

Good afternoon, and thank you, Chairwoman Moore, members of the California Reparations Task Force, fellow genealogists, and attendees at today's meeting. I am honored to participate in the discussion connected with this important legislation.

Determining who belongs to the community of eligibility is at the root of today's testimonies. My personal journey reflects and supports that African Americans can document their connections to enslaved ancestors.

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I trace my maternal ancestry to enslaved matriarch Florianne, whose daughters Rose and Mary Anne Reynolds emerged in Norfolk, Virginia court records in 1825 after Rose paid \$500 to free her younger sister from a slave-trading family.

I trace my enslaved paternal ancestry to Civil War veteran, Corporal Fielding Lisle, of Co. B, of the 114<sup>th</sup> Regiment of U.S. Colored Troops, who used his \$200 military bounty in 1874, to buy twenty acres of land.

Those acres formed the nucleus of a town that still stands today called Lisletown, named after its founder, and located in Clark County, Kentucky.

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And finally, I trace my maternal enslaved ancestry to Rachel Hodges of Portsmouth, Virginia, a woman sold away from her family in the 1850s. A woman whose son Mills Sumner, Jr. found his mother in Atlanta, Georgia after a twenty-six-year search. It required the same number of years to research these ancestors, to reunite mother and son visually with photographs, because different elders held different heirlooms, and each only knew small parts of our family's history.

I offer these stories to exemplify the types of discoveries possible through research. The first example, historian Dr. Tommy Bogger's study, *Free Blacks in Norfolk*, traced the history of free African American, Helen Robinson Harris, to enslaved ancestors Florianne, Rose, and Mary Ann Reynolds. The second example, historian Harry G. Enoch's, two thousand and eleven *Winchester Sun*

newspaper article, “Where in the World? Lisletown A Black Hamlet,” combined private, court, and public records to document the founding of a community by a formerly enslaved man.

And the last example, of Rachel Hodges and Mills Sumner, Jr. showed how piecing together different sources: oral history, family heirlooms, and public records such as the Atlanta, Georgia, Freedman’s Savings Bank account record, can flesh out stories and connect African Americans to their enslaved ancestry.

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My genealogy journey began during the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976, in the halls of the National Archives in Washington, DC, when I was thirteen years old.

There I met James Walker, a founder of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS). He helped me navigate through archival sources.

I also later met Reginald Washington, Walker's successor, who developed research guides and programs on African American genealogy. Through these two men and other archives staff, I witnessed the valuable work being done by the National Archives to increase access to federal records and assist with African American genealogy and enslaved family research.

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After college, I worked in special libraries, which led to my position as a professional genealogist at a premier U.S. lineage society, Daughters of the American Revolution. While there I reviewed, approved, or rejected, several thousand applications of women who traced their lineage to Revolutionary War patriots. I contributed research to two books: *Forgotten Patriots*, and *Women of the Revolutionary Era*, publications that identified thousands of sources documenting African Americans, Native Americans, and women who supported the American cause during the war.

I also helped document that Eunice Russ Ames (Amos) Davis, the daughter of patriot Prince Ames, and granddaughter of an enslaved man, joined the lineage society in 1896, more than eighty years prior to the date when the members believed the first African American woman joined their lineage society.

My years at the D.A.R. library exposed me to an array of genealogical sources, publications, and institutions that documented African American lives dating before America's founding.

I discovered published sources with segregated information, and by this, I mean records where African Americans and people of color were listed separately from whites. I realized ironically that some of those biased record-keeping and publishing practices helped current genealogists identify African American ancestors more readily.

I share this part of my journey to further emphasize that enslaved Africans, African Americans, Native Americans, and others appear in multiple types of sources and

records as enslaved people. And that the evidence needed to trace enslaved ancestry exists in abundance in primary, secondary, and derivative sources.

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My genealogy journey carried me to my current position at the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives Branch of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) where I serve as a Genealogy Specialist, providing genealogical and historical reference assistance to museum staff and the public.

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I also support the museum's crowdsourcing project where volunteers help us transcribe 1.7 million images of the Freedmen's Bureau Digital Records Collection. Our goal is to provide genealogists, historians, and other researchers with full-text searchable, free online access to the records. To date, more than 37,000 volunteers

have helped us transcribe more than 345,000 of the 1.7 million digital images.

The Freedmen's Bureau records provide information crucial to documenting pivotal generations of African Americans, between enslavement and freedom.

Created in 1865 by Congress to manage abandoned lands, help white refugees, and assist the formerly enslaved, bureau operations extended across fifteen states, western territories, and Washington, D.C.

Bureau agents recorded incomparable details about African American individuals and families, and it is this body of records, that will assist some of the potential members of the community of eligibility, in tracing their lineage to enslaved ancestors.

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I've highlighted the positive experiences connected with enslaved family research. However, there are negatives. Genealogical research is a time-consuming, costly process. Slave-era research is challenging because the system varied over time, by place, by the form of slavery

practiced, and by the manner in which records documented enslavement. I generalized the types of records I used to document my enslaved ancestry. Those records were scattered across a multitude of research institutions across the nation.

Looking at California genealogical and historical resources, and the possible places of enslavement of the ancestors of the community of eligibility, I have drafted a shortlist of suggestions to consider as you continue meetings, debates, and discussions beyond today's gathering. Time limits prevent me from reading the suggestions.

This concludes my remarks, and I have submitted the list of suggestions in writing for the record. If members of the task force have any questions, I am happy to address them.



## Shortlist of Suggestions [Included in Visual Presentation]

1. Establish an agency connected with the state archives and office of vital records, if possible, to administer and manage the genealogical and historical research eligibility processing of applicants.
2. Train a corps of African American genealogists, and other genealogists skilled in researching or compiling documentation needed to trace African American ancestry.
3. Enlist public, state, and private libraries in conducting workshops to help members of the community of eligibility learn how to conduct genealogical research.
4. Create a committee to identify and survey the types of records most useful to African American genealogical research and researching the enslaved.
5. Survey and publish a study on California African American genealogical and historical resources. The survey would parallel or update previous record surveys completed by the Federal Writers Project and Works Projects Administration of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.