

FGS April 2017

**A Needle in a Haystack:
A Case Study in Identifying 19th Century African Americans**

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The long-lost names and stories of Boston's 19th century African American police officers have been recovered using unlikely sources, including payroll records, family letters, pardons and petitions, the proceedings of political clubs, business leagues, and the well-documented lives of famous historical figures. This case study shows you *can* find that elusive ancestor!

Though an 1884 book on Boston referenced a police officer of color, his name seemed lost to history as no one could not identify any African American member of the Boston Police Department before 1919. I had no training in African American history or genealogy, but developed a research plan to find the Jackie Robinson of the Boston Police Department. By cross-referencing a variety of 19th century records, I was able to identify a name and date for Horatio J. Homer, a quiet pioneer who served for 40 years, retired as a Sergeant, and was buried in an unmarked grave. Sergeant Homer proved to be the hub of a forgotten group of African American police officers and female civilians who were leaders in their community and served with the Boston Police Department before 1900. Their story was recovered using records from three New England states that revealed a continuum of African American achievement reaching back to colonial times and slavery and continuing into the 21st century and living descendants. Their stories include self emancipation, generations of military service, leadership in business and public life, and generations of public service.

Sergeant Homer now has a fine memorial on his grave, has been the subject of news coverage from NPR to Canada, and had had the community room at the new Roxbury police station dedicated in his honor.

At a previous MGC conference, genealogist Helen Leary spoke of the common methods in African American and Irish genealogy. I will also use Irish examples in this talk

Define your quest * Create a research plan/review with others * Revisit and revise as necessary * How can you narrow quest, or begin with most likely hits * Research associates who are better documented than your ancestor and may have left their own records * research places lived, places educated and employed * in-laws, * landlords and neighbors* political leaders and parties* military records * local history records * staff and volunteers at institutional and local history collections* read the newspapers your ancestor read * real estate, business, and probate records * photographs as documents* who is in obituary * who is in grave* pension* ask your librarian

Resources

Boston Events Edward H. Savage

<https://archive.org/details/bostonevents00savagoog>

Boston Municipal Registers

<http://www.bpl.org/govinfo/online-collections/regional-boston-and-massachusetts/bostons-municipal-register-1841-1991/>

Records of National Negro Business League (film at Boston Public Library)

http://www.lexisnexis.com/documents/academic/upa_cis/1559_NatNegroBusLeaguePt1.pdf

Railroad Records (Chicago) <https://www.newberry.org/railroad-archives>

Connecticut State Library

<http://ctstatelibrary.org/state-archives/> <http://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/home>

Plainville CT Historical Society <http://www.plainvillehistory.org/events/>

Farmington CT Library <http://farmingtonlibraries.org/local-history-genealogy/>

Connecticut Freedom Trail

<http://www.ctfreedomtrail.org/trail/concept-of-freedom/sites/#!/redeemers-ame-zion-church>

Maine Historical Society <https://www.mainehistory.org>

The Massachusetts Archives <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arccol/colidx.htm>

Harvard University Libraries

Tufts University: Boston City Directories Search Service – selected years online

<http://dca.lib.tufts.edu/features/bostonstreets/people/directories.html>

The Boston Public Library Microtext Department (Copley Square) has City Directories 1809 – present.

New England Historic Genealogical Society (Newbury Street, Boston) has an extensive collection on New England city directories on microfiche.

Alexander's Magazine (on microfilm at many college libraries)

Black Biography 1790 – 1950 A Cumulative Index (Burkett, Burkett, and Gates)

Blacks in Selected Newspapers, Censuses, and Other Sources: An Index to Names and Surnames

James de T. Abajian

The celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of William Lloyd Garrison, by the colored citizens of greater Boston <https://archive.org/details/celebrationonehundred00garrich>

The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750-1950. Adelaide M. Cromwell