

Tracing Footsteps: Three Days of History, Genealogy, and Connection

From February 5–7, the Georgia Archives and the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society Metro Atlanta Chapter (AAHGSATL.org) welcomed the public for the 2026 African American Heritage Symposium, “Tracing Footsteps: African American Journeys Across 250 Years.” With more than 200 attendees across three days, the symposium offered time and space to learn, ask questions, and build skills that support historical research and family discovery. Just as importantly, it created opportunities for attendees to connect with fellow researchers, share strategies, and learn from one another, strengthening the sense of community that makes this work sustainable.

The first two days featured lectures that examined major eras in Georgia and U.S. history through a variety of sources and perspectives. Presentations explored the Revolutionary era through Reconstruction and Jim Crow, including sessions on Gullah/Geechee culture and African American civic and community life. Presenters encouraged attendees to consider questions of identity, community, and civic participation across these eras.



Michael Henderson
presenting
“First in Our State,”
Feb. 5, 2026.
Photo Credit:
[William Durant/AAHGS
Metro Atlanta Chapter](#)



Dr. Herman “Skip” Mason, Jr.
presenting “Encoded in Us,”
Feb. 7, 2026. Photo Credit:
[William Durant/AAHGS
Metro Atlanta Chapter](#)

Saturday shifted from historical context to hands-on action, focusing on African American genealogy and the work of rebuilding family stories from scattered records. Attendees could choose between a “Beginner Genealogy” workshop for those starting their family history research or a “Beyond 1870” track that addressed a common barrier in African American family research and paired traditional sources with strategies for interpreting DNA results. The symposium concluded with a keynote by Rev. Dr. Herman “Skip” Mason, Jr., who spoke to DNA as a powerful tool for reconnecting people with family history and expanding what researchers can learn from both records and genetic evidence. The day reinforced a simple truth: when people are given the tools and the encouragement to keep going, the past becomes something we can name, carry forward, and pass on.



Clevlyn Anderson, president of AAHGSATL, pays tribute to Emma Davis Hamilton, Feb. 7, 2026.
Photo Credit: [William Durant/AAHGS Metro Atlanta Chapter](#)

This year's symposium was also marked by a moment of remembrance. We honor the memory of Emma Davis Hamilton, a founding member of the AAHGS Metro Atlanta Chapter and a dedicated advocate for African American historical and genealogical research. Emma was a generous, steady force behind this program, helping to shape its vision, offering speaker recommendations, and encouraging the work at every step. Her commitment to ensuring African American stories are preserved, researched, and shared continues in the community she helped build and in the researchers she inspired.

The symposium was made possible through the support of the Clayton County Tourism Authority ([SeeClaytonCountyGA.com](#)) and the Friends of Georgia Archives and History ([FOGAH.org](#)). Explore symposium session recordings below, hosted on the Georgia Archives YouTube channel ([Youtube.com/@GeorgiaArchives](#)).

Playlist of Recorded Sessions:

Click the button or scan the QR code to watch recorded sessions on the Georgia Archives YouTube channel.

**View
the 2026
AAHS
Playlist**



Featured Session:

Click the image below to watch Tammy Ozier explain how you can trace your ancestors beyond 1870 using records and community connections.

2026 African American Heritage Symposium

**BREAKING THE
1870 BARRIER**

By Tammy Ozier



UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF GEORGIA

GENEALOGY TIDBITS
BY KENNETH H. THOMAS, JR.

Calendar:

March 5-7, RootsTech is the largest genealogy event in the USA and will be held in person in Salt Lake City and virtually. Many recent innovations in genealogy have been announced at this event. Visit familysearch.org/en/rootstech/ for more information.

Beginner's Focus:

Each state typically has a State Archives or State Library. Check here first to find out what they may have digitized or made available online that might help you in your research. Then, for states relevant to your research, keep checking back as more things are often added. Each state differs in what it makes available online. Alabama's state archive website, archives.alabama.gov, includes digitized Alabama Supreme Court Records. The Library of Virginia has a great searchable database of Chancery Court records at lva.virginia.gov/collections/cri. If you can, you should also visit the state archive most important to your research. An in-person visit can help you identify what is not online and must be researched on-site. Remember: Not everything is online.



Society Focus/Library Focus:

The Columbus Public Library has a great genealogy room that is open during all library hours. They have a large number of published genealogy books and periodicals from all the southeastern states, as well as quite a few from the rest of the country. They also have many family history books and good materials from England. Visit www.cvlga.org and click "Research and Learn" to view their collection. An in-person visit might be worthwhile.

DNA:

Recently, I helped a friend rework his maternal grandfather's ancestry. The family information he had been working with for over forty years turned out to be wrong or incomplete. If we had paid more attention to his high DNA matches, we probably would have figured this out sooner. So, if you are serious about doing family research, you should consider doing DNA testing yourself and try to encourage testing of close relatives on different branches of your family. If you're considering DNA testing, Ancestry.com has the largest database available. For example, I have 80,000 DNA matches on Ancestry.com, with only 10,000 at FamilyTreeDNA.com. DNA testing is not an option anymore; it is a must.



UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF GEORGIA

GENEALOGY TIDBITS (CONTINUED)

African American Genealogy Focus/Black History Month

Focus:

In late January, [Emma Davis Hamilton](#), one of Georgia's leading genealogists, passed away. She had been one of the founding members of the Metro Atlanta Chapter of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, and a major champion for teaching people about genealogy and history. Some of her lectures can be found for free on YouTube. You can search for her full name in quotes. She would be glad to know her spirit and her knowledge can live on via the Internet.

Website News:

You can always find some websites you may have never heard of or be reminded of some you had forgotten about if you go to Family Tree Magazine's website and look for their annual '101 Best Websites' list. Here is the free link for 2025: familytreemagazine.com/best-genealogy-websites. You will find more there than you will have time to check out.

Georgia Archives Research Tidbits:

While U.S. Census records have been digitized and are available online through Ancestry.com and other sites, you may do better by consulting a published census index book. Index books were published for many censuses and many states by private companies. Some libraries have even removed these volumes from their shelves, mistakenly assuming the digitized online versions are all that researchers need. In practice, however, an ancestor's name may be incorrectly indexed or spelled in unexpected ways, and there may be too many spelling variations to locate them easily online.

If you visit the Georgia Archives, you will find many published census index books centralized on a large bookcase in the Research Room, separate from the main book collection. You can also find additional Georgia indexes cataloged and shelved throughout the stacks, mixed in with county history books. For that reason, do not overlook these print indexes if you cannot find your ancestors in the digitized census records. It is worth a try.

Questions? Contact Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr.:
P. O. Box 901, Decatur, GA 30031, or email him through his website, kenthomasongenealogy.com.

COMING UP AT THE GEORGIA ARCHIVES

MARCH

March 13, 12 pm - 1 pm Lunch & Learn

*George III and the British
View of the American
Revolution*

by Dr. Patrick Alitt,
Emory University

APRIL

April 10-11 April History Symposium + Lunch & Learn

featuring
*Whose American Revolution
Was It - and Whose Is It?*
by Gregory Nobles,
Georgia Tech

MAY

Lunch & Learn May 8, 12 pm - 1 pm

*Trade and Diplomacy in
1700s Native South*
by Matthew Sparacio,
Georgia State University

Exhibit May 16 - July 18

*Georgia's
Declaration
of Independence*