

“Journey Through Ledgers People of Color, Enslaved & Free Can Be Found!”

By Diane L. Richard



Introduction:

A type of document not often examined by researchers is “small business” **ledgers**. Let’s talk about why ledgers can be invaluable to your research!

Have you explored ledgers? You can learn so much about your family and the neighborhood through these records. Store, business (e.g., hotels, livery, stable, distillery, blacksmith, etc), and health-related (e.g., Physician, Insane Asylum, etc.) ledgers can link family members and provide many interesting details invaluable to your family history narrative. Relationships are sometimes noted – e.g., Tom, son of William. Slaves (and location) are sometimes called out in physician’s ledgers as they were treated. Deaths or weddings might be noted in a livery ledger as a horse is rented. Distillery ledgers show that everyone seemed to buy whisky – including preachers and physicians. Depending on where you lived and when different types of goods were bought and sold at the local stores.

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Though many ledgers are only available offline, you can determine their existence online using Archivegrid! You won't regret looking at a ledger. Even if you don't find entries for your family, you'll certainly gain some perspective on the community in which they lived. And don't assume that everyone just transacted business in their county or state!

Besides placing in space and time, what might you discover?

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| ○ Convey the nature of household activities | ○ Document vital events – records of deaths and marriages | ○ Imply political beliefs |
| ○ State relationships (children to parents) | ○ Characterize the nature of a business endeavor | ○ Link to hobbies and extracurricular activities |
| ○ Identify hired hands | ○ Suggest religious and faith-related pursuits | ○ .. and more ... |
| ○ Identify enslaved/free persons of color | | |

Ledgers are personal, and intimate; everyday little details about your family.

We just may poke a hole in that brick wall we've been staring at.

Learning Objectives:

Learn about the many different extant types of business ledgers that document African American Individuals – whether enslaved, a Free Person of Color, or in the post-Civil War period. Explore what you might learn from these ledgers and how to find/identify which ones exist. Also, consider that ledgers for African American-owned businesses may also survive.

Presentation Highlights:

Ledger Types and Organization

Ledger Type:

- (1) Customer Account with credit (Cr) & debit (Dr) columns; one page or more often double-paged → format used when credit extended to customers
- (2) Cash-in-hand (usually chronological) → format used for real-time payments

Ledger Organization:

- (1) Chronological entries
- (2) Organized by Customer accounts
- (3) Summary lists referring to previous ledgers
- (4) [rare – Pittsboro, Chatham ledger] – appears to be rewritten and organized mostly alphabetically by surname for each month

Payments:

- (1) Money (various currencies until official U.S. currency is established and widespread)
- (2) Bartering (trade or exchange goods and services without using money)
 - (1) goods
 - (2) labor

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(3) services

Challenges

- These are HANDWRITTEN
 - Handwriting is OFTEN messy & illegible
 - SHORTHAND notations often used
 - SPECIALIZED terms often used
- Most are NOT extant; the ones that are are priceless

Some ledger types that have proven to be useful

- Distillery/General Store – a central community resource that almost every family visited! Connections to family members; possibly hired hands and slaves, also listed
- Physician – slaves & location, deaths
- Livery – attending weddings, funerals, church, etc.
- Blacksmith – purchases/services made
- Insane asylum/ sanitarium and related – linking patients to family; sometimes providing a death date
- Hotel – individuals who lived nearby and far stayed at hotels (as day-tripping was much more of a challenge)
- Post Office – based on subscriptions, you might learn about religion, politics, other locales connected to, interests, etc.
- Hat Maker/Millinery/Shoemaker – some personal wear items were not made at home; either too specialized or when seeking something fancier.
- Lawyers – many needed their services, including widows
- Midwives – documenting births
- Mills – employment of men, women and children
- Barber
- Undertaker & related businesses
- Pharmacist/Druggist – not every treatment/remedy can be found at home
- Insurance co (health/life, home/business, enslaved)
- Grog Shop/Tavern/Lodging establishments etc. – like today, locals sometimes wanted a meal cooked by others, drinks, etc.
- Post office ledgers – what periodicals did they receive?
- Newspaper ledgers
- Toll Roads, Ferries & Bridges
- Tanner
- ... and the list goes on

Think about the everyday lives of your ancestors. Who did they interact with? Who did they conduct business with?



Records Where Female Ancestors Might Be Found Are Also Noted

It is easy as a researcher and even a speaker to overlook discussing our female ancestors. Many records do mention them; more than most researchers realize. We are not talking about birth, marriage, and death or records linked to their parents, husbands, and/or children, and records where they are documented in their own right.

Since women are documented in the majority of ledger types, I no longer include this symbol in my talks. Assume that you WILL find women!

Manuscript & Archive Collections – How to Locate?

This is about on-the-ground physical archives and not born digital (or online) archives, though, many physical archives are being digitized and then also become available online.

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Archivegrid

<https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>

Think of it as a catalog for archival and manuscript collection finding aids. Not all are included, and many are!

DPLA [Digital Public Library of America]

<https://dp.la/>

It indexes (and points you to) almost 50 million digitized items, many of which are ledgers. Once you get to a relevant digitized collection, see what else you might find!

Archive Card Catalogs

Only some archives/manuscript collections (Federal, State, Regional, County, Private, Museum, etc.) currently participate with ArchiveGrid. If not included in Archivegrid, search its dedicated catalog to discover its holdings.

Libguides

Check out this community, <https://community.libguides.com/>, where archivists, librarians, and other professionals are letting you know about resources relevant to an impressive array of topics.

Some examples of helpful US digital collections where small business “ledgers can be found. Look for similar options for the locale you are researching.

**Often Successful
ArchiveGrid Search Terms
[the term ledger is not
always used even when the
item is a “ledger”**

- Ledgers
- Accounts
- Volume/Bound Volume
- Lists
- Members

North Carolina large online collections -- might find ledgers

DigitalNC [has many NC LEDGERS as part of its collection], <https://www.digitalnc.org/>. Original materials

from over 270 libraries, museums, and archives across North Carolina. Continually expanding.

North Carolina Digital Collections, <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/>. Too many types of materials to identify here; just go and check out.

Colonial North America at Harvard,

<https://colonialnorthamerica.library.harvard.edu/spotlight/cna> [contains many pre-1800 small business ledgers!]

Utah large online collections -- might find ledgers (digitized) or ledger-finding aids

Digital Collections, BYU University [ledgers & finding aids]

<https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/p15999coll31/search/searchterm/ledger>

J Willard Marriott Digital Library, the University of Utah [finding aids]

<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/search?q=ledger>

USU Digital History Collections

<https://digital.lib.usu.edu/digital/collection/Mendon/search/searchterm/ledger>

ArchivesWest [Utah + Ledgers]

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<https://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/search.php?r=&q=ledger+utah>

Weber State University [Utah Construction + Ledger; look for other collections]

<https://cdm.weber.edu/digital/collection/LEDGER/search/>

South Carolina “Digitized” Resources

University of South Carolina Libraries, Digital collections

<https://digital.library.sc.edu/>

Over 300 digital collections await you.

Greenville County Library System

<https://greenvillelibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/>

The South Carolina Room in the Hughes Main Library houses the Greenville County Library System's genealogy and local history collections. The digital collections include items from the South Carolina Room's archive, local organizations, and private collections.

Lowcountry Digital Library (LCDL)

<https://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/>

Digital collections and projects that support research about the Lowcountry region of South Carolina and historically interconnected sites in the Atlantic World.

The Walker Local and Family History Center Digital Collections, Richland Library

<https://cdm16817.contentdm.oclc.org/>

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Virginia “Digitized” Resources

Virginia Memory (Library of Virginia), <https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/>

University of Virginia, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library,

<https://small.library.virginia.edu/>

Virginia Heritage -- Virginia Heritage is a consolidated database of more than 13,000 finding aids [similar concept to Archivegrid except VA focused], <https://vaheritage.org/>

Virginia Tech Special Collections and University Archives, <https://spec.lib.vt.edu/>

James Madison University Special Collections, <https://www.lib.jmu.edu/special/>

Also, just do general “Google™” or use the search engine of your choice to just search on things like ledger + “ZZ County” + digitized and similar; a lot can be found by just “fishing” on the internet!