SEARCHING YOUR PAST TO STRENGTHEN YOUR FUTURE
AFRICAN AMERICAN GENEALOGY WORKSHOP

Presenter
Sharon Leslie Morgan
Founder, Our Black Ancestry
“In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is still a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness.”

Alex Haley
WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- LEARN the basics of how to research your personal family history

“What the next generation will value most is not what we owned, but the evidence of who we were and the tales of how we loved.”
YOU ARE
THE DREAM.

DISCOVER
THE DREAMERS.

OurBlackAncestry.com
AFRICAN-AMERICAN GENEALOGY,
1870 AND EARLIER.
WHAT IS GENEALOGY?

- Genealogy is a personal record of your ancestors
  - when they were born
  - where they lived
  - who they married
  - who their children were
  - where you belong in your family tree

- The terms “genealogy” & “family history” are interchangeable

“Any family tree produces some lemons, some nuts and a few bad apples.”
WHY IS GENEALOGY IMPORTANT?

- Helps you understand who you are as a person
- Teaches self discipline, organization & research skills
- Enhances self esteem
- Inspires creativity
- Challenges intelligence
- Helps you find & embrace lost family members
- Encourages a sense of belonging in America & the world community
- Helps heal the wounds of our past
WHO IS INTERESTED IN GENEALOGY?

- Interest in family history is growing exponentially – all over the world.
- The leading site for family research -- Ancestry.com -- has more than 3 million subscribers worldwide.
- OurBlackAncestry.com generates more than 8,000 website visits per month and our Facebook page has 23,000 active members.
There is a huge mass of information that is widely available online.

The digitization of public records & the internet have made it possible to explore family history like never before.

DNA testing even allows us to scientifically discover our geographic and tribal genesis in Africa.

BUT...

There remain MANY challenges for African American genealogists.

Much of our research has to be done IN PERSON at archives, libraries and other repositories.
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE
Because of slavery, many of us do not know to whom we “belong” – as families – prior to 1870.

Until 1970, most of us did not pursue interest in our family history, believing our search would be in vain.

That is no longer true.... Alex Haley changed the paradigm and modern technology has made records accessible to all.

Today, it is possible to trace black families back at least to 1870.

Many people are now able to go all the way back to the arrival of their ancestors into America from Africa and/or the Caribbean.
WHAT IS SLAVERY?

Our history is defined by slavery…

- **Slavery** is the systematic exploitation of labor
  - Slaves were held against their will from the time of their capture, purchase, or birth, and deprived of the right to leave, to refuse to work, or to receive compensation (such as wages) in return for their labor.

“Throughout history, slavery and the slave trade have existed in diverse forms and in many societies. In view of its duration, scope, and consequences, the transatlantic slave trade is widely regarded as one of the most appalling tragedies in the history of humanity.”

Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO -- International Day for the Commemoration Slavery
Slavery in the Americas dehumanized an entire race of people – based on the color of their skin.
Kidnapped from Africa

- 12+ million people were stolen from Africa and sold as slaves.
- Slave trade continued for four centuries, from the 16th to the 19th century.
- 3+ million perished in the Middle Passage.
- Countless others died in wars and raids connected to the trade.
The “triangular trade” connected the economies of four continents – Europe, Africa, North and South America (and the islands in between).

The slave trade built the economy of the entire western world.
500,000+ survivors of the Middle Passage were enslaved in North America.

In 1860, there were only 250,000 “free” African Americans.

In 1865, 4 million people were emancipated by the Civil War.

Today, we are a population of 44 million.
DOMESTIC SLAVE TRADE

- From 1830-1860, Richmond VA was the center of the “domestic slave trade.”
- Westward expansion and the explosion of cotton as a cash crop displaced 1.2 million enslaved people from the Atlantic states to plantations in the Deep South.

Slave auction house, Richmond VA
RECONSTRUCTION

12 years (1865-1877) during which America attempted to recover from the Civil War and redress the inequities of slavery and its political, social, and economic legacy.

- The Freedman’s Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands was created.
- Schools like Tuskegee Institute were established to address illiteracy and provide work training.
- Black people were allowed to vote and elected to political offices throughout the South.
- There was serious discussion about reparations.
JIM CROW

Racial segregation laws enacted between 1876-1965 at the state and local levels circumscribed the lives and ambitions of African Americans.
From 1877-1940 countless thousands of black men were victims of “debt slavery.”
Between 1882-1951, 4,730 people were lynched in the United States
- 3,437 Negroes
- 1,293 whites
THE GREAT MIGRATION

• From 1916-1930, approximately 7 million African Americans migrated out of the southern United States to cities in the North, Midwest and West.

A second migration occurred from 1940-1970, when another 1.6 million people changed location from South to North.
ENDURING CONSEQUENCES

 reminisce AFRICA

+ Was depopulated
+ Without slavery, the 1850 population of Africa would have been double the 25M it reached.
+ Removal of able-bodied people 18-40 impaired society's ability to reproduce itself economically, socially and culturally.
+ Today’s poorest African countries are the ones from which the most slaves were taken.

 reminisce EUROPE & AMERICA

+ Economies of Europe and America were built on slavery – Today’s economic wealth is tangible evidence.

Gordon, a runaway slave from MS (1863)
There are MANY slave narratives that document what happened.

Too many people – black & white - are in denial, hoping to ignore the truth.
TRAUMA

- Kidnapping
- Enslavement
- Unimaginable cruelty
- Destruction of families
- Breeding
- Crimilization of black men
- Medical experimentation
- Sterilization
THE LESLIE FAMILY STORY

From slavery to freedom ... Alabama to Chicago
Tom Leslie & Rhoda Reeves were born into slavery circa 1850.

Upon emancipation, Tom, Rhoda and her mother, Easter, departed a plantation in Lowndes County AL.

They moved to Opelika AL, where they married in 1871 and started a family.

By 1890, they were living in Montgomery AL, where my father was born in 1914.
HOW TO BUILD YOUR FAMILY STORY
THE STORY BEGINS WITH YOU

Sharon Antonia Leslie
(1951 – still living)
Trees grow exponentially

- Numbers double in each generation = 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64…
- After 10 generations, there should be 1,024 great grandparents.
- For African Americans, we are lucky to go back 3-4 generations.
- And even more lucky if we can reach our African origins.
RULES FOR SUCCESS

- Work from the known to the unknown.
- Do not take shortcuts.
- Follow every possible lead.
- Document all sources.
- Do not lose faith (ancestors will guide you).
- Remember that you are doing something important for the people who follow behind you.
Most of us start with family stories -- passed on from parents and grandparents.

Family stories are essential.

They always contain a grain of truth.

Interview your oldest relatives before they pass on.
NUTS & BOLTS
Most states did not require birth records until 1912 or later.

Old BMD records are kept at the county level.

In the past, most people were born at home.

Many people born before 1900 do not have birth certificates.
MARRIAGE RECORDS

Tom & Rhoda LESLIE Marriage Certificate - 1871 @ Opelika AL
Tom LESLIE died 1939 @ Montgomery AL

Rhoda LESLIE died 1954 @ Chicago IL
The first US census was taken in 1790.

1870 was the first census to record African Americans as people with surnames.

By 1880, many people had moved and changed their names.

1940 is the most recent census to be released to the public.
Tom’s mother Harriet was enslaved on the plantation of Dr. John Marrast.

He was one of the largest slave holders in Lowndes County.

He owned 104 people in 1850 and 128 in 1860.
In between Federal censuses, many states conducted local enumerations.

Most southern states produced a census in 1866, after the Civil War.
Arthur Leslie, affectionately known by friends and family as "Boots", entered this world on 14 April 1914. After a long and eventful life of 87 years, he surrendered his spirit one hour after midnight on Easter Sunday, 15 April 2001.

Arthur was a small child when his mother, Julia Williams Leslie, died. He and his two brothers -- Robert, Jr. and Frank -- were cared for by paternal grandparents, Thomas and Rhoda Leslie. When their father, Robert Leslie, left the south and remarried, he brought his sons to Chicago, where they were raised by their much beloved new mother, Antonia Dora.

Their extended family also included first cousin, Lonnie Hicks and adopted sister, Drucilla Grier.

The Leslie brothers were extraordinarily close to one another and Arthur was the last to depart this life.

He was very proud of the fact that, even in hard times, he succeeded in graduating from Englewood High School.

Over the years, he pursued many occupations -- Chicago policeman, boxer, bouncer, bartender and, for many years, driver for the Yellow Cab Company.

Arthur fathered one child, Sharon Antonia Leslie, from his marriage to Delores Marie Nicholson. He later shared his life with Winifred Clay and her four children -- Leon, Levi, Mildred and Yolanda Triplett.

For the last several years, Arthur was resident at the Alden-Wentworth Nursing Home, where he was highly regarded by the staff who cared for him. His final illness was brief and he is believed to have been at peace in his last days, particularly at a birthday celebration with friends and family immediately prior to his passing.

The family Arthur leaves behind includes his daughter, Sharon Leslie Morgan; grandson, Vincent Morgan; nephew, Frank Leslie, his wife Linda, daughter Francita and her son, Antoine; niece, Francine Leslie Thigpen; her children, Charles and Alicia Little and her son, David; and his brother Frank’s widow, Vivian.

Arthur clearly expressed his desire to be cremated and his wish has been honored by the family.
WWI Draft Registration – Robert LESLIE
PROBATE RECORDS

• Enslaved people were often bequeathed in wills and sold to satisfy debts.

• County courthouses maintain estate files, including annual “distribution reports.”

Thomas Rives Estate Inventory
Tom & Harriet @ Dallas County, 1864
Receipt for purchase of “coffin for Negro child” – MARRAST family papers
White men were granted “headrights” when they arrived in America = free land grants. Afterwards, they received land “patents” based on military service.
OTHER PUBLIC DOCUMENTS

Passport approval for Dr. John Marrast.
OTHER RECORDS

- Freedman’s Bureau
- WPA slave narratives
- Peonage files
- City directories
- Tax records
- Insurance records
- Criminal records
- School records
- Church records
- Associations & clubs
- Immigration records
- Newspapers

There are links to these and more on the Our Black Ancestry website.
SPECIAL ISSUES FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS
CHALLENGES

- Lack of records
- Fluid surnames (spelling, changes....)
- Lost siblings & other family members
- Fictive relationships
- Non-married partnerships
- Geographic movement
- Unmarked graves
A WORD ABOUT SURNAMES

- Before 1870, most black people did not have surnames.
- They were identified by the names of their owners... and these names often changed.
- When they were able to choose surnames, they chose a variety of names = the first or last slave owner, names of parents, esteemed people, locations, or just names that appealed to them.
SOLUTIONS

- Search ALL records
- Do line-by-line census reads
  - Look for family groups
  - Look at neighbors
  - Check neighboring counties
- Funeral programs v. newspaper obituaries
FIND THE SLAVE OWNER

“Nettie Rule”
if you search the 1870 census – 10 up and 10 down – you are likely to find the most recent slaveholder.

Once you find likely prospects, search white family records to prove the connection.

Look for
- Wills
- Deeds
- Court cases
- Insurance records
The Dawes Commission is the major source for Native American records. You MUST look for the REJECTED files.
BASIC TOOLS

Authoritative guide by America’s #1 African American genealogist + good software
ONLINE DATA SOURCES

MILLIONS of records are available to download, save & print using your home computer.

FREE
- OurBlackAncestry.com
- Afrigeneas.com
- FamilySearch.org
- NARA.com

SUBSCRIPTION
- Ancestry.com
- MyHeritage.com
- Footnote.com
OFFLINE DATA SOURCES

- State archives
- County courthouses
- Libraries
- Historical societies
At some point you will likely need to visit “home places” to obtain documents.
Oakwood Cemetery in Montgomery AL where many LESLIE family members are buried in a “free burial ground” – set aside for poor people.
DNA testing makes it possible to prove beyond doubt who you are related to and where your family originated.

Makua
East Africa

Mandinka
West Africa

Scotsman
Scotland
Begin your ancestral chart.

+ Start with yourself.
+ Add your parents.
+ Add your grandparents.
+ Go as far as you can.
Start a family group sheet for your immediate family.

Begin with your grandparents.

How much do you know?
What family stories have been passed down to you?
The first brick wall is deciding that you want to do this = time travel.

After that, it means overcoming obstacles to success.

Let’s climb “brick walls” together.

Is there anything in your research that has you stuck?
CLOSING THOUGHTS
DEAL WITH THE TRAUMA

- Confront the truth
- Build supportive relationships
- Work toward healing
- Take action
MAKE A PROMISE TO THE FUTURE

- Make a commitment to explore your family history ... take the time, do the work.
- Interview your oldest living relatives BEFORE it is too late
- Share your work with young people so they can appreciate from whence we came.
- Subscribe to Our Black Ancestry.com & join us on Facebook
SHARE YOUR RESULTS

- Family tree chart
- Collaborative family trees
- Photo albums
- Websites
- Family books
- Family reunions
OUR LEGACY

“We are not dead as long as someone remembers our name.”

African Proverb

The legacy we leave to future generations should be one
-- not just of names, dates and places --
but of FAMILY VALUES