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## Generations of Freedom: The Natchez Database of Free People of Color, 1779-1865

Peer-Reviewed Article

### Article Authors

Nik Ribianszky, Queen's University Belfast

### Dataset Creators

Nik Ribianszky, Queen's University Belfast

### Contributors

Pearce Magee, Queen's University Belfast

Jacqueline Galyon, Queen's University Belfast

Amy Kearney, Queen's University Belfast

Hollie Chambers, Queen's University Belfast

Orin McIvor, Queen's University Belfast

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### Description

The Natchez Database of Free People of Color (NDFPC) contains information on free Black people who resided in Natchez, Mississippi between the years 1779-1865. At the time of publication, the dataset contains 1,018 people who were recorded as living in the city of Natchez or surrounding Adams County at any time during that era. Some individuals and their families

made Natchez their home for decades and their descendants continued to dwell there well beyond the Civil War. Others were present for shorter periods of time. For example, there were a number of individuals who claimed to be free but were jailed as runaways and newspaper notices are the sole indicators of their presence in the area. Further, at least 71 individuals were involved in freedom suits in Natchez's courts and oftentimes vacated the area after proving their cases. The dataset contains data that was collected from U.S. Census returns, Spanish court records, Adams County Chancery and Circuit court records, Mississippi High Court of Error and Appeal records, will books, deed books, marriage books, probate records, legislative petitions, Police Board records, diaries, letter collections, newspapers, and secondary sources. The 500+ pages of transcriptions of these records, the Natchez Index of Free Individuals and Families of Color, like the NDFPC, is organized alphabetically by surname if known (and first name if not known), and correlates directly with the database.

In populating the NDFPC, I take an inclusive view of the concept of freedom when applied to people of African descent during this time period in that there is a level of "murkiness" concerning people's legal status that is often difficult to discern, especially given the fragmentary documentation. Free Black people in general occupied a tenuous space between freedom and enslavement. This was certainly true in Natchez during the period of 1779 under Spanish governance through the American acquisition in 1795 and continuing until the Civil War ended in 1865. Individuals were not legally owned like the majority of African Americans living in the United States, but they did not have unlimited enjoyment of their liberty. In myriad ways, this group of people who have been described as living "ambiguous lives," "in the margins," or "in shadow" and whose freedom was often contested, had to exert considerable effort to remain free.<sup>1</sup> Mississippi legislators expended great effort to control the growth of their numbers. In 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, Mississippi had one of the largest enslaved populations in the United States, at 436,631, but only 775 free people of color, the smallest population of all southern states, with the exception of Arkansas. Natchez distinguished itself within Mississippi for having the largest community of free people of color, but it was still a tiny number: only 225 free Black people resided in Natchez and Adams County, compared to 14,292 enslaved African

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarship regarding the ambiguity of the status of free Black people was previously quite uniform. For a short listing of some prominent works that speak to this, see Adele Logan Alexander, *Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789-1879* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991); Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); and Marina Wikramanayake, *A World In Shadow: The Free Black in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973). The scholarship on Natchez's free Black community essentially began with Edwin Adams Davis and William Ransom Hogan with the publication of *The Barber of Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954) and Edwin Adams Davis and William Ransom Hogan, *William Johnson's Natchez: The Antebellum Diary of a Free Negro* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951). Virginia Meacham Gould importantly published a collection of letters and other writings from some of the women in Black diarist William Johnson's family in her *Chained to the Rock of Adversity: To be Free, Black, & Female in the Old South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998). Others who have written on free Black people in Natchez—although not a wholly exhaustive list—includes: Ronald L. F. Davis, *The Black Experience in Natchez, 1720-1880* (Denver: National Park Service, 1993); Joyce Linda Broussard, *Stepping Lively in Place: The Not-Married, Free Women of Civil-War-Era Natchez, Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016); Kimberly M. Welch, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and my recent book, *Generations of Freedom: Gender, Movement, and Violence in Natchez, 1779-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2021).

Americans.<sup>2</sup> In relation to New Orleans, where the free Black population numbered in the thousands during most of the time period under consideration, Natchez's community was miniscule indeed.

The people themselves embodied a diversity of racial identities, as shown in the data contained in the NDFPC.<sup>3</sup> Of the 690 free people of color whose race was indicated within the dataset, 575 were of mixed race, while only 106 were listed as Black. A small number reflected both African American and Native American heritage (5). At times, the documents show inconsistency. For example, a few individuals were described as Black in one record and "mulatto" in another. And one man was characterized only as "dark." Notwithstanding these discrepancies, it is striking that 85 percent of the free community of color had both African and white ancestry. This is consistent with what other historians have found with free people of color living in the Lower South.<sup>4</sup> Several women, such as Elizabeth Barland and Amy Johnson, were freed as a consequence of having been sexually involved with white men, some having had children with them.

The high incidence of racial intermixture resulted in at least 29 known cases of free people of color "passing" as white, for a variety of reasons including to avoid enslavement, deportation, and the restriction of their privileges. The documents are not always forthcoming on whether individuals were actively seeking to obscure their racial heritage or they were mistaken by census enumerators. There are examples of people like Andrew Barland who petitioned the Mississippi State Legislature to confer the status of legal whiteness upon him to sidestep racial restrictions that prevented free Black people from sitting on juries and commissions, voting, and testifying against white people in criminal cases. Other individuals, like Harriet Johnson and her children, were recorded in census records as white; indeed, she went to great lengths to reinvent herself as white before the eyes of the Adams County Chancery Court to avoid reenslavement after two residents of Natchez accused her of not being properly licensed to reside in the state.

The NDFPC demonstrates that the free Black community was composed of individuals with diverse origins. Most whose birthplaces were known were born in Mississippi (339) or nearby Louisiana (35). Many others were born in some of the older slave states like Virginia (49), Maryland (32), and Kentucky (22). Several were from northern states like Indiana (7), Illinois (6), Pennsylvania (6), New York (6), and Ohio (5). Six were born in Africa, including one man, Ibrahima Abd Al-Rahman, who found himself enslaved on the battlefield in West Africa and sold

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<sup>2</sup> Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> As I note in *Generations of Freedom*, race as a concept is imperfect and racial classifications such as "Black," "white," and "American Indian" have been artificially constructed. Obviously, though, its social and political salience was foundational to the practices and laws of all the European groups who settled North America. Race was a subjective concept, and there was enormous variation in the ways in which people described others in the records. For example, although the word "mulatto" was specifically intended to apply to an individual who had one parent of "pure" African heritage and one of "pure" European ancestry, it was generally used in the documents from which the NDFPC draws upon to describe people of mixed racial ancestry of any combination of white, Black, and even Native American parentage. The meaning of the historical term "mulatto," then, should not be interpreted to mean a strictly biracial individual, but rather a person of varying degrees of mixed ancestry. When I refer to an individual of multiracial identity, though, I use the terms "biracial," "multiracial," or "mixed-race" interchangeably, Ribianszky, 189-190n2.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 108-111.

into slavery in Natchez. He claimed royal ancestry and found supporters willing to aid him in his bid for freedom and return to Africa, along with his American-born wife, Isabella.<sup>5</sup> Some came voluntarily. Others moved into the area, looking for opportunity, following enslaved family members, or kidnapped and forcibly brought. As Natchez was a vibrant riverside community in a wealthy cotton-growing area, it was a draw to many free Black people, particularly, with barbers like William Hayden eager to acquire a loyal and consistent base of white patrons upon which to build a lucrative business.<sup>6</sup> Other times, the movement surged out of Natchez as in the case of Fanny Leiper, who owned a house in Natchez, but during the “Inquisition” when restrictions were tightened on free Black people, she moved to Cincinnati but retained ownership of her property and rented it out.<sup>7</sup>

The methods by which Natchez’s free Black community became free varied. Within this overall project, I introduce the idea of generational freedom, influenced by the scholarship of Ira Berlin, who focused on the enslavement process by which free Africans and their descendants experienced slavery. I looked at that dynamic in reverse to chart how enslaved African Americans became liberated and worked to protect this fragile freedom for themselves and their families. I call those who were born into slavery but later freed, which could also include parents and their children, as well as grandchildren, the *foundational generation* of free people of color. Of the people whose status at birth is known (484), 336 of them were part of this generation. The generations that followed, the *conditional generations*, were those who were born free and without the experience of and socialization into North America’s system of chattel, racial slavery. 148 free Black people in Natchez were freeborn and thus of the conditional generations.<sup>8</sup>

The majority of those born into slavery were manumitted by white people (258). A much smaller number were freed by Black (10) or multiracial (25) people. Another seven manumitters were of African descent. Hester Cummins, for example, purchased her sister and niece out of slavery, but due to strict manumission laws, had to continue to legally own them for a time before their eventual emancipation. More people were freed by men (263) than by women (47). There are at least 56 manumissions involving single women who were of a reasonable age to have been victims of sexual abuse. Twenty-three of these women gave birth to children that had European ancestry. Given the power differential that existed between enslaved individuals and those who held them in bondage, this project defines such actions as sexual exploitation, no matter the specific circumstances. A few of them, like Betsy, were described as receiving their freedom for “her fidelity & attention” to the owner.<sup>9</sup> Some men and women were freed as a result of performing a service such as nursing an enslaver through an illness, saving a home from burning in a fire, or fighting in a war. Fourteen people also worked to save up the money to purchase themselves out of enslavement.

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South*, 30th anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South . . .* (Cincinnati: William Hayden, 1846).

<sup>7</sup> Nik Ribianszky, “She Appeared to Be Mistress of Her Own Actions, Free From the Control of Anyone:’ Property-Holding Free Women of Color in Natchez, Mississippi, 1779-1865,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 67, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 217, 227-229.

<sup>8</sup> Ribianszky, *Generations of Freedom*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Petition of Nicholas P. Carr to the Mississippi State Legislature, ca. 1817–39, in RSFB, Series I: Legislative Petitions, PAR # 11000019.

Another way in which people were liberated was through freedom suits. There were at least 71 people who brought their claims through Natchez's courts establishing that they were entitled to their liberty. These suits were brought for varied reasons and there were overlapping elements. Some claimed to have been illegally held in enslavement although they had free Black, "mulatto," Native American, or white mothers. Others were born free, kidnapped, and sold into slavery. Several were supposed to have been freed after the term of their indentures were served. And still others were supposed to have been freed according to their enslavers' wishes, but unscrupulous family members prevented their liberation.<sup>10</sup>

Freedom was, of course, a coveted change in status. It often enabled people to labor for themselves and their families, secure property, legally marry, educate their children, and live independently. There were 341 free Black people that held property in their own name or belonged to families that did. A number of them held slaves (152); oftentimes, these were family members that they purchased and later emancipated, but sometimes it was for economic reasons. However, there were multiple restrictions placed upon them dictating the conditions of their lives. For example, they could not vote, hold office, testify in criminal court against whites, or serve on juries. Certain occupations were closed off to them and there were many discriminatory indignities they experienced. There were certain events like real or reputed slave rebellions that would increase white hostility and repression towards them. This type of episode occurred in 1841, a period of time that free Black diarist William Johnson termed "the Inquisition," and free Black people were forced to come before the Police Board and certify their good characters. Some were ordered out of Natchez. Freedom was thus often challenging to retain.<sup>11</sup>

The NDFPC also documents the myriad aspects of violence that free Black people faced. Freedom for people of African ancestry was not necessarily a permanent condition, but one marked instead with permeable boundaries that engendered a tenuous and unstable state of purgatory between enslavement and freedom. As several Natchez free people of color showed through their lived experiences, one could be born into slavery, become manumitted, and even be reenslaved for failure to pay taxes or being accused of a crime and imprisoned, all in one lifetime. The dataset records a great many categories of violence including the incidence of individuals having been assaulted or beaten (15), accused of committing a crime—often unfounded (42), and deportment from the state or a threat of deportation (46). Among others, it records incidences of kidnapping (24), imprisonment (40), and reenslavement (53).

In spite of these significant obstacles to the full actualization of their liberty, though, free Black people devised ways to protect themselves and their families by using the courts, finding allies, developing friendships, and accumulating property. Their lives demonstrated great feats of love for their families and friends, care for their communities, and a determination not only to survive, but to thrive in freedom. In short, they strove to live and prosper under uncertain conditions. The NDFPC, used in tandem with the transcriptions of sources, is a tool to document critical aspects of their lives.

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<sup>10</sup> Ribianszky, *Generations of Freedom*, 81-98.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-101.

## **Dates of Data Collection**

1996-2022

## **Dataset Languages**

English

## **Geographic Coverage**

Natchez, Mississippi

## **Temporal Coverage**

1779-1865

## **Document Types**

Appraisal or Assessment  
Auction or Sale Notice  
Bill of Sale, Invoice, or Receipt  
Census or Register  
Civil Document  
Contract  
Criminal Document  
Death or Burial Document  
Digital Data Repository  
Freedom or Emancipation Certificate  
Freedom Suit  
Legislation or Decree  
Letter  
Life History or Narrative  
Inventory or Probate Record  
Runaway Advertisement  
Sacramental or Religious Registry  
Will and Testament

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1840, 1850, 1860

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## Methodology

The Natchez Database of Free People of Color (NDFPC) is the culmination of over two decades of research on Natchez, Mississippi's free Black community during the Spanish era (1779-1795) and after the US acquired it in 1796 until 1865.<sup>12</sup> The dataset records the name of every free Black individual appearing in all the primary sources investigated during the course of research; diligent attention was paid to entering values like gender, age, race, property ownership, occupation, literacy, experiences of violence, among many others (53 in total) in the dataset.

The companion to the NDFPC is the Natchez Index of Free Individuals and Families of Color, which is an approximately 500-page text document that archives transcriptions of records on the 1,018 free Black individuals who lived or stayed in Natchez during those years. It is organized alphabetically by surname when known or by first name. The idea behind the continuing expansion and digitalization of the Database and Index is the desire to disseminate the research to other scholars of enslaved and free people of color and link this project with data from different geographical regions, an endeavor that gives scholars working on transnational, comparative studies of freedom quick access to relevant demographic information. But perhaps most importantly, it will be a public platform which will provide resources to the descendent community who may be doing genealogical work to access records on their ancestors. The need to adapt it into a more user-friendly version is a key motivation also and it has gone through several iterations throughout the years.

At the beginning of this project in 1996, the scholarship on free people of color in Natchez largely centered around William Johnson (1809-1851), the free barber of color whose biography had been published in 1954.<sup>13</sup> Edwin Adams Davis and William Ransom Hogan had used Johnson's diary and family papers to write about the man himself, the specific groups of which he was a part, and the larger free Black community in Natchez. The diary he kept from 1835 until his murder in 1851 detailed the daily life and work of himself and his family and served for me as a platform to investigate the women in his family: his mother, Amy, without whom his freedom would not have been possible; his sister, Adelia; his wife, Ann, who, like him, owed her freedom to her own mother, Harriet Battles, and their five daughters. Further, though, the diary revealed valuable observations about other property-holding free women of color in Natchez, guiding my research toward relevant sources in census records, Spanish records, deeds and other documents in the Adams County Chancery Court.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> My recent book, *Generations of Freedom*, utilized the NDFPC and its feeder, the Index, heavily.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, William. *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro*. Edited by William Ransom Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951 and their *The Barber of Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954).

<sup>14</sup> The result of this period of research was my M.A. thesis at Michigan State University in 2003 and subsequent article of the same name, "She Appeared to be Mistress of Her Own Actions."



In the early stages of the data collection phase, in addition to free Black man William Johnson's diary, I heavily investigated the U.S. Census returns to flesh out the contours of the free black population and to identify property-holding free women of color. Loren Schweningen's groundbreaking work on property-ownership among free Blacks was highly influential in the conceptualization of this project. He expertly used census data to provide statistics on the age, color, household status, average holdings of real estate and personal property, slaveholding, and other factors of free black people in the various regions of the South.<sup>15</sup> Census data is incredibly useful as one source base to consider, particularly when examining an entire region or the country. The method by which the data was collected at this stage involved scrolling through the entire reels of census microfilm and manually recording every entry that listed a free Black person within it on paper that was later typed into a text document that eventually became a row in an Excel spreadsheet.

Doing a "deep dive" into one relatively small locale, like Natchez, it became clear that the census is limited; often free black people did not surface in it, which undercounted the community. In addition to people being excluded from it for expected reasons—not being present when the census-taker visited, consciously making the decision not to be counted, among others—the ten-year intervals in which censuses are conducted obscured people who moved in and out of Natchez during the intervening years. Moreover, the census did not list all members of a household until 1850, making it difficult to flesh out the free Black community without the consideration of other documents. And finally, the census did not include the category of property ownership until 1850; thus, prior to that, evidence of free Black women's holdings had to be recovered through an examination of other sources. This was illustrated vividly by Fanny Leiper, whose name never even appeared in the census and whose experience of property loss went to the highest court in Mississippi.<sup>16</sup>

The NDFPC and Index had their genesis in data collection at the Adams County Chancery Court and the Historic Natchez Foundation (HNF). Since this was in the 1990s and digital technology was in its nascency, the primary tools used were the photocopier at the archives and a laptop. It was most cost-efficient and productive to identify and transcribe documents on-site. Thus, the creation of individual text documents for each source type (Spanish, chancery and circuit court records, will books, deed books, marriage books, probate records, and Police Board records) was begun. Later, the *Index* was created to archive transcriptions of the documents in one continuous document. It was organized alphabetically by each property-owning free woman's surname when known or by first name. This quite naturally led to the development of an organizational tool to allow the cataloguing of individuals, much along the lines of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's *Louisiana Slave Database* and the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Loren Schweningen, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: Illinois Press, 1990); and "Property Owning Free African-American Women in the South, 1800-1870," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1990): 13-44.

<sup>16</sup> Ribianszky, "She Appeared to be Mistress of Her Own Actions," (2005), 217.

<sup>17</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); David Eltis, "A Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/about>; Philip Misevich, Daniel Domingues, David Eltis, Nafees M. Khan, and Nicholas Radburn, "A Digital Archive of Slave Voyages Details the Largest Forced Migration in History," *The Conversation*, May 31, 2017,

Initially, the dataset was primarily utilized as a means to record information for free black property-owning women. Following the examination of free black property-holding women, my focus shifted in 2005 to include the entire free black community, as I transformed the investigation to a gendered community analysis with especial focus on violence, movement, and the maintenance of freedom through generations. Rather than pursue a “sampling” strategy of a larger regional study, I narrowed the lens strictly to Adams County and the city of Natchez to maintain tighter control on the scope and exhaust the archives for all relevant documents to understand this group in microcosm. By alphabetizing surnames when available and copying all related documents within each group and comparing with census and other data, it was possible to establish relationships and to track how significant life events affected individuals and families. Logistically, it made more sense to visit archives within the state of Mississippi with heightened concentration on those in Natchez and to systematically examine all the extant relevant records housed at the Adams County Chancery Court. These included the Spanish court records, census, deed books, police board records, probate court records, marriage records, state court records, and will books for Natchez and Adams County.<sup>18</sup>

Chancery court sources are centrally housed, thus making it possible to inspect a physical copy of each record rather than to rely on microfilm, improving the quality and ease of research. Not trusting indexes—when available—to identify free people of color, for example, in the deed books, it was useful and rewarding to inspect them manually from beginning to end and systematically turn page by page through the deed books A-Z and then AA-KK, scanning for evidence indicating transactions involving free Black people or familiar names. Digital camera technology facilitated quick capture of photos of thousands of documents relating to free Black people for later transcription into the Index and entry into the NDFPC.

The chancery court at that time proved to be more accessible than Historic Natchez Foundation’s impressive collection of records. During the first phase, in the mid-1990s, HNF had acquired court cases that had been stored elsewhere and were in a state of disrepair. They were in the beginning stages of being organized, preserved, and catalogued. During my first visit to HNF, it was possible as a scholar to physically inspect any of the boxes in which the files were being temporarily stored, which was an opportunity to manually sort through and scout for useful documents. But this situation quickly changed and by around 2007, HNF had understandably changed their policy and required that researchers come in with a list of names to search their files, making extracting the maximum documentation on free people of color at the chancery court comparatively more fruitful. More recently, the HNF finding aids have made it possible to pinpoint court records specifically relating to free Black people, which translated into the addition of many new court cases to the Index with the data feeding into the dataset.

In widening the study from property-holding free women of color into a community study, exponentially increasing the scope of the project, there was some continuity but also change as

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[https://theconversation.com/a-digital-archive-of-slave-voyages-details-the-largest-forced-migration-in-history-74902?xid=PS\\_smithsonian](https://theconversation.com/a-digital-archive-of-slave-voyages-details-the-largest-forced-migration-in-history-74902?xid=PS_smithsonian).

<sup>18</sup> The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson and the Natchez Trace Collection at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas in Austin yielded fewer sources. Kimberly Welch’s, *Black Litigants in the Antebellum American South* is a recent example of a larger regional study; she examined the contours of the “Natchez District” as a whole which is a nod to the larger geographic area under control of the various international jurisdictions prior to American acquisition.

new fields populated the NDFPC. Many of the fields from the first version of the dataset carried over during the process of expansion, including “name” (first, last, aliases), “race” (“mulatto” and black), “age” (as specified in a certain year), “property ownership” (not separated into real estate and personal estate, though), and “slave ownership.” The category of “method of procurement of property” was eliminated as the study transitioned from a tool examining the intricacies of property ownership into one more focused on violence and movement. Several new fields were added to further flesh out the community of color, including a field for “relationship” (marriage or romantic involvement with an enslaved, free, or white man/woman), “children,” “literacy,” “former owner’s name/s,” and “occupation.” All of these categories added depth to the individuals populating the set. And an additional field of “Record Type” allowed the recording of the primary source/s for each person. All of these have been expanded upon as the data documentation details (from approximately 39 fields to 53).

I also made a conscious effort to present the data by using a rough color coding system to indicate family groupings. Thus, in the first entry, an individual listed only as Aaron, the standard text color of black was used. Since the next listed individual, Abigail, does not seem to be related in any way with Aaron, I used blue to distinguish her as an unrelated person. A third text color, red, had to be introduced as individuals were added over time with further research so as not to suggest a relation with those who appear before or after them in the spreadsheet. This can be seen with the fourth entry, Abraham, who is listed in red. After that point, the family groupings become more apparent. For example, the fifth and sixth entries, Deebry and Emeline Adams, are both recorded in blue to indicate a family relation. It is not a perfect system in that the dataset is alphabetized and sometimes people have different surnames, as in cases of marriage, remarriage, unmarried women giving children the surname of their fathers while retaining their own, and other issues.

In an effort to chart the continued presence of free Black individuals throughout the years in Natchez, fields were created for every decade from the 1770s-1860s to indicate if there was documentary evidence for a person’s presence. To pinpoint more specificity, there was a field included for the year an individual was manumitted, if known, and one for the year a document was recorded, which was helpful for those individuals who might have only surfaced in one source, say a Police Board record. Although there were certainly individuals who seemed only to live in Natchez for short time periods, there were others whose grandparents and parents were born there and who themselves had children and grandchildren living nearby.

Since the nature of freedom was not static for free Black people, an attempt was made to capture this sliding between states of freedom and unfreedom by creating new fields. There were unfortunately many scenarios that highlighted the fact that once granted, freedom was not guaranteed. There were select free families of color in Natchez, like the Johnsons, who owned large amounts of property and built strong relationships with local whites and who, in key ways, were seemingly immune to threats to their status. But there were others who were relatively unknown in town and did not have strong allies to vouch for them if they fell under suspicion for any reason; they could be imprisoned, reenslaved, or deported from the state. In light of that, fields were added for those three events, as well as for indenture.

Another notion of movement highlighted in this project—the physical moving of free Black people to and from a different geographic region than Natchez—was also a significant consideration for the population. There are entries of people who lived in Natchez for their entire

lives, short portions of it, or who were literally passing through. Because this project runs on an inclusive model, all of those permanent or transient free people of color have been included. A field was added to catalog the place of their birth and/or the last place in which they lived before moving to Natchez.

Movement for free people of color sometimes also entailed a metaphysical migration across the so-called color line. During the course of research, there were several clear cases of individuals and family members that either consciously pursued a strategy to racially “pass” or they are labeled as such by census takers and other residents of Natchez. Thus, definitively placing them within one racial category can be a complex undertaking. Harriet Johnson’s case, for example, illustrates this clearly. I added her into the dataset as a free Black woman with mixed ancestry because she was born enslaved and later freed. But she was clearly light-skinned enough to “pass” as white.<sup>19</sup> Hers was but one example of how race could be such a fluid category within this topic. A field for “passing” was added to record this phenomenon.

The final and perhaps most unifying consideration guiding this project was the category of violence that permeated the lives of free people of color. The NDFPC was altered to catalog these various ways in which free Blacks were subjected to violence. Initially, I had created one field for “violence” that had a wide range of codes to distinguish several types. A sampling of some of these include: A/B—Assaulted/beaten; BE—Born enslaved; C—Accused of a crime; CE—Child enslaved; D—Deported from state/threat of deportation; DA—Domestic abuse with a romantic partner or parent; E—Executed; FS—Freedom suit; K—Kidnapped; M—Murdered; P—(Im)Prisoned; PT—Property threat; R—Rape; RE—Reenslaved; S—Slaveowner; SE—Sexually exploited (or even a question of it). The prevalence of violence was one of the more striking features in the lived experiences of free people of color and the NDFPC vividly cataloged it. As will be seen in the new documentation section, I have separated this one column into independent ones for the different manifestations of violence and further refined the categories.

This dataset has been an invaluable organizing tool to uniformly record demographic information about each individual and connect them to family members and former enslavers when possible, and to facilitate the careful analysis of change over time in Natchez. Free people of color in Natchez were a collection of complex individuals who moved between uncertain safe havens, both in a physical as well as a legal sense to maintain the freedom, integrity, and flourishing of themselves and their loved ones. Finding the most effective digital home to document the details of their lives and make them available to scholars, specialists, the public, and descendants is of the utmost importance to me in commemorating their lives. Therefore, the NDFPC will be housed on my project website, <https://generationsoffreedom.com>, and preserved in the Harvard Dataverse to disseminate the records online.

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<sup>19</sup> William Cullen to Harriet & Robert, Deed of Manumission, 1829, Adams County Chancery Court, Deed Book R, 419; Harriet Johnson Police Board Records, 1832 Adams County Chancery Court, Police Board Records, 14, March Term 1832; and Harriet Johnson vs. L.H. Corey and L.M. Benbrook, 1860, Adams County Chancery Court, Chancery Court Case No. 107, Box No. 11. See also Ribianszky, *Generations of Freedom*, 146-147.

## Data Links

Project Website: <https://generationsoffreedom.com/>

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

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

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