

"Black man reading newspaper by candlelight" by H. L. Stephens, ca. 1863. Library of Congress.

Using Newspapers to Search for What Slavery Had Stolen

Excerpts from *Last Seen*

On February 4, Dr. Judith Giesberg discussed her book *Last Seen: The Enduring Search by Formerly Enslaved People to Find Their Lost Families* as part of our American Inspiration author series. The event was moderated by Tera W. Hunter, PhD, Edwards Professor of American History and Professor of African American Studies and Chair of the Department of African American Studies at Princeton University. The program can be viewed at AmericanAncestors.org/video-library.

***Last Seen* presents a handful of individual accounts that convey the shocking history of family separation and highlight the resilience and determination of the formerly enslaved to find one another again. We are pleased to present excerpts from the introduction that describe how these people separated by enslavement and war used newspapers to search for their loved ones.**



MARK TASSONI

Judith Giesberg *is professor of history and Robert M. Birmingham Chair in the Humanities at Villanova University. She is the founder and director of the Last Seen archive and the author of several books on Civil War history, including* Army at Home *and* Emilie Davis's Civil War.

By 1860, one million enslaved people had been sold from the Upper South to the Deep South. Each of them left behind family. One-quarter of those sold were between the ages of eight and fifteen; these children were often sold without a parent or a sibling.[1] When a child traveled that far from home, to a place where everyone was a stranger and nothing was familiar, they must have felt lost. Many never saw their family again. Enslaved people ran away more often to be close to family members than they did to escape to free states; we know this because when enslavers took out ads looking for runaways, they often had a good idea where to find them—with their spouses, parents, or children.[2] When a child ran away they headed in the direction of their mother or father. But they were not always sure how to get there and sometimes their legs couldn't carry them that far.

In the absence of a federal commitment to reuniting slavery's separated families, freed people recruited allies from within their own communities. They sought advice from United States Colored Troops (USCT) soldiers and schoolteachers. They repeated the names of loved

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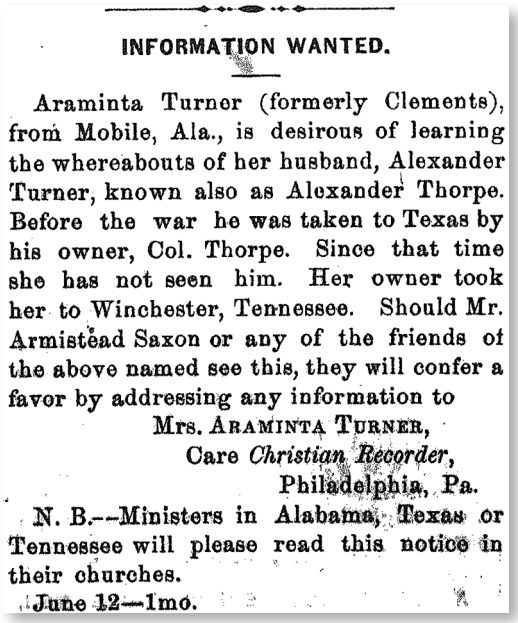
ones to Black pastors and newspaper editors. They took inspiration from their neighbors. And they left behind an archive of thousands of advertisements printed in Black newspapers documenting their decades-long efforts to rebuild their families after slavery.

From California to New Jersey, Massachusetts to Texas, and everywhere in between, formerly enslaved people took out ads in newspapers searching for what slavery had stolen from them. Under headlines such as "Information Wanted," "Seeking For the Lost," "Do You Know Them?," or, simply, "Dear Editor," they looked for children, parents, siblings, spouses, uncles, aunts, army comrades, and friends. Hundreds of these ads appeared in papers in the first years of freedom, and they continued for decades. Columns of ads could be found in newspapers well into the 1910s, fifty years after emancipation. As late as 1920, the *Chicago Defender* was still publishing ads from formerly enslaved people looking for family lost in slavery.

The ads were a regular feature in African American newspapers, especially Philadelphia's *Christian Recorder* and New Orleans's *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, whose editors were singularly committed to soliciting and publishing them. Both were associated with Black churches, where church and newspaper offices served as clearinghouses for information for Freedom Generation—men and women who were born enslaved and became free during or just before the U.S. Civil War—as they searched for their family members. The *Recorder* ran a regular column of ads beginning in 1864 appearing under the heading "Information Wanted," making them easily recognizable to anyone who might have been able to help. Published by Philadelphia's Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, the *Christian Recorder* had deep ties to the USCT; during the Civil War the paper printed soldiers' letters from the front and supported their strike for wages equal to white soldiers. Philadelphia was an important training ground for Black soldiers, and recruits traveling through the city circulated the *Recorder* throughout the South. Regimental chaplains took out multiple subscriptions of the paper to support the expansion of literacy and to draw men into the church.[3] A onetime ad cost $1.50 and came with a subscription to the paper; $4 bought an ad that ran for three months, $6 for six months, and for $10, an ad ran for a year. These fees could not have been easy for formerly enslaved people to manage. The editor of the *Christian Recorder*, Rev. Elisha Weaver, appealed to pastors of Black churches throughout the country to read the ads aloud to their congregations. This ensured that each search was broadcast widely and that the ads reached people who could not read the paper or who did not subscribe.

The *Southwestern Christian Advocate* was published by the Methodist Episcopal Church of New Orleans, and, like the *Recorder*, the paper was circulated widely, particularly in Methodist parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas.[4] The terms were comparable to those offered in the *Recorder*. Subscribers ran Lost Friends notices for free. Others were charged 50 cents, a smaller onetime fee than paying $2 for an annual subscription. Letters to the *Advocate* appeared under the heading "Lost Friends." A short note appeared at the top of the column directing ministers to read the requests from their pulpits and "report any case where friends are brought together by means of the letters of the *Southwestern*." Freed people sometimes wrote to report they had found their family. "Sir," wrote Naro Gillespie from Egypt, Mississippi, "I feel very thankful for your



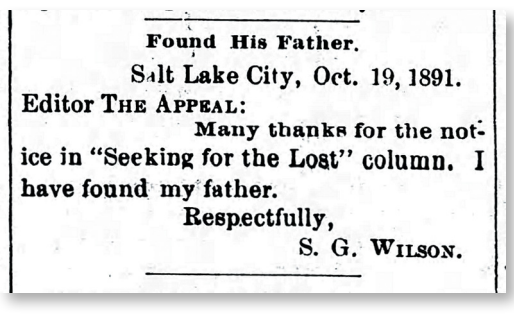
INFORMATION WANTED.

Araminta Turner (formerly Clements), from Mobile, Ala., is desirous of learning the whereabouts of her husband, Alexander Turner, known also as Alexander Thorpe. Before the war he was taken to Texas by his owner, Col. Thorpe. Since that time she has not seen him. Her owner took her to Winchester, Tennessee. Should Mr. Armistead Saxon or any of the friends of the above named see this, they will confer a favor by addressing any information to

Mrs. ARAMINTA TURNER,
Care *Christian Recorder*,
Philadelphia, Pa.

N. B.—Ministers in Alabama, Texas or Tennessee will please read this notice in their churches.

June 12—1mo.



Found His Father.

Salt Lake City, Oct. 19, 1891.

Editor THE APPEAL:

Many thanks for the notice in "Seeking for the Lost" column. I have found my father.

Respectfully,

S. G. WILSON.

Top: "Information Wanted," *The Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia, Pa.), June 12, 1869.

Bottom: "Found His Father," *Appeal: A National Afro-American Newspaper* (St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minn.), October 24, 1891.

Images are from the Last Seen Project at informationwanted.org.

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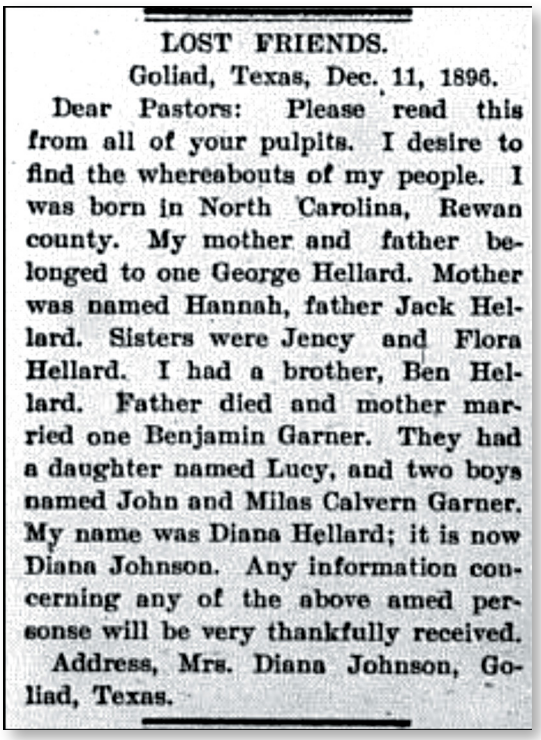
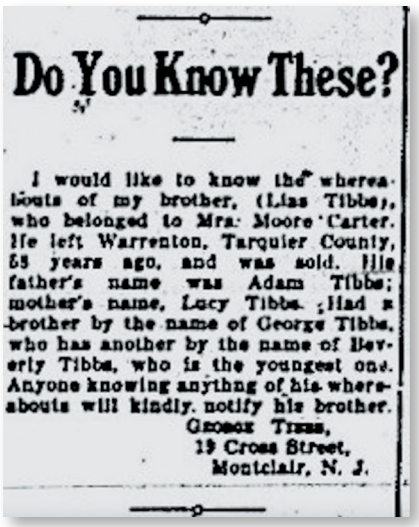


LOST FRIENDS.

Goliad, Texas, Dec. 11, 1896.

Dear Pastors: Please read this from all of your pulpits. I desire to find the whereabouts of my people. I was born in North Carolina, Rewan county. My mother and father belonged to one George Hellard. Mother was named Hannah, father Jack Hellard. Sisters were Jency and Flora Hellard. I had a brother, Ben Hellard. Father died and mother married one Benjamin Garner. They had a daughter named Lucy, and two boys named John and Milas Calvern Garner. My name was Diana Hellard; it is now Diana Johnson. Any information concerning any of the above amed personse will be very thankfully received.

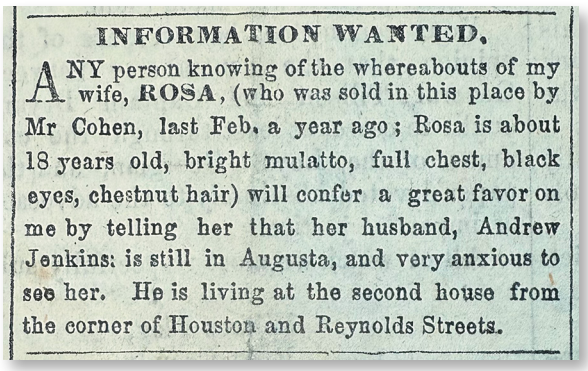
Address, Mrs. Diana Johnson, Goliad, Texas.



Do You Know These?

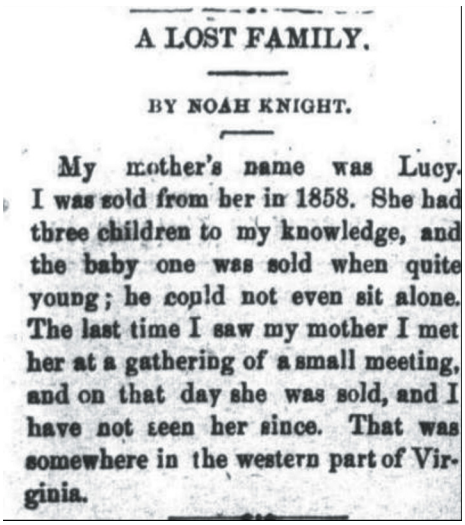
I would like to know the whereabouts of my brother, (Lias Tibbs), who belonged to Mrs. Moore Carter. He left Warrenton, Tarquier County, 58 years ago, and was sold. His father's name was Adam Tibbs; mother's name, Lucy Tibbs. Had a brother by the name of George Tibbs, who has another by the name of Beverly Tibbs, who is the youngest one. Anyone knowing anything of his whereabouts will kindly notify his brother.

Georgetown Texas,
19 Cross Street,
Montclair, N. J.



INFORMATION WANTED.

ANY person knowing of the whereabouts of my wife, ROSA, (who was sold in this place by Mr Cohen, last Feb. a year ago; Rosa is about 18 years old, bright mulatto, full chest, black eyes, chestnut hair) will confer a great favor on me by telling her that her husband, Andrew Jenkins: is still in Augusta, and very anxious to see her. He is living at the second house from the corner of Houston and Reynolds Streets.



A LOST FAMILY.

BY NOAH KNIGHT.

My mother's name was Lucy. I was sold from her in 1858. She had three children to my knowledge, and the baby one was sold when quite young; he could not even sit alone. The last time I saw my mother I met her at a gathering of a small meeting, and on that day she was sold, and I have not seen her since. That was somewhere in the western part of Virginia.

Clockwise from top left:

"Lost Friends," *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (New Orleans, La.), January 28, 1897.

"Do You Know These?," *The Richmond Planet* (Richmond, Va.), January 1, 1916.

"Information Wanted," *Loyal Georgian* (Augusta, Ga.), July 21, 1866.

"A Lost Family," *The Star of Zion* (Charlotte, N.C.), March 24, 1892.

Images are from the Last Seen Project at informationwanted.org.

paper which was the cause of my finding my relatives that I thought were dead. I found them in Sweet Home, Arkansas."[5] The cost of sending a letter to the paper again—and the effort involved—surely dissuaded people from reporting back.

Other papers also ran these ads. Some, like the *Richmond Planet*, were long-lived, but many papers came and went quickly. The *Afro-American Advocate* of Coffeyville, Kansas, for instance, lasted only two years, 1891–1893. The *Chicago Defender* was around for sixty years. The first copies of the *Defender* hit newsstands in 1906; soon after, the paper began publishing ads from formerly enslaved people looking for loved ones lost in slavery.

The advertisements highlight the role newspapers played in supporting Black communities and allow us to see how news and information traveled through and between these communities. The grapevine telegraph from slavery continued in freedom; it overlapped with the newspapers and continued to fill information gaps where there were no papers.

The ads provide narrative accounts of the lived experience of slavery, including everyday resistance. Freed people describe genealogies of slavery, naming kin and giving details about how enslavers and slave traders separated their families. The details allow us to understand how enslaved people survived separation, how family members got word to one another despite great distances

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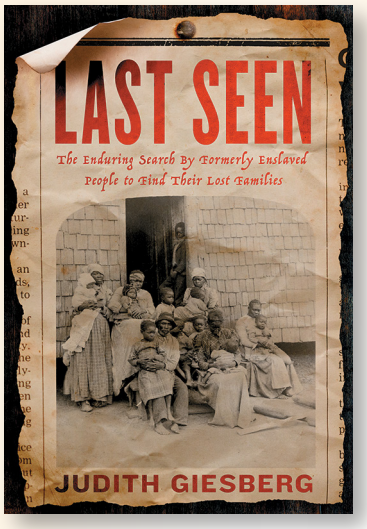
and considerable surveillance, and how they managed to maintain hope. Many indicate how the separation occurred, and some offer a rough timeline of events. Sometimes loved ones are described in detail. Including the name of an enslaver could stand in for other details, such as a changed last name or an imprecise location. Memory can be fickle. Age, too, can be its enemy. Written by survivors of traumatic events, the ads that form the basis for this book are imperfect and incomplete, but they are part of an archive of family stories never before told.

I began clipping and saving Information Wanted and Lost Friends ads many years ago as I came across them in the Black newspapers I read via the subscription database at my university library. I knew I had to make the stories told in the ads available to the descendants of the people named in them. Each ad contains information that can help a family find their ancestors. I knew, too, that whatever this archive would look like, it would be free. No one should have to pay to know their family's history. The result was the Last Seen Project website (informationwanted.org), which my graduate students and I built and which we launched in 2017. We'd dig into the microfilmed copies of African American newspapers that we borrowed through interlibrary loan and see what we found there. We hoped that one day we'd be able to publish one thousand ads. As of February 2025, the site had registered over eighteen million hits by 399,030 visitors. Currently—in October 2025—we have 5,020 ads.

We want stories that end in reunion, for families to be made whole. We require that freed people's lives "be made useful or instructive," as author Saidiya Hartman has explained: we demand "a lesson for our future or a hope for history."[6] Today, the desire for Black family reunion remains strong; it explains the proliferation of Black genealogy groups and television shows that cater to them. It drives tourism to the remains of West African slave dungeons. The desire for reunion accounts for the popularity of stories that end happily.

Last Seen: The Enduring Search by Formerly Enslaved People to Find Their Lost Families recounts the story of one generation's work to reimagine and rebuild family against considerable odds. It points to the truth: in spite of efforts that persisted over several generations, few of these searches resulted in happy endings. Still, Freedom Generation's love for their lost family endured—and so did their search. ◆



Last Seen: The Enduring Search by Formerly Enslaved People to Find Their Lost Families by Judith Giesberg (Simon & Schuster, 2025) is available from a wide range of booksellers.

"This unvarnished account reminds us that centuries of suffering have yet to be fully acknowledged or atoned for. Informative and sobering." **Kirkus Reviews**

"Heartbreaking, and essential." **Jill Lepore, author of *These Truths***

The Last Seen website, at **informationwanted.org**, offers a rich set of resources, including ads, associated maps, and educator resources. Online exhibits include letters to former enslavers and genealogy success stories.

Notes

1 Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders and Slaves in the Old South* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 144.

2 John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 52, 97–123.

3 Eric Gardner, "Remembered (Black) Readers: Subscribers to the *Christian Recorder*, 1864–1865," *American Literary History* 23, no. 2 (2011): 240–42.

4 James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 47–51. Irvine Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press, and Its Editors* (1891) (Arno Press, 1969), 223–27.

5 Naro Gillespie, "Lost Friends," *Southwestern Christian Advocate* (New Orleans, La.), December 1, 1881, in *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, informationwanted.org/items/show/1393.

6 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 14, 4.

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Image transcriptions

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