WHAT CAN OLD RECORDS TELL US ABOUT PEOPLE WHO LIVED UNDER SLAVERY?

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Nearly four million records about enslaved people in 20 former British colonies can now be searched online. The collection contains about 300,000 pages created between 1813 and 1840. The records include names, ages, family connections, births, deaths and transfers between owners. They were originally made by the British government to monitor enslaved people and stop illegal trading after the transatlantic slave trade was abolished in 1807. Today, descendants are using them for a very different purpose: finding their ancestors and rebuilding family histories. Researchers have already traced some families across six generations. The records cover places including Jamaica, Barbados, the Bahamas, Trinidad, Mauritius and South Africa. They cannot show everything about a person's life, because they were created by a system that treated human beings as property. However, they can reveal names, relationships and stories that might otherwise have disappeared.

WHY IS THIS INTERESTING?

Many accounts of slavery focus on governments, ships, plantations and slave owners. These records help bring attention back to the people who were enslaved. A name, an age or the name of a child can make the past feel more personal. The collection also shows that slavery still affects families and communities today.

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

"How can a person's name change the way we understand slavery?"

Source: The Guardian

https://www.theguardian.com/news/2026/sep/22/nearly-4m-records-of-enslaved-people-in-20-former-british-colonies-now-searchable-online