

THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE SAID WHAT?

Race Shifts in Records, Passing, and Belonging

ATTENDEE WORKSHEET

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"The official record isn't always the whole truth. Sometimes it's what someone needed to survive."

AAHGS New York Chapter & New York Genealogical and Biographical Society

HOW TO USE THIS WORKSHEET

This worksheet follows the talk in real time. I'll tell you when to turn to each section. Keep a pen handy — you'll be writing, checking boxes, circling names, and answering prompts throughout. The goal is for you to leave today with a concrete plan for your own research.

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1 THE SILENCE INVENTORY

Sometimes what's missing tells you more than what's there. Check any that apply to your family:

- Missing marriage license — especially ancestors in the South before 1967
- A marriage that happened far from where both people lived
- No photographs from "back home"
- A generation that "appeared" in a new place with no prior records
- Family members who don't appear in expected records (census, tax rolls, church records)
- Stories that were vague or changed depending on who was asking
- Topics the family refused to discuss — or got angry when asked about
- Ancestors who "cut off" contact with relatives in another region
- Names that changed between locations or generations
- A branch of the family that left a state suddenly (1806? 1830s? 1924?)
- Records that just... stop — no death certificate, person disappears from the paper trail
- An ancestor described differently by different family members ("French," "Spanish," "Cherokee")

If even one applies — you're in the right place. Which one surprised you most?

2 TRACKING SHIFTS IN YOUR FAMILY

Pick one ancestor — someone you've seen on multiple records. Track how they appear across different documents. Look for changes in racial designation, name spelling, or stated birthplace.

Ancestor's name:

DOCUMENT	YEAR	LOCATION	RACIAL DESIGNATION	WHO RECORDED IT?

What pattern do you notice? Did the designation change when they moved? When the recorder changed?

3 KEY DATES: HOW THE SYSTEM CHANGED

The rules kept changing — and every change affected what the records say. Star (★) any dates that fall within your ancestor's lifetime.

1790	●	First U.S. Census — racial categories built in from day one
1850	●	"Mulatto" added as a separate census category
1890	●	Quadroon (1/4) and Octoroon (1/8) added — the government does fractions on human beings
1910	●	The "Mulatto" definition loosened — anyone with any visible Black ancestry
1924	●	Virginia's Racial Integrity Act — no trace of non-white blood allowed
1930	●	Mulatto eliminated from census. One-drop rule formalized. "Mexican" added for one year only.
1943	●	Plecker distributes surname "hit list" to Virginia officials
1960	●	First year Americans could self-identify race on the census
1967	●	Loving v. Virginia overturns anti-miscegenation laws
2000	●	Census allows selecting multiple racial categories for the first time

Which dates fall within your ancestor's lifetime? How might a rule change have affected their records?

4 THE 1930 CENSUS INSTRUCTIONS

These are the actual instructions given to census enumerators before they went door to door. Read each one carefully.

"A person of mixed white and Negro blood should be returned as a Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood."

→ What does "no matter how small" mean for your family?

"A person of mixed Indian and Negro blood should be returned as a Negro, unless the Indian blood predominates and the status as an Indian is generally accepted in the community."

→ Who decides what's "generally accepted"? What if your neighbors didn't like you?

"A person of mixed white and Indian blood should be returned as an Indian, except where the percentage of Indian blood is very small, or where he is regarded as a white person by those in the community where he lives."

→ Your official racial classification could come down to whether people in your town would vouch for you.

What strikes you most about this language?

5 FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK EVERY RECORD

Use these questions every time you look at a document with a racial designation. Apply them to the ancestor you identified earlier.

1 WHO CREATED THIS RECORD?

Enumerator going door to door? Courthouse clerk? Midwife who knew your family? A stranger making a five-minute assessment? Who held the pen matters.

2 WHAT YEAR WAS IT?

What categories existed that year? Had the rules just changed? Was "Mulatto" still an option, or had it been eliminated?

3 WHAT WERE THE LOCAL LAWS?

What would it cost to be recorded one way vs. another? Could they legally marry? Own property? Vote? Send their children to certain schools?

4 DOES THIS MATCH OTHER RECORDS?

If not — what changed? Did they move? Did the categories shift? Did a different person record it? Don't assume error.

5 WHAT'S MISSING?

No marriage license? Maybe they couldn't legally get one. No photos? No stories? Silence is data.

RED FLAGS IN YOUR TREE

These patterns may indicate someone was navigating the racial classification system. Check any you've seen in your own family research:

- A sudden move across state lines with no clear explanation
- A name change — first name, last name, or both
- A marriage that happened far from where both people lived
- A family branch that got "cut off" — and nobody will say why
- Records that just stop — person disappears from the paper trail

- Stories that were vague or shifted: "French. Maybe Spanish. Maybe Cherokee."
- An ancestor whose stated birthplace changes across documents
- Physical descriptions in records that seem inconsistent with stated race

6 PLECKER'S TARGETED SURNAME LIST

YOUR FAMILY DIDN'T HAVE TO STAY IN VIRGINIA. Many left — some as early as 1806. They went to Louisiana, Tennessee, the Appalachian mountains, "No Man's Land," and beyond. The surnames traveled. If you see these names anywhere in your tree, your family may have roots in these targeted communities.

CIRCLE any surnames that appear in your family tree:

AMHERST COUNTY & ROCKBRIDGE:

Adcock (Adcox) • Beverly (Burch, Birch) • Branham • Cash • Clark • Coleman • Duff • Floyd • Hamilton • Hartless • Hicks • Johns • Lawless • Mason • Mayse (Mays) • Nuckles (Knuckles) • Painter • Pultz • Ramsey • Redcross • Roberts • Sorrells • Southards (Suthards, Southerds, Southers) • Tarry • Tyree • Willis • Wood

CHARLES CITY, KING WILLIAM, NEW KENT:

Adams • Adkins • Allmond • Bradby • Collins • Custalow (Custaloe) • Dennis • Doggett • Dungle • Hawkes • Holmes • Howell • Langston • Miles • Page • Spurlock • Stewart • Wynn

ESSEX, KING & QUEEN, CAROLINE:

Boughton • Brooks • Byrd • Cooper • Fortune • Hammond • Mitchell • Nelson • Prince • Robinson • Tate

HALIFAX COUNTY:

Coleman • Epps (Eppes) • Johnson • Martin • Sheppard (Shepard) • Stewart (Stuart) • Talley • Young

NORFOLK COUNTY & PORTSMOUTH:

Bass • Bright • Ingram • King • Locklear (Locklair) • Porter • Sawyer • Weaver

APPALACHIAN — Lee, Smyth, Scott, Russell, Wise, Tazewell:

Barlow • Bolden (Bolin) • Bunch • Castell • Collins • Delph • Dingus • Duncan • Freeman • Gibson (Gipson) • Goins • Hammed • Hawkins • Keith • Meade • Mise • Moore • Mullins • Profitt • Ramsey • Stillwell

OTHER COUNTIES:

Albemarle: Moon, Powell, Kidd, Pumphrey | Bedford: McVey, Maxey, Branham, Burley | Fauquier: Hoffman (Huffman), Riley, Colvin, Phillips | Greene: Shifflet (Shiflet) | Lancaster: Dorsey (Dawson) | Prince William: Tyson, Segar | Washington: Beverly, Barlow, Thomas, Hughes, Lethcoe, Worley | Westmoreland: Sorrells, Worlds (Worrell), Atwells, Gutridge, Oliff

Plecker noted for the Appalachian group: "Chiefly Tennessee Melungeons"

Names I found in my tree:

One word for how I'm feeling right now:

7 REFLECTION

Return to the Silence Inventory on page 2. Look at what you checked.

Does any of it look different now? Does the silence in your family have a shape you didn't see before?

Are there silences that might connect to racial identity, passing, or protection?

MY FAMILY MYSTERY

The ancestor I'm investigating:

What doesn't add up:

What I know so far:

What I still need to find:

WHAT DO I DO WITH THIS?

There's no one right answer. Some families want to know. Some have spent generations protecting a secret.

- Start with **curiosity**, not judgment.
- Start with **questions**, not announcements.
- Remember that your ancestors did what they had to do to **survive**.
- You're allowed to honor that, even as you tell the truth.

What's one question you want to investigate further after today? Make it specific — that's your next step.

What's the first record or resource you'll check? Where will you look?

Who in your family might have answers — or might have questions of their own?

RESOURCES

Census & Instructions

- Census.gov: "Measuring Race Across the Decades"
- Pew Research: "What Census Calls Us"
- IPUMS USA — compare census categories across decades

Walter Plecker & Virginia

- Encyclopedia Virginia (search "Plecker")
- Library of Virginia: full surname list and original letters
- "Mongrel Virginians" (Estabrook & McDougle) — the eugenics study Plecker relied on

Books

- *The Forgotten People* — Gary B. Mills
- *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South* — Dormon
- *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing* — Allyson Hobbs
- *Walking Toward the Sunset* — Samuel Cook (on Monacan Indians and Plecker)

Danielle's Work

- YouTube: @NYTN
- Patreon: patreon.com/nytn

SILENCE IS A RECORD TOO.
And now you know how to read it.

Questions? Connect with Danielle at @NYTN on YouTube or patreon.com/nytn

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