



LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson, JD, LLM, CG, CGL

Sharing Her Knowledge about African American Research

by Mary Penner, CG

Reflecting on her early days of genealogical research, LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson noted that she “made all the mistakes that others make without taking classes.” While more advanced genealogists are typically notorious class-course-institute-takers, most of us didn’t start out that way. Before she focused on getting a genealogical education, LaBrenda didn’t know there were proven methodologies and she didn’t think in terms of employing the genealogy standards. “By the time someone hears about an institute,” she said, “they’re probably already more advanced than a beginning genealogist.”

LaBrenda, like the rest of us, progressed through the genealogy education spectrum. Now she’s on the forefront of teaching about her specialty—African American research.

In 2019, LaBrenda coordinated the inaugural course on African American



research at the Salt Lake Institute of Genealogical Research (SLIG: slig.ugagenealogy.org). Even though it was considered a niche topic, it filled quickly and there was a wait list to get in the class. An updated version of the course will be offered again in 2021. The three instructors who contributed lectures to the 2019 institute, Judy G.

Russell, JD, CG, CGL, Michael Hait, CG, CGL, and Deborah Abbott, PhD, are all returning next year along with several new instructors.

While the SLIG course focused on some of the unique pre-1900 records that hold information about African Americans, one of her goals for the week was “to bring home to folks how universal the Genealogical Proof Standard is.” LaBrenda wanted researchers to understand (as others in our field have emphasized) that while ethnicities vary, the genealogy standards do not. Professional genealogists, librarians, lecturers, and others who don’t have personal African American research projects, still want to learn about the subject. “If you have good skills,” she commented, “you can work in this area.” She further commented that for pre-1870 research, researchers look primarily at the same records they would for non-enslaved people. Look for the enslaved, for



A group photo of LaBrenda's 2019 SLIG course attendees. Can you spot the APG members?

example, in the probate records of the slaveholding families.

LaBrenda had attended SLIG as a student for several years, but this was her first attempt to coordinate a week-long institute. She spent a lot of time preparing the proposal, including picking her instructors and making sure they would

be available for her course. She admitted that she “tends to overprepare,” but at the same time acknowledged that it does take “hours and hours to prepare a course.”

For those who want to teach and lecture, she recommends talking about the things you know best. Draw examples and methodologies from your

own research experiences. Even though LaBrenda is still learning new things about genealogy every day, she believes that when we focus on sharing content from our areas of expertise, we can have success as genealogy teachers.

Preparing for next year's SLIG isn't the only thing on LaBrenda's plate. She

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Kenyatta Berry, former APG President, attended LaBrenda's SLIG course. LaBrenda is holding a copy of Kenyatta's book, *The Family Tree Toolkit*.

is scheduled to teach at various institutes this year as well as at the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (aahgs.org) conference this fall.

Additionally, she's the president of the Board for Certification of Genealogists (bcgcertification.org). One of her main goals during her tenure is to enhance BCG's outreach and get more people interested in understanding and applying the genealogy standards to their research.

She's also the registrar general for the Sons and Daughters of the United States Middle Passage (sdusmp.org). This lineage society is open to those of African descent who were enslaved or indentured in America before slavery was abolished in 1865.

When considering her busy schedule, LaBrenda said, "My family tells me I'm busier now than when I was practicing law. But I love what I'm doing. There's no natural stopping point."

Most genealogists can relate to that sentiment. There is no stopping point because we're never done. LaBrenda, though, sees a broader purpose in her activities. She wants "Americans to understand the history of African Americans. If everyone had a better sense of history, including genealogy, that could be a force for good in our society."

Learn More from LaBrenda Garrett-Nelson

Check out some of LaBrenda's webinars and publications.

Webinars

These two Legacy Family Tree webinars require a subscription: familytreewebinars.com/labrendagarretnelson

- "Reasonably Exhaustive Research of African American Families That Came Out of Slavery," 6 October 2017
- "Analyzing Probate Records of Slaveholders to Identify Enslaved Ancestors," 15 August 2017

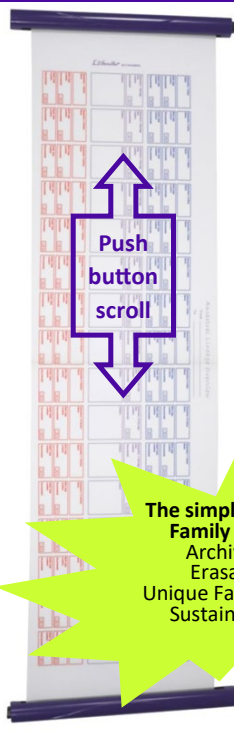
Purchase access to a National Genealogical Society lecture at playbackngs.com:

- "Using DNA to Support Family Lore Regarding an Enslaved Ancestral Couple," 10 May 2019

Publications

- *A Guide to Researching African American Ancestors in Laurens County, South Carolina and Selected Finding Aids* (Xlibris, 2016)
- "Researching African American Families that Came out of Slavery," *BCG Springboard* (blog), 5 January 2016, bcgcertification.org/researching-african-american-families-that-came-out-of-slavery

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