

Ghosts of the Masters: Descendants of Slaveholders Reckon with History

By David Pettee & Susan Hutchison

Several years ago, two white descendants of slaveholders, David Pettee and Susan Hutchinson, explored a hypothesis: was the legacy of slavery still present in the lives of their families today? Could it be present in the lives of others like them? Descendants of slaveholders are a large but invisible group, among an estimated fifteen million people who have ancestors who held slaves in the South at the start of the Civil War. This number doesn't include the descendants of Northern slaveholders or those from elsewhere in the United States, the Caribbean or from South America.

Few people are willing to acknowledge connections to slaveholding. The reality that it was their family members who perpetrated slavery is not something many wish to draw much attention. As far as we know, this is the largest group of descendants of slaveholders that has ever been interviewed.

We needed to utilize snowball sampling, a research method where participants help recruit other participants when the topic of research is controversial. After developing a set of open-ended questions, recognizing that there was no obvious place to go to find this hidden population, we started with our colleagues from *Coming to the Table*. This project is based out of Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and has brought together descendants of enslaved people and those who enslaved for honest conversation.

We also sought out members of heritage societies, such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Susan developed a website for the responses that we received from various places throughout the Internet, which were usually

anonymous. Soliciting contact this way rarely led to an interview. Most people needed some knowledge about us before they were willing to talk more openly about this difficult dimension of their family history.

Over a year's time, we interviewed (or heard from) more than one hundred white descendants of slaveholders from a wide range of religions, political leanings and socioeconomic backgrounds. Descendants ranged in age from fourteen to eighty-nine. We heard from writers, clergy, business owners, artists, students, professional historians, genealogists, psychotherapists, lawyers, poets, songwriters, speech pathologists and those in the military.

We interviewed people who had slaveholding ancestors from every state in the former Confederacy, from eight states in the North and three Border States, and from Cuba, Haiti, Barbados, Brazil and Africa.

We heard from two people whose ancestors had enslaved thousands of people. Most others had found reference in records to only one or two slaves. Some people struggled with their wealth inherited from slavery. We heard from several people whose slaveholding ancestors had been poor, and who felt stigmatized by being associated with rich plantation owners with whom they felt no sympathy or connection.

Because of the sensitivity of the topic, we felt it was important to try to shape the interview so that it felt safe. We promised to hold complete confidentiality. We were willing to answer any question, including questions about our own stories. While we conducted as many interviews as we could in person, most took place over the phone, and a few through Skype. Most of the interviews took about an hour, but a few went longer. We were astonished at how quickly so many people were willing to trust us.

Several people had serious second thoughts about their participation in our project. They fearfully demanded that any notes or recordings be immediately destroyed.

Family Dynamics

Almost everyone accepted our hypothesis that there were lingering psychological impacts upon their families from the legacy of enslaving others. Many confessed that it was difficult to identify what these impacts were, primarily because they had never even considered this possibility before.

Some people worried that long-standing family problems such as self-medicating with alcohol and drugs might be a clear example of the impact. Many others wondered about growing up with elders who enforced a 'no talk rule' around issues that elicited painful emotions. Others observed that their elders believed that blacks were incapable of managing their own lives effectively, and had adopted an attitude of benevolent responsibility based out of this racist idea.

A number of people openly wondered how slaveholders could psychologically cope with the violence required to uphold slavery. In 1785, Thomas Jefferson noted, "There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it

with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.”

Some observed that their elders ruled over the family with an iron fist and an attitude of angry command and control. Some remembered that when they were children, they felt treated like objects, rather than as people. Several people wondered: was an impulse to ‘break the will’ of their own children drawn from their family legacy of enslaving others? Others admitted to feeling emotionally numb whenever the topic of slavery was raised.

More than a few people confessed that members of their families had been involved in the KKK, and/or had served on citizen councils. Many others remembered hearing explicitly racist remarks from older family members. For these people, the enduring legacy of slavery was already clear: within their families, it had morphed into Jim Crow and/or acts of violent racism. Speaking up was an exercise in courage.

Silence

The most enduring theme that emerged was silence. Silence has erased most of the memory of slavery in the North, and it is a dynamic that has been used in the South for the same purpose. Many people who first heard about our project initially expressed excitement and a desire to participate. Then, they couldn’t seem to find a good time to talk. One person admitted: “I have waited for so long to talk about this history because it has haunted me for years. But then I heard inside my head the voice of my father, who warned me to never talk about what our ancestors did.”

Some scholars of historical trauma speak of encryptment, a psychic response to trauma where intolerable experiences become walled in, silenced, and removed from conversation. Finding a way to tolerate

their own internal resistance seemed to be necessary before many people could begin to make sense of their heritage. Most people had heard little or nothing about slavery from parents, grandparents or other relatives.

More frequently, they stumbled upon the first clues while conducting genealogical research. Most told us if they had heard anything at all, the information was communicated almost matter of fact. Others reported that any conversation about this history was actively discouraged, and discussing their history was taboo.

Many spoke of feeling stunned and shocked to describe how they felt after learning that their ancestors held slaves. This tended to be less true for people raised in the South, because the visible reminders of the region's more recent dependence upon enslaved labor, such as plantations or slave cabins, had surrounded them. Some carried memories about furniture that had been made by slaves, or had heard about seating areas in their family churches that had originally been reserved for slaves. One man recalled that his grandmother referred to her hired domestic help as slaves.

Those descended from Northern slaveholders were usually completely shocked by the discovery. The stories a few heard were impacted by the institutionalized cultural amnesia that permeates the North: the celebration of abolitionism and the Underground Railroad, while omitting the difficult reality of New England's primary role as the economic engine of the transatlantic slave trade before and after the Revolutionary War.

Many told us that they had to become truth tellers in their families and felt alone. To break silence and confront the legacy required they become race traitors. When asked to speculate why many stories were not passed down, most suspected that their elders were so

ashamed that they couldn't bear to face the history directly to talk about it.

Fear and Denial

Several people admitted that they were irrationally afraid of people of African descent. One person wondered if black people in her subway car would be able to see in her eyes what her ancestors had done. Another person feared that if he ever shared his family heritage with his African American work colleagues, he would be shot.

Many had difficulty appreciating and understand that white people were negatively impacted by the legacy of slavery. There seemed to be an impulse to want to minimize or deny an ancestor's involvement. People often told us that they had first heard that their family had owned 'just a few' slaves. Then, while conducting research, they felt troubled to learn that there were often many more slaves in the family.

Very few people claimed to know much about the brutality of their slaveholding ancestors. Instead, most had heard stories about their ancestors who were benevolent slaveholders. The truth was too hard to bear. The willingness to research primary source court records helped them to confront the deeper truth around the mythology of the benevolent slaveholder.

Guilt and Shame

Some felt very guilty about their family history. Others don't feel any guilt at all. Some who didn't feel guilty responded defiantly that they didn't feel guilty, and were angry and dismissive of those who did. Some who didn't feel guilty instead felt 'bad' or embarrassed or ashamed for what their ancestors had done. Often, when the fuller

story had been uncovered, they told us that they felt ashamed by all the complicity, and angry that the information had been denied, forgotten or withheld. Encouraging people to appreciate that all their emotions were acceptable proved helpful.

Confronting slaveholding ancestry is emotionally powerful and hard work. Many people felt a need to be well prepared before feeling ready to begin engaging this part of their family history. We felt that those who could 'hold their history' were more able to deal with it. Some folks had to develop new skills or find a supportive community before they were ready to tackle their history head on. Some told us that if they didn't have a safe place to share what they were finding in their research, they wouldn't confront the history at all.

Ancestor Worship/Mythology

Many folks told us that had to uncover the truth by first sifting through the mist of distracting and romantic family narratives. Commemorating famous ancestors gives people a positive sense of place and identity. We grew accustomed to hearing first all about their famous ancestors. We wondered: did this need to lift up of exemplars represent a way for people to avoid facing the more painful family story? A connection with any famous Confederate military leader was a source of deep pride for many people.

More than a few people told us that same story: how the most loved house slave had buried their family silver in the backyard when the Yankee soldiers arrived. Several people shared with us that they had heard that their ancestors had 'given' land to their former slaves after the War. Research in land records very rarely confirmed this common mythology.

We kept hearing a benevolent mythology about why former slaves stayed on plantations after the war ended. Many were told by elders

that former slaves had stayed because there was so much reciprocal love. We were surprised at how many people seemed to so easily accept this mythology why former slaves stayed on, blissfully ignoring the economic realities of the devastation that occurred because of the Civil War.

The Civil War/War Between the States

The memory of the Civil War remains very powerful. Many Southerners are recipients of a strong oral family history tradition that includes detailed stories about the war. From a few Southerners, we heard fervent denial that the Civil War had anything to do with slavery, and that the war was only about State's rights. We became sensitive to the significance of the emotional power connected with the legacy of the war that could overwhelm the conversation.

Offering a safe space for people to vent their intense feelings and memories about the Civil War was often a necessary first step before they would begin engaging the emotional legacy of their family history of slaveholding.

Some from the North observe a cultural tendency to be rigid, and to use denial to steer quickly into over-intellectualization. As the 'winners' of the Civil War, one Northerner pondered: why has the North chosen to forget the conflict? In the North, the Civil War is rarely ever talked about, if at all. Another Northerner told us that while the Civil War was occasionally remembered in the North, he had noticed a self-congratulatory attitude of moral righteousness when talking about how the North had won the war. That many in the North entered the Civil War because of anger around secession, and not to end slavery, remains an unfamiliar narrative.

We wondered what role amnesia about the history of slavery in the North played in all of this. The confluence of these cultural attitudes

can discourage many Northerners from investigating their pre-colonial family history, when the enslavement of Africans and indigenous people most commonly took place.

We concluded that many Northerners would benefit from trying to appreciate the meaning of the Civil War from a Southern perspective, and vice versa, to lay a foundation for more respectful conversation about the legacy of this conflict.

Accountability: Reparation? Or Repair?

We did not hear any clear consensus whether slaveholding descendants shouldered any responsibility to repair the damage wrought by their ancestors. Many felt they should not, nor could not, be held accountable for the actions of people who lived 150+ years ago. Some people were angry or had 'compassion fatigue' with those who sought reparations. Others were scared about being billed for financial reparation if they ever met a descendant of someone enslaved by their family. Others reported having been discouraged from being public with the family history because of the fear of retribution. We noticed that many people were resistant to any conversation around "reparations" which tended to agitate and shut them down from engaging their history more directly.

Conversely, we learned how several artists, educators, clergy, writers, historians, archivists and filmmakers had used their professional lives to facilitate personal healing, accountability and integration. Two people endowed scholarships: one for the descendants of the people her family had enslaved, and the other was at a seminary in hopes of supporting truth and reconciliation efforts.

Another person took inherited plantation property and made it available for African American writers-in-residence. A personal

commitment to some kind of repair could be creative, involve money (or not) and be healing and liberating for all involved.

Direct Encounters: Connecting with Others and Healing

A direct encounter with history such as visiting the old family plantation, a slave cemetery, slave quarters or slave forts, slave marts or slave pens, reading their ancestor's wills and inventories, or meeting the descendants of enslaved Africans helped many begin to reconcile their history. It was important for many to find a way to engage their emotional resistance, and we saw how direct encounters with the history of slavery were difficult to rationalize away.

Many people expressed interest in meeting a descendant of those their ancestors enslaved. Some hoped to share stories and fill in gaps. Some had already met 'linked descendant', a living descendant of someone who had been enslaved. They hoped for the possibility of accountability and transformation as these relationships deepened.

A few were hoping to find and meet a linked descendant and/or would be delighted if they were contacted. Making a connection with a linked descendant was seen as a powerful way to transform the legacy of slavery into an affirming and hopeful force. This desire for connection combined with some manner of acceptance of the past was a positive force for moving forward. Others felt ready to offer an apology if they ever met a living descendant of people their families had enslaved.

Many people wanted to learn more about their family history, but didn't have the tools. Without support, they reported feeling discouraged and overwhelmed. A large number of people we spoke with came through our involvement with Coming to the Table, www.comingtothetable.org. Many of these people reported that simply knowing there were others engaged in this truth and

reconciliation gave them the courage to reach out or dig more deeply.

We wondered if attendance at a seminar about genealogy frequently offered by local historical societies would empower people to continue their research.

Summary

After listening to more than one hundred descendants of slaveholders, we believe there is clear evidence that there are identifiable emotional and familial dynamics that can migrate down the family tree. We are beginning to know more about why so many white people find an honest conversation about slavery and repair to be so difficult, and there is a strong need for further research to confirm or challenge what we learned.

Breaking silence is fundamentally the first step. Then finding the courage to become accountable to family history and to make connection with others can lead to transformation which can empower people to take action to further heal the legacy of slavery.

The Authors

Rev. David Pettee has recovered fifty-seven forgotten slaveholders among his family, all who lived only in New England in between 1638 and 1803. One ancestor was a ships' captain who sailed to and from Africa five times out of Newport, RI in the early to mid 1700's. A number of his earliest ancestors enslaved the indigenous survivors of the Pequot War and King Philip's War.

Susan Hutchison had a number of enslavers in her ancestry from seven Southern states. One Mississippi ancestor wrote a long and passionate defense of slavery. Susan was also a descendant of

Thomas Jefferson. After DNA testing revealed Jefferson was most likely the father of six children with Sally Hemings, Susan became an active participant in the important conversations held between Jefferson and Heming's descendants.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Susan Hutchison who passed away in December 2016.