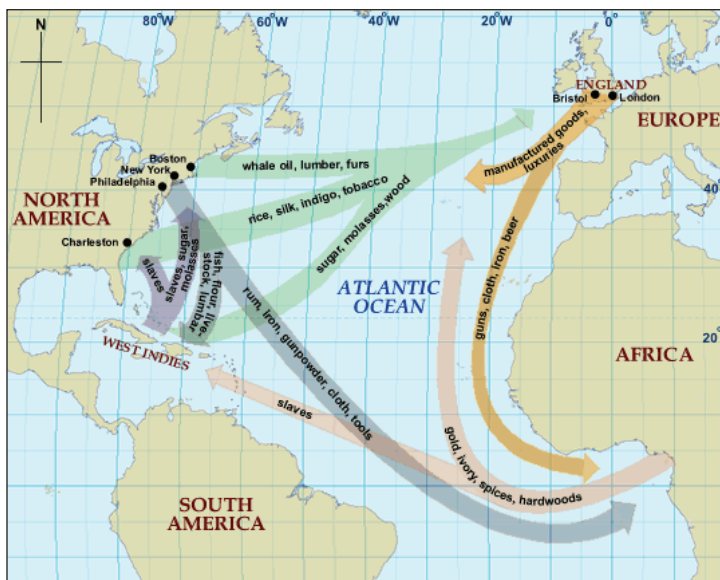


Unexpected Family History

To the Teacher

The PBS documentary, *Traces of the Trade*, chronicled the story of a family that discovered, to their shock, the troubling connection their ancestors had to the slave trade and the full extent of Northern state entanglement in that trade. Another work, *Children of the New England Slave Trade*, is a book that tells a similar story. The families depicted in both works embark on journeys to learn about their family's past and grapple with the implications for their lives now.

Use this Teachable Moment to help your students explore some of the forgotten history of slavery and what it feels like when history gets personal—very personal. Then, let them journey into their own family past to see which “sides” of history they have been on.



Options for Using Student Activities and Worksheets

Students do not need to view the *Traces of the Trade* documentary or read *Children of the New England Slave Trade* in order to do the activities.

Worksheet 1—Question 4 asks students to browse two discussion forums for reactions to the documentary. If you prefer more structure, consider finding interesting or representative comments in advance. Divide students into groups. Give each group a comment and have them discuss it, then present the key issue or point and their reactions to the class.

Worksheet 2—As with any family roots activity, be sensitive to family diversity (e.g., adoptive and foster children). When in doubt, ask your student directly how he or she would prefer to handle the assignment. When discussing family stories, encourage but do not force students to share—and be prepared to lead with a story of your own. Possible extension for the final discussion question: Have students actually plan the trip they would take to discover some aspect of “untold” family history (where they would go, places they would visit, people and/or descendants they would interview).

NCSS Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- The student understands why the Americas attracted Europeans, why they brought enslaved Africans to their colonies, and how Europeans struggled for control of North America and the Caribbean
- The student understands how the values and institutions of European economic life took root in the colonies, and how slavery reshaped European and African life in the Americas
- The student understands economic, social, and cultural developments in contemporary United States

Web Sites and Online References



Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North

www.tracesofthetrade.org

PBS P.O.V. *Traces of the Trade. Behind the Lens.* Filmmaker Interview

www.pbs.org/pov/pov2008/tracesofthetrade/behind_interview.html

Traces of the Trade: Discussion Forum—Reactions to the Film

<http://forum.tracesofthetrade.org/viewforum.php?f=4>

PBS P.O.V. Blog—Traces of the Trade

www.pbs.org/pov/blog/2008/06/talking_back_traces_of_the_trade_1.html

On Point: Children of the New England Slave Trade

www.onpointradio.org/shows/2008/05/children-of-the-new-england-slave-trade

Ancestry.com/RootsWeb

www.rootsweb.ancestry.com

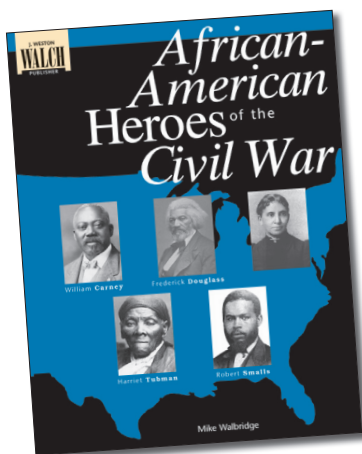
Genealogy.com

www.genealogy.com/index_n.html

Teaching Tolerance: Free Teaching Kits and Handbooks

www.tolerance.org/teaching-kits

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Teacher Background Information

January 2008 marked the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the U.S. slave trade, but the legacy of slavery is still very much with us. Often we hear about it in the numbers: wealth gaps, racial achievement gaps, U.S. demographic trends, and so forth. However, the documentary *Traces of the Trade* takes a more personal path. Divinity school student Katrina Browne learned from her grandmother that her ancestors, the DeWolfes, had been Rhode Island-based slave traders. As she researched, she began to realize her limited knowledge of the slave trade and how deeply intertwined it was with the Northern economy (“not just a sin of the South,” as commonly held).

Browne also came to believe that knowing the history wouldn’t be enough for her. She decided to invite family members to join her on a trip to trace the Triangular Trade Route—from Rhode Island to Cuba to Ghana and back—and to “fumble” their way through the issues of race, privilege, and accountability as they confronted their family’s past. Their journey turned into a full-blown documentary film project, *Traces of the Trade*. The film appeared at the Sundance Film Festival, began to air on PBS stations in June 2008, and has played at other festivals and events around the country in 2009.

Not too far away, another New Englander, Unitarian Universalist minister David Pettee, was on a similar genealogical journey. He had only heard “good things” about his ancestors—early colonists, Puritans and Pilgrims—stories filled with “mythic” qualities of his forebears. By accident he discovered a census that showed slaves living with his family. Like Katrina Browne, he was surprised to learn the extent of slavery in the North. Eventually his research took him from Rhode Island to Africa—and then on to Queens, New York, where he met Patricia Mann and her family, descendants of a slave his family once owned.

In both cases, family members wondered . . . worried . . . about what it would mean to delve into their family’s slave trading history and what would happen as a result.

Worksheet 1: Untold Family Stories

Use your Web resources to learn more about two families that unexpectedly discovered family ties to the slave trade. Then answer the following questions.

1. Katrina Browne, director of the *Traces of the Trade* documentary, learned that her ancestors were slave traders. What about this discovery was surprising to her?
2. How did Browne learn about her family's past? What did she decide to do as a result?
3. Browne says she hopes her film will help create a dialogue about "what, concretely, is the legacy of slavery—for diverse whites, for diverse blacks, for diverse others? Who owes whom what for the sins of the fathers of this country? What would repair—spiritual and material—really look like, and what would it take?"
Browse through posts in the Discussion Forum of the *Traces of the Trade* Web site or the PBS P.O.V. Blog. What kind of dialogue is the film creating? Are there recurring themes? Find four key points representing diverse or contrasting perspectives.
4. Browne believes it is important to tell stories from both perspectives: victim and perpetrator. Do you agree? What impact has investigating her family past had on Browne?
5. David Pettee, a minister from the Boston area, wrote a book, *Children of the New England Slave Trade*, about his family's slave-owning past. He eventually met descendants of a slave his family owned. If you were one of the descendants, would you have wanted to meet Pettee? Are there situations in which you would want, or not want, to meet descendants of people on the other side of an injustice or conflict? Do descendants of people directly affected by these historical moments have a special role to play in helping us understand or heal past injustices?

Worksheet 2: Journey into Your Past

Traces director Katrina Browne says she wanted to put “her family under the microscope.” What would you learn if you did the same? How have some of your ancestors intersected with history?

Instructions: Find one example of a relative with an interesting, important, or controversial connection to a historical event, issue, or person. Start by asking family members to share stories about your family history and heritage.

- Which ancestors or relatives are featured in favorite family stories? Are there any “colorful” characters?
- Are there people or aspects of family heritage the family prefers not to highlight?
- Has anyone in the family been involved in something or believed something he/she now views quite differently?
- Has anyone experienced an event or episode that changed his/her life and perhaps the lives and future of your whole family?

You can also ask about your family tree or use online tools, such as Ancestry.com or Genealogy.com, to research your tree. When and where did your grandparents, great grandparents, and/or other relatives live? What do family members know about their lives? Using any clues you uncover, research to find out what was happening historically in a time and place one of your relatives lived. Given what you know about your ancestors, how might they have been involved?

Use the information you discover to complete this chart.

Family member name	
Relationship to you	
When and where person lived	
Background information/what you know about person	
Connection to historical event, issue, or person	

Worksheet 2: Journey into Your Past (*continued*)

Discussion Questions

1. What are examples of situations in which family members might find themselves on a “side” of history? Would you want to know what roles family members played in these situations?
2. Do you think it is important to understand your family’s history—including “untold stories” and controversial aspects?
3. How do people wrestle with the good and bad in their family (or personal) history?
4. What would you do if a relative invited you on a trip to discover a controversial aspect of your family’s past? Would you go? Given what you know about your family, where do you think you would travel? With whom would you speak?

Answer Key

Worksheet 1

1. The DeWolfe family lived in the North (Rhode Island); they were the largest slave-trading family in U.S. history. By the end of his life, slave trader James DeWolfe had reportedly become the second richest man in the United States.
2. Her 88-year-old grandmother mailed her a booklet in which she had written a few sentences about slave trading ancestors. Browne later sent a letter to 200+ family members asking if they would go on a trip to trace the slave trade and their family's involvement in it from Rhode Island to Cuba to Ghana and back. Ten family members, some of whom had never met, went on the trip, and Browne made a documentary based on it.
3. Answers will vary. Some of the themes include:
 - People are trying to sort out individual vs. collective guilt, responsibility, and accountability. Do I—do we as a collective—need to take responsibility for something our ancestors did?
 - People aren't sure what to do about the situation—what do we do about historical wrongs—or people feel you can't right them.
 - People definitely feel the legacy of slavery (e.g., wealth gaps, access to opportunity, etc.).
 - People didn't remember or don't learn important aspects of our history.
 - People aren't comfortable talking about race, or black Americans are but white Americans aren't.
4. Answers will vary. Browne says she feels more “grounded in herself and her whiteness” and has a much better understanding of how to “connect the dots between the past and the present.” She also feels “different in terms of interactions around race.”
5. Answers will vary.

Worksheet 2

1. Examples: Nazis/Jews, Jews/Palestinians, Vietnamese/American soldiers, settlers and Native Americans/Trail of Tears, Tutsis/Hutus (Rwanda), British/Scots, murderer/family of the victim
- 2–4. Answers will vary.