

OPRAH'S ROOTS

Thirteen/WNET New York
450 West 33rd Street
New York NY 10001-2605
thirteen.org

press information



PBS

Feature

FINDING OPRAH'S ROOTS: FINDING YOUR OWN

By Henry Louis Gates, Jr

Companion Book to the PBS Special, **OPRAH'S ROOTS**

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In **OPRAH'S ROOTS**, an *African American Lives* special premiering Wednesday, January 24 at 8 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings), TV pioneer and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey and Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. continue their fascinating genealogical journey begun in the 2006 PBS documentary *African American Lives*. Below are tips for building your own family tree, from the companion book published by Crown (available January 23, 2007).

*"This is a book about finding your roots, about how one goes about the intriguing, fascinating, sometimes frustrating process of determining the identity of the many individuals who make up the many branches of your family tree... I want to share with you the steps you must take to unearth your family's past, even though I know that not all of your efforts will bear fruit. Nevertheless, from my own experience, I know that the end result will be well worthwhile, even when one's searches inevitably meet with dead ends... I've decided to focus this book on examples drawn from the January 2007 PBS documentary **OPRAH'S ROOTS**... If we could find out so much detail about Oprah Winfrey's ancestors, we most certainly can help you to find out a great deal about yours."*

- Henry Louis Gates Jr., from the introduction to
Finding Oprah's Roots: Finding Your Own

Resources for Building Your Family Tree

- **Begin by gathering basic information regarding who your ancestors were**, when they were born and died, and where they lived. Write down everything you know about yourself and your family.
- **Then start interviewing your relatives.** Meet with the oldest ones first - as they have the least time left and can give you the most information on past generations. Ask them everything - their birthdays, anniversaries, where they lived and worked, who their siblings were, their parents, their colleagues and friends.
- **Bring a tape recorder and record the interviews**, but also take good notes - write down everything that comes into your head. Plan to do at least one follow-up interview with everybody you talk to. This is very important.

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- **When you conduct your interviews, ask your relatives if they have documents to support their memories** - birth certificates, marriage licenses, diaries, newspaper clippings, anything, really. Take whatever they'll give you and make copies.
- **Sort out the data you're collecting from interviews.** I'd suggest organizing it all into genealogy charts that trace bloodlines, and grouping people in family units. You can post index cards on a wall, if you like. I find that having a visual image of the family tree is a great organizational help.
- **Start checking everything you've learned against the public record.** Remember: don't just take what your relatives say as gospel truth. Start with census records, which allow you to place your ancestor within a generation in a particular state, town, and county.
- **Then tap into all possible record sources in that area.** You can search marriage records, death records, cemetery records, Social Security applications, military records, immigration records, trial records, tax filings, voting records, land deeds, slave trade records, wills and other estate records, newspaper obituaries, school records, funeral home and church records, as well as local genealogies, county histories and private journals and letters. Wow.
- **Professional genealogists often start to look for these records by using a Web site called ancestry.com.** It is especially useful for researching in the census records, but also contains other kinds of helpful information. Ancestry.com charges a subscription fee, however you can access it from the public computers at most local libraries.
- If travelling to the courthouse or archives where the original records of your ancestors are stored is difficult **consider using the vast microfilm archives maintained by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.** You can access the list of available microfilms at the Church's web site and then rent individual films to view at one of their Family History Centers worldwide.
- **You will also find important documents in the Freedmen's Bureau records** (part of the National Archives and available online at www.archives.gov) as well as at many historical societies, public universities and libraries, and newspaper archives around the country and online.
- **Remember that African Americans face unique problems in researching their family trees.** The fact that a vast majority of our ancestors were slaves until 1865 means that - with very few exceptions - no census prior to 1870 is going to contain their names. So African Americans who are trying to trace their families back past 1870 must try to find their enslaved ancestors mentioned in the property records of the white people who owned them.

Finding Oprah's Roots: Finding Your Own by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is available wherever books are sold.

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Thirteen/WNET New York Press Contacts:

Donna Williams
212.560.8030
williamsd@thirteen.org

Gloria Park
212.560.2063
parkg@thirteen.org