

Hawthorne, Walter. and Daryle Williams. "Editors' Introduction." *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* 1, no. 2 (2020): 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.12921/d8qk-zw83>.

Editors' Introduction

Introduction

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Introduction

At the close of an exceptionally generative year in the study of slavery and emancipation, across higher education and in public debate, the *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation* publishes its second issue. On behalf of the Editorial Board and the entire team at Enslaved.org, we commend an impressive slate of contributors for joining us in a novel endeavor at the intersection of historical studies, anti-racism, and peer-reviewed, digital scholarly publication.

"Enslaved People in the *African American National Biography, 1508-1865*" (Steven J. Niven, et al., Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, Harvard University) and "Legacies of British Slave-ownership, 1760-1880" (Keith McClelland, et al., University College London) extend commitments initiated in *JDSP's* [inaugural issue](#) to publish biographical datasets adapted from the ongoing work of Enslaved.org's [founding partners](#). With the initial support of the National Endowment of the Humanities and the ongoing generosity of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Enslaved.org continues to gather together an international community of humanists and data scientists interested in slave biographies. Through the *Journal of Slavery and Data Preservation*, this community builds an open-source, scholarly platform of discovery that works across different software, multiple languages, and distant geographies. And, as each new published dataset advances our understanding of the possibilities of biography in slavery studies, the federation of multiple datasets speaks to the urgency of naming the names of both enslaved and enslavers.

To borrow from the data sciences, the publication of datasets also extends the four foundational principles of FAIR¹ data management and stewardship – Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reusability – to digital slavery studies. Whereas the siloing of data has been an enduring feature of slavery studies in the age of machine-readable datasets, under the FAIR Principles, Enslaved.org is working towards putting “specific emphasis on enhancing the ability of machines to automatically find and use the data, in addition to supporting its reuse by individuals.” In this regard, *JSDP* has worked with the historians and information studies teams at Harvard and UCL to make available rich, structured biographical data about enslaved and formerly enslaved individuals, as well enslavers and slaving interests throughout the English-speaking world, from the early days of the transatlantic slave trade through the post-emancipation period in the United States. While no contributor has been asked to change the original data, each published dataset represents adaptations to a [Controlled Vocabulary](#) that enhance machine-assisted searching across projects and platforms. File download options and Creative Commons licensing for published datasets extend opportunities for data filtering and reuse outside the functionalities built into the Enslaved.org interface.²

The contribution from the Hutchins Center’s multivolume biographical dictionary of African Americans is foundational to [Enslaved.org Stories](#), and we are grateful for an agreement with Oxford University Press to exempt 85 life stories from the restrictions of paywalls and institutional subscription. K-12 audiences are special beneficiaries of this arrangement animated by the FAIR principle of accessibility.³ The 65 fields that structure the AANB dataset published in the *JSDP* refine our controlled vocabularies for a number of variables in slave biography (e.g., slave status, place of birth, familial relations, literacy, flight) useful in identifying generalizable patterns and unique idiosyncrasies in an individual person’s life experience. The use of unique identifiers in the dataset extracted from the LBS relational database, consistent with similar data practices underway with founding partners [Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database](#) and the Free Africans of Brazil Dataset, bolsters similar work in machine-assisted biographical comparison, identification, and disambiguation.⁴

Again in the register of the FAIR Principles, the publication of “Take Them in Families: The Enslaved People of Casa Bianca Plantation, Florida” (Miranda R. W. Burnett and Martin H. Violette), “Database of Coroners’ Inquisitions Taken Over the Bodies of Enslaved, Formerly Enslaved, and Free Black Peoples in the U.S. South, 1840s-1890s” (Stephen Berry, University of Georgia), and “They Had Names: Representations of the Enslaved in Liberty County, Georgia, Estate Inventories, 1762-1865” (Stacy Ashmore Cole), make other existing datasets resources

¹ Mark D. Wilkinson, et al., “The FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management and stewardship,” *Sci Data* 3, 160018 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1038/sdata.2016.18>.

² “I1. (meta)data use a formal, accessible, shared, and broadly applicable language for knowledge representation” and “R1.1. (meta)data are released with a clear and accessible data usage license.”

³ “A1.1 the protocol is open, free, and universally implementable.”

⁴ “F1. (meta)data are assigned a globally unique and persistent identifier” and “A1. (meta)data are retrievable by their identifier using a standardized communications protocol.”

more findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable for scholarly and general interest audiences working currently or “downstream.” Within Enslaved.org and across a growing ecosystem of linked open data digital resources about named individuals and their descendants in American slave societies, the extracted data that appeared originally in [taketheminfamilies.com](#), [csidixie.org](#), and [theyhadnames.net](#) can now be searched, browsed, and visualized on a centralized hub that has the support of the land-grant public research institution. Moreover, *JSDP* archives a copy of each published dataset with [Harvard Dataverse](#), accessing an infrastructure of sustainability and “long-term care’ of valuable digital assets” that undergirds the FAIR approach to data stewardship.

The other contribution to appear in this issue, “Contested Freedom: Free Persons of Color in Savannah, GA, 1823-1842” (Marquis Taylor, Northwestern University), signals a new phase in the life cycle of Enslaved.org, as we welcome contributions from rising scholars who are developing original research datasets specifically targeted to the structure and aims of the growing community of *JSDP* contributors and readers. With the publication of the “Contested Freedom” dataset, extracted data is available at the same time as the analytical prose,⁵ rather than years afterwards (or never). The published dataset is, moreover, a product of rigorous peer review. The methodological section of Taylor’s data article, like the corresponding sections in the other published contributions, captures the emergent work among humanists who are expected to describe in careful and concise detail the relationship between original (messy) source material and extracted (less messy) data; the linguistic and paleographical skillset involved in the research design and execution; the choices, methods, and values deployed to structure the data; the gaps, silences, and biases in manuscript and digital materials; and the analytical value of the research endeavor.

Again, we commend each of the contributors whose work appears in this issue, and we look forward to many more joining their ranks. At present, we invite our readers to explore the research into the broad structures in slaveholding across the British Caribbean and U.S. South as well as the intimacies of personhood and family bonds in localities like Liberty County, Georgia and the Florida Panhandle. Alongside the data fields for named individuals, the reader will identify the varied experiences of movement and production in slave societies, from the economically failing Upper South to burgeoning rice, cane, and cotton estates of the Lower South, or from Saint-Domingue to the Atlantic port city of Savannah. Across datasets that draw from county and state records from South Carolina, Virginia, and Missouri, there is the spectre of the violence, surveillance, re-enslavement, and death that haunted black men and women in bondage. And, finally, in the datasets that are animated by the concerns of the genealogist, we see the building blocks of family histories that enslavement and data work all too often fracture or erase.

Daryle Williams & Walter Hawthorne, Editors

⁵ Marquis Taylor, “Contested Freedom: Free People of Color and Enslaved People’s Pursuit of Freedom and Economic Prosperity in Antebellum Savannah, Georgia,” honors thesis (Howard University, 2020).

Cite this Introduction

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