

# **Reparative Description of Slavery Era Finding Aids and Catalog Records: Centering Genealogists Who Research African American Family History**

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## **Abstract**

Wilson Special Collections Library recently concluded a year-long project in which staff interviewed 10 genealogists who are focused on African American family history. We wanted to be in conversation with this audience because we are exploring how we can improve our finding aids and catalog records to facilitate the research experience of genealogists who are specifically interested in tracing family history to before 1865 in the United States.

Wilson Library has a large collection of slavery era family papers that document the lives of enslaved and free Black people. Description of these materials in finding aids and catalog records historically has privileged the lives and perspectives of the white families represented in the collections; moreover, this description typically was created with a scholarly audience in mind. Slavery was to be studied as an institution, but the humanity of individual enslaved people was rarely recognized.

We hoped that these interviews would inform our process for repairing exclusionary language and redressing unbalanced representation in finding aids and catalog records, but we learned so much more. The interviewees generously shared about their research processes and experiences and made recommendations for how libraries could re-center this audience as we think about not only finding aid language and remediation, but also outreach, researcher experience, digitization priorities, database construction, connection building across collections, catalog navigation, and content warnings. This presentation will share suggestions that will be of interest to repositories with slavery era and other collections that document marginalized and underrepresented groups.

## **About the authors:**

*Nancy Kaiser* is a Technical Services Archivist at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She joined Wilson Library in 2000 and has been a leader in remediation of finding aids for slavery era collections at UNC since 2020.

*Nicka Sewell-Smith* is a host, consultant, and documentarian with more than 20 years of experience as a genealogist. She has extensive experience in researching the enslaved and their communities and is a valued expert in genealogy research along the Mississippi Delta.

Nicka has diverse and varied experience in media with a background in audio, video, and written communications. She's appeared on TODAY, Good Morning America, CNN, MSNBC, an Emmy

winning episode of the series *Who Do You Think You Are*, was featured in the groundbreaking short film, *A Dream Delivered: The Lost Letters of Hawkins Wilson*, and has been interviewed by *National Geographic*, *TIME*, *USA Today*, and *New York Times*. She is the host of BlackProGen LIVE, an innovative web show with more than 130 episodes focused on people of color genealogy and family history.

She is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, a member of two lineage societies (Sons and Daughters of the Middle Passage (SDUSMP) and the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR)), and a past board member of the California Genealogical Society (CGS) and the African American Genealogical Society of Northern California (AAGSNC). Nicka served as the chair of the Outreach and Education Committee for AAGSNC, and is the former project manager for the Alameda County, CA Youth Ancestral Project where more than 325 youth were taught the value of family history.

Additionally, Nicka is the family historian and lead researcher for the Atlas family of Lake Providence, East Carroll, Louisiana, and guides and coaches an active group of family historians at the Who is Nicka Smith Patreon community.