



# COMING TO THE TABLE

---

## Confronting Slavery in Your Family's History

*By Susan Hutchison*

If you know or suspect that some of your ancestors were slaves, slave holders or slave traders, we hope this handout is helpful to you. It is intended to offer ideas and support for researching your family's possible connection to slavery, and for responding if or when you find a connection.

We have found the process of confronting this part of our family history to be transformational, and hope your journey is one of growth, self-discovery, and finding a greater sense of connection with your family and the world.

Some of our thoughts are for anyone on this journey, and some are specific to people whose ancestors were enslaved, or people whose ancestors enslaved others.

Whatever your situation, we hope you find something helpful in what we offer here. For more suggestions and for stories about others confronting slavery in their family's history, visit our website at [www.comingtothetable.org](http://www.comingtothetable.org).

**Find support.** We have found it crucial to find support as we undertake this process, whether it is a relative or a friend, perhaps someone else interested in family history, or just someone who cares about you and is willing to listen and be encouraging. There are not a lot of people

who are ready to talk about slavery, much less a direct family connection to slavery, and it can be a very lonely process if you don't have someone with whom you can share thoughts, discoveries, hopes and fears. Being listened to without judgment can be very helpful for clearing the mind.

**Make time for reflection.** It will help to take time now and then to reflect on your thoughts, feelings, motivations, and expectations, whether you talk with a friend, write in a journal, or find a quiet time and place to do some thinking and soul searching.

**Get started.** Use our genealogy guides, resource list, and case studies for ideas on how to get started researching your family history.

**Approach the issue of slavery gently.** When asking family members what they know about your family history, listen for pride in particular stories and ancestors and share that pride as best you can. After plenty of listening, if the topic of slavery hasn't already come up, approach it gently. Feelings of shame, guilt, anger, embarrassment, fear or grief can make a family connection to slavery hard to talk about.

**Be aware.** Among African American descendants of slaves there is a wide range of



knowledge about slavery, and about family connections to slavery. Some families have a strong and full oral history, some know nothing at all, with many families somewhere in between. There may be feelings of deep pride about ancestors having survived, and sometimes having accomplished great things, under circumstances beyond our comprehension. There may be feelings of rage or shame.

White descendants of slaveholders rarely have much awareness of that part of their family history. Feelings of shame, guilt or fear can be behind patterns of silence and denial within white families. If any information has passed forward to living descendants, it is usually minimal, and is often distorted by a sort of ancestor mythology.

**When you have evidence.** If you find evidence, whether from oral history or documentation, that one or more ancestors were slaves, slave holders or slave traders, we suggest you spend some time in reflection with a supportive friend or family member, or writing in a journal. Here are some questions you may find helpful:

- How do you feel about what you are learning?
- What do you find most challenging? Why?
- Where do you feel pride in your family?
- What are your hopes and fears?
- How can you use this information to grow as a person?
- How can you share what you have learned with your family? Who might be receptive? Who might have a harder time?

**Share what you find.** Sharing what you have learned with nuclear and extended family members can lead to deeper relationships,

greater understanding of self and other family members, healing, more information, and positive action. It can also lead to upset and conflict, so tread thoughtfully.

Making information available on the Internet can provide valuable information to others who are also searching, and may lead to contact with kin from long-lost branches on the family tree. It may even lead to contact with descendants from the ‘other side’ of your family’s connection to slavery. Share what you have learned on general and African American genealogical web sites, and sites devoted to history of the area in which your family lived.

White families in particular need to be aware that any information about the people your family enslaved, especially names, are extremely valuable to African Americans researching enslaved ancestors. Because slaves were not recorded by name on census records or slave schedules, were rarely issued birth, death or marriage certificates, and could be sold at any point to a completely different area, African Americans usually run into what amounts to a genealogical brick wall when they look for pre-emancipation information about ancestors. This is often a source of grief, frustration and anger for many, so sharing what you have learned can be a very important act of repairing some of the damage done by slavery.

**Connecting with “linked” descendants.** If you would like ideas or support related to contact with a descendant of people enslaved by your ancestors or a descendant of people who enslaved your ancestors, please see our guide “Contacting “Linked Descendants,” or feel free to contact us at [cttt@emu.edu](mailto:cttt@emu.edu) or 877-540-2888.

## Mission

Seeking to acknowledge, understand and heal the persistent wounds of the U.S. institution of race-based slavery and its legacies.

[www.comingtothetable.org](http://www.comingtothetable.org) • (877) 540-2888

A program of the **Center for Justice and Peacebuilding** at Eastern Mennonite University

