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Enslaved People in the *African American National Biography*, 1508-1865

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Description

The dataset builds on the complete print and online collection of the *African American National Biography* (AANB), edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham.¹ The full collection contains over 6,000 biographical entries of named historical individuals, including 1,304 for subjects born before 1865 and the abolition of slavery in the United States. The total word count of these 1,304 biographical essays exceeds 1.3 million. In making a subset of

¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds. *African American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 8 vols., 2008; 12 vols., 2012).

biographical entries from the multivolume work, the goal was to extract life details from those biographies into an easy-to-view database form that details whether a subject was enslaved for some or all of their lives and to provide the main biographical details of each subject for contextual analysis and comparison.

The entire dataset will be available at <https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/projects>. The full biographies from which the data is extracted are currently accessible with a subscription to <https://oxfordaasc.com/>. The *Enslaved.org* website includes a sampling of 75 full biographies of enslaved people in the AANB, and its partner volumes published by Oxford University Press, the *Dictionary of African Biography* and the *Dictionary of Caribbean and Latin American Biography*.²

The dataset reflects information known about each subject as of December 2019. As new full biographies are added to the AANB website (<https://oxfordaasc.com/>) data relevant to new biographies of enslaved and free people born before 1865 will be added to this website at the end of each calendar year. We will update any new data that emerges, including new information about a subjects' enslaved status and dates of death or birth. Additional data fields that will be added in the future will include names and biographical details of the children of subjects, when known, and geographical details of places mentioned in each biography.³

Dates of Data Collection

2017-2020

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

Spanish, Dutch, French, and British colonial North America to 1776
United States of America, 1776-1865

Temporal Coverage

1508-1865

² Emmanuel K. Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *Dictionary of African Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Franklin W. Knight and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *Dictionary of Caribbean and Latin American Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³ We intend to build similar databases that draw on enslaved people featured in the AANB's sister projects published by OUP, the *Dictionary of African Biography* and *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*. The Hutchins Center website will also include a "Contact Us" feature that enables users to provide feedback, corrections, and suggestions for new biographical essays to the AANB.

Documents Types

Life History

Sources

African American National Biography. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. New York: Oxford University Press, 8 vols., 2008; 12 vols., 2012.

Methodology

The dataset was created by Steven J. Niven at the Hutchins Center using Microsoft Access for the African American National Biography project, and the metadata collected for each biographical essay by Oxford University Press's African American Studies Center.

Full definitions of the 65 data fields used in the database can be found in Dataverse. Of these, 52 fields were drawn from the OUP AASC database covering location data within the OUP data system; gender; names, alternate names and suffixes; dates and places of birth and death; and up to 8 occupations. We also added 13 unique fields that provide biographical details on each subject. With research assistance from Sarah Pollnow, we reviewed and evaluated 1306 complete biographies for persons included in the full AANB who were born or believed to be born before the abolition of American slavery in 1865. These are listed in the database as follows:

Field	Column	Definition
Free born in North America	G	Statement of whether Free born in North America or Freeborn and later enslaved
Free before 13th Amendment	H	Descriptions of subject's status prior to U.S. 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in 1865
Ever enslaved	I	Descriptions of whether subject was born enslaved, enslaved, or likely enslaved for any period
How was freedom attained	J	Narrative statement of how subject attained freedom (if applicable)
Other/uncertain status	K	Descriptions of various types of uncertainty about slave or free status
African born	L	Yes/Possibly answer to: was subject born in Africa

Parent information	M	Narrative statement of subject's parents' status as free, enslaved, or unknown
Runaways and rebels	N	Narrative statement describing captive subject's escape
Education/literacy	O	Narrative statement describing subject's ability to read and write
Religion	P	Narrative statement describing subject's professed spiritual beliefs
Slave narrative or memoir author	Q	URL link to Narrative produced by subject
Notes	R	Narrative statement about subject
Images	S	URL link to images about subject

For Columns G, H, I, K, and L, we established basic details of enslaved or free status. We also examined other sources when the information was not evident in the published biography text. Because of the uncertainty of the historical record of enslaved and free black people in North America, these evaluations involved a degree of subjectivity. Nevertheless, the text provided sufficient detail to distinguish subjects who were freeborn, or believed to be free before the 13th Amendment, were born in Africa, or were enslaved for some part of their lives. In a small number of cases, that status was uncertain or entirely unknown. For other fields, we added narrative detail to show: how freedom was attained (J); biographical information about parents (M); whether the subject ran away or rebelled from captivity (N); evidence of education and literacy (O); evidence of religious faith (P); details of a Slave Narrative with online links when available (Q); A general notes field (R); details of images that exist for the subject and online links when available (S). Establishing these details involved a great degree of subjectivity, particularly on issues of “rebellion” or whether a person under profile was literate or semi-literate. Our narratives here reflect our interpretation based on the evidence we surveyed.

The AANB Enslaved People dataset of 1,304 biographies represent approximately one-fifth of the 6,000 entries published in print and online in the *African American National Biography*. Our review found that 648 (50%) were born enslaved or were enslaved at some point in their lives, while 494 (38%) were freeborn, or possibly freeborn. This is significantly higher than the proportion of black people in the United States/North America. By 1860 around 500,000 free blacks lived in the United States, approximately 9 percent of the entire African American population. A further 162 subjects (12%) were of uncertain origin or were born in slaveholding states between 1861 and 1865. Many of these were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 but remained unfree laborers in the Confederate states. Others may have been freed by fleeing to Union lines with their families. In all, at least 929 of the biographies were on subjects who had gained their freedom before the 13th Amendment in 1865.

Of the 648 enslaved or possibly enslaved, 121 (19%) were women and 527 (81%) were men. At least 54 of the subjects were born in Africa and later enslaved. The vast majority—552—were born in British North America, or a U.S. state, territory, or the Federal District. The most common places of birth recorded are Virginia (128) North Carolina (64) and Maryland (50). Our analysis found that 136 subjects (21%) had written a slave narrative or recorded memoir, including some memoirs by freeborn people. A remarkable 200 subjects (31%) were enslaved captives who ran away or recorded significant resistance or rebellion, while 402 (62%) of the subjects, including freeborns, showed evidence of literacy or formal/informal education. The biographies of 357 of the subjects (55%) including freeborns provided evidence of religious faith/practice.

This database of Enslaved People in the *African American National Biography* is not meant to be exhaustive of the experiences of captives and African descended people in North America before 1865. By its very nature, biography reflects what is unique, remarkable, or noteworthy about the lives of human subjects. And for the 648 enslaved people included here, what is remarkable is their very survival. Not only do we know the names of these fascinating people, we can build—data point on data point—toward full and sometimes complex accounts of their lives. The dataset also sets parameters for future biographies: we know that, even as late as 1865, more than 90 percent of black people in the U.S. were enslaved; to get closer to representativeness, we need to mine the growing number of datasets that are part of Enslaved.org and—data point on data point—create more fully realized biographies. We also know that gender ratios among North American captives were roughly balanced. Again, mining other enslaved datasets as well as emerging scholarship on African American women captives, can increase the proportion of enslaved biographies from the current share of 19 percent, closer to parity with enslaved men. Finally, the geographic details of where enslaved people were born and died set a benchmark for adding new biographies based on local and community studies. It is not surprising that the largest number of enslaved subjects were born in the Commonwealth of Virginia, the cradle of slavery in the United States. But, especially in the nineteenth century, we know that slavery spread extensively in the Deep South. Historians of Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Louisiana, in particular, might look at this dataset and ask who is missing, and which biographies can we add to better reflect the lived experiences of enslaved people in America.

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Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FIEYGJ>

Linked Data Representation: *Enslaved.org* [Summary Visualization](#)

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