

Web site links African-Americans to ancestors' voyage

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In a major advance in genealogical research, African-Americans will be able to trace the routes of slave ships that transported 12.5 million of their ancestors from Africa as early as the 16th century.

The free Internet database gives African-Americans the opportunity for the first time to explore their African heritage the way whites have long been able to chart their migration from Europe.

Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database is the result of 40 years of research by hundreds of scholars. Two years ago, Emory University researchers, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, began compiling maps, images and other records of about 35,000 slave-trade voyages from Africa to North America, Brazil, the Caribbean and Europe. It is the first time such a large amount of data on the subject has been available to the public.

"Everybody wants to know where they came from, and for people from Europe, it has been possible for several centuries now to trace migrant communities," said David Eltis, a history professor at Emory and a director of the project. "Now it is possible to do the same for people of African descent.

"The records for people of Africa and the Americas are better than the records of connections between Europe and the Americas for the simple reason that slaves were property," he said. "No one cared what happened to free migrants. They did care what happened to slaves, because they

were making money from them."

While the database can establish the regions slave ships launched from in Africa and where they arrived in the United States, it generally is impossible to determine which ancestors were on board, researchers said, because the records have African names that were changed when the slaves arrived in North America.

"The data certainly is not going to be helpful in tracing individual ancestors. You can't say your ancestor came on this vessel, except in a tiny handful of cases," Eltis said. "What it can do is provide context. The big advantage is that it establishes connections between parts of Africa and parts of the Americas."

African-Americans have had a fascination with discovering their African heritage since the miniseries "Roots," based on the Alex Haley novel, was televised in 1977. Since 2003, a Washington, D.C., company called African Ancestry Inc. has offered mail-order DNA tests for \$349. In recent years, other DNA research projects have been developed, attracting such celebrity clients as Oprah Winfrey, Spike Lee and civil rights icon Andrew Young.

The problem with DNA testing, according to researchers, is that insufficient samples of DNA have been collected from Africa, making it difficult to provide matches from many parts of the continent. The Voyages database will help reinforce DNA data, researchers said.

"People may not be able to trace their particular ancestor, but it is the most complete accounting of individual lives, individual ships, individual journeys to date," said Leslie Harris, an Emory genealogist and author of "In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863."

It is more difficult for African-Americans in Illinois to use the database because many of their families traveled North in the Great Migration from 1916 to 1930. To find those records, Illinois residents would have to know where in the South their ancestors were enslaved.

"During the slave trade, we don't have people who were dropped off in Illinois. The ships landed on the East Coast," Harris said. "So we are talking about people who started out on the East Coast and then, one way or another, ended up in Illinois, not necessarily as enslaved people but as free people."

The database, which is expected to become a classroom tool, contains the records of 10.5 million slaves, more than 85 percent of the slave trade. It identifies more than 67,000 of them by their African name, age, sex, origin and place of embarkation.

Though many Americans view slavery as a U.S. phenomenon, the United States represented only 4 percent of the slave trade, far behind Brazil, the leader, which imported about 45 percent of the slaves, Eltis said.

"During the time the slave trade was at its peak, it was considered to be an ordinary business, not something immoral. Slave ship owners used to name their voyages after their family members," said Eltis. "So the difference between attitudes then and now is quite considerable."

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