

A Perspective on Indexing Slaves' Names

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Abstract

The indexing of slave names poses problems for archivists who seek to create more detailed access to information about slaves that is contained in a wide variety of records. A system of indexing that uses the slaveowner's name as a primary reference point in finding aids is proposed. This methodology reflects the recordkeeping practices of the time and provides an additional element of identity, beyond first name, that allows different records to be connected with each other.

Almost a quarter-century ago, while describing types of archival records available to study North American slaves and slavery, Carol Merritt wrote in *Georgia Archive*, "At times, the historian of the Black family . . . may have to link individual people from record to record systematically." She urged "the development of finding aids to facilitate record access," particularly indexes that included slave names. She criticized the common past practice of excluding slave names from finding aids, concluding that omitting slave names "misrepresents the records and perpetuates the assumption that the Black past is unknowable."¹ Merritt's comments are as valid now as they were then. Many finding aids, otherwise effectively and logically constructed, seem to fall into confusion—even silence—in dealing with slave names.

Slaves are named and described in a variety of archival records of public and private origin. The public records for all states in which slavery existed contain a variety of documents naming slaves. These can include property records such as deeds, mortgages, bills of sale, and probate records (wills, inventories, appraisements, annual returns, estate sales and divisions). The records of courts of law and equity contain countless disputes over debts and title involving identified slave property. Criminal trials often included slaves as defendants, witnesses, and victims, or included incidental slave involvement in the crimes of

¹ Carole Merritt, "Slave Family Records: An Abundance of Material," *Georgia Archive* 6(Spring 1978), 16, 20.

free persons. Slaves are found in miscellaneous records such as coroners' inquests, petitions, manumissions, divorces (as property to be divided), sheriff's *fi fas* (orders for the seizure and sale of debtors' property), and minutes of town council meetings, to name just some of the common public records. In virtually all legal records (criminal trials being the significant exception), slaves were treated as property, and are therefore linked with specific slaveowners.²

Archival records of private origin, in which slaves can be found, range from the purely personal (letters and family Bibles, for example), to business (mercantile ledgers, plantation records, insurance policies), to social and organizational (such as church records). Family letters and personal diaries of slaveowners frequently mention the slaves in their own households, and sometimes discuss the doings of slaves belonging to others. Plantation records describe the management of slave laborers. Even the majority of church minute books that record slave members define their identity not just in terms of the slave's personal name, but as the property of a particular person. In all these records, while slaves are usually called only by first name (exceptions are discussed below), their identity in the community—whether as legal, social, spiritual or economic entities—as seen through the eyes of the persons who wrote the records, is defined by their association with the slaveowners.³

Archival finding aids are not always written to the level of identifying every person named in the holdings, whether slave or otherwise, but when names are to be included, there needs to be a consistent and logical methodology for including slaves' names. Similarly, archivists at local repositories are often asked to guide or assist projects undertaken by volunteers to index local records. Since such projects are often intended as genealogical aids, there is usually a heavy emphasis on listing persons named in the records. Dee Parmer Woodtor, author of *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity*, has described the principal strategy, equally applicable to a genealogist or historian, necessary for tracing individual enslaved persons: "Once you find the last slave owner, you are using his family history and genealogy as a guide to identify his recorded transactions that named slaves he *and* his extended family owned over time using primarily the family's personal records, if you can find them, and any public transactions

² Criminal trials of slaves are customarily titled as "The State vs [forename only], a slave" (presumably because criminal law was only concerned with slaves' moral capacity as persons, not with their property status). Even so, the slaves' owners are almost invariably identified in the text of the indictments and records of trial.

³ Not all records give a slaveowner's name the same way. For instance, church members may be known by their social names (for Southern men, often their middle names) rather than the names they used in business and legal transactions. The author encountered an example that caused him much confusion, where a Georgia slaveowner known from legal records as William H. Hartsfield was recorded in his church as Henry Hartsfield. Such puzzles are usually beyond the duty of the indexer to solve and must be untangled by the researcher.

that they recorded at the courthouse.”⁴ Finding aids that contemplate including slaves’ names should support this methodology.

The system of indexing proposed here uses the slaveowner’s name as a primary reference point in finding aids—to serve as the link in order to systematically trace individual enslaved people from record to record. This indexing methodology is not intended to supplant the surnames of persons who, though they may have been slaves or ex-slaves, are already familiar to historians. Persons such as Henry “Box” Brown, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner, and hundreds of others like them, are well-established historical figures, and are not contemplated as subjects for this recommended methodology. Rather, this indexing system is for the millions of Marys, Williams, Vineys, Isaacs, and others, the evidence of whose lives is still fragmented in hundreds of thousands of documents in thousands of locations. For these persons ever to emerge from virtual historic anonymity, there must be a way to provide an additional element of identity, beyond first name, that allows different records to be connected. Since the archival records of slavery were written almost exclusively by members of the slavemaster class from *their* perspective of slaves as property, we need to recognize this perspective in order to optimize the usefulness of the slavemasters’ surviving records.

Although there does not appear to be any book that specifically addresses the indexing of slave names, authoritative guidelines can be easily applied to these names. One of the best-known authorities is Hans H. Wellisch, whose book, *Indexing from A to Z*, argues for indexing names as fully as necessary for proper identification.⁵ Use of a slave’s first name alone, exemplified by entries such as “George (slave in Alabama),” mistakenly assumes that a slave’s forename was his or her full identification. Finding aids built around this assumption render individual slaves unnecessarily obscure—as if, for instance, President George Washington were to be indexed under “George (free man from Virginia).” The key to effectively indexing slave names is to recognize how slaves were identified in the records.

Each free person’s combination of names (first, middle, and last, along with the occasional nickname) was used to identify her or him in records of business and personal activities. This combination of names narrows the possible number of identities for each documented person, and enhances our ability to

⁴ Dee Parmer Woodtor, *Finding a Place Called Home: A Guide to African-American Genealogy and Historical Identity* (New York: Random House, 1999), 275. After reading an earlier draft of this article, Woodtor reminded me that some genealogical researchers who do not know the slaveowner’s name will search by first name to find a slave ancestor (“They are fishing at this stage,” she wrote). In a paper-based finding aid, there is certainly a trade-off between listing slaves by first name or by slaveowner’s name, but the latter method has (in my opinion) much greater utility. Fortunately, as more finding aids are entered in computer databases, researchers will gain flexible search options (such as search by first name), free from the conventional search sequence of primary, secondary, and tertiary keys.

⁵ Hans H. Wellisch, *Indexing from A to Z*, 2d ed. (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1995), 357.

recognize the same person in different records. Just so, each slave had a set of names that was used in the records which form our evidence of slavery, and that can often allow us to identify the same person in different records; therefore, it is appropriate that slaves should be uniformly listed in finding aids, using the same key elements by which they are most commonly identified in historical documents. The slave's forename was almost invariably used in conjunction with the owner's name (as in: "Mariah, the property of James Adams"). The vast majority of extant documents naming slaves always associate the slave with a specific owner or owners. Using the slaveowner's name as the lead term, in conjunction with the slave's forename, provides identification of each slave as dramatically and as certainly as a free person's full name. Slaves belonging to the same master and having the same given name (multiple Johns and Marys, for example) can be confusing to a researcher, but should be no more of a stumbling block to an indexer than would be a multiplicity of persons named, for example, "William Smith" in other types of records. The indexer primarily needs to ensure that references to persons can be found by name in the finding aid, and may safely leave it to the interested historian or genealogist to sort out who is who.

Although used as part of the identification of a particular slave, the owner's name was not, of course, actually the slave's name. A finding aid needs some practical way to distinguish between them. One method, particularly suitable to materials that name many slaves belonging to the same owner, would be to place the slaves' forenames as subheadings under the owner's name, thus:

Walker, Nathaniel F., slaves of:
 Bob
 Eliza Bowlin

A second method is particularly suitable to materials in which there are many slaves, few of whom belong to the same owner. An explanatory note at the beginning of the finding aid would explain that the owners' names are enclosed in square brackets, followed by the slaves' names, thus:

[Beall, Alpheus] Fredonia
 [Utye, Nathaniel] Jacob

Either of the styles demonstrated above offers an easily understood and simple system to index slaves in a way that provides useful identity, and avoids their submergence into the virtual anonymity of forename indexes.

Most slaves had more than one owner during their lives, but this is no bar to an effective system of indexing. Compilers of finding aids already, routinely, deal with other situations where historic persons go by different names during their lifetimes. For instance, a contemporaneous free woman might have been known at various stages of her life (and might thus be indexed) by her maiden

name, then by her husband's surname, and if later widowed or divorced by the different surnames of subsequent husbands. Slaves named in documents that transfer their ownership (bills of sale, for instance) should necessarily be listed twice in a finding aid, under the names of both the old and new owner, and cross-indexed. Such a methodology enhances the identification of individuals by pointing to records in which ownership changes.

The way names are entered in a finding aid will depend on the degree of intimacy the compiler has with the records being indexed. Historical records written by different persons may refer to the same slave by a variety of name spellings and forms. Unless the compiler of the finding aid has some particular familiarity with the records and so can discern when different forms of a name refer to the same person, it is safer to index different name forms separately as if they were separate persons. For example, Robert may in some instance be used interchangeably with Bob to name the same person, but elsewhere the names Bob and Robert could refer to two different persons. Researchers delving into old records of slavery may find a person named Fredonia transmuted into Doney, and Ginney may be spelled Jinney, Jincy, Gincy, Janey, Jane, or even Jenny. Of course, only a careful study of the records could establish whether these name variations refer to the same person or to different people.

There may be situations where a researcher or indexer has special knowledge of a particular series of records and can definitely associate different name forms with the same person. An example comes from probate records of an estate in Upson County, Georgia. A slave boy is first called Andrew Jackson in an inventory from 1848. By 1850, he is recorded as Jackson, and, by the time he is sold in 1858, he is simply called Jack.⁶ How should he be listed in a finding aid? If the compiler did not know that the three names referred to the same person, it would not be unreasonable to include:

[Bunkley, Macharine] Andrew Jackson
 [Bunkley, Macharine] Jack
 [Bunkley, Macharine] Jackson

On the other hand, if the indexer realized the identity of all three names, the index would list the most complete form as the secondary term, followed by the alternate forms:

[Bunkley, Macharine] Andrew Jackson (Jackson, Jack)

Incidentally, it is fairly common to find examples of a slave's name becoming increasingly abbreviated as the slave grows older.

⁶ Upson County, Georgia, Record of Accounts, Book C, 2, 238; Book D, 294, 644, 648; and Georgia Supreme Court, printed transcript of *Caroline W. Bunkley v. Terrel Barksdale, et al.*, on appeal from Upson Superior Court May Term, 1854, 91 (in loose records of Superior Court, Upson County Archives).

Common names, nicknames and diminished forms of common names, and significant spelling variations may be used interchangeably for individuals *who are known to the indexer to be the same person*. Where there are significant variations in the recording of a name that could aid in identity, or could cause confusion, these should be placed in parentheses after the full name, as in the following examples:

[Rogers, Simeon] Julia Ann (Julian)
 [Rose, Amos] Lucretia (Creacy)
 [Rose, Henry] Henrietta (Ritter)
 [Worthy, Kinchen L.] Emanuel (Mann)

Although there will be occasional reasons to depart from the general rule, finding aids should use the fullest documented form of the slaves' forenames as the secondary term, followed by alternate name forms, or nicknames, where appropriate, *if clearly referring to the same individual*. When identity is in doubt, of course, different name forms should be indexed separately.

Names of particular persons that appear only in a shortened form (such as "Bill" or "Eliza") should be indexed in that form. They should not be expanded to "William" or "Elizabeth," unless there is contemporary documentation for a conventional, longer form for those particular persons. The abbreviated forms of the names may, in fact, have been the correct given names of those individuals.

In most cases where two slaves belonging to the same master shared the same first name, some discriminator was often added to the name to distinguish them. Several types of these discriminators, along with some other special situations, are discussed below.

Suffixed Name Discriminators. Sometimes slaves named in archival records have a second name that may indicate family relationships. Two women in the Allen M. Walker estate (Upon County, Georgia) are named Mariah Tom and Jinny Isham. The presence in the same records of two men named Tom and Isham strongly suggests (but does not prove) spousal relationships to these women. From the same estate, an older woman is recorded as Nancy Sinah, and her oldest daughter is listed as Jane Siner. Walker's estate administrator apparently used the name "Siner" to differentiate Jane, Nancy's adult daughter, from another Jane in the estate—although he felt no compulsion to use the same indicator with Nancy's four younger children whose names did not duplicate the names of any other slaves on the plantation. Furthermore, Nancy's fifth child, a girl, is named Sinah. If this is an example of the slave practice of naming a girl after her grandmother (unverifiable, since Nancy's mother's name is not yet known), then the use of Sinah in all three cases is of matrilineal derivation. Olmsted described the derivation of similar names on a Mississippi plantation, in which children were called by their father's name or mother's name to distinguish between slaves of the same forename (Olmsted's examples include

“Jim Bob” and “Jim Clarissy”).⁷ Such names are best indexed with the suffixed name as a tertiary term:

[Walker, Allen M.] Mariah Tom

[Walker, Allen M.] Nancy Sinah

Surnames. Another type of suffixed name may look like a surname. For example, among approximately 250 slaves named in records of Allen M. Walker’s estate in Upson County, Georgia, there are eleven persons with such names, including Matilda Todd, Jesse Holt, Fanny Turner, and Jinny Stamper.⁸ The origins of these names are not explained by the records, except for Stamper, which is a previous owner’s surname. The indexer may wonder whether to abandon the slaveowner’s name as the primary key and index such persons in the conventional way used for free persons (surname, first name). Are names like these the surnames by which slaves called themselves, or are they surnames recorded for the convenience of the slavemaster to differentiate among slaves of the same forename, or for other purposes? Would these apparent surnames be appropriate primary keys because they represent a persistent identifier for the individual so named, or are they merely another kind of transient (or situational) tag applied by the slavemaster? Put yet another way, do these surnames provide researchers, historians, or genealogists a more useful point of entry in a finding aid than the slaveowner’s name?

The issue hinges on interpretation of the records. Herbert G. Gutman’s pioneering work, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925*, includes an extensive discussion of slave naming practices, including surnames.⁹ Critiquing earlier analysis, Gutman dismisses Ulrich Bonnell Phillips’ conclusion that slaves are found in plantation records with the surnames of previous owners because owners wished to distinguish slaves with similar given names.¹⁰ Gutman suggests, instead, that these written records reflect slaves’ autonomous retention of previous owners’ surnames as their own. Nevertheless, Gutman elsewhere convincingly shows that “owners rarely knew that slaves had surnames” because the slaves were unwilling to reveal their surnames to whites (p. 237).¹¹

⁷ Upson County, GA, Record of Accounts, Book C, 336–340; and Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller’s Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 457. Interpretation of Nancy’s suffixed name (Sinah) is complicated by the fact that her husband’s name is somewhat similar (Sino), but I believe the similarity of Sinah to Sino is probably coincidental. Slaves’ preference for naming a girl child after her grandmother rather than after her mother is suggested by Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 190, 195, 198.

⁸ Upson County, GA, Record of Accounts, Book C, 337–8.

⁹ Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 230–256.

¹⁰ Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 251.

¹¹ Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 237.

This last assessment has been echoed by another prominent historian, Leon F. Litwack.¹²

Given, first, that we seldom know the derivation of a slave surname in a slavemasters' documents (who originated its use—the slave or the slaveowner?); second, that owners rarely knew of the existence of slaves' *self-chosen* surnames; and, last, that the records in question were written by the slaveowners for their own purposes, I suggest that using such slave surnames as the primary key in an index risks isolating those persons from the most effective methodology of tracing American slaves. Of course, if other (perhaps post-emancipation) documents show how a particular person gave his or her own surname, the question is moot. My concern is with the majority of cases where no such connection is available to the indexer.

In summary, while slave surnames (as found in slavemasters' records) can be valuable evidence of a slave's identity, may represent the name of a former master, may be the name adopted by that slave's family, may have been taken for reasons known only to the slave, or may be present in the record merely because the slaveowner needed to differentiate one slave from another—nevertheless, in most cases we cannot be sure of their significance without more research than is reasonable to expect from the compiler of an index. We do know, however, that retaining the slaveowner's name as the primary key provides a reliable and useful reference point for historians and genealogists. I recommend indexing most slave surnames as shown in the following examples:

[Walker, Allen M.] Ginny Stamper

[Walker, Allen M.] Jesse Holt

Prefixed Name Discriminators. Researchers sometimes find that a prefixed name, rather than a suffixed name, acts as a discriminator between persons of the same forename. A typical example is the twenty-five-year-old woman, Binah Eliza, bought by Allen M. Walker in 1841. Binah Eliza may have been the daughter of a fifty-year-old woman, Binah, who was listed on the same bill of sale. Thus her name, Binah, may have been derived from her mother's name and was used

¹² Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm so Long: the Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 247–51. Gutman's most heavily-cited source for antebellum slave surnames is slave trader Isaac Franklin's records (Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 239–40, 586 n. 12), but he is inconclusive about the names' origins and significance. In fact, he cautions on page 240, "Not too much should be made of the surname as a necessary clue to the ties within immediate families." Having convincingly shown that slaves seldom revealed their private surnames to owners, Gutman does not explain why the Franklin records should be accepted as expressing the slaves' own secret names, divulged to a slave trader.

As an aside, business record books of the interstate slave traders may contain an unusually high incidence of apparent slave surnames, and could merit a specialized study to determine their function in those records; besides the Franklin records, Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), third illustration following page 116, shows a page from another slave trader's account book that clearly lists most slaves with surnames.

to differentiate her from the other Eliza bought at the same time. This would suggest that the usage was a prefixed variant of the suffix name discriminators discussed earlier. This possibility is strengthened by the evidence of a subsequent bill of sale, where her name was recorded as Elizabeth, without the prefix Binah.¹³ The next example shows one way to index this woman, with the fullest version of her first name (Elizabeth) as secondary term and the distinctive variant (Binah Eliza) tertiary. Cross-references are included to the other seller and purchaser listed on the two bills of sale:

[Walker, Allen M.] Elizabeth (Binah Eliza) (see: [Cantelow, Louis], [Burt, Martha])

The particular name form used in the secondary position in any finding aid will, naturally, depend on the compiler's knowledge and interpretation of whatever documents are available.

Prefixed Size, Color, and Age Discriminators. Slaves with the same name belonging to the same master are frequently differentiated by size, color, and age. Researchers commonly find names like "Yellow Mary," "Black Mariah," "Big George," "little John," and "old Sucky." Whether or not the adjective is capitalized, such names are somewhat akin to a nickname, and were usually used to differentiate between slaves of the same name.¹⁴ These name forms may not be used consistently with reference to the same persons; for example, in records of the Alpheus Beall estate, two persons, "Big Eliza" and "Little Eliza," were also called "Old Eliza" and "Young Eliza."¹⁵ Such name forms seem to have been almost always situational names, and do not persist in the records when the reason for using them no longer pertains. For instance, if an estate contains a "big John" and a "little John," but then one of the Johns leaves the estate, the remaining person of that name may be recorded thereafter simply as "John." The appropriate indexing principle in these situations would be to retain the slave's first name as the secondary term, with the adjective tertiary, as in the following examples:

[Beall, Alpheus] Eliza (Big, Old)
[Grantland, Seaton] Fanny (yellow)

Nicknames. Occasionally, there are appellations that might be nicknames, and do not easily fall into any category already discussed. They include the likes of "Golah Jack," "Jim Crow," "Tom Beaver" and "Alabama John," found in the huge estate of Allen M. Walker in Upson County, Georgia.¹⁶ "Golah" is probably

¹³ Upson County, Georgia, Deed Book E, 270–2; and Deed Book H, 557.

¹⁴ Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 457, gives several examples and the explanation of their purpose.

¹⁵ Upson County, Georgia, Record of Accounts, Book C, 40 and 44. The author established the identities of the two Elizas through close analysis of several documents.

¹⁶ Upson County, GA, Record of Accounts, Book C, 336–38.

a variation of “Gullah,” indicating either Jack’s origin in Georgia’s coastal rice islands or his African tribal origins. “Alabama,” also, suggests a geographic association. Because the adjectival names Golah and Alabama seem to be mainly descriptive, they can be considered tertiary in importance after the slaves’ forenames. Listing Golah Jack as “Jack, Golah,” however, just does not satisfactorily convey the sense of the nickname. It might be best to retain the nicknames, intact, as tertiary terms, and index them thus:

[Walker, Allen M.] Jack (Golah Jack)

[Walker, Allen M.] John (Alabama John)

Terms of Address. “Uncle,” “Aunt” and the like were used by both slaves and masters as terms of deference, respect, or affection when addressing slaves older than themselves.¹⁷ Some compilers of finding aids have used these terms of address as if they were the person’s first name—for example, indexing a man (under the letter “U”) as “Uncle Toliver (slave).” This violates accepted indexing principles, by which modes of address such as “Uncle” are no more appropriate as the lead term for indexing slave names than such words as “Mister,” “Miss,” “Reverend,” and “General” for indexing free persons’ names. Besides being terms of address rather than names, their use was largely dependent on the stage of life both of the slave being addressed and the person addressing him or her. Indexing by terms of address, while not appropriate for historic persons, may be reserved for those few names inseparably linked to well-known literary characters like Uncle Remus and Uncle Tom.

Determining Ownership in Deeds of Trust. Persons working in legal records will frequently encounter deeds of trust. Slaves were frequently given to women and minor children in trust. Even though these deeds of trust are sometimes couched in the terms of a sale to the trustee (for example, “Negro woman Vina, sold to John Doe for five hundred dollars, in trust for my daughter Jane Doe during her natural life, and afterward to be divided among her children.”), they are, nevertheless, essentially gifts to the beneficiary of the trust. Their purpose was to secure possession of the property to the beneficiary. When selecting an owner’s name by which to index slave names, deeds of trust should be treated as if they were deeds of gift, with the slaves belonging to the trust beneficiary, not to the trustee. When a woman’s trust property was to pass to her children after her death, it will usually be adequate to index using only the mother’s name as a lead term.

Owner Not Known. In some rare cases, a slave may be named in a document, but the indexer may be unable to divine the identity of the slave’s owner. In such cases there is little choice but to index by first name. Wellisch prescribes that persons “known by their forenames only” and persons “otherwise not

¹⁷ Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 216–20.

known” should be indexed with further identification “by occupation, position, or activity, as derived from the context” in parentheses following the name.¹⁸ An index entry following his prescription might look like:

Mary (slave in Abbeville District, SC, owner unknown)

If alphabetical forename entries, scattered throughout an index, seem inconvenient, a compiler might group all such cases under a single heading:

slaves, owners unknown:

Bill (blacksmith, Shelby County, TN)

Mary (child, Bibb County, GA)

The choice between individual listings or a unified list of unknown slaves will depend on the compiler’s estimate of the most likely use for the finding aid or on the number of unknown persons being included.

Just as those who administered the system of slavery used the slave’s forename in combination with the owner’s name to identify individual slaves, latter-day archivists and historians need to promote an equal degree of exactitude to identify individual slaves in modern finding aids. The resulting index may at first glance appear to be primarily a listing of slaveowners, but this approach best reflects the recordkeeping practices of the time. It is these recordkeeping practices that must be recognized in an indexing system that seeks to provide access to information in the records. The mass of primary materials available to researchers is larger than ever before, and with demand for access and usage ever expanding, effective and consistent finding aids will be essential to ensure optimum utilization of archival records—and the same applies to the indexes of secondary works that will interpret this material. The use of the owner’s name as the primary term, followed by the slave forename, is most consistent with standard indexing principles and with original usage in the bulk of primary sources.

¹⁸ Wellisch, *Indexing from A to Z*, 367, 376.