

Guidelines for Description of Slavery and Enslaved People in Special Collections

Many collections in Rubenstein Library contain documentation of slavery in the United States and other regions of the Western Hemisphere. This document seeks to formalize Rubenstein Library Technical Services policies and present a unified, department-wide approach for library description of items and collections documenting slavery and enslaved people.

Goals:

1. Identify and consistently describe manuscripts or archives that contain legal and transactional documents relating to slavery; or which reference or record the existence, activities, and relationships of individual enslaved and freed people.
2. Directly acknowledge when collection materials imply or record the existence and influence of slavery.
3. Make records of slavery easier to locate in our collections, for all types of researchers (including genealogists and descendants of enslaved people).
4. Supplement documentation already elaborated in RLTS Guiding Principles of Description and How We Describe.

1. How to look for documentation of slavery

Often in pre-1900s RL manuscript or archival collections, the assigned creator is a white male head of household, a business owner, or a government official or administrator. These are the sorts of collections that the library sought to acquire in the early 20th century, because these papers tend to record the business practices and political influences of that creator and his network. These collections often speak to the routinization of slavery economics in the American South. Even if the creator themselves was not a slaveholder, there is a high likelihood that interactions with enslavers or enslaved people is documented in the collection.

Consider the age and provenance of the materials you are describing. If it is pre-1866 and created in the Southern United States, review the collection carefully to look for references to or documentation of slavery.

1. If you find references to the presence or activities of enslaved people; documentation of legal or financial transactions relating to slavery; directions or documentation about plantation management or overseers; references to the trading, hire, escape, or sale of enslaved people; financial receipts, valuations, or accounting relating to enslaved people; ledgers or lists of names of enslaved people and their families or children; invoices or other bills relating to enslaved people, such as medical care, clothing, or expenses recorded by the slaveholder – anything like this should be considered as documentation of slavery, even when it is ephemeral in the context

of the remainder of the collection. Make sure that slavery is reflected in the subject headings and scope notes you create for the materials.

2. If you find references or documentation relating to emancipation, freed people of color, enslaved people pursuing their freedom, legal manumission, revolts or rebellion of enslaved people, and other activism protesting and fighting slavery - this is also documentation relating to slavery. Make sure the nature of the content is reflected in your subject headings and scope notes along with the broader terms of slavery and enslaved persons.
3. Often manuscript collection dates extend past the end of the Civil War, into the post-slavery and Reconstruction era. If you find references or documentation relating to post-Civil War lives and livelihoods of formerly enslaved people, including employment and apprenticeship; education; land or housing leases or ownership; travel; violence or harassment by white people towards Black people, including the Ku Klux Klan; political involvement and engagement of Black people or communities; relationships and family life; religious activities - these topics are also important content to include in your scope notes and subject headings for the collection.
4. If you have checked and do not see the presence of slavery, include that in a scope note for the collection. "No documentation of slavery was found by the library at the time of description."

2. Evaluate the evidence and its context before starting

Consider the context of the documents before deciding what level of description and physical arrangement would be best. When looking at items, and determining what level of description is most appropriate, here are some factors to consider:

1. How rare or historically unique are the items?
 - a. Some items' formats are extremely rare, such as photographs, letters, or legal testimony of enslaved people. In those situations, attempt to determine personal names, and include specific features of the item in your description. Add collection-level genre headings and subject headings indicating the presence of the ultra-rare item, and describe the item (date and location within the collection) so it can be found easily by a user.
 - b. Other formats are more routine and may be effectively described collectively, particularly if they are present in batches in an archival collection (see #2, below).
2. How do the specific items compare in scale with the rest of the collection?
 - a. If you are describing a single manuscript or volume, include detailed description of any slavery-related content, and identify and establish name authority records if possible. This is especially important if this item was a recent acquisition by a curator, or is a good candidate for digitization (good condition, out of copyright, likely to be used in instruction or exhibits).
 - b. If you are describing a group of Southern white family papers, and the family enslaved Black people, then it is possible there is a variety of documents relating to slavery

scattered throughout the collection. Evaluate how much slavery-related material is present in the collection before deciding how to most effectively use your time.

- i. For collections with large, scattered amounts of slavery-related documents, it may be best to create folder-level or collection-level description which summarize the collection as a whole, and describes the sort of slavery-related content that is present in aggregate. You could add some specific item-level description if certain items' condition or content warrants it.
- ii. For collections with only one or two documents referring to slavery, considering foldering those individual documents (and describing those folders in a title list) to make them easier to find within the larger collection.

3. How is the collection arranged already? What sort of re-processing goals do you have for the collection?

- a. Traditionally, RL's 19th-century family papers tended to be arranged by format: Correspondence, Legal Documents, Financial Documents, etc. At times they were arranged chronologically as Papers and Bound Volumes. Slavery documents could be scattered across any of these categories and formats. Your approach to description may not necessarily require you to re-arrange anything.
- b. Help the user find the slavery documents, but do not feel obligated to drastically change the arrangement of the collection (unless that is needed to better store the documents and ensure their conservation).
 - i. Depending on the size of the collection, you could collect all slavery-related formats into a single folder or folders. This approach would mean that you must item-level review each document, and even when taking that level of time and care, you risk missing something.
 - ii. You could leave the items in their original folders and describe them either in aggregate ("lists of enslaved people") or individually ("bill of sale for...") in a series or file-level note. When possible, include dates and locations of these formats to help users browse the description.
 - iii. You could individually-folder significant items and include those as titles in your folder lists (for example, "Letter written by Fanny, an enslaved person, to John Smith, dated YYYY Month Day"). This is item-level description and works well for potential digitization of the document.

4. What details are recorded about the people who were enslaved, particularly as it relates to the potential for genealogical research?

- a. The transactional and ephemeral nature of many slavery documents make it difficult for researchers, including descendants or genealogists, to positively identify enslaved people. Be cognizant of how different audiences may be researching this collection, and make descriptive choices that help them land on your description. Even if you are not able to transcribe this material item-by-item, be sure to record its existence and where a researcher would find it in the collection.

- b. Legal documents may warrant additional description because they may have disambiguating information about the people being trafficked, including their name and age, names of other family members, or the name of the trader or enslaver.
- c. Sometimes lists tucked into general slaveholder account books, estate documents, and white family correspondence include references to names, ages, and relationships between different enslaved people. The lists may have been created as part of a plantation census, or as a valuation document or appraisal document as part of estate dissolution or financial records. Be sure to record the presence of these lists in your description.
 - i. Some estate lists and other log books are go-to records for genealogists to look for names or information. Indicating the presence of these formats gets the user to the collection (even if the user then needs to conduct additional page-by-page research themselves).
- d. Family names and networks of the enslavers can also help trace the movements and activities of the different enslaved people associated with them.

3. Required Headings and Notes for description of slavery

A. Collection Level (Or Single-Item Manuscript) Description

If the item or collection documents or references slavery, then the collection-level description (both the MARC record and the finding aid) should include notes and subject headings about slavery.

- A. Add subject access points in the MARC bibliographic record and in the finding aid. Always start with Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). You can search them here: <https://authorities.loc.gov/>, through Classweb, or OCLC.
 - ☐ Some LCSH headings are remapped locally through TRLN Discovery (ex: Slave traders -> Traffickers of enslaved persons). Please use the original LCSH in the MARC record regardless of how TRLN Discovery is displaying the heading.
- B. At least one of the following LC subject headings is required whenever the item or collection references or documents slavery:
 - ☐ 650 -0 Slavery
 - ☐ 650 -0 Enslaved persons
 - ☐ 650 -0 Slave trade
 - ☐ 650 -0 Slaveholders
- C. In addition, the following LC subject headings are required whenever the collection or item includes or references the following topics:
 - ☐ 650 -0 Fugitive slaves \$z location
 - Use this whenever there are records documenting instances of runaway slaves who freed themselves by leaving their slaveholders or plantations.
 - ☐ 650 -0 Slave rebellions \$z location

- Use this whenever the records include instances of a revolt or rebellion by enslaved people, and in cases where white people were concerned about the possibility.
- This heading was recently changed from ‘slave insurrections’ - check that notes and other legacy description reflect the updated term.
- 650 -0 Plantations \$z location
 - Include in your notes the name of the plantation and where it is located. If it is a significant aspect of the collection, propose a formal subject heading for the plantation (consult with Collection Services colleagues for advice).
- 650 -0 Freed persons \$z location
 - Use this heading whenever there are records (typically pre-1890s) in the collection relating to formerly enslaved people (whether they were manumitted or emancipated at the end of the Civil War).
 - This could be combined with a heading for the American Civil War that indicates the presence of ‘contraband’ or former slaves who left their enslavers and crossed Union lines during the war.
- 650 -0 Free Black people \$z location
 - Use this whenever there are records relating to African Americans who were not enslaved but lived during the slavery era
- 650 -0 Enslaved persons’ writings, American
 - Use this whenever letters or narratives completed by or on behalf of enslaved or formerly enslaved people are present in the collection. Ex: a letter from a person to their former enslaver.
 - Whenever this exists in a collection there should be a note helping researchers locate these items (typically a scope/content note for that section or folder of the collection, or by using the title of the item itself in your description and foldering it individually.)
- 650 -0 Slave bills of sale \$v Specimens
 - Use this whenever the format is present, even a single time, in the collection. Whenever this exists there should be a note helping researchers locate these items (typically a scope and content note for a section of the collection, or by foldering this content separately)
 - Do not subdivide this heading geographically or by time period (although you can include that information with other valid headings, or in other parts of the description)
- 650 -0 Slave records
 - Use this whenever there are ledgers or other lists prepared by slaveholders, slave traders, or other enslavers as a form of accounting, estate management, or inventorying the people enslaved on their plantations. This heading has cross-references of ‘Registers of births, etc.’ and ‘Vital statistics’ - use that as a framework for when to apply

it to your description. Explain in your notes what sort of records are present.

D. If you find LCSH terms inadequate for your purposes, you can also make use of MESH subject headings, Getty AAT genre headings, and RBMS genre headings.

- RBMS Controlled Vocabulary for Rare Materials Cataloging: <https://id.loc.gov/vocabulary/rbmvcv.html>
 - Works: Content of work: Prejudicial works has terms like Racist works, Anti-Black works, White supremacist works - which may be relevant to the collection or item you are cataloging.
- Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus: <https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/index.html>
- MESH vocabulary: <https://meshb.nlm.nih.gov/>
 - May have better choices for terms related to social sciences
- More information about Alternative Thesauri can be found here*: <https://wiki.duke.edu/display/RLTS/Alternative+Thesauri>
 - *needs to be updated (as of 2023)

E. Summarize the type of slavery documentation in your collection or item notes.

- Biographical and Historical Note (545):
 - If known, explain the main entry's relationship to slavery in the collection or item's biographical/historical note. This could be a note regarding the person as an enslaver, a slave trader, a plantation owner, or whatever is justified by the context of the collection.
 - Do not use shorthand or euphemisms like Planter or Trader without supplying additional context.
 - If there is a particularly compelling section of the collection that warrants an explanation in the historical note, please repeat the 545 and include it.

Some examples of 545s of enslavers:

- 545 -- Col. William Sylvester Carter (approximately 1833-1902) was a white Confederate plantation owner, businessman, and state representative from Fairfield in Hyde County, N.C.
- 545 – Josiah Clark Nott (1804-1873), born in South Carolina, was a surgeon, ethnologist, and specialist in infectious disease vectors; his first practice was established in Mobile, Alabama in 1833. He was an enslaver and was a well-known instigator of racist theories of white supremacy; together with Henry Hotze, he translated Arthur de Gobineau's book, "An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races," from French into English.
- 545 – Abel Beach Nichols (1796/7-1868) was a merchant, farmer, slaveholder and slaver trader from Bedford County, Virginia.

- Scope and Contents Note (520):
 - Summarize the whole of the collection first, before you summarize the sorts of documents relating to slavery that are present in the collection. Give researchers enough specific information to determine whether this is a collection or item they would like to consult.
 - In other words, try to help researchers save time and eliminate false leads.
 - Use person-first language when discussing enslaved people. The names of the enslaved individuals should be included in any item-level description. Refer to How We Describe for more stylistic guidance.

B. Mid-depth / File-level description

The description at this level should help users locate slavery-related information within a larger collection. Summarize the series or folders' overall content, and then include any item-specific information you have relating to slavery.

- If there are too many slavery-related items to individually list, summarize the sorts of records present. You can highlight a specific item if it warrants it (for example, a letter from an enslaved person within a folder of correspondence.)
- Include dates and any other disambiguating information you have in order to help the researcher find the specific item(s) you've described (among the many in the folder).
- Use quotes as needed to indicate which portions of your description are cataloger-supplied, versus what is being transcribed from the documents themselves.
- Ex: "Plantation Ledger" includes an estate list for John Doe's Tara Plantation with 40 names and ages of enslaved people on page 3.
- Ex: Includes a bill of sale for Joseph, age 35, dated 1855 August 5.
- RL Example: [Joseph Ingram, Sr. Papers](#): Folder is titled "Letters, 1769-1819" and contains range of materials from those dates. Folder's scope/content note includes details about slavery documents found within that folder. Accompanied by subject headings and notes at the collection level.

Letters, 1769-1819

Containers:

Box 1

Scope and Content:

Assorted manuscript documents from the Ingram and Chiles families, arranged chronologically. Items include correspondence from acquaintances and business contacts regarding the Ingram's cidar, brandy, and cotton businesses; memoranda concerning trading and legal matters; some family correspondence about the health of family members and Eben N. Ingram's medical education in Louisburg, NC, Pennsylvania, and New York. The bulk of documents fall into two distinct periods, 1785-1792 and 1815-1819. Letters and memoranda from the early period include those of John Chiles of Georgetown, SC and Thomas Chiles, Esquire. The later period includes several letters from Thomas Ingram to his brother, Eben N. Ingram about family and business matters at the Ingram plantation while Eben was away for medical school.

Folder includes at least three references to enslaved people. One is a list of 18 names written on the back of a scrap of a legal document. The front of the document is dated 1792 while the list of names on the back is dated 1826. List appears to be related to cotton shares. The second item is letter from a Mr. Johnson to Joseph Ingram acknowledging the receipt of "nine bales of cotton by Jacob." The third item is a letter from Thomas Ingram to his brother, Ebenezer N. Ingram, in which Thomas informs his brother of the death of "Negro man Jim."

- RL Example: : Folder is titled "Correspondence, general, 1857-1873." The series' scope/content note highlights a specific letter from Fanny, a formerly enslaved woman. Researchers can go to that folder using the date provided in the description.

Post-war letters include general family correspondence, with frequent letters between the Slade women, including Janet, Mary, Emma, Martha, and Helen (on the Thomas Bog Slade side) and Annie, Mary, Elizabeth, Helen, and Frances (on the William Slade side). Correspondence also relates to the family's business ventures, including land rentals and other engagements with freedmen, news from the fishery, and reports from various horse breeding ventures. **This series contains a letter from Fanny, dated 1867 August 5, writing to her "Sister" from Texas asking for any information on the whereabouts of her children. Fanny was formerly enslaved and apparently sold away from her children by the Slades.** Another letter from Mount Airy in 1874 tells of the death of the Siamese twins, Eng and Chang.

C. Item-level description within a larger collection

- You are creating the description that will be the item's citation in a catalog record or collection guide, as well as what text would appear in a digital collection. Summarize the content with the expectation that your description will be appearing next to the item when it is distributed online. Transcribe or quote from the item, as needed for a reader to understand its content and significance. Early manuscript handwriting can be difficult for users to read, so your transcription can help with access.

4. Examples from RL's holdings:

- A single-item manuscript: [Deed of manumission freeing Sue, an enslaved woman, and her daughter Margaret, Georgetown, South Carolina, 1815 October 6](#)
- A travel diary referencing enslaved people: [Mississippi Valley travel diary, 1825-1826](#)
- A ledger with a few rows of content: [William S. Carter Papers](#)

- A letter written by an enslaved (or formerly enslaved) person in a manuscript collection: [Slade Family Papers](#)
- A collection of family papers: [Massie Family Papers](#)
- A photograph: [Rebecca, a slave girl from New Orleans](#)

Prepared by Rubenstein Library Technical Services Department, June 2023

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References: American Slavery Documents cataloging guidelines:

<https://duke.app.box.com/file/704388843504?s=rpsc5lcap24gr68nd8ddcmrdk2jtykcw>