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## **Digitizing a history**

**Genealogists and researchers across the country may find tracing the roots of African American descendants much easier after next year.**

**More than 100 years ago, historical documents, including letters, personal records and census figures were compiled in the Freedmen's Bureau Records following the emancipation of slaves after the Civil War. The historical data includes information on emancipated slaves, freed blacks and black Union soldiers. There's lots of information, but it has been difficult to access because it was all on paper.**

**The records are set to go online next spring or summer, said Karen White, president of the Afro-American Historical Association of Fauquier County. She said that digitizing the documents will make the history - specifically the genealogy of families looking to map their family trees - much more accessible to the public.**

By: Haley Huie

In the past, White said the records were not indexed and were difficult for people to search. They are currently on microfilm; people often go to the Library of Congress or search other national archives for the records. According to a statement from the office of the governor, Virginia will be the first state in the country to index and digitize the documents.

The Afro-American Historical Association in Fauquier, located in The Plains, also stands to gain from the documents, White said. Since the historical association's goal is to collect a comprehensive history of the African American experience, the digitized records will better serve county residents.

"It gives you an idea of the mindset of the people," White said, explaining that everything from bank and marriage records to slave trades and emancipations are collected in the documents. Without access to the records, people often find it difficult to trace back to before the war because slaves were traded and families were easily split up.

"Slave marriages were not recognized as legally binding," she said. "You weren't seen as a human - as a family with all equal rights."

With so little documentation, it is difficult to learn the history of the people, White said. She recalled a time when she met a man doing research in Fauquier to find information about Jacob Cooper, a soldier who served with the U.S. Colored Troops during the Civil War. He was a descendant of Cooper, but had been unable to learn more about his family because there was no paper trail left from before or during the war.

"That's why it's so important. People weren't left in family groupings, they were dispersed all over," she said.

Part of the Cooper line had been broken, and White cited this as a reason that historical documents, such as the Freedmen's Bureau Records, should be available in an easy-to-search form. She hopes the documents will help teach people more about their heritage.

Although research is time-consuming, for some people it is a passion.

Jane Butler, a family researcher with the association, said she has used the Freedmen's Bureau Records for a number of years; it has helped her to follow marriages and trace her lineage.

She has been doing personal research for more than 30 years and can assist members of the community with in-house research at the AAHA's offices or can be contracted to do independent research on their family tree.

Some of things she's turned up surprised her. When she began looking through letters from soldiers to the Freedmen's Bureau, Butler said she was shocked by what she found. Instead of looking for money or material goods, the soldiers were searching for separated family members and transportation to go find them.

A special census taken just after the emancipation helped with tracking the number of African Americans in most of the country, but the records from Fauquier County are missing, Butler said. Both Culpeper and Rappahannock counties have the documents in their county offices.

"(Freedmen's Bureau Records) lets us know the link to our past. Nothing was written about us until after the Civil War," Butler said. She said the documents are very important on a personal level, as well as being helpful for doing research. Butler is looking forward to advances in research made possible by the records' digitization.

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