**G T Y Georgia Teachers of the Year Association**

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**“Promising Practices Classroom Activity”**

Title of Activity: Putnam County Slave Database

Recommended to use with this number of students: 15-20 students

Content Area: US History Grade Level(s): 10-12

Match to Georgia Standard(s):

SSUSH 2b, SSUSH7d, SSUSH8a-e, SSUSH10b-d

Note: Use the remainder of this page and up to one additional page for describing the activity.

Lessons don’t have to come from a textbook, a PowerPoint presentation, or a meaningless worksheet. Taking the basic teaching standards we as teachers are required to educate our students and amplifying them to relate to our local history, can do magnitudes to our students learning and thought process.

The Putnam County Slave Database Project is a once a week, semester long lesson dealing with the issue of slavery in our community. This lesson has opened our students’ eyes to see how real research is conducted, how data is turned into “history,” and why it matters. This experience has also had the added effect of making history come alive in my classroom.

I kicked off my student’s engagement with the Putnam County Slave Database Project by taking a trip to the Putnam County Courthouse in Eatonton, Georgia. This may seem an odd choice, given that most of the research they’re doing is through the back end of the genealogy website FamilySearch.org, but I wanted to show them that the digital images they would be using were connected to real, ink-and-paper documents that have been stored in our local courthouse for the past 150-200 years.  The purpose of this trip was simply to get them excited by showing them that nothing exists in a vacuum, especially history.

At the county courthouse I had the honor to work with our county Probate Judge and Clerk of the Court, who showed us the inner workings of the Probate Court and how to find information in the Probate Records. We showed the students how to use the probate and deed records to find where this particular slaveholder had lived, then went to the house, which still stands in downtown Eatonton, and finally to the cemetery where the slave owner was laid at rest. This experience of making the intangible into the tangible, of moving from digital images to ink-and-paper to the houses and graves of the people involved, opened up some of the most profound discussions about the issue of slavery I’ve ever had with students.

Students were assigned a set of Probate files from the digitized records in FamilySearch.org. and were given a file folder containing a research log and sample cursive cheat sheet. In their research logs students write the date, what estate records they were assigned, their starting page number and the ending page for the day. This has been an excellent tool for students to keep track where they left off and for me to check over their work since we are limited to working on the database one day a week.

The database allows students to document valuable information according to the document(s) being reviewed. The database has the year, name of enslaved person, slave age, gender, current owner, to the enslaved person is being transferred to and from, price consideration, location, connections with other slaves, link to deed, type of record, date of record, identifying information, image page number, photo id, qualifying factors, and abstract.

The database project has been really rewarding and challenging to our students. There is real excitement in the air every time a student finds a document identifying people who were enslaved in Putnam County.  These important finds spark deep conversation about the enslaved, about their owners, and really about the broad scope of American history.

**Websites:**

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) – Georgia Probate Records

Google Docs – each student has a downloaded data spreadsheet in their documents that are shared with the teacher.

**Challenges:**

* Cursive – Spend some time with the students practicing reading and transcribing 19th century script.
* Going through Probate records can be tedious and frustrating for students for a lot of reason:

1. We focus on the years of 1808 – 1865. The files can go up to 1928. So, students have gone through hundreds of documents without finding anything to enter into the database.
2. Different documents that are in the files and getting to understand what they are. Examples: Last will and testaments, inventory appraisals, debt receipts, doctor’s bills, leases, etc.