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**Georgia Archives and the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society
(AAHGS) Metro Atlanta Chapter Present:**

**African American Heritage Symposium 2026
“Tracing Footsteps: African American Journeys Across 250 Years”**

The Georgia Archives and the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS) Metro Atlanta Chapter present the 2026 African American Heritage Symposium, “Tracing Footsteps: African American Journeys Across 250 Years,” a Semiquincentennial-focused exploration of history, culture, and family research.

Join us Thursday, February 5–Saturday, February 7, 2026, at the Georgia Archives, 5800 Jonesboro Road, Morrow, GA 30260. Thursday and Friday will feature lectures on history and culture. Saturday focuses on genealogy with practical guidance for beginning and advanced researchers. This free, in-person event is made possible in large part by a grant from the Clayton County Tourism Authority and the support of the Friends of Georgia Archives and History.

Space is limited for some sessions, and registration is required for each day. Registration will close by Tuesday, February 3, 2026, at 11:59 p.m. Please register here: <https://tinyurl.com/AAHS2026>. For any registration questions, please email Robin Klemm at robin.klemm@usg.edu.

Thursday, February 5, 2026: Early Georgia and Turning Points

12:00 p.m.–1:00 p.m.: Session 1

“The Identities and Cultures of Gullah/Geechee Ancestors during the Revolutionary Era in Coastal Georgia and Lowcountry South Carolina” by Dr. Ras Michael Brown, Associate Professor, Georgia State University

The era of the American Revolution brought significant changes to the identities and cultures of African descendants in the coastal areas of Georgia and South Carolina. The war disrupted the massive displacement of captive Africans to North America, which almost entirely interrupted the arrival of newcomers from the Motherland for the first time since the 1740s. African-based perceptions and practices did not fade away; however, as Black communities reconfigured and reinforced their foundational grounding, they ultimately created Gullah/Geechee identities and cultures that endured long after this tumultuous period.

1:15 p.m.–2:15 p.m.: Session 2

“First in Our State: A Revolutionary Achievement” by Michael Henderson

From Louisiana native to U.S. Naval officer to family history researcher, Michael N. Henderson’s journey has included many firsts. In this presentation, he highlights the groundbreaking genealogy research that led him to become the first African American member of the Georgia Society, Sons of the American Revolution, and later,

his rise to the office of President of the Button Gwinnett Chapter. He explains the impact he has had in Georgia by recognizing several “forgotten” Revolutionary War patriots, and his efforts to share his story internationally, pave the way for others, and leave a legacy for his family. His inspiring story exemplifies the intertwined legacies of freedom and perseverance during America’s struggle for independence.

2:30 p.m.–3:30 p.m.: Session 3

“African American Civil War-Reconstruction visions of Freedom and the Militia, 1865-1880” by Dr. Gregory Mixon

Black Georgians engaged the Civil War and Reconstruction eras as opportunities to define themselves as citizens of the nation and the state. In that context, Black male Georgians joined two types of militia organizations. The militia companies in both cases were instrumental in defining citizenship and belonging and in providing ways to organize. One connected Black people to the nation’s antebellum militia defense legacy, and the other to civic, community, and service traditions following the Civil War. Both served the African American search for freedom and inclusion promised by the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, as white Georgians engaged in the process of becoming citizens of the United States. Newspapers, militia records, county histories, governor’s records, legislative records, personal papers, and scholarly studies each contributed to exploring African American Civil War-Reconstruction history in Georgia.

Friday, February 6, 2026: Community, Movement, and Lived Experience

9:30 a.m.–10:30 a.m.: Session 1

“I’m Here to Demand my Rights!” by Velma Maia Thomas

In 1868, after being wrongfully expelled from the Georgia legislature, Henry McNeal Turner delivered a blistering speech, demanding to be treated as a citizen and respected as a man. This session explores the life of Turner, chaplain in the United States Colored Troops, duly elected state representative, bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and leading Pan Africanist. Turner’s fiery oratory and clear analysis of race prejudice made him among the most respected Black leaders of the 19th century.

10:45 a.m.–11:45 a.m.: Session 2

“In Pursuit of ‘Their Highest Potential’: Black Georgians, Segregation Scholarships, and Postbaccalaureate Education during the Age of Jim Crow” by Dr. Crystal Sanders

In the segregated South, Black students who aspired to education beyond the bachelor’s degree encountered obstacles at nearly every turn. While more than 100 public and private Black colleges existed in the region, training beyond the bachelor’s degree was almost impossible to obtain. Before 1936, there were only seven schools in the South, all private institutions, where African Americans could pursue graduate or professional study. No Black institution conferred the Ph.D. degree until 1955. To feign compliance with the legal doctrine of ‘separate but equal’, sixteen states, including Georgia, authorized the use of public tax dollars for Black residents to go out of state to pursue postbaccalaureate degree programs that were available in-state to white residents.

12:45 p.m.–2:00 p.m.: Session 3

Exclusive Georgia Archives Tour

This program includes a behind-the-scenes tour of the Archives, offering a rare glimpse into the preservation and curation of historical documents. Attendees will have the opportunity to view and study original documents that are significant to African American history. This is a special chance to connect with the past and gain deeper insights into the heritage and contributions of African Americans. **Space is limited. Please be sure to register for the tour by Tuesday, February 3, 11:59 p.m.: <https://tinyurl.com/AAHS2026>.**

Saturday, February 7, 2026: African American Genealogy

Track One: African American Genealogy Basics Workshop

These sessions will cover the fundamentals of beginning your family history research, with a special focus on African American genealogy. You'll learn to critically analyze records, ensuring you gather accurate, comprehensive evidence. Practical tips on organizing your research findings, including software recommendations and strategies for building a research toolbox, will also be provided. The day concludes with a hands-on research session, giving attendees the chance to apply their newfound knowledge alongside experienced genealogical experts and Archives staff.

Space is limited. Please register for the workshop by Tuesday, February 3, 2026:

<https://tinyurl.com/AAHS2026>

9:30 a.m.–10:30 a.m.: Session 1

“Begin with YOU: Getting Started with Your Family Tree” by Tamu Taylor

You have an interest in researching your family tree, but where do you begin? This presentation will introduce the basic principles and methodology of African American genealogy, covering the steps to begin tracing your family history.

10:45 a.m.–11:45 a.m.: Session 2

“Don’t Take That Record at Face Value! Analyzing Records and Evaluating the Evidence” by Tamu Taylor

Now that you have found a record of your ancestor, do you stop there? Did that green leaf on Ancestry lead you to a tree with the motherlode of information about an ancestor? Don’t take that record at face value! Learn how to analyze documents and exhaust all possible clues for evidence before accepting the document as part of your research.

1:00 p.m.–2:00 p.m.: Session 3

“Genealogy Research Organization Tips and Tools” by Dawnya Lindsey

Discover effective methods and practical tips for organizing your genealogy research findings. Get recommendations on useful software and streamlined processes that will help you better utilize your research in family and group workshops. Additionally, learn how to build a comprehensive research toolbox to support your genealogical journey.

2:15 p.m.–3:15 p.m.: Session 4

Hands-on Research

Attendees will enjoy a hands-on research session in the Georgia Archives Reference Room with experienced genealogical experts from the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS) and members of the Georgia Archives' staff.

Track Two: Tracing Footsteps Beyond 1870

10:00 a.m.–11:00 a.m.: Session 1

“Paving the Way to the 1870 Brick Wall” by Tamika Strong, Genealogist

The ability to trace African American roots can vary depending on several factors. Collecting information and doing census research is just the tip of the iceberg. Join genealogist Tamika Strong in this interactive session as she discusses research techniques and methodologies to help researchers lay a strong foundation in preparation for approaching and breaking through the 1870 Brick Wall.

11:15 a.m.–12:15 p.m.: Session 2

“Breaking the 1870 Barrier in African American Genealogical Research” by Tammy Ozier

For many African American researchers, the 1870 census is both a breakthrough and a brick wall. This session offers practical methods for pushing past 1870 using case studies and key sources such as vital records, census schedules, Civil War records, and probate files. Attendees will see how FAN (Friends, Associates, and Neighbors) research and close reading of community connections can uncover ancestors who lived in the era of slavery.

1:15 p.m.–2:15 p.m.: Session 3

“Beyond the Match List: Practical Strategies for Interpreting Your DNA Results” by Stephanie Powers

You’ve taken a DNA test, now learn how to transform your match list into actionable research strategies that solve genealogical problems. This session teaches you three specific skills: mapping DNA segments to identify which ancestor they came from, using shared matches to break through brick walls, and avoiding the interpretation mistakes that waste months of research time. Whether your results have been sitting untouched for years or you check them weekly without knowing what to do next, you’ll leave with concrete techniques you can apply immediately to your own DNA matches and a clear action plan for integrating genetic evidence with your traditional research.

2:30 p.m.–3:30 p.m.: Session 4

Keynote Address: “Encoded in Us: How DNA Restores Memory, Reclaims Identity, and Reframes African American Family History” by Dr. Herman “Skip” Mason, Jr.

This lecture explores how DNA is more than science; it is a testimony. For African Americans whose histories were fragmented by enslavement, migration, and erasure, DNA offers a powerful tool to recover memory, correct the record, and reframe identity. What was once hidden in ships’ logs, plantation ledgers, and lost surnames and family secrets now speaks through our own bodies.

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The Georgia Archives is a unit of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. The Georgia Archives identifies, collects, manages, preserves, provides access to, and publicizes records and information of Georgia and its people, and assists state and local government agencies with their records management.

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