



## Connecting Through Family Reunions

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The history of family reunions in the United States is deeply tied to immigration, social change, and historical events that have shaped the nation's identity. From early colonial gatherings to modern-day multi-generational events, family reunions have evolved in purpose and practice, reflecting the cultural and social transformations of the country. Donna Beasley (1997) estimated that there are approximately 200,000 reunions every year with 1.7 million participants, creating a significant social and economic impact.

In her book, *Family Reunion*, Jennifer Chrichton (1998) described foundations for our modern American family reunion. Early Scotch-Irish immigrants brought a tradition of outdoor preachings, tent meetings, and “meetings on the hill.” Other western European immigrants held cemetery association days, also called “Decoration days,” when families linked by bloodlines gathered to maintain grave sites of ancestors. As people moved west with the new nation, American churches held homecomings, drawing congregation members back for a day of preaching, encouraging family togetherness, honoring the dead and the founders of the church, all while sharing a meal. New Englanders hosted “Old home day,” inviting people to return, mingle, and picnic with old friends, neighbors, and relations.

The shape of the family reunion as we know it today took hold as family members left the rural worlds of the South for the North; the hills of Appalachia for jobs in Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana; and the Midwest of the Dust Bowl days for California, Oregon, and Washington. It was this sense of being scattered from an agrarian base, merging with the long American history of religious camp meetings and retreats, that gave the American reunion such a rural image. This image persists with reunions held by descendants of those who arrived in America during the great wave of immigration in the early 1900s even though they are primarily urban. The rise of transportation infrastructure, such as railroads and automobiles, made it easier for far-flung relatives to travel and participate in reunions.

During the Great Depression (1929–1939), economic hardships made family reunions more challenging to organize. World War II (1939–1945) brought another major disruption, as millions of Americans were deployed overseas. The period following the war saw a resurgence in family reunions, often coinciding with national holidays such as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving. During the 1930s and 40s “family circles” and Jewish “family networks” thrived, stimulated in large part by disruption

of the war and growing knowledge of the Holocaust. These “cousins clubs”, popular among Jewish families after World War II, declined in the 1960s.

African American family reunions now account for half of all American reunions. They paved the way for the large highly organized reunion that is a staple of the landscape today. African American family reunions go back to shortly after the Civil War (1861-1865), and during Reconstruction (1865–1877), when families broken by slavery, scattered by the war, and dislocated by emancipation sought to reestablish family networks. Later, the Great Migration, which took place during and after World War II, split many families. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s had a significant impact on African American family reunions. The African American family reunion movement took off as a commercial phenomenon late 1970s and 80s, when vacation travel opportunities opened up for black families. Black family genealogy boomed when Alex Haley’s *Roots* inspired people to learn more about their extended families and collective past. Dr. Dorothy I. Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women, launched the Black Family Reunion Celebration in 1988 to fortify and celebrate the historical strengths and traditional values of the black family.

Many reunions are sponsored by family associations. Numbering in the thousands in the United States, they are often composed of genealogists, historians, and family history buffs interested in a certain family surname or a set of original immigrants. *The Genealogical Helper*, a magazine published by Everton Publishers, Logan, Utah, publishes an annual issue listing active family associations. There is also the *Directory of Family Associations*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., published in 2001 that lists 6,000 of these groups.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, advancements in communication and travel technology have transformed family reunions. The rise of social media helps people find and maintain contact with family members across time and distance. Online platforms like Family Search, Ancestry and MyHeritage, and the increased popularity of DNA testing, help people make connections they sometime never knew about. Innovative approaches to the traditional reunion include virtual reunions, hybrid events, and online family trees.

While family reunions remain a cherished tradition, they face challenges in the modern era. Busy schedules, geographic dispersion, and financial constraints can make it difficult to coordinate large gatherings. Additionally, generational shifts in priorities may impact attendance and enthusiasm for reunions. As families continue to grow and evolve, reunions remain a vital way to strengthen connections, celebrate heritage, and build lasting traditions for future generations. A well-planned reunion brings family members together, strengthens bonds, and creates lasting memories.



## Reunion Nuts & Bolts

1. Purpose
  - a. (Who, why) size, scope,
  - b. goals & objectives,
  - c. types of reunions (picnic, destination, cruise)
2. Administration, Organization, planning:
  - a. Identify core group/team,
  - b. record keeping (financial, mailing lists)
  - c. Establish timeline / deadlines
3. Money matters
  - a. Determine costs (facility, equipment rental, speaker fees, etc.)
  - b. Fund raising, charging admission, individual & corporate donations
  - c. Merchandise (T shirts,
4. When
  - a. Align with a holiday, annual (1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in October)
  - b. Avoid conflicts with local or national events (Super Bowl Sunday)
5. Where: (location, venue)
  - a. Weather, parking
  - b. accommodations/hotel/transportation (destination, resort)
6. Communication (locating family, connecting, network, invitations, RSVP)
  - a. Social media (Facebook, Zoom, email)
  - b. Web pages (domain name, web hosting)
  - c. Cost of snail mail (printing, postage)
7. Structure of the event.
  - a. Type (one or multi-day, BBQ, formal)
  - b. Theme (historical, military service, comedy, motherland, etc.)
  - c. Ritual styles, welcome, leave taking
  - d. Food (potluck, catered, sit-down dinner)
  - e. Program (keynote speaker, activities, ice breakers, games)
  - f. Registration packets, handouts
  - g. Site prep, set up, clean up
  - h. Etiquette, family dynamics
8. Capture the moment
  - a. Record, preserve family history, professional photos, book, oral histories, displays, video
  - b. pass the torch, elect officers
  - c. involve children
9. May the Circle be Unbroken
  - a. wrap up, follow up, plan next reunion

## Family Reunion Resources

### In-Print

Beasley, Donna. *The Family Reunion Planner*. United States: Wiley, Simon & Schuster Macmillan Company, New York, 1997. (Musical metaphor for the reunion, the rhythm section, planning committee, keeping records: how to avoid singing, the Blues, Orchestrating the reunion, Showtime)

Bentley, Elizabeth Petty and Carl, Deborah Ann, *Directory of Family Associations*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., Baltimore, MD, 2001.

Brown, Barbara. *Family Reunion Handbook*. Reunion Planning Network, San Francisco: Ninkovich, 1992.

Clunies, Sandra MacLean. *A Family Affair: How to Plan and Direct the Best Family Reunion Ever*. United States: Thomas Nelson Incorporated, 2003.

Crichton, Jennifer, *Family Reunion: Everything you need to know to plan unforgettable get-togethers*, Workman Publishing, New York, NY, 1998. <https://archive.org/details/familyreunioneve00cric> (Appendix includes detailed charts, timelines, budget items, “checklist for backyard barbecue”, “potluck coordinator’s chart”)

Denton-Hatten, Jimmielee, *The African-American Family Reunion*. United States: Xlibris US, 2010.

Fall, Cheryl. *Family Reunion Planning Kit for Dummies*. Germany: Wiley, 2011.

Greene, Bob., Fulford, D. G., *To Our Children's Children: Preserving Family Histories for Generations to Come*. United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1993.

Hackleman, Phyllis A., *Reunion Planner*. United States: Genealogical.com, 2009.

Hawes, Joseph M., Shores, Elizabeth F., *The Family in America: An Encyclopedia [2 Volumes]*. Ukraine: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002.

Mason, Regina. *Family Reunion: Taking it to the Next Level*. United States: Xlibris, US, 2011.

Miller-Cribbs, Julia E., African-American Family Reunions: Directions for Future Research and Practice, University of South Carolina Perspectives, accessed online <https://www.academia.edu/20659514/>

Monogrelotta. *Family Reunion Guest Book: Large Sign in Keepsake Book for Family Events, Anniversary Gatherings, Space for Name, Birthday, Contact Info and Favorite Memory, Colorful Tree with Leaves and Roots*. N.p.: Independently Published, 2019.

Morgan, George C., *Your Family Reunion: How to Plan It, Organize It, and Enjoy It*. George G. Morgan, Ancestry Publishing, an imprint of MyFamily.com, Inc., Orem, UT, 2001. (Morgan is a contributor to Ancestry Magazine. George G. Morgan & Drew Smith have been podcasting about genealogy since September 2005, when they launched *The Genealogy Guys Podcast*. \$99 / year <https://genealogyguyslearn.com/> )

National Council of Negro Women, *The Black Family Reunion Cookbook*. United States: Atria Books, 2023.

Richardson, Chad, *Family Reunion*. United States: Barefoot Books, 2021.

Swenson, Greta E., *Festivals of Sharing: Family Reunions in America*. New York: AMS Press, 1989.

Vargus, Dr. Ione D., *Black Family Reunions: Finding the Rest of Me*. United States: Xlibris US, 2020.

Wagner, Edith. *The Family Reunion Sourcebook*. United States: Lowell House, 1999.

Williams, Krystal. *How to Plan Your African-American Family Reunion*. United States: Citadel Press, 2000.

## Online



*Reunions Magazine*, PO Box 11727, Milwaukee WI 53211-0727, <https://reunionmag.com/>



Florida Division of Tourism, 126 Van Buren St.  
Tallahassee, Florida 904-487-1462  
<https://www.visitflorida.com/>



<https://www.visitlauderdale.com/> Visit Lauderdale  
- previously known as the Greater Fort Lauderdale  
Convention & Visitors Bureau, 101 NE 3rd Ave.,  
Suite 100, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301, 954-765-4466  
[gflcvb@broward.org](mailto:gflcvb@broward.org)

Visit Fort Lauderdale does not assist with planning family reunions. We do, however, have a guide on our website to help you plan your family reunion. Please see the links below to get started.

[Guide to Planning a Family Reunion in Greater Fort Lauderdale Reunions](#)



<https://www.miamiandbeaches.com/miami-meetings>

Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau,  
201 S Biscayne Blvd, Suite 2200, Miami, FL  
33131 USA, 1-305-539-3000, 1-800-933-8448



FamilySearch.org

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Family\\_Reunions](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Family_Reunions)  
Articles, books, online resources about family reunions.

Family Reunion Institute, School of Social Administration, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122, 215-204-6244 <https://nationalfamilyreunioninstitute.net/>



The Family Reunion Institute is the only organization of its kind in the United States with a mission to serve as a resource to families having reunions. In a program designed to strengthen and preserve the extended family, the Institute supports and enhances family reunions. We see family reunions as a catalyst for carrying out critical extended family functions, such as providing a sense of belonging and transmitting a sense of identity and direction and strengthening family values.

- **City & state tourism bureaus, See also: hotels, airlines, cruise lines.**

