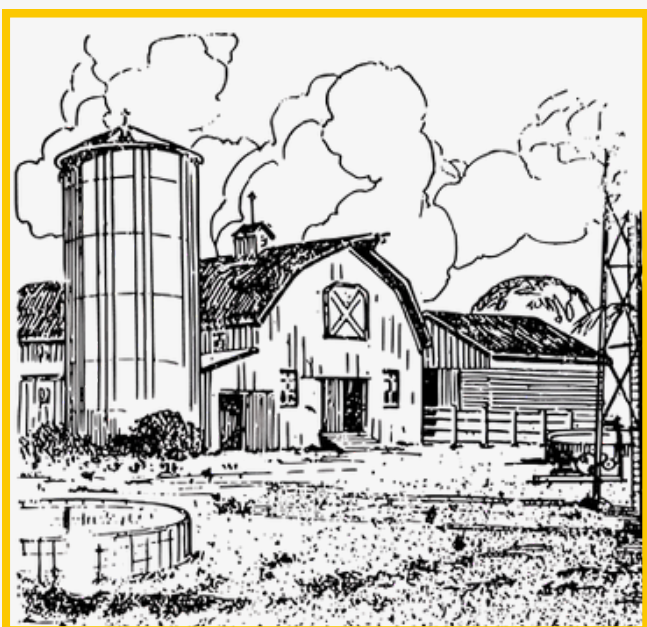
* "Nonpopulation Census Records," National Archives

(<https://www.archives.gov/research/census/nonpopulation>; accessed 1 June 2017).

** Ibid.

The Agricultural Census

In this enumeration, Jane is listed as the person who “conducts this farm,” and it’s her name that appears next to the checkmark in the owner column. For the improved land category, she is listed as having 24 acres of tilled land, 10 acres of permanent meadow/permanent pasture/orchards or vineyards. She also had 10 acres of unimproved land that was considered “woodland and forest.” The value of her farm, including land, fences, and buildings, was \$1,000. She also had machinery worth \$20 and livestock worth \$150. The worth of all farm productions (sold, consumed, or on hand for 1879) is listed at \$300. Animals on her farm included 4 horses, 6 working oxen, 4 milk cows, 6 “other,” 8 swine, and 20 poultry. Her only crops were 8 acres of Indian Corn and 12 acres of cotton.



The 1880 Agricultural Census provides me a look at Jane’s life after the death of her husband. I find this enumeration an important addition to the population schedule, since the 1880 population schedule lists no occupation for Jane, and refers to her 17-year-old son’s occupation as “farmer,” which downplays her role as the farm owner. This additional Agricultural Schedule helps me better understand how she provided for her family and is one more source about her life.

Now It’s Your Turn

The Agricultural Schedule can be found online through subscription websites. You may also want to consult the catalog for the state library or archive, and/or state historical society, where your ancestor lived. FamilySearch has some non-population schedules that can be found by conducting a Catalog search on the keywords “non-population” or “agriculture.”

To learn more about the census and the enumerator’s instructions, consult the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) website. Download blank census forms from the [National Archives](#) website.

This article originally appeared in the [GenealogyBank](#) blog on June 27, 2017. It has been reprinted with permission.

African American Heritage Resources

During Black History Month, we are featuring a list of resources to help you research your African American heritage.

Blogs

- [Melvin Collier's Roots Revealed](#)
- [Robyn Smith's Reclaiming Kin](#)
- [Dr. Shelley Murphy's Family Tree Girl](#)
- [Angela Walton-Raji's African Native American Blog](#)
- [Renate Yarborough Sanders's Blog](#)

Authors

- [Bernice Alexander Bennett](#)
- [Margo Lee Williams](#)
- [LaBrenda Garrett Nelson](#)
- [Angela Walton-Raji](#)

Podcasts

- [Speak On It!](#) by Janice Gilyard and Cherekana Feliciano
- [Journey Through the Generations](#) by Phillip and Trisha Cummings
- [Research at the National Archives & Beyond](#) by Bernice Alexander Bennett

Additional Online Resources

- [African Ancestry](#)
- [Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society](#)
- [Find Your African American Ancestors](#)
- [National Archives \(NARA\)](#)
- [10 Million Names](#)
- [Black Pearls of Genealogy \(BPOG\)](#)
- [African American Resource Guide \(PDF\) \(Ancestry.com\)](#)
- [Mapping the Freedman's Bureau](#)
- [Library of Congress – Chronicling America](#)
- [U.S. Census Overview \(PDF\)](#)
- [Genetic Genealogy](#)
- [Nomini Hall Slave Legacy Project](#)
- [Northwest African American Museum Genealogy Center](#)
- [Our Black Ancestry.com](#)
- [RootsWeb.com](#)
- [The Digital Library on American Slavery](#)
- [Black Past.org](#)
- [Nonpopulation Census Records](#)

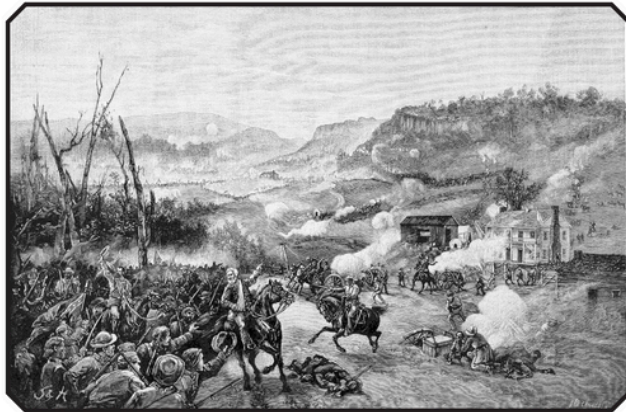
Celebrating 250 Years

It's 2026, and on July 4th, the United States will celebrate its 250th birthday. AGS is now accepting submissions for our Summer edition of the *Arkansas Family Historian*, specifically surrounding families who lived in early colonial America during the Revolutionary War and whose descendants migrated to Arkansas.

Share your genealogical research with us today! We are looking for family records and research that crosses multiple generations.

Submit your family story to afh@argsoc.org.

THE ARKANSAS FAMILY HISTORIAN



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bookmark our website!*



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[LinkedIn.com/company/Arkansas-
Genealogical-Society-inc](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Arkansas-Genealogical-Society-inc)



[ArGenSoc.org](https://www.ArGenSoc.org)

So, You Have Arkansas Roots?

*At our annual AGS member meeting, we voted to increase membership dues to **\$35 per year in January 2026.***

Members receive access to our quarterly publication, The Arkansas Family Historian, as well as many other benefits!

Sign up at [argensoc.org/join-us!](https://argensoc.org/join-us)

AGS Ezine Administrative Staff

Contributions: If you have news for *The AGS Ezine*, send it to ezine@argensoc.org.

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