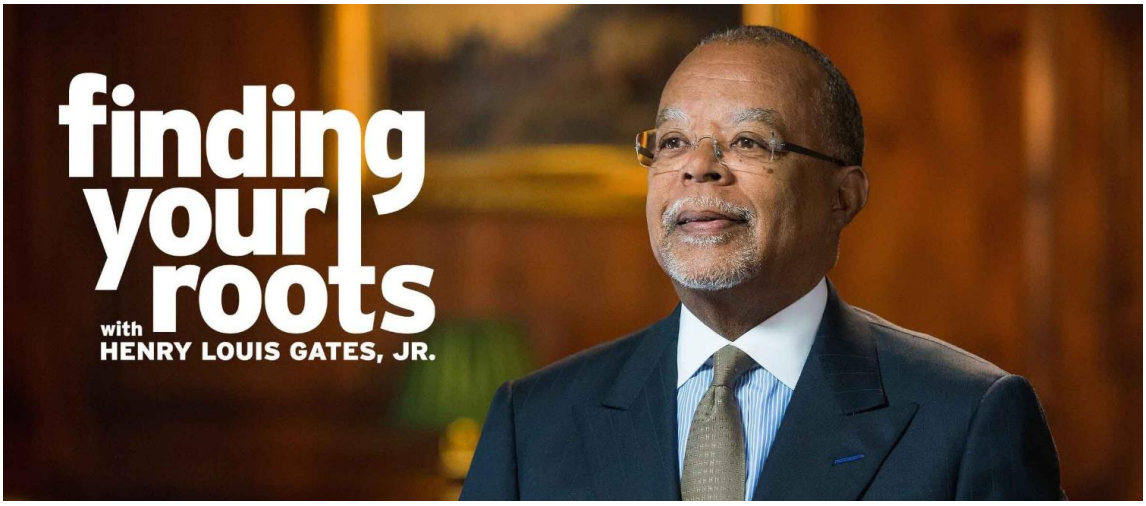


Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

African Americans Rebuilding and Reconnecting After the Civil War

Grade Level: 9-12

BACKGROUND ESSAY

In Season Eight of *Finding Your Roots*, while exploring the ancestry of actor Terry Crews, it is discovered that his family, once torn apart during slavery, was reunited after the end of the Civil War.

During slavery, plantation owners were legally allowed to buy and sell enslaved Black children, parents, husbands, wives, siblings, and other family members at any time. They also could bequeath and inherit enslaved people, themselves trapped in perpetual bondage, one generation to the next. Throughout the antebellum era, separated families never stopped wondering where their loved ones were. According to the National Archives, advertisements in search of separated family appeared in newspapers as early as the 1830s. Following the Civil War, many formerly enslaved Africans began looking for lost family members.

The process to connect with loved ones was arduous and, at times, relied on following leads based on a family member's last known whereabouts. Historian Heather A. Williams states,*"People took to the roads trying to find family members. I mean, literally, walking to where they had last left family"* (Gates, 2019, 1:12:09)" With little guidance about how to find their loved ones, separated family members walked to plantations nearby in hopes of reunion. Face-to-face interactions and word of mouth proved helpful in these efforts. Adding to the challenge, many newly-freed African Americans were unable to read or write because most enslaved people were intentionally kept illiterate as a way to deter them from formulating plans of rebellion. Historians estimate that 10 percent of enslaved people in the **antebellum** South were literate.

With the end of slavery, **Reconstruction** saw an increase in efforts to track down formerly-enslaved family members through various publications worldwide. Churches also joined in the efforts. Literate church leaders and worshippers read newspaper ads aloud to the congregation in hopes of reuniting separated families. With freedom came the opportunity to combat illiteracy for the nearly 4 million African Americans emancipated after the war. The creation of **The Freedmen's Bureau** by the U.S. government included resources to aid in this process.

The Freedmen's Bureau, established in 1865, was created by an act of Congress to help freed people and refugees during their transition from bondage after the Civil War. With the assistance of northern missionaries, the Freedmen's Bureau requested help from military officials in the South to find lost family members, legalize the unions of married couples, and help free people understand their rights under the Constitution and laws of the United States.

To this day, many African Americans are still working toward finding ancestral connections to family members who lived through slavery by using **Census** records, genealogical societies, and online databases. The Census, established in 1790, did not include all African Americans by name until 1870. According to the National Genealogical Society (NGS), founded in 1903, "Learning how to use US census records is fundamental for family history researchers who are getting started or who wish to broaden their expertise in American Genealogy". Through NGS, the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, founded in 1977, and through advancements in technology, lost and neglected family histories are being discovered, reconnecting families more than 155 years since the end of slavery.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What methods of communication were available in the 1800s? Who was afforded the opportunity to use those methods?
- What barriers may enslaved people or formerly enslaved people have faced when trying to communicate with distant family members?
- What steps did formerly enslaved loved ones have to take to get back to their families after being separated?

Further Discussion Questions

- How do you stay connected to family members?
- Who are the keepers of your family's story? Is there anything interesting that you have learned about your ancestral family over the years?

VOCABULARY

Antebellum – Latin for "before the war"

Census – The procedure of systematically acquiring information about the population. In the United States, this is procured every ten years and is required by the Constitution. The Census provides figures that result in representation in the House of Representatives as well as distribution of federal aid. The Census Bureau is the oversight agency for the United States Census.

Emancipation – The process of giving people social or political freedom and rights.

The Freedmen's Bureau – Established by Congress in the War Department, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, also known as the Freedmen's Bureau, was created to oversee the affairs of freed people and refugees after the Civil War.

Reconstruction – Following the Civil War, the Reconstruction era sought to remedy the inequities of slavery while readmitting the southern states back into a reunified nation

Reconstruction Amendments - the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery and guaranteed equal protection of the laws and the right to vote.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: Exploring Searching and Found Ads

The Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery project works to digitize, transcribe, and publish ads placed in newspapers across the United States (and beyond) by formerly enslaved people searching for family members and loved ones after emancipation.

Procedure:

Using these interactive maps from Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery have students familiarize themselves with the "searching" and "found" ads compiled from around the world. The map allows participants to scroll over locations of those looking for family members, as well as the places where those being sought out could have possibly been. Allow about 5-10 minutes for students to explore on their own.

As they explore, students will brainstorm, in small groups, the following:

- How do you think formerly enslaved people started their adjustment into society after being emancipated, especially if they were separated from their family or loved ones?
- How would formerly enslaved family members use these ads to find their loved ones?
- For the people who saw an ad seeking them, consider what their next steps would be.

Educators may assign small groups of students ads from their local region (i.e. educators in New York may go to New York on the map for added relevance). You may differentiate ads assigned based on students' reading level. Students will read through their ads and note what information was used to identify loved ones.

Have students note the following:

- Who is searching?
- Who are they searching for?
- When were the people they are searching for last seen?
- Where were the people they are searching for last seen?
- Where could their loved ones have traveled from or to post emancipation? (Other known locations, if included in the ad)

- Name(s) of plantation owners (if known)

Using the information gathered, have students create an inferred life path for the lost loved one. Have students include important dates in U.S. history (i.e., Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War, establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau, etc.)

To close, have students write a paragraph about what they learned about how African Americans went about reconnecting with family members post-Civil War.

Extension Homework

Students will return to the map and attempt to recreate a family reunion. Using ads placed, have students follow leads to find family members who were displaced during slavery. Note: not all "Last Seen" ads have a corresponding "found" ad. During the next class session, have students discuss the process they used to search for the person in the "last seen ad" Consider the following:

- Who were you looking for?
- What steps did you take to try to find this person?
- What, if any, information was missing from the ad, that would have aided you in finding the missing family member?
- Were you able to find them?

Supplemental Material

Frederick Douglass reunites with his brother Perry after 40 years of separation – 1867
Amy Morris, nee Amy Baxter, found her mother, Feraby, after 30-year separation – 1884

Activity 2: Analyzing Census Data

Document Analysis Form - students will learn to use a census record from the Reconstruction period. They will identify background information on the document to determine the text's bias or perspective.

Background

The census is a decennial (every 10 years) survey that has been conducted since 1790 as required by the US Constitution (Article 1, Section 2). The purpose of the decennial census is to 1. determine how much representation a state has in the House of Representatives and 2. determine how to disburse federal financial aid to the states. The census survey includes questions such as age, marital status, education, income, and other questions used to study the nation's demographics. All residents are counted regardless of citizenship status or what the answers to the census are. This means everyone matters and is accounted for to determine the number of seats their respective state receives for the House of Representatives, the number of electors for the presidential election, and fund or subsidize programs in education (such as Head Start and Federal Pell Grants for college), food, law enforcement, public works, and much more. In short, the census is a way to show that all persons matter in making a difference.

The 1870 census was the first to include all African Americans by name. This census included the first record of last names for formerly enslaved individuals, as well as ages

and places of birth. The 1880 census began listing familial relationships in each household. In this activity, students will explore a version of the document that many African Americans used to search for their loved ones following the Civil War.

Procedure

Instructor will play the clip from *Finding Your Roots* Season Eight. Following the clip, ask the students for their immediate thoughts on what they watched. *What did you learn from this clip?*

Teacher may encourage dialogue among students by using the discussion questions.

This activity can be completed either individually or in small groups. The teacher will introduce students to the census. Using the above and additional historical information from census.gov, explain to them what a census is meant for and how we can trace our ancestry through these documents. Teachers may use census images from their region for added context (I.e. New York, Fulton County).

1. Group students in pairs and assign them a census image taken from the available census data on census.gov
2. Give students a few minutes to read through the information in the census image.
3. Have students complete the Document Analysis Form
4. Once complete, the class will come back together to discuss the perspective and historical significance of the census. Students may edit their document analysis forms to include any information they may have missed, based on the class discussion.

After regrouping, have the students consider the following:

- How would families have used the census to find leads on their relatives' whereabouts?
- What are some limitations to using the census to find loved ones?
- How do these methods compare to how people may search for missing loved ones today?

Activity 3: The Freedmen's Bureau S-I-T

S-I-T: Surprising Interesting Troubling - The Freedmen's Bureau

Background

Established on March 3,1865, The Freedmen's Bureau was responsible for overseeing all matters relating to refugees, freedmen, and lands abandoned or seized during the Civil War (National Archives). Along with missionary societies and individuals, General Oliver Otis Howard was appointed as the Commissioner of the Bureau by President Andrew Johnson 3 months later.

The Freedmen's Bureau contributed to the establishment of over 3,000 schools in the South, allowing for African Americans to receive a formal education. They also gave food, clothing, legal aid, and medical care to freed people. It assisted Black military men in receiving pensions, bounty payments and back pay for their service. Though having

limited resources, the Freedmen's Bureau had over eight hundred fifty thousand acres of land, which Major General Howard wanted to the freed people to use . By the end of summer in 1865, many of the former Confederates who took the South out of the Union had received presidential pardons under President Andrew Johnson . He ordered Howard to restore almost all of the lands in the hands of the Freedmen's Bureau back to the Confederates he had pardoned. Congress refused to consider redistributing land to freed people and prioritized other national interests. In response to continued outrage from white Southerners, Congress ended the bureau in 1872.

Procedure

Using the background information provided, introduce students to the Freedmen's Bureau, outlining who they were and their main functions. Then, direct students to research the bureau, on their own.

Students will denote surprising, interesting, and troubling facts about the Freedmen's Bureau, what they accomplished, and how society responded to them. Students will share what they learned in a 3-5 minute PowerPoint presentation or a short oral report.

Linked *Finding Your Roots* Lesson Plans
Kevin Bacon clip on PBS LearningMedia – Season One
Michael K. Williams Reconstruction – Season Five
John Baptiste Reconstruction – Season Six
Queen Latifah Free Black Americans – Season Six
Maya Rudolph Emancipation Proclamation – Season Three

References:

- Library of Congress
- Reconstruction Exhibit
- Make Good The Promises Smithsonian Exhibit
- National Archives
- Reconstruction: America After the Civil War Film
- Reconstruction: America After the Civil War Collection on PBS LearningMedia

Additional Reading

Williams, Heather Andrea. *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery*, The University of North Carolina Press
Chapel Hill, 2012.

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