

"Black Indians" and Their Records

A rich source of information pertaining to African-American ancestors exists in Native American records. "Black Indian Genealogy Research: African- American Ancestors among the Five Civilized Tribes," a book by Angela Y. Walton-Raji, shows where to find and how to use what are called the Indian Freedman records. It also discusses the topics of "Black Indians" and tri-racial groups from the Upper South.

The historical relationship between Native Americans and African-Americans may be one of the longest unwritten chapters in the history of our country. Despite the commonly held perception that slavery consisted only of white people owning black people, the reality was much more complex. There were many blacks who were free; there were blacks who owned blacks; and many Indians, particularly the Five Civilized Tribes, owned African slaves.

When the Five Civilized Tribes--Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw and Seminole -- were removed from the southeastern states in the 1830s to what would become Oklahoma, their slaves went with them. Approximately 1,600 black Cherokee slaves made the infamous Trail of Tears trip. While most slaves were freed in the United States in 1865, emancipation of those in Indian Territory was not official until 1866, when emancipation treaties with the Indian tribes were signed. Most of these freed blacks remained in Indian Territory (now eastern OK), staying in the Indian nation in which they had lived as slaves.

In the early 1900s, when it came time to apply for funds and land as freedmen of these Indian nations, the "Black Indians" had to distinguish themselves from the other blacks who had poured into the Indian Territory after the Civil War. An Indian freedman, as they were called, had to testify in front of a court-appointed panel known as the Dawes Commission. The recordings of this court produced the Indian Freedmen records that are of immense value to today's genealogists. For one born a slave, it was critical that his or her slave owner was a member of the Indian nation being claimed.

The full testimonies of these freedmen from all the Indian nations are at the National Archives on microfilm, and accessible through other repositories. "Black Indian Genealogy Research" is available (\$22 postpaid) from Heritage Books, Inc., 1540-E Pointer Ridge Pl., Bowie, MD 20716 (call 1-800-398-7709). This superb guide to these genealogical records also provides excellent historical background. Many African-American families discover they are of tri-racial ancestry. Relations between blacks and Indians are known to have occurred as far back as the 1600s. While most tri-racial families identify as either black or white, genetically and historically, they are often tri-racial descendants of black, white and red ancestors. The author includes two lists of family names that researchers will find most helpful. One is the freedman surnames from the final rolls of the Five Civilized Tribes, arranged by tribes. The other list contains surnames of some of the known tri-racial families of the Upper South.

Walton-Raji is also the editor of an outstanding periodical called "The Frontier Freedman's Journal," published semiannually. Subscriptions rates are \$8, and orders should be addressed to 6508 Woodbridge Circle, Baltimore, MD 21228; (call 410-719-7899). This outstanding journal focuses on African American genealogical and historical records of the South, Indian Territory and the Southwest.

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