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ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This teaching resource, written for grades 7 through 12, prompts student inquiry into the work and life of Bill Traylor (ca. 1853–1949), a man born into slavery and who lived his entire life in Alabama. Owing to his remarkably long life, this resource spans the following eras:

- The Civil War and Reconstruction (1850–1877);
- The Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900);
- The Emergence of Modern America (1890–1930);
- The Great Depression and World War II (1929–1945)

Traylor’s paintings and drawings, made largely between 1939 and 1942, provide professional and student historians alike with a valuable personalized account of an African American navigating the perils of the Jim Crow South.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Whose stories get told? To whom? By whom?
- How can student, citizen, and professional historians restore unrecorded histories?
- How does our understanding of the past and the present change when we consider multiple perspectives?

The activities in this resource help students consider possible multiple readings of Traylor’s work and challenge students to question the perspectives and stories hidden within or missing from the telling of American history. Alignment to Common Core State Standards includes:

1. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1
2. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6
3. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3
4. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4
5. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7
6. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Note: ▶ signifies hyperlinks to websites or pages in this document.
Bill Traylor (ca. 1853–1949) is regarded today as one of the most important American artists of the twentieth century. Born enslaved in Alabama, Traylor was an eyewitness to history: the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, the Great Migration, and the steady rise of African American urban culture in the South. Traylor would not live to see the civil rights movement, but he was among those who laid its foundation.

The paintings and drawings he made are visually striking and politically assertive; they include simple yet powerful distillations of tales and memories as well as spare, vibrantly colored abstractions. When Traylor died in 1949, he left behind more than one thousand works of art, the only sizable body of drawn and painted work made by anyone born into slavery.

Traylor said little about his art to the white artists from Montgomery who purchased it from him. Other than a few sparse remarks he made, we are left to glean Traylor’s thoughts and possible meanings from the images themselves, and the time and place that shaped them. Having lived his entire life in the racially fraught South, Traylor likely understood that black and white viewers would pick up different meanings from his pictorial stories. In today’s sense of “code-switching,” Traylor would have been adept at communicating in one manner with the white people around him, and in another manner within his own community. Extending this notion into the pictures themselves, which are laden with symbolism and allegory, Traylor’s seemingly simple scenes may have conveyed messages to black audiences that were overlooked by whites. At a time when openly expressing views and describing memories of oppression could have cost him his life, veiling controversial imagery would have been key to Traylor’s very survival.
THREE LENSES

To develop the exhibition *Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor*, curator Leslie Umberger undertook a years-long research project. Although various accounts of Traylor’s life and art making had been recorded in the past, those stories rarely derived from Traylor himself. None traced Traylor’s history from start to finish or with complete accuracy, and many reflected the inherent racial bias of those who had first collected his work and told that story. Umberger’s painstaking reconstruction of Traylor’s biographical details and integration of his life and times into a larger historical framework provides a rich backdrop for considering the imagery Traylor made, allowing students to consider three lenses, or ways of “reading” Traylor’s artwork: personal, transitional, and allegorical.

One reality ties these three lenses together: the power of social order to oppress some voices while elevating others. Bill Traylor’s choice to take up a pencil on the streets of segregated Montgomery was an assertion of selfhood in the face of this overwhelming force.
PERSONAL: TRAYLOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Starting around 1939—by then in his late eighties and living on the streets of Montgomery, Alabama—Bill Traylor made the radical steps of taking up pencil and paintbrush and attesting to his existence and point of view. His work offers a window into one man’s lived experience as well as the troubled mindset of a person who had been denied the freedoms and opportunities he saw dawning for his people.

Bill Traylor was born into a family enslaved by John Getson (J. G.) Traylor in Dallas County, Alabama. The Traylor plantation—like many—was located in a large swath of land known widely as the Black Belt. This moniker was first coined for the rich, fertile soil of that land, but more lastingly took on a double meaning referring to the black laborers (first enslaved, later free) who farmed it.

The Equal Justice Initiative’s report, published in 2017, notes that 361 lynchings took place in Alabama alone from 1877 to 1950. Bill Traylor spent his first 10 years in Dallas County, the next 45 in Lowndes. These counties were, respectively, the second and fourth most active lynching counties in Alabama during that same period.

J. G. Traylor died before Bill Traylor was born, but his farm and property kept running with the help of his brother, George Hartwell Traylor. J. G.’s enslaved families continued working J.G.’s farm as they had before his death. No record of Bill Traylor’s birth exists, but archival documents suggest April 1, 1853, as the most likely date.

President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, when Traylor was about 10 years old. The proclamation declared freedom for enslaved people in the Confederate states—but since states were not under Lincoln’s control, families like Bill Traylor’s effectively remained enslaved. Still, Southern planters knew the ultimate outcome of Emancipation depended on which side won the war and they grew increasingly nervous, prompting George Hartwell Traylor to relocate Bill Traylor and his family from J. G.’s Dallas County property to his own plantation in nearby Lowndes County.
Bill Traylor was about 12 years old when Emancipation went into effect. Despite their freed status, restrictions on life and prosperity for black Americans were overwhelming. Like many, Traylor and his family stayed where they had been enslaved, working as paid laborers. After living in rural Dallas and Lowndes Counties for 55 years, Bill Traylor and his family moved to rural Montgomery County to work the land there.

In the late 1920s, Bill’s wife had died and his children were mostly grown and moving on. Traylor moved, alone, into the city of Montgomery around 1927, when he was in his late seventies. In the segregated part of town, Traylor found a rising African American culture that was dramatically different from the rural life he had known. In the decade following his move to Montgomery, Traylor’s ability to provide for himself further declined. By 1936, Traylor, now essentially homeless, relied on help from black business owners who established an informal “support and share” network meant to care for their own.

It is uncertain when Traylor began drawing, but his extant artworks (over 1,000 in all) date between 1939 and 1942, when he was in his late eighties. He seemed to prefer working on discarded paperboard (box tops or advertisements), beginning in pencil and quickly adopting paints. Sitting on a sidewalk outside of the Pekin Pool Room and drawing in full public view, Traylor looked back at his past and ahead at the new reality playing out in front of him. The paintings and drawings he made ultimately intermingled memories of his rural upbringing with a dramatically different urban culture in which blacks were literate, owned businesses, and shaped their own culture.

In 1940, during this period of prolific art making, Traylor visited family in the North and East, but the pull of the familiar brought him back to Montgomery time and again. There he survived on a combination of grit, public welfare, and the kindness of his community in the Monroe Street neighborhood.

Traylor did draw and paint after 1942, but this later work seemingly has not survived. In the last seven years of his life, Traylor didn’t live in just one place. He visited relatives, lived independently while he could, and spent his last years with a daughter who lived in Montgomery. He died on October 23, 1949, at the segregated Oak Street Hospital; he was around 96 years old. Bill Traylor was buried at Mount Mariah A.M.E. Zion Church cemetery in Montgomery. His grave was unmarked until 2018.
**TRANSITIONAL: TRAYLOR’S TIME**

*Bill Traylor’s life was divided almost equally between two centuries; the art he made offers a perspective on American history, from the final throes of slavery to the cusp of civil rights. The Alabama of his lifetime spanned multiple worlds—old and new, black and white, rural and urban. Traylor’s survival meant negotiating and balancing these opposing realities at all times.*

Bill Traylor grew up, married and raised a family, and worked the land during decades of social upheaval across the United States. In Traylor’s Alabama, the changes were profound and their impacts are still being experienced today. This section does not comprehensively address national, social, political, and economic shifts; rather, it focuses on events specific to Traylor’s own time and place, and the impact these changes had on Traylor and the art he made.

**CHANGING LAWS** Throughout his life, Traylor navigated hostile legal and social systems. The ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution in 1865 (when Traylor was 12 years old) began an era of drastic change in laws and systems. Formerly enslaved people now had legal rights and full citizenship. White Southerners were provoked by the loss of a free-labor force and notions of equality with those once considered their property. They effectively thwarted black Americans’ full participation in democratic society by creating local laws and “codes” to disenfranchise blacks and by tolerating, enabling, or joining white supremacist groups.

After Reconstruction, when Traylor was about 24, whites subjected blacks to a new wave of restrictions and intimidations, ushering in the era of Jim Crow laws to enforce segregation in the South. This period of American history, perhaps made familiar to today’s students through Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), can be defined by its interplay of legal and social systems meant to oppress African Americans. Sociologist David Cunningham explains:
“Predominantly, what Jim Crow would have been was a system of customs. So it didn’t need to be encoded in laws for everyone who lived there, locally, to understand what was acceptable and what wasn’t, in terms of the racial order. . . . And the more regimented that was, in terms of culture and custom, actually the fewer laws that you would see. Mississippi and Alabama actually had fewer formal Jim Crow laws than many of the states in the upper South, in part because it was just so clear to everyone in these communities that this was a fixed order and you didn’t need laws to put that into place.”

Extrajudicial killings, called lynchings, were often the price white society exacted for perceived infringements: “African Americans frequently were lynched for non-criminal violations of social customs or racial expectations, such as speaking to white people with less respect or formality than observers believed was due.” Hardships that cut across racial lines, like the Great Depression, exacerbated racial tensions. Perceived competition for jobs, status, and power sometimes lead white communities to violently enforce racial boundaries. As a result, significant portions of the black population abandoned the South.

CHANGING POPULATION CENTERS During the 1920s alone, one million African Americans left the South in search of economic opportunity and to escape racial terrorism. Many of Taylor’s children took part in what became known as the Great Migration, a 50-year, 6-million-person resettling motivated in part by the ongoing threat of violence.

Looking back, many wonder why all formerly enslaved people didn’t leave the South. Why would Bill Taylor and others stay in Alabama? There are various reasons. Sharecropping often left black farmers in perpetual debt to white landowners, leaving no money for making a fresh start. Familial and social networks were key to survival for blacks in the segregated South, and many stayed close to their roots and home ground. Systematic violence against blacks made migration a perilous endeavor. As one Freedmen’s Bureau agent reported: “The Negro does not know whether to leave the plantation and be

The Scottsboro Boys. The landmark legal cases involving nine African American teenagers, falsely accused of raping two white women in 1931, dealt with racism and drew national attention to the right to a fair trial. Alabama Department of Archives and History
harassed or remain on the plantation and be brutalized.” Many African Americans who didn’t move north relocated to nearby cities where they shaped their own communities; Montgomery is a prime example of a city in which the black population surged after Emancipation. For Traylor, Alabama was the home and culture he knew; he once told a daughter who had moved north that he’d rather be homeless in Montgomery than live in Detroit.

**NEW IDENTITIES** African Americans living in Southern cities created support networks of black-owned businesses, churches, and fraternities. Black leaders in Montgomery and elsewhere advocated for social and civic allegiance, banding together in business and society for the betterment of their community. A segregated section of town became a seedbed for black business, music, fashion, foods, and cultural identity.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, technology and widening literacy for African Americans changed the way business was done and how information traveled. Black Alabamians were well aware of events taking place throughout the country, whether through family connections outside the South or through the media, including black-owned newspapers. As early as 1919, local newspapers relayed stories that cities such as Pittsburgh and Detroit had passed equal rights laws.

Streets that had once been dominated by mules and carts were now taken over by buses. As young people became literate and mobile, they eschewed the traditions and ways of their parents, which many could not detach from the legacy of being enslaved. Traylor, steeped as he was in the traditions of his youth, was out of step.
Racial terrorism in the decades of Jim Crow was brutal and pervasive in the South. Bill Traylor spent his first 10 years in Dallas County, the next 45 in Lowndes. These counties were, respectively, the second and fourth most active lynching counties in Alabama during his lifetime. The facts of Bill Traylor’s life and times demand that viewers of his work consider the strategies African Americans employed in the Jim Crow South to avoid danger.

At first glance, Traylor’s scenes might seem simple, but—given their historical period as well as the artist’s life experience and the perils of the Jim Crow South—they are actually quite radical. In order to understand the multifaceted readings of each image, consider them in the context of the pervasive racism that shaped Traylor’s community. The pushes and pulls (violence and opportunity, respectively) that motivated millions of black people to move away from home during the Great Migration were certainly strong enough to impel a street corner artist to disguise his stories.

Physical places held reminders of Alabama’s recent past, including those real-life referents that Traylor repeatedly depicted in his artwork. African Americans had different memories of physical places than the white citizenry, and this was certainly the case in Montgomery. Montgomery’s Court Square (at left), had once hosted one of the South’s major slave markets; the buildings that flanked it were once holding pens for enslaved people yet to be sold or shipped. The architectural details in Traylor’s work appear to be commonplace structures for white viewers, but they housed far more troubling memories for black Americans. Compare the image on this page with the next, for example.

Alabama State Capitol building and Court Square Fountain, Montgomery, ca. 1950; photograph by Albert Kraus/Tommy Giles Photographic Services
During slavery, folkways and faith had sustained people while oral traditions reinforced history and culture in a group denied literacy. To retain their religious and cultural practices, enslaved people had entwined folk magic, herbal healing, and a vivid world of spirits with the Christianity of their slaveholders. This fusion allowed oppressed men and women to retain their roots in spite of their oppressors, a practice that reinforces the theory that Traylor’s works hold many layers: meaning deliberately hidden in plain sight.

Why might this “layering” be necessary? During Jim Crow, white Alabamians longed for a more empowered past. One need only look to the dedication ceremony of the Edmund Pettus Bridge for evidence. While this bridge served as the famous conduit of civil rights marchers from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, it is named after a decorated Confederate officer, lawyer, and US senator. Pettus also served as the Grand Dragon of Alabama’s Ku Klux Klan in 1877. At the dedication of the bridge in 1940, more than thirty years after Pettus’s death and in the midst of Jim Crow, Selma’s city leaders defiantly stated: “The occasion marks another epoch in the growth and advancement of Dallas County . . . The new bridge is the answer to ‘The March of Progress’.”

It was a matter of survival, then, that Traylor codeswitched to stay safe. As a black artist making artworks about his life and times in full view of the public, he cautiously kept some of his story lines ambiguous, and understood that whites and blacks would view his works differently. He brought a lifetime of knowledge to bear on his drawings, and he learned how to communicate those experiences subjectively on paper. Traylor could hide his stories in plain sight.
STUDENT ACTIVITY

WHOLE-GROUP ANALYSIS

See pp. 16–19

SMALL-GROUP ANALYSIS
(EXTENSION ACTIVITY)

See pp. 20–23
INTRODUCTION

This inquiry-driven activity introduces the complexity of Traylor’s images and builds basic background information on his life and times.

STEP 1 Establish an entrance narrative. Initiate whole-group discussion by posing the following questions. Note your students' answers on a large sheet of paper or whiteboard:

1. In life, what kinds of stories remain hidden? Why?
2. What should student historians do when presented with simple, single-perspective stories? Why?

STEP 2 Frame Traylor’s work within his historical context using content from this booklet, then invite and address students’ questions.

1. With this new information in mind, what questions might guide our exploration of Bill Traylor's story? Any person's story?

STEP 3 Scaffold an exploration of the multiple lenses through which a historian might read a single text. Focusing on the text provided on pp. 24–25 of this packet, progress through the following protocol:

1. Assign students to one of three small groups:
   a. Biography: What does this excerpt tell the reader about the artist, Bill Traylor?
   b. History: What does this excerpt tell the reader about the historical period?
   c. Legacy: What does this excerpt tell the reader about the lasting effects of slavery?

2. Distribute “Big Ideas for Students” from pp. 24–25 of this packet. Challenge each group to read this introductory text through their assigned lens, annotating it when they discover content that answers the prompt provided.

3. Invite groups to report their key findings.
WHOLE-GROUP ANALYSIS

Engage students in close looking and examination of Bill Traylor's *Untitled* (ca. 1939–42) on the following page. Working as a large group and with your facilitation, this activity will challenge students to explore elements of the artwork as well as connections they can draw between this artwork, their own prior knowledge, and the background information they just read.

1. Challenge students to build an inventory of the scene. What do they see?
2. Challenge students to interpret the artwork. What’s going on in this picture?

Referring to the artistic themes outlined on pages 18 and 19, verbally layer in additional information about the artwork based on items inventoried in the previous step.

3. Invite groups to report their key findings.
   a. What information from our earlier discussion might be relevant here?
   b. Both black and white people would have seen these works on the streets of Montgomery. How might have their respective responses to this artwork differed? What hidden story might this artwork tell?
   c. Legacy: What does this excerpt tell the reader about the lasting effects of slavery?

4. Encourage students to reflect on their thinking prompted by the activities so far.

What surprised you about this artwork? Why does biography, history, and legacy matter when trying to understand this artwork?
Bill Traylor, Untitled, ca. 1939–1942, colored pencil on cardboard, 19 3/4 x 15 in.
Collection of Jan Petry and Angie Mills, photograph © John A. Faier
Dogs – Traylor’s dogs convey a wide range of character types, from docile pets to lethal foes. On plantations, canines were common farming and hunting aides, but they were also trained to hunt and kill humans. The Alabama Slave Narratives (given in the 1930s) are just one source for accounts of the lasting terror inspired by scent hounds, trained to hunt fugitives—a fear that lasted well into the twentieth century.

Trees – In many of the works with trees, Traylor adhered, overtly at least, to a hunting narrative. Billie Holiday’s musical interpretation of one of the anti-lynching campaign’s most well known poems, Abel Meeropol’s “Bitter Fruit,” adds a different layer of meaning. The song, “Strange Fruit,” came in at number 16 on the charts in July 1939. Its lyrics included:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Stains – Many people who lived during the Great Depression learned to make use of second-hand supplies. Traylor seemed unbothered by the stains on the pieces of reused paperboard on which he drew. In fact, he often incorporated these into his artworks.

Figures – Traylor employs chaos as a method for blurring the lines as to who exactly is being hunted here—an animal, or a human? On hunts, enslaved people (and subsequently black laborers) were sometimes sent into a tree to flush out an animal clinging to the upper branches. When scholars take into account the narratives of enslaved people being tracked by scent hounds and use of dogs against African Americans during Jim Crow, one might read this scene as truly menacing.

Hats – Traylor’s men often wear hats, a custom necessitated by the hot Alabama sun. In Traylor’s imagery, both black and white people sometimes wear hats. Yet when Traylor depicts some men in hats and others without, he seems to clearly demarcate who is in power, and who is vulnerable.
**Birds** – Traylor’s birds range from doves to chickens to vultures and accordingly serve multiple narrative purposes. In folklore from numerous cultures, crows and owls are each widely regarded as portents of death or bad fortune, and Traylor seems to employ them in keeping with such ideas. Alternately, songbirds in flight might be associated with the pursuit of freedom or the destination of heaven.

**Guns** – Nighttime hunts for possums or other animals were common to plantation culture in the South. Alabama native Margo Russell’s parents were born in the early twentieth century; her grandparents would have been about Traylor’s age, her parents and aunts and uncles closer to the ages of his children. She reflected on her own upbringing in the mid-twentieth century, which took place just over thirty miles from Traylor’s home ground and in many ways recalled an earlier time. “There were squirrel hunts, coon or possum hunts, all mixed with laughter, dancing, quarrels, terrible fights, and times when people got real drunk on corn liquor. These people were God-fearing, hard-working, hard-living folk.” Traylor’s representation of rifles may have a dual meaning, tools for practical survival, but also symbols of power and oppression.

**Blue** – The belief in blue as a spiritually shielding color is widespread, especially as an African association that survived in America. Throughout western and west-central Africa, blue beads were considered protective charms and in some cases were as valued as highly as gold. The use of blue on Southern houses as a deterrent is so pervasive the paint company Sherwin-Williams discusses “haint blue” on its website, noting that porch roofs, window trims, and doorways employ the color as a symbolic means of extending the daylight and keeping evil spirits (haints, haunts, or ha’nts) from entering the premises. Traylor used blue in many ways; sometimes to offer a particular figure a suit of armor or to lend a spiritual aura, other times his use is more pervasive, suggesting an encompassing need for protection within the drawing, or perhaps because he himself felt that drawing in blue might protect him, as he depicted scenes of racial conflict.
SMALL-GROUP ANALYSIS (EXTENSION ACTIVITY)

Using a set of Bill Traylor’s artworks to inspire their inquiry, students will undertake a series of analyses to discover and draft their own routine for unveiling hidden stories. As a demonstration of their understanding, students will apply their routine to accounts of a historical or contemporary event of your choosing.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

• History: How can student, citizen, and professional historians restore unrecorded histories?

• Social Studies: How does our understanding of both the past and present change when we consider multiple perspectives?

Assign small groups of students to either Set 1 (p. 22) or Set 2 (p. 23) of Traylor’s artworks, then guide them to complete the following tasks, moving from concrete and artwork-focused discussion to more abstract concepts.

1. Challenge students to build an inventory of the scene. What do they see?

2. Challenge students to interpret the artwork. What’s going on in the picture?

STEP 1: DEVELOP INQUIRY

1. Challenge students to look closely at the individual works in this new set of Bill Traylor’s artwork, differentiating between observation and interpretation while also reasoning with evidence.

2. Invite students to look at the set as a whole, comparing the artworks within their set to uncover trends or themes.

   a. What do you see? What is similar? What is different? What are common items in these artworks? What items appear in multiple artworks? What are differences between these items?

   b. What themes or big ideas seem to connect this set of artworks? How do those big ideas connect to Untitled (see p. 17), which you just discussed as a class?

3. Invite each small group to present their thinking to a group with the opposite set of images.
STEP 2: APPLY DISCIPLINARY TOOLS AND CONCEPTS

1. Working in small groups, brainstorm what you already know about this time period, geographic area, or the themes you uncovered in Traylor’s work. Record your prior knowledge on a large sheet of paper. Feel free to pull your knowledge from any class or the “Big Ideas” reading.

2. At the bottom of your large sheet, write 5 questions that could help you uncover additional layers of meaning in your set of artworks.

3. Identify gaps in your knowledge, then record these as research questions on the same large sheet. Conduct a brief online search based on your research questions.

4. Come back together as a small group and report out. Apply any new information to your thinking about Traylor’s work:
   a. Which questions were hardest to answer? Why might that be? What new layers of meaning might be hidden within these drawings and paintings?

STEP 3: EVALUATE SOURCES

Invite teams of students to more broadly consider historical sources, their veracity, availability, and perspective. Challenge them to distill their discoveries about Bill Traylor in a short statement. Then invite them to apply that thinking to the steps a good historical researcher should take when following a line of inquiry.

STEP 4: APPLY DISCIPLINARY TOOLS AND CONCEPTS

Give teams of students an opportunity to summarize their discoveries both about Traylor’s lifetime and the research process. Then challenge them to develop a repeatable process of their own for uncovering hidden stories.

1. Reflect on your research. As a small group, distill your thinking about the process of uncovering hidden stories in a single statement. Consider:
   a. What types of information were easy to find? What types were more difficult?
   b. Whose stories were easiest to find? What does that tell you about history, more broadly?

2. Working together, create a routine for discovering hidden stories. How do you know when there’s a gap in your knowledge or even in the historical record? Whose perspectives should you consider? What kind(s) of questions should you ask?

STEP 5: ACTION PROJECT

Having devised a routine in Step 4, students completing the Action Project will put their routine to use. Invite teams of students to carefully read a historical or contemporary text from your regular classroom curriculum. Challenge them to identify one or more perspectives that has likely been left out of the telling of that story.

Having selected just one of these perspectives, invite teams of students to apply their routine to attempt to fill in that story. What should they research? Where might they find sources for that information? How might they rewrite this text to incorporate more historical voices?
Bill Traylor, Untitled (Chase Scene), ca. 1940, pencil and opaque watercolor on paperboard, 7 x 13 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Micki Beth Stiller, 2015.25; photo by Gene Young

Bill Traylor, Horse ("Turned him out to die"), 1939, pencil and poster paint on cardboard, 13 x 16 in. Collection of Barbara and John Wilkerson; photography by Teri Bloom

Bill Traylor, *Man and Large Dog*, ca. 1939–1942, poster paint and pencil on cardboard, 28 x 22 in. Collection of Jerry and Susan Lauren; photo: Matt Flynn © Smithsonian Institution
Bill Traylor was born as property of white farmer John Getson (J. G.) Traylor in Dallas County, Alabama. No definitive record of his birth exists.

For Traylor and all the enslaved people in the South, freedom came in 1865, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation at the end of the Civil War. While Traylor was not enslaved for the majority of his long life, he lived under a harsh system of racial oppression and learned to navigate black and white worlds to keep himself alive.

After Emancipation, free or not, black Americans were still subjected to strict, unwritten “codes” of racial conduct. “Without federal troops, freed black men and women remained subject to violence and intimidation. . . . African Americans frequently were lynched for non-criminal violations of social customs or racial expectations, such as speaking to white people with less respect or formality than observers believed was due.” The price for infractions might be torture, or execution, and fear of extrajudicial violence permeated black communities.

Traylor and his family spent decades laboring on his former enslaver’s plantation, and later on farms in rural Montgomery County. As they came of age, many of Traylor’s children moved north as part of the Great Migration. While Bill Traylor considered moving with them, the South was the home he knew and understood. Traylor moved to Montgomery around 1927, when he was about 74 years old.

In his time, Traylor witnessed a slow but steady change in society. Before Emancipation, the Alabama capital had been a major artery of the slave trade. Later, Montgomery was segregated and embattled, but it became a place in

Bill Traylor painting on Monroe Street, Montgomery, Alabama, ca. 1939; photograph by Jean and George Lewis. Courtesy of Caroline Cargo Folk Art Collection (Cazenovia, NY)
which blacks were literate, owned businesses, and increasingly shaped their own culture. In that place, Traylor found a rising African American culture that was dramatically different from the plantation life he had known.

Traylor began creating artwork that blended memories and impressions of his rural experience with the urban scenes playing out in front of him. He made artwork with the materials available to him, including discarded cardboard from packaging or advertisements.

Traylor would have known that certain topics were dangerous for a black artist in the South. Just drawing or painting scenes of interracial conflict or images that expressed his views on the terrorization of black Americans would have put Traylor's own life in jeopardy. As a result, he used allegory and symbolism that gave his artwork layers of meaning. A viewer's own racial identity and perspective might shift the way they understood each image.

Bill Traylor died on October 23, 1949, at the Oak Street Hospital around age 96. He was buried in an unmarked grave at Mount Mariah A.M.E. Zion Church cemetery in Montgomery. In 2018, a headstone was added featuring the epitaph: "THROUGH HIS ART HE LIVES ON."

Today, notions of who can be an artist are broadening to reflect the diversity of our nation. Art like Traylor's—one considered inferior to that of mainstream professional artists—is now viewed as valid and important. In 1982, Traylor's art was featured in an exhibition called *Black Folk Art in America, 1930-1980*, which first brought him national attention and acclaim. In 2018 the Smithsonian American Art Museum displayed 155 of Traylor's paintings and drawings in the exhibition *Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor*.

- How does Bill Traylor's story fit with your understanding of American history?
- Whose voices are missing from history? Why?
Today, some of Traylor’s pictures might seem modest or plain. When positioned in their historical context, however, they are revealed to be radical. His images embody intellect, intention, creativity, and his profound determination to record his voice and perspective whatever the risk.

White supremacy was the social standard of Traylor’s Alabama. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, depictions of African Americans in popular culture were commonly stereotyped. Jim Crow minstrel shows and circus acts overtly lampooned black people. Other images were more subtle, positioning blacks

as either tragic, impoverished farmworkers or as non-intellectual clubgoers in Harlem, drinking and dancing away their troubles.

In his drawings, Traylor portrayed black Americans according to his lived experience and as they appeared before him: individuals shaping their own culture and society in a rapidly changing country. He depicts women and men walking down Monroe Street, reading, shopping, conducting their business, wearing fine clothes and walking with heads held high. Comprehensively, the figures in his artworks embody cultural pride.

As a man with little personal agency or financial means, Traylor's determination to assert himself anticipated the 1968 sanitation strikers' request for human dignity through a simple but bold statement: I AM A MAN.

Throughout the 1960s, as the tidewaters of civil rights swelled, artists wielded their power to create symbols and records of injustice, strength, equality, and empowerment. Traylor might have been astonished to see Montgomery become ground zero for the civil rights movement just six years after his death—but from his view within Montgomery's black business district, he had probably seen it coming.

In this decade of tumult, Americans who believed in peaceful protests were disillusioned by the violence perpetrated on protesters such as the Freedom Riders, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy. People of color protested more openly, more often, and more vociferously. The Black Power movement challenged the ideology and strategy of non-violence, but it also encouraged questions about history and ethnic identity, fostering notions of cultural pride and beauty that countered long-standing stereotypes.

The work of these activists, whether celebrated or known only to their families, created national change. A rising respect for a more diverse America was evidenced by a 1982 exhibition, Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980. Among the featured artists, Bill Traylor was the earliest born and the only one to have been born before slavery ended. What the artists had in common was the desire to stake a claim for selfhood, record personal vision, and assert her or his rightful place in the world.

Traylor's art, the actions of civil rights advocates, and the ongoing efforts of citizen and professional historians, artists, and students create a long chain linking past and present.
Bill Traylor lived during a time of tumultuous change in the United States. Born into slavery in rural Alabama, Traylor experienced the impact of the Civil War, the backlash incited by Emancipation, and the bigotry of racial segregation. The details of Traylor's life, like those of many African Americans who lived during this period, are not well documented. This timeline weaves together what is known of Traylor's personal biography with historical events that shaped the country and transformed Traylor's world in the heart of the South.
1853  Bill Traylor is born into an enslaved family in Dallas County, Alabama.

1857  Dred Scott Decision — In *Dred Scott v. John F. A. Sanford*, the US Supreme Court rules that African Americans are not citizens of the United States.

1861-1865  Civil War

1863  Emancipation Proclamation — President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, which promises freedom to enslaved people in the rebelling Confederate states—but only if the Union wins the war.

1865  At about age 12, Bill Traylor is freed with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. He and his family remain in rural Alabama as laborers for the next 45 years.

Marcia Weber research files
1868  Fourteenth Amendment — Congress passes the Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” including those who had been enslaved.

1870  Fifteenth Amendment — Congress passes the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing African American men the right to vote.

1896  Plessy v. Ferguson — The US Supreme Court votes that “separate but equal” facilities and services for black and white Americans are constitutional.

1908  Traylor moves his family to rural Montgomery County, some 50 miles from the Lowndes and Dallas County plantations he has lived his entire life on.

1909  NAACP Founded — The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded “to promote equality of rights and eradicate caste or race prejudice among citizens of the United States.”

1914–1918  World War I

1927–28  Now in his mid-70s, Traylor relocates to urban, segregated Montgomery, Alabama.

1929  Traylor’s 28-year-old son, Will, is killed by Birmingham police for an alleged home break-in. A newspaper article from the time stated, “According to officers, the negro thrust his hand into his pocket as soon as he found that he was discovered. Believing that he was reaching for a gun, [officers] Justin and Walker fired.”

1929–1941  Great Depression
1931 The Scottsboro Boys — Nine African American teenagers (the youngest just 13), collectively known as the Scottsboro Boys, are falsely accused of rape by two white women. Their trials garner national attention and help to spur the civil rights movement.

Alabama Department of Archives and History

ca. 1936 Traylor, now in his 80s and in declining health, spends his days on the streets of Montgomery and his nights sleeping in neighborhood businesses. He lists his address as the Ross-Clayton Funeral Home.

Photograph by Ken Hughes, image courtesy Debbie George

1939–1945 World War II

1940 The white artists’ collective New South organizes the first exhibition of Traylor’s work, Bill Traylor: People’s Artist.

Photograph by Jean and George Lewis, courtesy of Caroline Cargo Folk Art Collection (Cazenovia, NY)
1941 Tuskegee Airmen — In 1941 the segregated US Army Air Corp (precursor to the US Air Force) begins training the first African American pilots and mechanics at air bases around Alabama, including at Maxwell Field outside Montgomery.

Photograph by Toni Frissell, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Toni Frissell Collection, LC-DIG-ppmsca-13299

ca. 1942 Traylor visits his children living in urban hubs in the north and east but ultimately returns to Montgomery. He takes up residence in a shanty overlooking the Alabama River.

ca. 1945 Traylor moves in with a daughter in Montgomery. Despite suffering from diabetes, he continues to paint in her backyard.

Photograph by Horace Perry, courtesy Alabama State Council on the Arts

1949 Bill Traylor dies October 23, 1949, at about age 96. He is buried in an unmarked grave at Mount Mariah A.M.E. Zion Church in southwest Montgomery.

1955 Rosa Parks — On December 1, 1955, just a few blocks from the spot where Traylor painted, Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white passenger, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

1965 Selma to Montgomery March — In response to African American voter suppression, a group of civil rights protesters organizes a march from Selma to Montgomery. The peaceful marchers are violently attacked by local police in a televised assault that came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.”

In the late 1970s, Bill Traylor's art began to receive attention beyond Alabama. In 1982, his paintings featured prominently in the groundbreaking exhibition *Black Folk Art in America* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Thereafter, Traylor's art became increasingly celebrated and collected in the United States and internationally.

In March 2018, a headstone finally graced Traylor's previously unmarked grave. His final resting place honors an artist whose work illuminates a powerful American story.

Photograph by Leslie Umberger
NOTES


4 Lynching in America, 2017.

5 “Understanding Jim Crow.”

6 Lynching in America, 2017.


8 Lynching in America, 2017.


11 Lynching in America, 2017.

12 After the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in 1919, membership soared in Traylor’s home state during the 1920s.
Hidden Stories: A Teaching Resource for Grades 7–12 produced by the Education Department, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

This publication accompanies the exhibition Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor, held at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, from September 27, 2018, to April 7, 2019.

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Front cover: Bill Traylor, Untitled (Two Dogs Fighting), ca. 1939–1942, poster paint and graphite on cardboard, 16 1/2 x 21 1/8 in. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, T. Marshall Hahn Collection; photo by Mike Jensen

Back cover: Bill Traylor, June 1946. Photograph by Horace Perry, courtesy Alabama State Council on the Arts