



THEIR HISTORY IS OUR HISTORY

GRADE LEVEL: 9–12

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OVERVIEW

Oftentimes history is viewed as a series of events that happened independently of each other. Through this activity guide, students examine how personal histories overlap within a wider historical narrative to create a web of connection between us. Students will also explore how history can be viewed, perceived, and recollected differently by people and across generations, and reflect upon ways that reconciliation can be achieved for difficult histories. In doing so, students will analyze historical accuracy and the role that narrative plays in history. Lastly, students will develop recommendations, based upon America's history, for improving its present.

BACKGROUND

As author Douglas A. Blackmon traveled the country talking about his book *Slavery by Another Name*, he was surprised by the number of readers who told him that the book made them reassess their own family histories. Many people talked about needing to revisit accounts of forced labor passed down by relatives that they had initially not believed. Others started to notice gaps in their family history, glossed-over accounts of their childhoods, or mysterious relatives whose fates were largely unknown.

With the advent of the film *Slavery by Another Name*, some people are realizing that their family histories may be radically different than what they once believed. Whether their ancestors were victims or purveyors, many people are now discussing, coming to terms with, and learning more about forced labor.

For additional background, visit the following from the *Slavery by Another Name* Theme Gallery:

Descendant Stories:

<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/descendant-stories/>

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does history connect people?
2. In what ways is history perceived differently by people of different experiences, both at the time the events occur and across time?
3. What role does narrative play in history?
4. In what ways can people reconcile historical injustices?
5. How can we fill in the blanks of incomplete historical narratives?

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

Personal histories are part of a broader history that connects us with others. History isn't one-sided, and often events are seen differently depending upon one's perspective and interpretation. This can make reconciling histories — especially difficult or hidden ones — challenging, but not impossible.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY: IN THEIR SHOES

1. Prepare to view “Reflections on Family History” by facilitating a discussion using the pre-viewing questions. Provide background on the clip for students. After viewing, continue the discussion using the post-viewing questions.
2. Next tell students that they will hear from descendants of forced laborers. Prior to viewing “Descendants,” facilitate a discussion using the pre-viewing questions. Provide additional background on the clip for students. After viewing, continue the discussion using the post-viewing questions.
3. Through continued discussion, have students consider the similarities and differences in the two historical narratives presented in the film clips and how the women are all connected. Have students define reconciliation and the role that it plays in dealing with difficult past events. Have students consider how each descendant can reconcile her personal history.
4. Divide students into pairs. Have students work in teams to compose a one- to two-page imagined dialogue between a descendant of a plantation owner who practiced forced labor and a descendant of a forced laborer. What questions would they ask one another? What explanations, if any, would be voiced? The goal of the dialogue should be reconciliation for both sides. What needs to be said and understood to

achieve this goal?

For additional assistance with this activity, have students watch “A Look Back on Desegregation” (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21134540/vp/45799882#45799882) and read “Elizabeth and Hazel: Little Rock Women Struggled After Iconic Civil Rights Image” (inamerica.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/22/little-rock-nine-elizabeth-hazel-margolick/) both of which discuss how two teenage girls, one black and one white, worked towards reconciliation after an extremely hurtful encounter, and how even now as adult women, they are still on that challenging path.

5. Facilitate a post-activity discussion and ask students if they feel their dialogue reached reconciliation. If so, what contributed to reconciliation? What does reconciliation require? If they don't feel like they reached reconciliation in their dialogue, why? What makes reconciliation difficult?

ACTIVITY: HIDDEN HISTORIES

1. Prepare to view “Reflections on Hidden History” by facilitating a discussion using the pre-viewing questions. Provide background on the clip for students. After viewing, continue the discussion using the post-viewing questions.
2. Continue the discussion about hidden histories. Ask students to think about one aspect of history that seems “hazy” to them, that has “blank spaces,” or a group of people whose history may not be well known. Examples include Emancipation Proclamation, the Holocaust, the Iraqi War, the Civil Rights Movement, pre-contact Native Americans, buffalo soldiers, or undocumented immigrants today.
3. Next have students turn their topic into a research question. For example: What started the Civil Rights Movement? Why did the United States go to war with Iraq? What was life like for pre-contact Native Americans? What can we learn easily, and what may be hard to uncover?
4. Using the library, print resources and the internet, have students research the answer to their question by finding a little-known story, event, or history that can provide an additional explanation to their question. Inform students that there won't be a single answer, but that the goal is to add to their knowledge about the history that they are researching in efforts to provide a more complete historical perspective beyond the knowledge that they already have or that is commonly held. They should find at least four sources, two of which should be primary sources.
5. Based on their research, students will develop three- to five-minute presentations to share their investigations with the class. During their presentation they should present their topic, their research question and their little-known fact, story, or event that adds to the historical narrative, and why they think knowing this history is important. Their presentations should also include mention of the sources they used

and how they evaluated those sources for credibility. Encourage students to incorporate multimedia elements like video, images and audio into their presentations.

6. After students present, facilitate a post-activity discussion about what tools students can use to investigate incomplete histories, methods of evaluating sources, how our understanding of history can't be based just on commonly held beliefs, and what tools are available to flesh out historical narratives into more complete histories.

ACTIVITY: HOW FAR HAVE WE COME?

1. Prepare to listen to "A Legacy of Fighting Injustice" by facilitating a discussion using the pre-listening questions. Provide background on the clip for students. After listening, continue the discussion using the post-listening questions.
2. Have students divide a sheet of paper into two columns. In the first column, ask students to develop a list of all the strides — political, racial, social, economic — that past generations have made since the various forms of forced labor took place in the American South after the Civil War.
3. Next, write on the board, Judge Reese's statement: "We still have a ways to go." On the opposite column, have students consider in what ways — politically, racially, socially, economically — America should improve as a country.
4. Ask students to choose one improvement America should strive for, based on the list they created and in class discussion. Instruct students to write a blog entry of fewer than five hundred words that describes the improvement and provides concrete actions that their generation can take to achieve it. Consider providing a model of a blog entry that advocates for a cause that students can read and analyze before they begin writing.
5. If technology is available, consider posting student work in an online classroom space such as a blog platform like Tumblr (www.tumblr.com) or WordPress (www.wordpress.com). Have students read and comment on their classmates' blog entries with additional action steps as well as thoughts on feasibility and importance. Discuss techniques for constructive criticism.

MULTIMEDIA CLIPS

Reflections on Family History

<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/descendant-stories/video-reflections-family-history/>

This video clip features Cristina Comer, a descendant of B.B. Comer, a former Alabama governor and his brother J.W. Comer, businessmen who managed forced labor. In this clip, Comer describes the impact and importance of learning the full history of her family.

Pre-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. What is narrative? Is there a place for narrative in history?
2. What is the primary narrative told regarding Emancipation Proclamation? How does forced labor alter this narrative?
3. Why are some parts of history hard to talk about?
4. Why doesn't everyone see eye-to-eye on what's right and what's wrong?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. What's the other reality that Comer learned about her family's history?
2. How can we evaluate the completeness of history or a historical event?
3. Why is forced labor a part of history that's not often talked about?
4. Do you think it's the responsibility of later generations to atone for acts committed by their ancestors? Why or why not?
5. What are ways that people can reconcile difficult family or personal histories?

Descendants

<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/classrooms/history/>

This video clip features Sharon Malone and Tonya Groomes, both of whom are descendants of forced laborers. Groomes is a descendant of Green Cottenham, a young man who was charged with vagrancy and forced into labor, only to die shortly afterward. His story is featured in the film and also provides the primary arc for Douglas A. Blackmon's book *Slavery by Another Name*. In this clip, the two women discuss the need to know their history and why it's important to give voice to their forgotten ancestors.

Pre-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. What stories do you know about your ancestors and their experiences? Are there things that make you proud or ashamed? What would you like to know that you don't?
2. Why don't some families know their history?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. How can history have blank spaces?
2. What tools can people use to uncover the missing pieces of incomplete historical narratives? What tools are available to do so?
3. The historical record of most people who lived over a century ago is thin, but it is particularly thin for forced laborers like Green Cottenham. What are the reasons for that? What groups today are less likely to be recorded in history?
4. What are some ways to give voice to those who have been forgotten in history, such as forced laborers?

Reflections on Hidden History

<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/themes/storycorps-stories/video-reflections-hidden-history/>

This excerpt is from a StoryCorps oral history that features Robert Corley, a descendant of Robert N. Franklin, a white deputy who profited from wrongfully arresting blacks for the practice of peonage. Here, Corley, an historian and teacher, talks about the importance of uncovering, teaching, and reconciling hidden histories.

Pre-viewing Discussion Questions

1. Can we ever know the truth when it comes to history? Why or why not?
2. What do you think is meant by hidden history?
3. Why are some histories more prominent than others?

Post-Viewing Discussion Questions

1. Do you think the history of convict leasing is important for students to know? Why or why not?

2. Do you think there are more hidden histories within American history? Why or why not?

A Legacy of Fighting Injustice

<http://video.pbs.org/widget/partnerplayer/2195234372/?w=400&h=224&chapterbar=false&autoplay=true>

In this excerpt from the book *Slavery by Another Name*, author Douglas A. Blackmon writes about the work of Judge Eugene Reese, the grandson of Warren Reese, Jr., a federal prosecutor who worked to abolish the use of peonage, but was ultimately unsuccessful. Reese, Jr., a white man, felt very strongly that the peonage system was inhumane and that those who were forced into labor deserved justice.

Pre-Listening Discussion Questions

1. What are ways that you determine right from wrong? Is it always easy to do so, why or why not?
2. Is justice blind? Why or why not?

Post-Listening Discussion Questions

1. How was Judge Eugene Reese's work similar to his grandfather's? Consider political, racial, and overall similarities.
2. Why do you think Judge Reese's work on education in Alabama was deemed controversial?
3. In what ways can fighting for justice be unpopular?
4. Why do you think Judge Reese said, "We still have a ways to go"? What do you think he meant?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"*Slavery By Another Name* Unites Georgia Women" | *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*
<http://www.ajc.com/business/slavery-by-another-name-1346880.html>

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards

Reading Standards for Literacy in History and the Social Studies

Standards 1 to 3: Key Ideas and Details

Standards 4 to 6: Craft and Structure

Standards 7 to 9: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

IRA/NCTE National Standards for the English Language Arts

Standard 1; Standard 2; Standard 7; Standard 8

<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Books/Sample/StandardsDoc.pdf>

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, Change

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards>

National Standards for History

ERA 6: The Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900)

Standard 2

<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/>

Historical Thinking Standards

Standard 3

<http://nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/historical-thinking-standards-1/overview>