

LAST SEEN: Finding Family After Slavery

The History of the “Last Seen” Archive and *The Christian Recorder* Newspaper

By Nora Neus



Illustration by Cora Lee Davis

Historian Judith Giesberg first discovered the advertisements by accident. She was researching the role of women during the Civil War and reading old editions of a Black newspaper. It was called *The Christian Recorder*. Suddenly, she saw an advertisement that looked different than the others. It started with two words: “Information Wanted ...”

It was an advertisement placed after the war, asking if anyone had information about this person’s family. The person writing the ad had not seen them in many years, since before the Civil War. They had been separated when they were enslaved on a plantation in the South.

Soon, Giesberg found more advertisements.

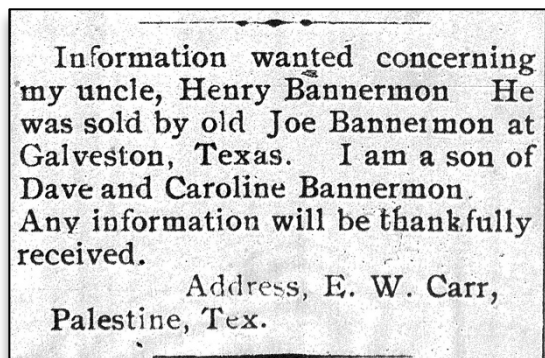
Some of the advertisements started with “Information Wanted.” Others started with “Last Seen.” Still more were addressed, “Dear Friend.” But they all had one thing in common: families looking for each other after being freed.

“I started to just take screenshots of them. I printed them out and put them in a folder,” Giesberg says. “I had never really heard about them before.”

For more than 10 years, Giesberg clipped these advertisements. She tucked them away. She thought maybe someday people could use them to research their family histories. But Giesberg wasn’t sure what she’d do with her collection. It wasn’t until 2017 that she founded the Last Seen Project. It is a digital archive of almost 5,000 of these advertisements.

An archive is a collection of historical documents that have been assembled and preserved, to give information about a group of people or a place. The Last Seen archive helps people today understand how formerly enslaved people tried to put their families together after being freed.

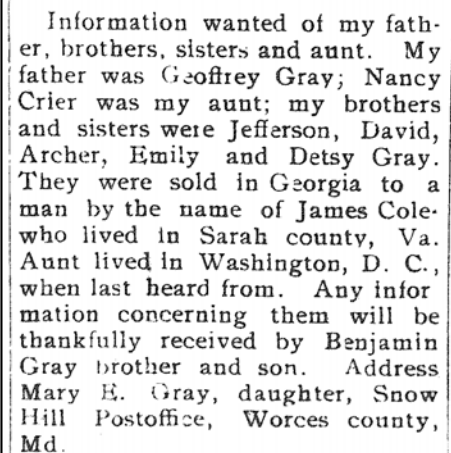
“The *Recorder* published what we called the Dear Friend notices. [They were] basically persons who were looking for enslaved members of their family who they had been separated from,” says John Thomas III. He is the current editor of *The Christian Recorder*. “You can only imagine having to write, ‘I haven’t seen my mother in 20 years.’ Or, ‘The last time I saw my brother was when I was leaving this plantation. Can someone help me find my brother?’”



Information wanted concerning my uncle, Henry Bannermon. He was sold by old Joe Bannermon at Galveston, Texas. I am a son of Dave and Caroline Bannermon. Any information will be thankfully received. Address, E. W. Carr, Palestine, Tex.

The Christian Recorder (Philadelphia, PA) December 24, 1896. <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/4880>

The AME church itself started in the 1700s because racist “officials at [the local church] pulled Blacks off their knees while praying,” according to the church’s official history. [<https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/>] Today, it is the largest Black-run church in the world. It has churches in 39 countries on five continents. The *Christian Recorder* is the official newspaper of the AME Church.



Information wanted of my father, brothers, sisters and aunt. My father was Geoffrey Gray; Nancy Crier was my aunt; my brothers and sisters were Jefferson, David, Archer, Emily and Detsy Gray. They were sold in Georgia to a man by the name of James Cole who lived in Sarah county, Va. Aunt lived in Washington, D. C., when last heard from. Any information concerning them will be thankfully received by Benjamin Gray brother and son. Address Mary E. Gray, daughter, Snow Hill Postoffice, Worces county, Md.

The Christian Recorder (Philadelphia, PA), December 14, 1899. <https://informationwanted.org/items/show/17>

Thomas says these Last Seen or Dear Friend notices became popular in Black newspapers after the Civil War. The *Recorder* was one of the first to publish them. It continued publishing them for many years.

In fact, the *Christian Recorder* is the oldest Black newspaper in America that is still being published today. It was started in 1852 by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, or the AME Church, for short.

It makes sense that a church newspaper would become so important to the Black community. After the Civil War, the Black church was one of the main places that formerly enslaved people could find community.

“With emancipation, free Black communities were very invested in building up their ... schools, church and newspapers,” Giesberg says. That’s because they weren’t allowed to have those things as enslaved people.

Giesberg reports that as of today, about 60% of the ads in the Last Seen archive are from papers published by Black churches.

“These pastors were also very invested in helping freed people become adjusted to freedom,” Giesberg continues. “And one of the ways they did that was to assist freed people in finding their family members. So, pastors actively encouraged readers of the newspaper to take out these advertisements. And most of the time what happened is that then the pastors would read them out in Black churches.”

Reading the advertisements out loud was important. Before emancipation, it was illegal to teach an enslaved person to read and write. After emancipation, learning to read was often one of the first things a formerly enslaved person did. But it could take a while to learn, so spreading the news by word of mouth was still important.

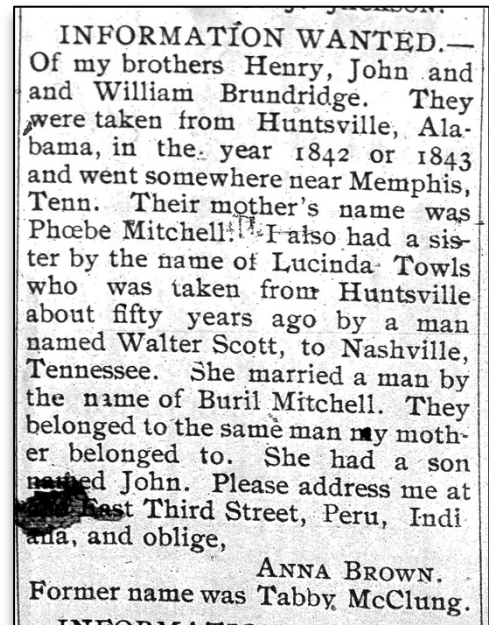
Today, the advertisements are still relevant. They help us understand the importance of family to enslaved people. They show how the slave trade destroyed families all over the country, especially when family members were sold. And they are important for people today to understand the lives of enslaved people.



The Christian Recorder (Philadelphia, PA) February 9, 1888.
<https://informationwanted.org/items/show/867>

physical archives in an AME church in Philadelphia. The church, Mother Bethel AME Church, kept records of all the old copies of the *Recorder* on an old-fashioned technology called microfilm.

“Microfilm looks like old film reels, like if you’ve ever watched a movie at a theater with a big projector and those curling film reels,” Giesberg explains.



The Christian Recorder (Philadelphia, PA) July 23, 1896.
<https://informationwanted.org/items/show/4879>

Today, the ads can also help descendants of enslaved people find long-lost relatives. But that means there must be a way for people all over the world to look at the ads. That’s why Giesberg started the Last Seen Project.

When Giesberg first did her research, there wasn’t anywhere online that people could look at the ads. She had to travel in person to

It's kind of like scanning old newspapers onto the computer. The difference is that the images go onto old-fashioned film reels instead of computers.

The *Recorder* itself didn't keep old copies of the newspaper. Researchers like Giesberg had to use outdated technology called microfilm readers to read the scans of the newspapers.

"Sadly, the AME church was good at *producing*, but not so good at recordkeeping and not so good at storing," Thomas says.

That's why the Last Seen Project is so important.

It is the first and only online archive of advertisements of former slaves seeking to reunite their families. Even though the archive's original goal was to publish 1,000 ads, the project now has over 4,500 ads! It has ads from over 275 different newspapers published over a period of 80 years.

Giesberg says the project is only going to continue growing.

"Our mission is to keep this laser like focus on finding these advertisements and getting them out there for free."

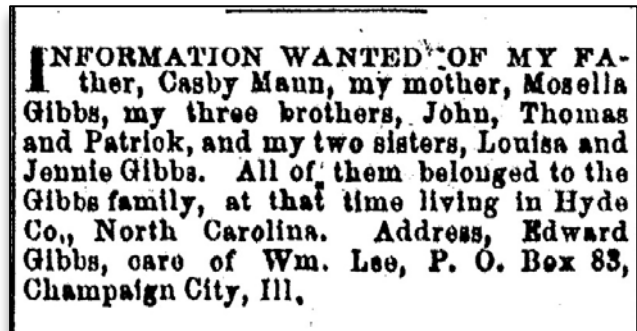
About the author:

Nora Neus is an Emmy-nominated journalist and author of the award-winning book about citizen journalism in Syria, *Muhammad Najem, War Reporter*.

About the artist:

Cora Lee Davis is a former militant and angry protester turned reconciler. She believes a willingness to look at ourselves is the key to bringing unity to the hurting world around her and is now convinced we cannot fight hate if it is in us, no matter how justified it is. She's a mentor program director & educator in Fayette County, Georgia. She loves music, poetry, art and justice. She hates a boring classroom and looks for opportunities every day to teach students how they can make a positive impact in the world around them.

Created with support from these partners:



The Christian Recorder (Philadelphia, PA) May 26, 1881.
<https://informationwanted.org/items/show/563#q=1&slide=0>