Finding Ancestors of Bondage and Color

Black, white, red, mulatto, Melungeon, free people of color (FPC)…or even white indentured servants….if your ancestors were not free or were from a minority or mixed racial population, then this link is for you.

The records from the early Colonial or pre-Colonial period in American history are a desert when trying to piece together the history or even the mere existence of your family if they weren't landowners, had no estate of value, or weren't at least considered to be "white". If you are lucky, you may be able to track your family through slave-owning families, as slaves at least had value and were often noted in wills, estate inventories and on tax lists by name. Others weren't so fortunate, especially if your ancestors lived on the fringe, were Indian or part Indian, or were not "white enough to vote or testify in court", or were white and not wealthy enough to pay tax or own land, being tenant farmers or lower still on the social scale, indentured servants.

If your ancestor happened to be a woman raising children alone, especially if they were born "out of wedlock", you not only may never find them, you may never know, without the benefit of DNA, who their father was. Some of those women, even if they were white, paired with men of mixed racial background, as they were no longer accepted in polite society, but like all of us, they wanted a partner and needed to survive. Life was difficult, at best, and survival was not at all assured.

The slave in America had little choice about who they "married", and marriage for slaves was a social/cultural liaison, sometimes of convenience, not a legal bond, and therefore there were no records. Marriages were torn apart by the master's inking of a bill of sale, and most slaves married again. Some, by choice, or otherwise, bore mixed race children, often the children of the master or the slave-owning family. In some cases, bearing mixed race children was the ticket to better care, easier jobs and eventual freedom for the child.

Many Native Americans who weren't killed were enslaved too, and given that they lived with the African slaves, they typically intermarried with them. Often, Native American slaves were considered too mean and unruly, and were sold into bondage in the Caribbean where they were much less likely to escape.

Early slave owners were anxious for ancestral pride and memory to disappear, robbing the slaves of any identity or memory beyond that of being a good, compliant, subservient, slave who could be depended on to do what they were told, unquestioningly.

This intermixing of white, black and native blood led to a tri-racial population in short order. Given that the first slaves were reported at Jamestown before 1620, and given that we can expect an average of 4 generations per hundred years, by

1700 the memory of freedom was only a whispered fragment told by your great-grandmother to your grandmother and had taken on the veil of legend, or the cloak of time to hide one's heritage. By 1800, few, if any, remembered the genesis of their ancestors who lived in the 1600s, most of them simply struggling to survive.   By 1900, many families had intentionally become "white", often in conjunction with a move from a state where their family was known to one where they were not. Following a family backwards in time in the census can be very enlightening as to their racial status. Before the end of segregation in the mid-1960s, children were taught to deny their African or Native American heritage, lest they be forbidden to enter their own neighborhoods…..always aware of the signs that said "People of Color Not Allowed", and knowing, it mean them.

Today, we take pride in our ancestry, if we could only uncover what the decades and centuries of deliberate cultural genocide have erased. These records posted here are hopefully windows to the time in which your ancestors lived and will include hints and clues about your ancestors, which, coupled with DNA and genealogical sleuthwork, may release that genie in the proverbial bottle.