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WALLS TUMBLING DOWN:

TEACHING BLACK FAMILY HISTORY AND GENEALOGY IN SOCIAL HISTORY CONTEXT

By Katherine Scott Sturdevant

Family history—which to this historian means the rich, contextual narrative of a family over time (the "flesh") built upon the skeletal genealogy charts of names, dates, and places (the "bones")—has become increasingly popular, with so many trends to prompt its rise. Those trends, of course, include the website dominance of Ancestry.com; the intriguing but everchanging results of DNA testing; and the appeal of "finding family" stories through all media. African American family history is no exception to these trends; indeed, it has spawned some of them. So many of us who *practice* family history are fulfilling needs, goals, obsessions, and callings by researching, recording, analyzing, synthesizing, and legacy-making. Most important: sharing precious primary sources of family history—such as recording oral tradition or preserving documents, artifacts, and photographs—is a service to society and to the history of all of us, by capturing resources before they are lost. Therefore, teaching students to do family history well, with best methods, and conscientiously interpreted in the context of that family's times, is a gift to the historical record as much as any research results from historians' scholarly work with primary sources.

Overcoming "the Brick Wall of Enslavement"

"Brick wall" is a popular genealogical term for an informational barrier one hits in generational research, a barrier that frustrates the researcher, who tries many ways to address the problem, to find the sources and methods that will get around the barrier. Some African Americans have been understandably reluctant to attempt genealogy and family history over the years, because of "the brick wall of enslavement." Enslavement can be a research barrier. When people refer to it as such, they mean that records showing Black people by name diminish (or the names change) when researching back to the pre-emancipation period of history. This is a problem but is not insurmountable. As shown often on the PBS series "Finding Your Roots" with historian Henry Louis Gates Jr., (and in his earlier series "African American Lives," featured in the following Lesson Plan) there are ways around this brick wall. Censuses and schedules of people who were enslaved show how many Black people and White people were on a plantation, with their gender and age indicated, are useful information, though painful. Gathering statistical information like that can make it apparent which enslaved person is your ancestor.

Indeed, Reconstruction (the period after the Civil War when Union troops occupied the South, 1865-1877) is a rich period for family research. Former enslaved people sometimes seem suddenly born full-grown into historical records because, during this period, the Freedmen's Bureau first identified them as named individuals. This is when you see them searching for their separated family members; legally marrying someone who might be new to them or might be someone to whom they were unofficially married already; and choosing new legal first and last names. Freedmen's Bureau records are some of the richest in which to start a search, but you are

starting *after* emancipation, after likely new identities, and after probable disconnection with the previous "owner."[1]

One modern source can catapult the researcher over the brick wall of enslavement to a much earlier time: DNA. As interpreting DNA becomes more sophisticated, Black researchers can see general locations and cultures of their African origins. This can seem disappointingly broad and distant at first but is a great discovery. With that information, a person can research those African cultures and perhaps even pinpoint likely routes and time periods of transit to the Americas. DNA also offers the opportunity for researchers to find and connect with fellow descendants of common ancestors. As fellow descendants contact one another—say through a medium like Ancestry.com messaging—and form a network, they can better discover the locations and identities of the owners and their enslaved people who were previously anonymous.

Each advancement is not a panacea, so the researcher needs to be practical and not disappoint easily. When asked the impact of popular DNA testing for family history, long-time expert on Black genealogy, Tony Burroughs wrote,

> Like the larger community, DNA testing has helped Black adoptees connect with their birth parents. However, many beginners think DNA *is* genealogy. They do not understand DNA is a tool that might be able to help their genealogy research….Many try to use DNA without understanding DNA science or even how to use DNA with genealogy research….For many others DNA has become a distraction, pulling genealogists away from increasing their genealogical knowledge and skills.[2]

In other words, we must always keep in mind the need, methods, and sources of basic genealogy:

- starting from yourself, then your parents, working back in time;
- documenting the names, dates, and life events as you go;
- utilizing all institutional records (some online but some not);
- making sure that what you document is accurate (by crosschecking);
- and rescuing precious home sources (artifacts, photographs, documents, family Bibles, and oral history)
- while interpreting how all of it puts that flesh of story on the bones of data.

Then there is the phenomenon of African American, Harvard historian Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s engrossing PBS program "Finding Your Roots." Gates earlier series, "African American Lives," studied Black family history more exclusively, while "Finding Your Roots" includes a variety of ethnic backgrounds. On "Finding Your Roots," Gates hosts his celebrity guests—often African Americans—on a journey through what his *team of researchers* has found for them. The program combines that mystery-solving appeal with mini-documentaries that place family members in social and political historical context. Gates has broken many barriers. One is to have large audiences appreciate family history by focusing on *diverse* family history. There have been other finding-family TV shows, but the trend used to be that the subject people were most likely not people of color. With Gates, the reverse is true. If there is a drawback for the field in the "Finding Your Roots" approach, Burroughs noted, it is that

> Professor Gates concentrates on results, not process, so viewers do not learn how to do genealogy research. They get the impression genealogy is quick and easy. They do not see the large team of researchers behind the scenes that have been working on a project for a year.[3]

It is true that the drama is in presenting the proven discoveries, already put together in a binder, chart, and mini documentary form, to the awestruck recipient. It is true that it took a network of genealogists, miles of legwork, and days of screen time to put it together. In the time allotted in his program, however, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. performs a significant personal service. He often walks his guests through *brick-walls-coming-down*, through highly emotional moments, sensitively savored. An interviewer asked him, "What is the number one thing someone can do if they want to succeed [at family history]?" Gates answered,

> They have to ask for advice. You need a "guidance counselor" or the local minister or someone who's been where you want to go. You need to ask many people. Many people are too anxious or too afraid to ask a question…. I always tell my students that the most important thing is being able to ask the right questions and finding somebody who can answer them.[4]

Although referring to asking questions for research purposes, Gates has also made clear the role he plays in those emotional moments of realization for the recipient. It might be the moment when the African American guest sees slavery's cruelties in records. It might be a rare discovery, such as seeing in a record that many-times-great grandparents were *born in* Africa, when historian Gates tells the descendant he is fortunate to see that, because researchers rarely do.[5]

The *Roots* of a Family History Movement

There is no doubt that the still-growing extreme popularity of family history in later-twentieth-century America began with African American author Alex Haley's 1976 novel, and the television miniseries based on it, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. Although I was always soaking up family history at home "like a sponge," one of my classes at San Francisco State University first made me study methods for family history and apply them in a scholarly fashion. The professor was immigration history specialist Dr. Moses Rischin, who explained that he thought of giving us this assignment (to write our own family history) because of the popularity of "Roots." He sent us to the National Archives branch in San Bruno to research. I recall being startled to see it so packed that I had to wait to sit at a microfilm reader. I asked the archivist why so many and why all grey haired? He said, "it's been like this ever since 'Roots.'" He explained that only retired seniors had the weekday time to come in. I, like them, have been "hooked" ever since. Interestingly, all those folks whom I saw crowded into that archive each day seemed to be White. "Roots'" impact was universal.

"Roots" (especially the TV miniseries) influenced generations of Americans (of any races or ethnicities) to believe they could uncover their own roots to great satisfaction. It almost single-handedly spawned a run on genealogy that has stayed alive with additional boosters since. Alex

Haley gave African Americans a sense of having their own history, rooted in Africa. Tony Burroughs

> "attended a lecture by Alex Haley seven years before *Roots* was published. I was impacted before the book and film came out. When the book finally came out, I was disappointed because it was the story of Haley's family, which I already knew. It did not tell me how to research. When the television series came out, I watched every episode."

Recall that Burroughs wanted to learn all the traditional methods of genealogy, which *Roots* did not tell, but *Roots* still had its appeal. Note that when Burroughs published his own guide to "tell how to research," its title was *Black Roots*.[6]

Henry Louis Gates Jr. said, years later, "*Roots* is a work of the imagination rather than strict historical scholarship. It was an important event because it captured everyone's imagination." Gates later made clear *Roots'* influence, confessing that he had: "One serious case of *Roots* envy," to which he attributed his interest in African American genealogy. Note that Gates's current successful PBS program is called "Finding Your *Roots*." In each effort to lead an African American guest through their family history, Gates reinforces Haley's impact even without saying so, and even though it is so difficult to achieve what Haley claimed to have achieved—discovery of a named African individual who was the progenitor of an American enslaved family for descendants in the present. We all want that to be possible and even hope DNA might someday make it so.[7]

Meanwhile, weaving African American DNA studies with the American historical context is becoming an interpretive norm among the African American DNA analysts. For example, percentages of European ancestry among African Americans still vary with the region of the country where Black families have lived, and still live, since larger-scale importations of people who were enslaved. African Americans from the isolated Gullah Islands still have the lowest European ancestry, next lowest being South Carolina and the Charleston area. This matches remarkably with the historical patterns of where colonial-era to pre-Civil War populations of Africans who were enslaved, outnumbered White Europeans. Percentages of White European DNA among self-identifying and DNA-identifying African Americans probably go back to pre-1870 enslavement experiences much more than they reflect modern mixing. Again, we have the interpretation of historian Henry Louis Gates, whose research into DNA studies found that a "whopping 35 percent of all African-American men descend from a White male ancestor who fathered a mulatto child sometime in the era of enslavement, most probably from rape or coerced sexuality." This blunt, deeply troubling reality of enslaved existence will always be one of the necessary challenges of studying it, although Gates and others also uncover situations such as White men who, after the Civil War, legally married their former-enslaved women with whom they already had children.[8]

Interpreting Your African American Ancestors in Social History Context

There is a means of "storytelling" narrative family history without writing a novel. Family historians can use the researched history of ancestors' experiences, *combined with what was typical*, to explain the times in which the family lived. *Historical inference* comes into play just

as it does when most historians write history. For example, we can write "Like most enslaved people living in the quarters on a plantation like Sotterley, he would have had a true childhood among motherly caregivers until about age eight, when he would experience the rude awakening of becoming an enslaved person who worked in the field." Social history helps as a context.

Social history is the study of "ordinary people's everyday lives." It is history from the bottom up instead of the top down, not focusing exclusively or primarily on the elite and famous. Social historians tend to identify something's importance by how many people it affected more than by how singular it was. The social historian sees historical events as they affected groups collectively, not just how they affected exceptional people individually. We study "the common people" and the frameworks within which they lived. It is a perspective much more inclusive of ethnic minorities, women, and age groups than is traditional political history. Social history is not "history with the politics left out," as some have accused, however. Instead, social historians will tend to look at the people-side of politics: grass roots campaigns, local politics, the formation of parties, and reform movements.

Social history, then, is one of the most appropriate contexts for any of our ancestors' stories. The more one studies the history of the times and its cultures, while also learning how to access sources particular to the family, the more one will be able to conceive of solutions to mysteries or the possibility that someone in a certain time and place had more (or fewer) options than we realized. Fictionalizing family history accounts can be, of course, valid, creative, and inspirational but only if you make clear that is what you are doing, a novel. If, however, you research for the accurate social history context in which to place a family—and you cite your sources—your work can remain trustworthy to scholars and later descendants while still being more engaging than just barebones facts. The social historian can use historical inference: if we know this was common, we say so, inferring that it could be the explanation for the subject at hand.[9]

Below are some examples of records that provide narrative material already, and some with small additions. Note what studying each example reveals about some family experiences within historical context.

Example 1:

Records from the Virginia State Archives show that 4th great-grandfather James Sorrell applied for a Revolutionary War pension in Northumberland County (VA) court on 14 August 1832. He was a "free mulatto" head of a Northumberland County household of 10 "other free" in 1810. Eighteen years before, he had been "head" of a Northumberland County household of 6 "Black" persons in 1782. On 15 October 1783 Captain Thomas received his pay of £91.10.10 for his service as a gunner's mate in the Virginia Navy [Creel, *Selected Virginia Revolutionary War Records*, I:108]. In 1833 his heirs applied for bounty land for his services in the Navy and included his discharge papers from Captain John Thomas who certified that James enlisted in the Navy on 10 January 1777 as a gunner's mate for three years, discharged his duty faithfully, and was discharged on 10 January 1780.

Consider all here learned about an ancestor of color, his family members, service to country, and acquisition of land. Would he and his family members being "mulatto" possibly explain their being able to serve and achieve in these ways?[10]

Example 2:

Records show that Black great-great grandparents Horace Dixon and Margaret Turner married in Craven, North Carolina, on July 25, 1865. The Civil War had ended in April. Research into Craven at the time shows that the U.S. Army made a settlement for refugee former slaves on land confiscated from a Confederate officer's plantation. The settlement by 1865 had 3,000 Blacks in 800 houses. The founder of the settlement was *Horace* James, an abolitionist minister and a superintendent for Negro affairs of the Freedmen's Bureau, so the town was named James City after him. The freed people made it a proud town. Teachers came and founded schools. The government set up a hospital in a large plantation house belonging to a wealthy man named Thomas *Dixon*. That house still survives as a historic site called Dixon House.

Research into what freedmen did to start their new lives tells us that some of their first steps were to, of course, seek their separated families, to marry, and to take new names. The names tended to be symbolic of whom they would honor as well as to whom they would like to say, "we are as good as you." Think *Horace Dixon*.[11]

Example 3:

Records show that fifth great-grandfather Raphael Kane and his son, 4th great-grandfather Hillary Kane, had families of slaves on the same plantation for generations. The plantation is Sotterley, now a National Historic Landmark in tidewater Maryland. Historic Sotterley turns out to be one of the plantations that has adapted to feature slave quarters and enslaved life realistically, from an original slave cabin to the archaeologically studied slave graveyard.

Dr. Agnes Kane Callum was a descendant of this Kane family who became a much-respected genealogist, who gathered document collections, and who influenced historic interpretation at Sotterley. She also traced and contacted fellow descendants, leaving those records as well. Any Kane descendant or those studying slave life would benefit from her work.[12]

Example 4:

Carol was an African American adult student in one of my community workshops. She presented results in class from interviewing her parents. In the 1950s, her military father, who had served in Hawaii, had to drive his wife and baby across country to go to his new military post. They could rarely stop to use any facility, certainly not to stay the night. It would not be safe. The treatment they received when they tried stunned them, because Hawaii had not been that way. Carol's mother remembered with such gratitude the one lady who did allow them to stop, and who had a baby herself. She shared things that fulfilled baby's needs.

We reached for sources to help Carol's research. At about this same time, I was interviewed for a documentary film on Colorado Springs's Fannie Mae Duncan. I had informed that director about the *Negro Motorist's Green Book* in relation to Fannie Mae's need to create accommodations for Black entertainers to come perform in her club. The *Green Book* was a catalog of places that African Americans were welcomed as they traveled across country. I then discussed the *Green Book* with Carol. Thus, an artifact, like the *Green Book* can provide social history context to a family's history. Ironically, the Hollywood film "Green Book" came out soon after these two discussions.[13]

"Home Sources": The Familial Term for Primary Sources in Family History

There might be no greater gift for a history or social studies teacher to give to students and to posterity than to cause them to locate, identify, evaluate, and preserve the primary sources—artifacts, photographs, documents, oral history, family Bible, and oral tradition—that fill their own lives, families, and surroundings. During the current and growing public passion for DNA testing, Ancestry.com, and all things genealogical, it is crucial that we not neglect the family history materials that have a tenuous existence. Today scanning and even mobile phone photography make it that much likelier that we might save and share copies of precious images and records. The digitized document or photograph more likely will outlast the original, no matter how acid-free the container we use for that original. Photographs literally preserve views of faces and places. Even the unidentified photograph is worth keeping for careful analysis and comparisons. Sharing with others (rather than holding onto a singular original) also insures preservation. Photographing and writing down the family significance of artifacts is the best way to guarantee the history of a family's material culture. Worthy of reminders: buildings and tombstones are artifacts too. Defining artifacts and primary sources broadly lends credence to their preservation and use.

In community workshops, one exercise is to have each participant pull out anything they have with them and write about it in family history context. Most memorably, one young lady wrote about her lipstick. She wore that shade every day. It was particularly striking, the lipstick being truer red than is popular today. She wrote a touching essay about how she searched for that color to emulate her grandmother whom she much admired, and whom everyone told her she resembles. That essay made that artifact and a photograph valuable to family history.

The Oral History Imperative

There is no family history program or project more urgent for each family or each archive than to collect oral history. This imperative becomes still more urgent in times of pandemic or for historically underrepresented groups. Praise the New Deal for the "slave narratives," for example, capturing the last generations of folks who could recall living in enslavement. Firsthand accounts of historical experiences make excellent school projects, partly because they can be a team effort. Having just had all my classes write COVID-19 journals that will go into our local library district archive, I have been reading their perspectives. How often I noticed young students disregarding the seriousness of an epidemic because, they wrote, "I wasn't afraid at first because only old people were dying!" Therefore, I had the students consider doing an oral history project with seniors, which is intergenerational as well as historically valuable. That is possible to do, even to digitally record, from a "social distance," with technology so many use today. Losing our older generation at a faster rate during these times means we are losing precious history and tradition at a higher rate than "normal."[14]

Collecting oral history especially needs to include a respect for and thus collecting of oral *tradition*. Many cultures who pass down oral tradition do so purposefully and with greater degrees of intent and veracity than others assume. African American oral *tradition* is sometimes the only or best way to capture what is on the other side of that *brick wall*, especially how it felt to be there. Of course, old family stories change over time and with the teller. Family historians need to expect and embrace those characteristics of the medium. One can write family history

quoting conflicting and competing versions of the same story and it only becomes more authentic, revealing, amusing, painful, and inspiring.

African American family history generally is storytelling with intent, intent that inspired, and that forces have tried to suppress. It sparked millions of us to dig for *roots* anew. WE need to keep it grounded in scholarly and primary source research. We need to keep digging, preserve what we find, and share it for the inspiration of all.

Professor Katherine Scott Sturdevant is the senior American history professor at Pikes Peak Community College (PPCC). Additionally, she received the PPCC Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion award. She authored two pathbreaking books, *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000) and *Organizing and Preserving Your Heirloom Documents* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2002). Currently, Professor Sturdevant is editing two family memoirs for publication. She served as a scholarly historical editor for UC Santa Barbara's *The Public Historian*, the State Historical Society of Iowa's *Annals of Iowa*, and the University of Arizona's *Journal of the Southwest*.

LESSON PLAN
WALLS TUMBLING DOWN:
TEACHING BLACK FAMILY HISTORY AND GENEALOGY
IN SOCIAL HISTORY CONTEXT
By: Katherine Scott Sturdevant

Grade: Middle/High School

Overview:

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to: 1) gather and chart family information in the form of genealogical facts; 2) set up simple oral history experiences with relatives, develop questions for those interviews, and record; 3) make notes and collect copies or pictures of family history documents, photographs, and artifacts; 4) research the historical context of some of the family history they are gathering; and 5) treat any of these family sources as primary sources and interpret their validity compared to general historical context.

College, Career, and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

D2.Geo.6.9-12. Evaluate the impact of human settlement activities on the environmental and cultural characteristics of specific places and regions.

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.7.9-12. Explain how the perspectives of people in the present shape interpretations of the past.

D2.His.10.9-12. Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.

Essential Questions

1. What are family history and genealogy? How do they differ and yet support each other?

2. How can family history support American history and vice versa?
3. What is social history and how does it compare with the general American history in textbooks? Why does that difference make social history work well for doing family history?
4. What are the most important contributions each person can make, to their own family history, to build a historical record?

Procedures

Warm Up/Motivation

- Begin by instructing students about how they are going to learn ways that anyone's own family histories can teach us American history and American history can inform each person's family history.
- Inform students that each will need a paper folder—as they also will need files when they work online—to keep these family history papers and documents together.
- This collection is the beginning of their family history they should keep.

1) This is a 5-to-10-minute warm up exercise to motivate students into the lesson. Group students together and either have them select or you select one of the three examples for each group to read and discuss in their group. Tell them that each example is a true story from historical records.

- Examples for Warm-Up Exercise: Note that each of these is intended to make two points:
    - The lives of Africans during enslavement, were complex, not simple, and not true to stereotypes we have of them and
    - Conduct research to understand what was going on in their lives.

- **Example 1:** Records from the Virginia State Archives teach us about your 5th great-grandfather James Sorrell. From 1777 to 1780, he served in the U.S. Navy as a gunner's mate. In 1810, the U.S. Census listed him as a "Free mulatto" who was "head" of a household of 10 "other free." In 1832, he applied for a Revolutionary War pension. In 1833 his heirs applied for bounty land for his services in the Navy.

    Consider all here learned about an ancestor of color, his family members, service to country, and acquisition of land. Why, during a time of enslavement (which existed in America until 1865), was James Sorrell able to achieve all these things?

- **Example 2:** Records show that Black 3rd great-great grandparents Horace Dixon and Margaret Turner married in Craven, North Carolina, on July 25, 1865. The Civil War had ended in April. We have no other records of them or their families *before* then. Research into Craven at the time shows that the U.S. Army made a settlement for 3,000 former enslaved people on land confiscated from a Confederate officer's plantation. The founder of the settlement was Horace James, a White antislavery minister from the North who was a superintendent for Negro affairs of the Freedmen's

Bureau, so the town was named James City after him. The government set up a hospital in a large plantation house there belonging to a wealthy Southern White man named Thomas Dixon. That house still survives as a historic site called Dixon House.

> We know that former enslaved people took certain steps to start their new lives. They would seek their separated families, get married like these two did, and take new names. The names tended to be symbolic and meaningful to them. So why did this former enslaved ancestor take the new name *Horace Dixon*?

- **Example 3:** Records show that 5th great-grandfather Raphael Kane and his son, 4th great-grandfather Hillary Kane, had families on the same plantation for generations. The plantation is Sotterley, now a National Historic Landmark in tidewater Maryland. Historic Sotterley turned out to be one of the plantations whose historian-staff studied life of former enslaved people, from an original cabin to the archaeologically studied graveyard.

  Dr. Agnes Kane Callum was an African American descendant of this Kane family who became a much-respected genealogist, who gathered document collections, and who influenced historic interpretation at Sotterley. She also traced and contacted fellow descendants, leaving those records as well. Any Kane descendant or those studying enslavement would benefit from her work

  > Consider how difficult it is, as a descendant of former enslaved people, to visit a historic plantation and learn about how they suffered. Would the work of historians and genealogists in a case like Historic Sotterley make that descendant experience any different? Why or why not?

3) Have each group answer the following question.
What does your example cause you to realize about the people and their situations in the example?

4) After the instructed time has elapsed, have at least one person in each group report their findings.

5) Provide further findings to the class. Connect these examples to the students' lives and how they can conduct their own family histories.

Guided Practice

6) Give each student their first **"Pedigree Chart"** (family tree) to fill out. Here is one of the best charts from the National Genealogical Society: https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/free-resources/charts/

- Make an enjoyable whole-class exercise by handing out forms and seeing what they might know to fill in. Be understanding of what they do not know.
- Send them home with a form to fill in with family help.
- Project the form on your white board, if possible, so that you can show them how to fill in.

- Note that the NGS page above has tips on the bottom of the page with the charts. Those tips are standardized practice of how to fill in every bit of information.
- Here is a very detailed set of guidelines about filling in charts: https://familyresearchlibrary.com/pubs/form_instructions.pdf
- *Paper vs. Electronic Charting*: Millions of people now use technology such as Ancestry.com and rarely chart on paper anymore. Many still prefer to use paper. So, it is good to learn to chart on paper, but there are ways to access electronic resources.

7) Assign the students a short list of steps they must practice with online research. This could be to use a program and make a family tree that way or to investigate a person or aspect of their genealogy.

Ways You and Your Students Can Access Online Genealogy Sites Free or Low-Cost

- **Public libraries** with genealogy departments and **LDS Family History Centers** usually supply library versions of Ancestry.com, Fold3, and other tools for free. They might require a library card, charge for printing, or you might have to wait awhile to use one of their machines. These sites usually have very helpful staff!
- Ancestry.com and other sites (such as Fold3 which specializes in military records) occasionally advertise **free trials or special discounts** (especially Ancestry DNA around holidays for gifts).
- **Familysearch.org** is an older, free LDS site like but with fewer modern opportunities than Ancestry.com. It enables creating a family tree, connecting files to it, and even locating original records that you might not see on Ancestry.com. You must only create a *free* account for access.
- **Genweb.org** is a free site that enables genealogists to aid one another in a larger national community of research.
- **During the COVID pandemic**, because libraries have closed except for online, many libraries have made available the Ancestry.com Library Edition and other resources online remotely.
- For military records through Fold3, there is a **military portal** that veterans, active-duty military, and federal employees in defense can access for free with the right military identification numbers. See https://www.militaryonesourceconnect.org/achievesolutions/en/militaryonesource/mwrDigitalLibrarySearch.do?contentId=27777
- When you know a locality where your ancestors lived for a period, check through the nearest library or historical society whether they have **digitized newspapers** that go back to that period. Often there is a free online index to find any mention of your family in the news. There are also national websites like Newspapers.com which occasionally has free trials.
- A website that has almost anything genealogy is https://www.cyndislist.com/.

8) Build your/their genealogy vocabulary. Inform students they are going to work as genealogists and use social history as they research their own family histories. Most of these are **defined in this BHB article**. After writing the terms on the board and discussing what they mean, quiz the students.

Define important terms such as:

- Genealogy, genealogist
- Family history, family historian
- Social history, social historian
- Family tree, pedigree chart, family group sheet
- Oral history vs. oral tradition
- DNA testing, genetic genealogy
- Brick wall
- Ancestor vs. descendant (many people get these mixed up)
- Cemetery research (people frequently misspell the word cemetery—remember all "Es")

9) Plan a research field trip if possible. Determine the best libraries, archives, or research centers in your area. Contact them to see
   - which one handles genealogy?
   - which is best suited to treat your class as a tour group and to work with their grade/age group?
   - what are their days and hours?
   - which has staff to show students how to research their families in those records?
   - which has free versions of programs like Ancestry.com for students to use?
   - which also has a history collection that could help students connect their family to history?
   - Likely repositories could include,
     - your largest **public library** which probably has a genealogy section.
     - the meeting place of your city, county, or regional **genealogy organization.**
     - a city or county history **museum.**
     - your nearest Mormon (LDS) **Family History Center** (FHC), see this link: https://www.familysearch.org/help/fhcenters/locations/

       Note that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) maintains the largest family history archives in the world. The FHCs are open to all and have helpful staff as well as training programs. The LDS also operates Ancestry.com and many other online programs.
   - Once you know where you are going for your field trip and other particulars, you could develop handouts and exercises for the students. For example,
     - A scavenger hunt list could direct each student to locate and try using different resources and methods in the site.
     - If each student or all students are to locate and work with specific records or specific family members, design an assignment sheet that both asks them to fill in information they find but also challenges them to start to write what they found or what they think of it in complete-sentence short essay form.

10) Guided discussion on facilitating delicate family matters
   - In any group of people there are likely to be those with sensitive family issues. These could be, for example,
     - an adoptee who wants to search for birth family but has little to go on
     - a stepchild or child not aware of parentage

    - a child without access to one or both parents
    - a child with home circumstances that make asking questions difficult
- To discuss concerns early and privately, make a short questionnaire that each student completes. Ask both uncontroversial and potentially controversial questions about
    - What family history information does the student and family already have?
    - What part or person in their family history would they most like to research and why? What sources do they think might help them do this?
    - What, if any, worries do they have about doing this project with their family?

Independent Practice

11) Separate students into groups of three. Read them the example of the girl and her lipstick from the article. To illustrate how we inherit or reflect characteristics of our families, have each member choose an object they have with them, something they are wearing, or something about them that parents or family members have said connects them with their family, such as:
    - The girl in the story explained how she wore the same color lipstick as her grandma.
    - You have something a family member gave you, here or at home.
    - You have a feature about you (hair, eyes, etc.) that is like a relative's.
- Have each student then share with their small group, to get ideas of what works well or less so in the example.
- Take ten minutes for students to each write a self-reflection paragraph about how this exercise produced one small piece of a future family history or autobiographical narrative.
- Note that each student may bring in a photograph (printed or electronic) that assists in illustrating the similarities they are describing.

12) Assign each student to learn at home about 2-3 artifacts that help tell an aspect of family history and to bring in a written description of the artifacts and what they symbolize about the family history. Pictures are welcome too, but discourage rough handling of original, especially fragile or older, artifacts.
- Have each student then share with their small group, to get ideas of what works well or less so in the example.
- Take ten minutes for students to each write a self-reflection paragraph about how this exercise produced one small piece of a future family history or autobiographical narrative based on one or more artifacts.

13) In similar small groups, have each student write a short essay (less than a page) about the oldest (or furthest back) family member they personally remember. Explain that this is to be descriptive based on memory, not fiction.
- Have the students share in their small groups.
- In the short essay, each student should attempt to describe the person using some "sensory perception." How did the person look, sound, smell, feel to the touch, etc., *without fictionalizing*? It is alright if they cannot describe all these perceptions but include what they genuinely recall.
- Have one student from each group read their page aloud and the other students comment.

- Note that each student may bring in a photograph (printed or electronic) that illustrates the person they are describing.

14) Again, in small groups, have each student create a list of family members with whom they plan to conduct an oral history interview.
- In their small groups, each student should explain who and why to the others to get advice about whom to interview next, and then choose whom that would be.
- Next, with group help, each student should list three key questions they want to ask in that interview. Encourage the students to choose questions that cause the interviewee to tell stories and describe, rather than questions that would just elicit short answers.
- Then the students should share with the whole class for ideas.
- Note that each student may bring in a photograph (printed or electronic) that shows the person or people they might interview.

Closure/Assessment

15) In small group discussion, the students report back after an oral history interview.
- They summarize the interview itself and the family history results of it.
- Then they advise each other in the small group, taking notes what their classmates suggest.
- The objectives are to
    - analyze what went well and what did not go so well about the interview, and why.
    - share the best story or explanation from the interview.
    - speculate on how this material would fit into a family history.
    - anticipate what historical research they might need to do in order to help build family history narrative using material from the interview.
- One member from each group then presents to the whole class a summary of these results for their interview. The whole class discusses
    - what each student should do with the results of the interview.
    - what they learn by comparing their results.
    - what they have all learned so far and how they will apply this to the next interview.
- Note that each student may bring in a film or tape of the interview, for an additional level of learning and critiquing, but allow extra time for that.

Homework

16) Students watch at least one episode of "African American Lives," Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s four-hour series that investigated African American celebrities' family histories, including his own, before "Finding Your Roots" became a new series.

Part 1 of 4 African Americans
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phcqu8rNZ9Q

Part 2 of 4 African American Lives A Way Out of No Way

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsvANqpGv8k&list=PLsy0eg7XsZUFROaPBeKoZmA71bTveIOUI

Part 3 of 4 African American Lives We Come from People
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5x5oAUTPL9M&t=413s

Part 4 of 4 African Americans
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTT7MMz7KIc

- Develop a worksheet for the class that asks students specific questions to answer as they view the film. Choose subtopics that match matters that came up in class or that are associated with what students had learned so far about their own families.
- Have each student write a one-page essay on techniques or focus that they learned from the film and that they plan to use for their own family history.

17) As homework for the class, students should continue to fill out their pedigree charts https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/free-resources/charts/

18) Equating a brief (perhaps 2-5 pages) final narrative as a substitute for a final exam or term paper, provide a due date for students to write a narrative about their family history based on everything collected thus far.

Extension Activities

- Have students go online and conduct research on their families then attempt to write a separate story with the idea that doing so might someday be publishable.
- Have students create a PowerPoint presentation, or poster board of their family history.
- Have students create a historical social media piece of their genealogy work.
- Have students create a video, song, rap, or another artistic personal expression of what they learned about their family history.

For further information, see Tony Burroughs, *Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree* (New York: Simon and Schuster Fireside Books, 2001); Katherine Scott Sturdevant, *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000); Franklin Carter Smith and Emily Anne Croom, *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2003) and reprinted by Genealogical Publishing Company of Baltimore in 2008; Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press, 1988); Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hills: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Immigrant & Ethnic Ancestors* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000); and Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Random House, 1976). Also, for the role of military in Black family history, see the sources from "The Black Military Family" in this issue of *BHB.*

For useful websites see https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/African_American_Genealogy; https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/African_American_Online_Genealogy_Records; https://www.americanancestors.org/education/learning-resources/read/african-american-research; http://freedmensbureau.com/; https://www.prattlibrary.org/research/tools/index.aspx?cat=96&id=4305; https://www.aahgs.org/; https://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/bib_guid/journey/index.html; https://www.thoughtco.com/african-american-family-history-1421639;

https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/technique/african-american-genealogy/;
https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/african-american-genealogy-research-guide/;
https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/african-american-ancestors-online/;
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Quick_Guide_to_African_American_Records

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1 There are many excellent sources for Freedmen's Bureau records and guidelines such as https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/ref-info-papers/rip108.pdf; https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/freedmens-bureau/; https://www.pbs.org/genealogy-roadshow/genealogy-tips/slave-research/; https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4607663/; https://www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/changing-names; https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/02/22/516651689/after-slavery-searching-for-loved-ones-in-wanted-ads

2 Tony Burroughs, email to author, 6 May 2020. See Burroughs' still excellent *Black Roots: A Beginner's Guide to Tracing the African American Family Tree* (New York: Simon and Schuster Fireside Books, 2001).

3 Tony Burroughs, email to author, 6 May 2020.

4 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. interview, "How To 'Find Your Roots' like Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *Forbes Magazine* 16 July 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivalegatt/2018/07/16/how-to-find-your-roots-like-henry-louis-gates-jr/#4b3322c726f5.

5 It is rare to see Africa as the place of birth in post-slavery records. Remember that you probably would be seeing your *named* Black ancestors in a record made *after* the Civil War (in 1865), unless they were long-time free Blacks. American importation of slaves officially ended in 1808, although at least one infamous shipload arrived illegally after that and there was smuggling. One reason the U.S. government could agree to stop importation was because the American slave population (in some states more than others) was successfully reproducing its numbers regardless of new imports.

6 Tony Burroughs, email to author, 6 May 2020.

7 Gates quoted in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roots:_The_Saga_of_an_American_Family#cite_note-29 and https://www.wnyc.org/story/33022-talk-me-henry-louis-gates-ancestry/ . See also Philip Nobile, "The Strange Evolution of Henry Louis Gates's Estimate of Alex Haley and 'Roots'" at https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/168334.

8 See https://blackdemographics.com/geography/african-american-dna/; https://www.indystar.com/story/news/health/2019/10/29/dna-testing-gives-african-americans-hard-find-answers-past/2485660001/; https://africanancestry.com/home/; https://www.futurity.org/tracing-family-roots-with-dna/; https://psmag.com/news/how-slavery-changed-the-dna-of-african-americans; and https://www.ancestry.com/cs/african-american.

9 See the author's own *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000). Also again see Burroughs, *Black Roots* and the other guide of its type, Franklin Carter Smith and Emily Anne Croom, *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your African-American Ancestors* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2003) and reprinted by Genealogical Publishing Company of Baltimore in 2008.

10 This is a very helpful older genealogical source on Black Revolutionary War service. It also lists James Sorrell. http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/slavery/JNH-7-1942.pdf

11 An excellent, detailed, scholarly, and painful source on the separation of slave families and its impact on them and on family history is Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hills: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

12 See https://mdgensoc.org/cpage.php?pt=105.

13 See https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/history-green-book-african-american-travelers-180958506/ and https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/16/green-book-the-true-story-behind-the-oscar-buzzed-road-trip-drama

14 The Slave Narratives are an amazing compendium resulting from one if the New Deal programs to gather oral history. See https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/; https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/; and https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html.