

Endowed With a Renewed Sense of Purpose for Teaching Research Skills

By Janet Woodward

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Looking for a professional development experience to inspire you next summer? Try the National Endowment for the Humanities Landmarks of American History Program (<http://www.neh.gov/projects/landmarks.html>). Last summer I was fortunate to be a participant in one of the 17 projects that were offered in 2004. I traveled to the Raleigh Durham area of North Carolina to learn about the history of African Americans from the unique perspective of those who used their skills to build successful businesses, even during the age of slavery. Along with 200 other teachers, in four different 6-day sessions, we took part in an effective and comprehensive hands-on presentation entitled “Crafting Freedom: Thomas Day and Elizabeth Keckly, Black Artisans and Entrepreneurs in the Making of America.” Organized by the Thomas Day Education Project <<http://www.thomasday.net/>> in conjunction with the North Carolina Museum of History <<http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/>> and made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), this was a special opportunity to learn about historical people and places through field trips, tours, lectures, dramatic interpretations and craft activities. It also offered a chance to collaborate with educators from around the country. We met during the 3rd session from July 16-July 21, when 50 teachers who came from such far ranging cities as Los Angeles, Detroit and Boston gathered together to gain new knowledge. The curriculum was tightly organized around visits to landmarks and interpretative seminars which covered the lives of Thomas Day and Elizabeth Keckly in addition to other African Americans from the time period.

Thomas Day (1801-1860) was a free black cabinet maker who owned and operated a thriving furniture shop in Milton, North Carolina. Elizabeth Keckly (1817-1907) was born into slavery, and lived in Hillsborough during her girlhood. As a seamstress she later purchased her freedom and became the dressmaker of Mary Todd Lincoln in the Whitehouse. In order to emphasize the significance of these individuals and others, the schedule included the following activities in and around the Piedmont area of Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina:

Day I - Orientation Dinner at Wingate Hotel in Research Triangle Park

Day II - Bus trip to Burwell School in Hillsborough with lectures about background information on Day and Keckly, life in this 19th century residence and slave narratives. Further bus travel to Milton with a country dinner at the Milton Women’s Club and lecture/tour of the Union Tavern, the former shop of Thomas Day which is a historic site now being restored. Continued bus travel to Yanceyville,

North Carolina with craft circles in sewing and furniture making (joints and tools) offered by craftspeople who live locally followed by a barbeque dinner in the Richmond-Miles Museum served by the Caswell County Historic Association.

Day III - Bus trip to Historic Stagville, the largest plantation in the state during the 19th century with a tour of slave quarters, main house and barn built by enslaved skilled workers followed by a slide/lecture on the African American artisanship on plantations. Further bus travel to the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh to attend a slide/lecture on the furniture of Thomas Day along with viewing preserved pieces owned by the museum. Next, rotation to various stations presenting a historical furniture game, educational CD-ROM on Thomas Day and workshop on using runaway slave advertisements for student writing assignments. After dinner back at the hotel, a video about black involvement in the American economy before the Civil War was shown.

Day IV - Bus travel to the North Carolina Museum of History to attend a forum and panel discussion presented by visiting scholars and professors on the topic of “Crafting Freedom” in the Antebellum era. A sumptuous lunch honoring the teachers and visiting academicians was served by the museum. The afternoon included free time in the museum, a tour of the North Carolina state archive several blocks away and a lecture on African American artists. Evening time included an open microphone where participants could share their own experiences, reactions, publications and projects.

Day V - Morning brainstorming sessions in facilitated groups to begin the process of planning lessons to take back to schools and students. Afternoon time for teams and individuals to work on their lesson plans and assignments.

Day VI - Presentation of lesson plans, program evaluation and departure.

We were so impressed by the quality of the activities, the forethought and planning that went into carrying out this project and the honor and respect shown to K-12 educators by offering meaningful sessions with experts and practitioners in the field. The leaders who are to be commended for putting on such a well planned, exciting and fascinating program are:

Laurel Sneed, Director - Thomas Day Education Project &
Betsy Buford, Director – North Carolina Museum of History.

They enlisted other local teachers and staff to accompany us and lead us on our daily sessions but we would especially like to recognize the contributions of the following academicians and professors:

Juanita Holland – Independent Scholar

Jo Leimenstoll - University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Katherine Malone-France, Burwell School
Percy Murray - North Carolina Central University
Patricia Phillips Marshall - North Carolina Museum of History
Loren Schweniger – University of North Carolina, Greensboro
John Vlach - George Washington University
Michele Ware - North Carolina Central University
Juliet Walker – University of Texas, Austin
Peter Wood – Duke University

Motivated by all these presentations, the group set out to develop lesson plans that would incorporate the learning and information we had absorbed and give students a better understanding of the history of African Americans, both enslaved and free in the Antebellum era. I joined with Monica Fleming, Instructor at Edgecombe Community College in Tarboro, North Carolina, and Deborah Foley, Information Literacy Instructor Library/Humanities Dept. at Culver Academies in Culver, Indiana and quickly settled on building a website that would enhance instruction in research skills. Thus was born our site:

There are many stories yet to be uncovered.

Who Will Give Voice to the Past?

African Americans 1800 ~ 1870

http://www.culver.org/academics/infolit/Faculty/foleyd/Teacher_files/craftingfreedom/cfindex.htm

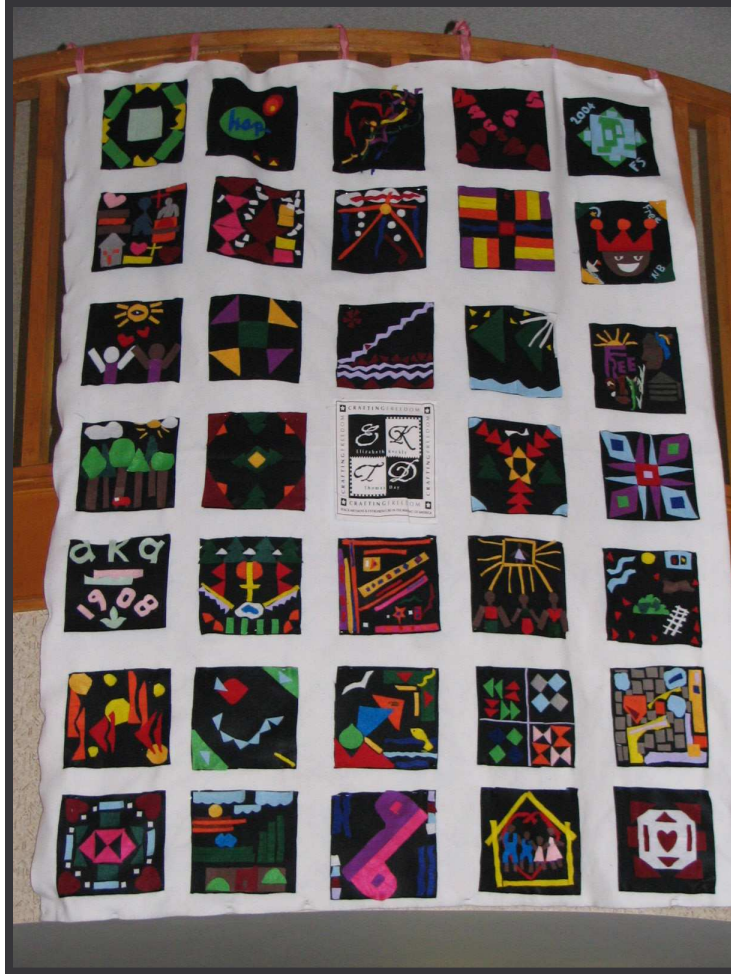
Our site has been a work in progress, outlined on our last day together in North Carolina and developed through collaborative e-mail over the summer and fall of 2004. From the east coast, across the mid-west to the west coast, we agreed on the importance of emphasizing the contributions of those who may have remained unknown in the past. Therefore, we developed a sample list of African Americans who invite further research as well as methods for finding out about historical figures locally in student's own communities. We also covered the myriad of research strategies that students can use to find out biographical information from primary and secondary sources. By including a mission statement, state curriculum learning standards, methods and sources for conducting research, sample writing assignments and PowerPoint presentations along with evaluative rubrics, the audience for our site includes both teachers and students.

The idea for our site was essentially stimulated by our hands-on participation in the NEH landmarks history program. If all of the locales offer this caliber and quality of program, and we understand that they do, we highly recommend that you consider applying!



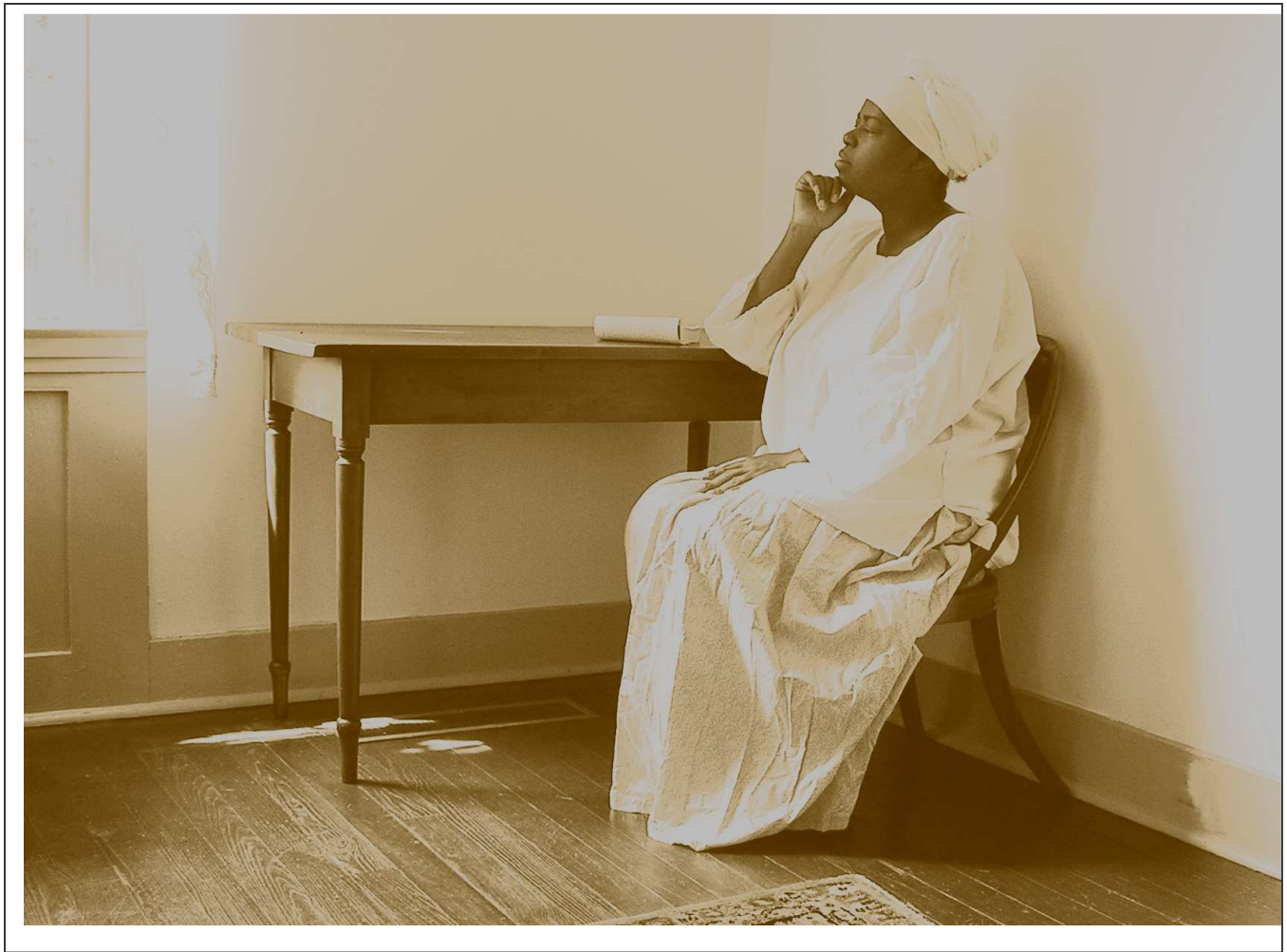
Nellie Williams, member of the Milton Woman's club which sponsored a country dinner for participants. Williams taught at the Caswell County Training School in rural North Carolina, the history of which is outlined in *Their Highest Potential, An African School Community in the Segregated South* by Vanessa Siddle Walker, UNC Press, Chapel Hill, 1996.

Photo by Janet Woodward



Quilt created by participants in the 3rd session of the “Crafting Freedom” workshop on their last evening together after viewing a video entitled “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend”. This 28 minute documentary features interviews with and singing by women who live in a small isolated river community in the southwestern part of Alabama. It accompanied a major exhibition of their work-sewn from everyday materials and expressing cultural originality- at the Corcoran Museum of Art in Wash. DC in 2004. There are also 2 books published to accompany the exhibit of these expressive quilts.

Photo by Janet Woodward.



Rhonda Hatton, of the Thomas Day Education Project, is reflective after her dramatic reading of an excerpt from Elizabeth Keckly's memoir, *Behind the Scenes*, at The Burwell School, a historic site in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

(Sepia photograph by Bill McLoughlin, elementary computer and social studies teacher from Columbus, Ohio.)