

| MAGAZINE |

The search for lost slave ships led this diver on an extraordinary journey

Explorer Tara Roberts took up diving to learn about the human side of a tragic era. She wound up connecting with her family's inspiring past.



Diving With a Purpose (DWP) lead dive instructor Jay Haigler cradles a stone from a ballast pile in Coral Bay, St. John, in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The stones have been key to identifying slave ships; they often were used to balance the weight of captives in a ship's cargo hold.
PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID DOUBILET, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

BY TARA ROBERTS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WAYNE LAWRENCE

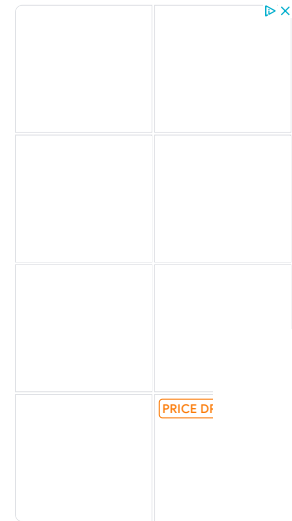


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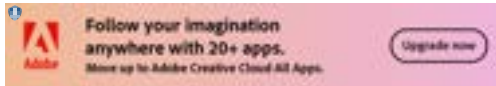


Storyteller and diver Tara Roberts is helping document some of the thousand slave ships that wrecked in the Atlantic Ocean. She is working to tell the story of DWP and the complex history of the global slave trade in an inclusive way that amplifies Black voices.



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I dive in. The water is cool against my skin, the silence absolute, and as I hover over the remains at the bottom of the sea, I feel peaceful, thankful, a sense of coming home.

Descend underwater with me—not too deep now, maybe only 20 feet or so—and you’ll see about 30 other divers, paired in sets of two. They calmly float in place, despite strong currents off the coast of Key Largo, Florida, sketching images of coral-encrusted artifacts or taking measurements. I am—we are—mapping the remains of a shipwreck.

Most of the divers are African American. We’re training as underwater archaeology advocates, gaining the skills necessary to join expeditions and help document the wreckage of slave ships being found around the world, ships such as the *São José Paquete d’Africa* in South Africa, the *Fredericus Quartus* and *Christianus Quintus* in Costa Rica, and the *Clotilda* in the United States. An estimated 12.5 million Africans were forced onto ships like these during the transatlantic slave trade from the 16th to the 19th centuries, according to Nafees Khan, a professor in the College of Education at Clemson University and adviser to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.

“It took at least 36,000 voyages,” he says. One thousand or so ships likely sank.

Podcast: Join Tara Roberts on a historic journey

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(A new six-part podcast series, [Into the Depths](#), explores the complex history of the global slave trade and the stories of the estimated 12.5 million Africans forced to make the Middle Passage. [Listen now on Apple Podcasts.](#))

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Enter [Diving With a Purpose](#), a group that trains divers to find and conserve historical and cultural artifacts buried deep in the waters. Since its founding in 2003, DWP has trained some 500 divers to help archaeologists and historians search for and document such ships. The group's goal is to help Black folks, in particular, find their own history and tell their own stories.

"When you are African American and you're diving on a slave ship, that's a whole lot different from somebody else doing it," says legendary diver Albert José Jones, a co-founder of the [National Association of Black Scuba Divers](#) and board member of DWP. "Every time you go down, you realize basically two things: One is that maybe your ancestors were on the ship. The other thing you realize is that you have a history. Your history didn't start on the shores of the United States. It didn't start with slavery. Your history started [in] Africa at the beginning of time, the beginning of civilization."



Albert José Jones has been on more than 7,000 dives and is considered the godfather of Black scuba diving in the U.S... [Read More](#)
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY ALBERT JOSÉ JONES

The [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#), in Washington, D.C., showcases DWP's work as part of the [Slave Wrecks Project](#), a network of groups that uncover and document the remnants of slave ships and work to tell a more inclusive history of the slave trade.

Diving With a Purpose members are "using their skills to dive to help us find the stories that are buried under the water," says [Lonnie Bunch III](#), the museum's founding director and the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. "In some ways, there's so much we know about slavery. But there's so much we still don't know. And I would argue the last frontier is

what's under the water."

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Under the water. Out here in the deep. It is magic feeling the ocean breeze on my skin and the spray of seawater as the boat races home after a day's work. It is soul-lifting to look at the tired faces of those around me and know these ordinary people—teachers, civil servants, engineers, students—are here despite their busy schedules, volunteering because they love to dive and believe in this important work.



LUCRATIVE TRIANGLE

European nations traded goods, such as metals and textiles, from their empires to purchase captives in Africa. Those Africans were shipped via the months-long Middle Passage to the Americas to work in agriculture and extract natural resources. Goods produced by the labor of enslaved people were then sent back to Europe.

Matthew W. Chwastyk and Soren Walljasper, NGM Staff. Scott Elder
Sources: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Slavevoyages.org;
Slave Wrecks Project, Smithsonian-NMAAHC

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Lounging on a return trip, you might hear lead instructor [Jay Haigler's](#) booming voice and his trademark cackle—and you might see the twinkle in his eye and his infectious joy when he says, quietly before nodding off, “This is what I live for.”

And it just might touch you.

Maybe by starting at the start—at the beginning of the voyages from those shores to these shores, and inside the ships—we can find clues to a history little discussed, to stories that have been lost in the depths. We can begin to assemble long-lost threads that help us better understand our obligation to the past and to each other, and change the way we think about who we are as a society and how we arrived at where we are today.

We are deeply connected to those who made the crossing. And we are connected to the estimated 1.8 million souls who perished along the way. *The Atlantic Ocean is full of*



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ILLUSTRATION BY JOE MCKENDRY

spirits of folks whose names we may never know. Souls who have never been acknowledged or mourned. Dreamers, poets, artists, thinkers, scientists, farmers. More than just cargo or bodies packed in a hold. More than faceless statistics. More than people bound for enslavement.

And their day of reckoning is at hand. It is time for their stories to rise from the depths, to be told in their fullness, in their wonder—and with love, with honor, with respect. Finally helping heal a wound that has festered for far too long. That is the dream. That is the promise. That is the possibility of this work, of this

watery resurrection that DWP has taken on.

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DWP's Haigler has trained divers and searched for slave shipwrecks for 15 years. He says being underwater is a "life-changing, spiritual experience."



The story of slavery is a story of empowerment.
It's also a story of resilience, a story of triumph."

JAY HAIGLER, DWP LEAD DIVE INSTRUCTOR



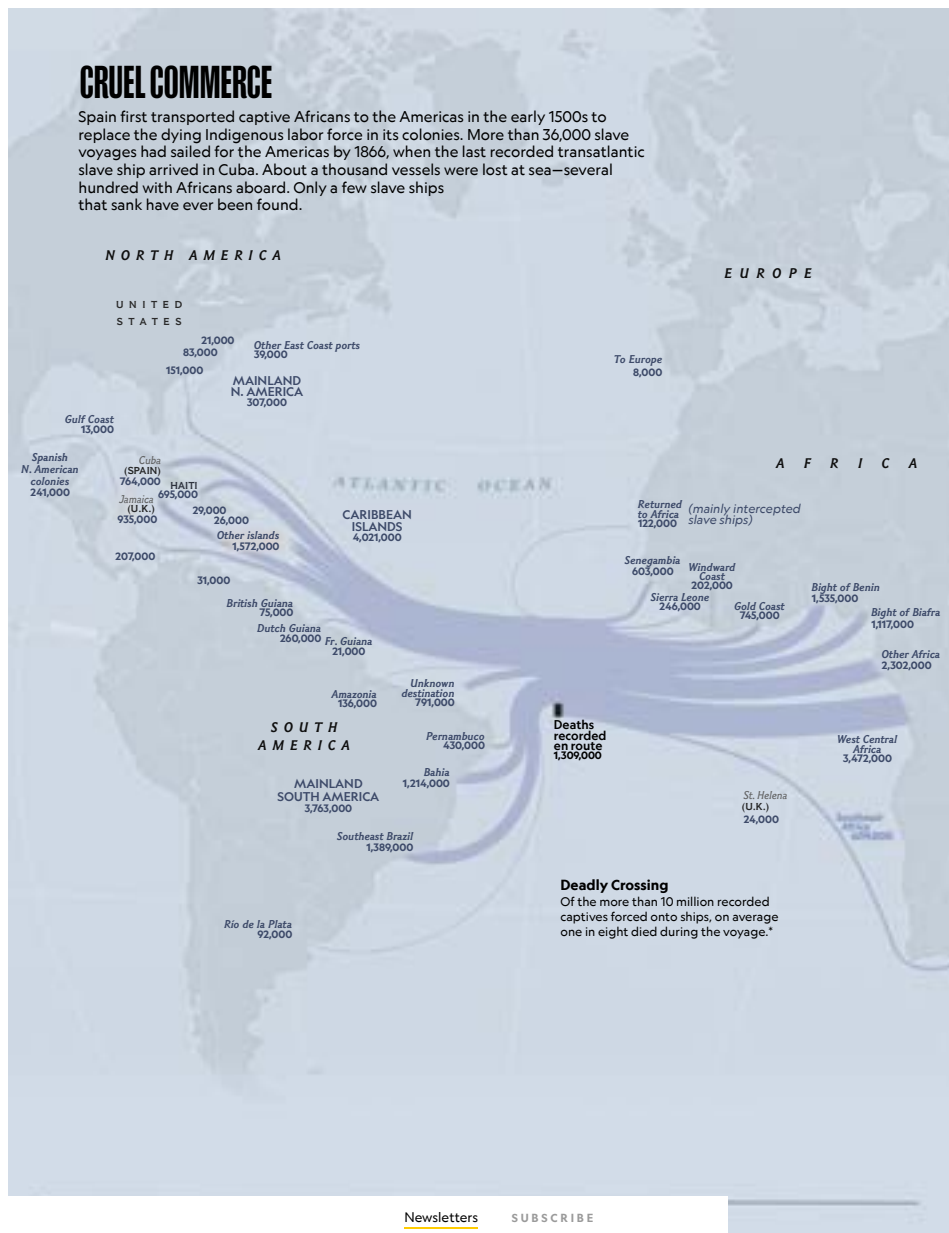
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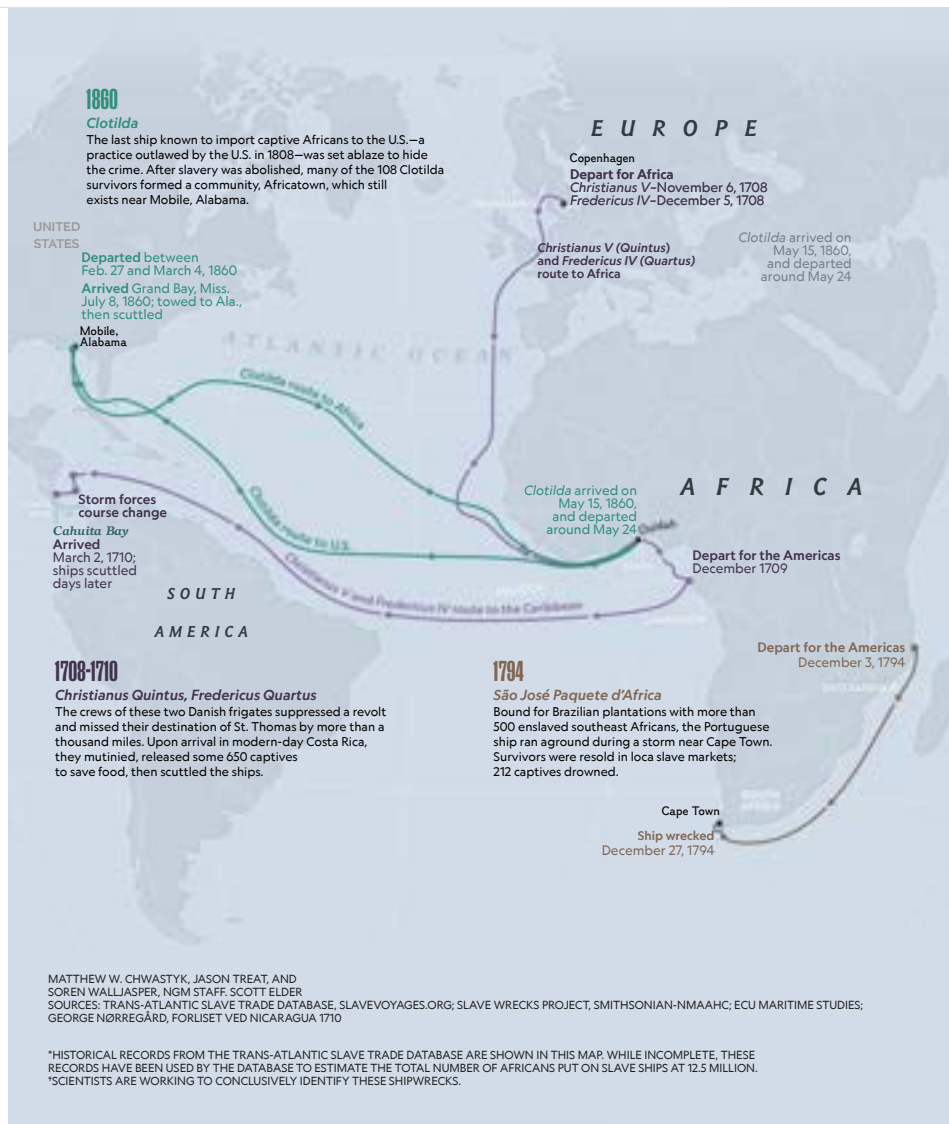
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These ships "allow us to honor those that didn't make it," Bunch says. "They allow us to sort of almost touch sacred spaces that are not just spaces of death, but spaces of memory. And that as long as we find those spaces, as long as we dive for these ships, as long as we learn as much as we can, those people whose names we'll never know are not lost. They're remembered."

But there is a truth, an obstacle, in the way: The wrecks are notoriously hard to find. Ships from that time were primarily made of wood, and they have disintegrated over time and been absorbed by the sea. Searchers today use equipment such as magnetometers and side-scan sonars to detect unnatural, manufactured materials in murky water. The work can take place amid treacherous conditions or at sites teeming with marine life that should not be disturbed.





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“Once you disturb a site, there’s no making that site how it was before it’s been disturbed,” says Ayana Flewellen, a co-founder of the [Society of Black Archaeologists](#) and instructor with DWP. “So we’re really intentional about how we are documenting, being very cognizant of what is in the water around us to ensure that we’re not disturbing the wreck or ocean creatures.”

The sandy ocean floor covers and reveals as it fancies. What may be seen today may not be seen tomorrow. A proper expedition with historians and archaeologists can take years. But it is important to take as long as is needed to look.

“Our identities are informed by the past,” says Calinda Lee, the head of programs and exhibitions for the [National Center for Civil and Human Rights](#) in Atlanta. “The past provides necessary context ... and [it] is something that we have to engage if we’re going to be honest about what race means for us, has meant for us.”



Archaeologists Justin Dunnivant (at left), a National Geographic Explorer, and Ayana Flewellen are co-founders of the Society of Black Archaeologists and instructors with DWP. Photographed while on a mission to evaluate an 18th-century wrecked merchant ship in St. John, th... [Read More](#)

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“

There is something about these ships, how they moved traditions, how they moved culture.”

AYANA FLEWELLEN, ARCHAEOLOGIST AND DWP INSTRUCTOR

I learned of DWP from a picture of Black women divers that I saw at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Also in the photo was Ken Stewart, the visionary who got DWP off the ground almost 20 years ago. He had met the lone archaeologist at Biscayne National Park in the Florida Keys, Brenda Lanzendorf, who needed divers to help find the Spanish slave ship *Guerrero*, which had wrecked in 1827. As the southern regional representative for the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, Stewart had access to lots of divers. He rounded up a few. They learned how to map shipwrecks. Stewart declared that it was time for the group to dive with a purpose. Since then, DWP has helped document 18 shipwrecks and logged more than 18,000 hours in six countries.

Stewart steps with the quickness and the rhythm of an uptown New Yorker. He is meticulously groomed, his salt-and-pepper beard and

the cadence of a soulful love song. He is my herald, a songbird who called me forth and who continues to encourage me on this voyage.



Fewellen, an anthropology professor at UC Riverside, and Dunnavant share a moment with fellow DWP member Kamau Sadiki (at right) in between dives at Coral Bay, St. John. Members of DWP traveled to St. John in July 2021 to determine the historical significance of a wr... [Read More](#)

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I remember feeling my heart pound and leap as I gave him a resounding yes when he invited me to join them. A yes that started a rolling, powerful wave that eventually would wipe my life clean. I would resign from a communications director's job, give up my apartment in Washington, D.C., and siphon funds from my small bank account to travel and get the dives required to participate in DWP's training program.

I joined DWP partly because I wanted this adventure. Diving sites around the world. Pushing myself physically. But also because I've felt lost these past years. As if I don't belong. I am single, have no children, and among my close friends, I'm the only one who has had 10 different addresses—in eight cities, three countries, and on three continents—in the past 15 years. As a storyteller traveling the world reporting for magazines and news sites, I've felt like a global citizen but also like a leaf floating in the wind. Unrooted. Unmoored.



Left: Erik Denson, a DWP lead instructor and board member, was the diving group's first applicant when the call to search for the slave ship *Guerrero* was extended to divers almost 20 years ago. Denson, a chief electrical engineer at NASA's Kennedy Space Center, hel... [Read More](#)

Right: Kramer Wimberley, a master scuba diving trainer who has been diving for more than 35 years, says African Americans have long been connected to the water. In addition to teaching young people how to dive, Wimberley has worked to restore coral reef habitats.

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I prepared for a journey that I hoped could help me answer one core question: How can finding and telling the lost history of the slave trade help me, as a Black American woman, figure out where I belong—and to whom I belong?

Mozambique & South Africa: Affirmation

My journey begins on Ilha de Moçambique (Mozambique Island), an island just under two miles long and less than a quarter of a mile wide, in the north of Mozambique. The island was the colonial capital of Portuguese East Africa from the 16th through the 19th centuries. Portuguese colonizers eventually turned it into a center of the slave trade; hundreds of thousands of Africans were trafficked from its port.

I have come at the invitation of DWP and the Slave Wrecks Project, hosted by the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The project includes the George Washington University, the [Iziko Museums of South Africa](#), the U.S. National Park Service, and DWP, among others.

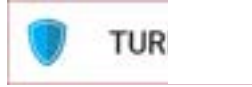
The island is colorful—reds, pinks, and blues painted on colonial-style buildings. On nondive days, I stroll through the cobblestone streets and the dirt paths. I eat good food such as *matapa de siri siri*, a stew of seaweed, cashews, and coconut milk that looks like creamed spinach. I note bright smiles on friendly faces that say, “*Tudo bem*—How’s it going?” as I pass.

I also hear stories of the *São José Paquete d’Africa* shipwreck. The Portuguese ship traveled from Lisbon to Mozambique Island in 1794.

Traffickers loaded more than 500 people, many of the Makua ethnic group, into the ship’s cargo hold. Headed for Brazil, the ship met its fate in the wee hours of the morning on December 27, on the rocks off Cape Town, South Africa. Two hundred twelve of the captive Africans on board were killed, the survivors sold into slavery.

The Slave Wrecks Project had been on a mission to find the *São José* and several other wrecks since 2008. The evidence eventually pointed to the area around Clifton, a suburb of Cape Town.

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“We knew about the shipwreck, and Clifton, because it was identified by treasure hunters in the eighties as a Dutch ship,” says Jaco Boshoff of the Iziko Museums, the lead archaeologist of the wreck and a co-founder of the Slave Wrecks Project. But he thought “maybe the identification was wrong, let’s go have a look.”



Sadiki (at left), a DWP lead instructor, has participated in more than 20 diving missions. He helped identify the slave ships *São José Paquete d’Africa* in South Africa and *Clotilda* in Mobile, Alabama. Jewell Humphrey, an archaeology doctoral student on her first diving miss... [Read More](#)

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Being connected with your ancestors is a very powerful thing. If you break that connectivity, it’s like you’re wandering around lost.”

KAMAU SADIKI, DWP LEAD INSTRUCTOR

DWP provided divers to assist in the search. While Ken Stewart is my herald, Kamau Sadiki has been my guide, my sensei. He has served as my instructor and dive buddy. A shining light of clarity and purpose, he has been on more than 20 missions. He shares what it has meant for him to travel to Cape Town in 2013, to dive into those turbulent waters, and to find and touch artifacts from the *São José*.

“It was like you can hear the screams and the hollering and the pain, and the agony of being on a vessel in shackles, the sinking and breaking up in the sea,” he says. “You know, in scuba diving we wear a mask, and sometimes they get foggy. But mine got wet from tears.”

Trauma. Exactly what I feared to face. But then the story shifts and takes a surprising, and a soul-affirming, turn.

After positively identifying the *São José* and determining that some of the people held captive in its cargo hold were Makua, the team, which included Bunch and Sadiki, went back to the Makua-descendant community in the coastal village of Mossuril across from Mozambique Island to deliver the news.

**It is time for the stories of those who died
aboard slave ships to rise from the depths, to be
told in their fullness—with love, honor, and
respect.**

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Following a ceremony of singing, dancing, and speeches, Chief Evano Nhogache, the highest ranking Makua there, presented Bunch with soil from the island in a special cowrie-shell vessel with explicit instructions.

“He said that his ancestors have asked that when I go back to South Africa ... if I could sprinkle the soil over the side of the wreck, so for the first time since 1794, [his] people can sleep in their own land,” Bunch says.

“I lost it,” Bunch adds, shaking his head as he recalls the scene. “I’m crying ... I’m just thinking about the contradictions, the beauty that surrounds me, the fact that I’m a historian, but this is about how living people feel and think.”

The team returned to South Africa to carry out Chief Nhogache’s request. It was a rainy, stormy, dreary day on June 2, 2015. About 30 people turned out. Sadiki and two other divers walked into the water, and each distributed the soil from the cowrie-shell vessel.

“We stood for a moment. And I think there’s one point where we just stood and embraced. And just let the waves hit us and wash us,” Sadiki says. “I couldn’t speak at all. And tears started flowing down all three of our eyes.”

After traveling to Cape Town to see the wreck site for myself, I sit on the Sea Point Promenade, a two-mile stretch of palm trees, paved paths, and joggers that connects neighborhoods along the coast. It is adjacent to the location where the *São José* sank. I listen to the violence of the crashing waves on a bright sunny day, imagining what it would have been like more than two centuries ago as the ship struck those rocks and sank in the darkness. My heart aches for what those in the *São José*’s cargo hold must have felt that night of the wreck. The trauma still seems to exist as an actual energy radiating out from the sea. And I feel it.

But this time, I feel something else. Healing. Finality. Resolution that comes from knowing what happened.

I begin to see a way of interpreting one of the most painful parts of American history through a new lens, with the possibility of repairing a deep wound.

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And I am transported to a place of hope and possibility. I begin to see a way of interpreting one of the most painful parts of American history through a new lens, with a loving perspective, and with the possibility of repairing a deep wound—of closure. And that feels revelatory.

Costa Rica: A Quest for Identity

I head to **Costa Rica**, to the small towns of Puerto Viejo de Talamanca and Cahuita, about 10 miles apart in Limón Province on the Caribbean coast.

I meet with cousins Kevin Rodríguez Brown and Pete Stephens Rodríguez, then 19 and 18, respectively, and their aunt Sonia Rodríguez Brown.

The young men started scuba diving with the nonprofit diving group Centro Comunitario de Buceo Embajadores y Embajadoras del Mar (Ambassadors of the Sea Community Diving Center) when they were only 14 years old. The center has galvanized and trained local teens and young adults as scuba divers and citizen scientists since 2014.

“People call us recreational divers. And we are—re-creational,” says journalist María Suárez, a co-founder of Ambassadors of the Sea. “We are re-creating diving. We are re-creating the history of Costa Rica. We are re-creating the way that the kids relate to the ocean.”

Ambassadors of the Sea leads a community effort to help identify and document two possible wrecks of slave ships in their harbor, and it collaborates often with DWP.

The Browns are one of the oldest families in Puerto Viejo, 200-plus relatives who look out for one another fiercely—and have a variety of skin hues, even within the same family unit. Stories of late, whispered in beds at night and over coffee in the morn, hypothesize that maybe the first Brown ancestor in these parts came in the cargo hold of one of the slave ships in the harbor.

Historians and archaeologists have gathered evidence that strongly suggests the bricks, cannons, anchors, bottles, and pipes at a site in the waters of Cahuita National Park belong to two Danish slave ships, the *Fredericus Quartus* and the *Christianus Quintus*.

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“That site is just amazing,” says Danish archaeologist Andreas Bloch, who has been helping Ambassadors of the Sea document the ships. “You have an archaeological site exactly where you’ve got tourists snorkeling and enjoying the wildlife. You have this amazing story that’s just lying there as an open-air museum for everybody to see.”

The two ships set sail from Denmark in 1708, heading to St. Thomas in the

ships, which were traveling in a convoy partly because of concerns the captives might rebel as they had once before, were blown off course by bad weather and navigational errors. In March 1710 they landed in the harbor at Cahuita. The crews on both ships mutinied. The sailors divided the ships' gold among themselves, then burned the *Fredericus* and scuttled the *Christianus* after some 650 Africans still alive reached shore.

About a hundred of the Africans soon were recaptured and enslaved. But some disappeared into the hills, into oral history and myth. Some likely mixed into the local BriBri Indigenous community and left a line of descendants who still inhabit the area today.

Kevin Rodríguez Brown says they know the Brown family is part BriBri and part "Afro," the term Costa Ricans use to describe people of African descent. But before diving at the wreck site, he always thought the Afro part was 100 percent Jamaican, since he knew Jamaicans came as immigrants to Costa Rica in the late 1800s to build the railroad.

Sonia says the questions she and other members of the community began to ask deepened as the young divers started finding artifacts in the water. She wondered, "Why this is not in history? Why our family never taught us that? Why the community never say anything?"

"So I make myself a question," Sonia continues in her soft and lyrical voice. "Who I am? And I think that is the most beautiful question that any people can do to [themselves]: Who I am?"

Who I am? Who am I? This kind of questioning sounds familiar.

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Nearly 1,500 miles north of Costa Rica, along the Gulf of Mexico, are Mobile, Alabama, and Africatown, another Afro-descended community.

In Africatown many know for certain that their direct ancestors came over in 1860 on the *Clotilda*, the last known ship to bring captive Africans to U.S. shores. But those descendants are also fighting to get the story of the *Clotilda* and Africatown more widely told. They ask: Why is our history not in history books?



Left: Along this arm of the Mobile River in Alabama are the remains of the *Clotilda*, the last known American ship to bring captive Africans to the U.S., in 1860. The captain tried to burn the ship because importing enslaved people had been illegal in the U.S. since 1808. Dis... [Read More](#)

Right: Some of the Africans trafficked on the *Clotilda* were buried at Old Plateau Cemetery in Africatown, a community founded by the ship's survivors after slavery had been abolished.

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In 1808 the transatlantic slave trade had been abolished by the U.S. But an Alabama plantation owner and shipbuilder, Timothy Meaher, made a bet

sponsored an expedition to West Africa and transported 110 captive people to the U.S. on the *Clotilda* (two died en route). The captain burned the ship on its return to hide the evidence, and Meaher dispersed most of the captives to the expedition's financial backers. He kept 32 people for himself.

Five years later, in 1865, the Civil War ended, and the captives were emancipated. The men worked in lumber and gunpowder mills and at the rail yards; the women grew vegetables and sold produce door-to-door. Some of these men and women, who had arrived on Alabama's shores naked and in shackles, managed to save money and eventually bought 57 acres on which to build their own version of home.

More than 150 years later, Africatown still exists, having experienced a heyday in the 1960s with more than 12,000 residents and barbershops, grocery stores, churches, a cemetery, and plenty of descendants who still have letters, pictures, documents, and stories, passed down through the generations.



Eric Tyrone Lewis (at left), Garry Lumbers, and Altevese Lumbers-Rosario stand near their ancestor Cudjo Lewis's memorial in Old Plateau Cemetery. Cousins Eric and Garry are both fourth-generation descendants of the *Clotilda* captive, and Altevese is a fifth-gene... [Read More](#)

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“They had the brilliance and the intellect, and the passion and the wherewithal, to do all of those things. I look back and I even try to reflect over, ‘What did I do in 10 years?’” laughs Jeremy Ellis, whose ancestors on the ship were named Pollee and Rose Allen. “If that doesn’t get you excited, understanding that the DNA resides in you, I don’t know what will.”

In 2019 a team of archaeologists announced the discovery of the remains of the *Clotilda* in a remote arm of the Mobile River. The wreckage had settled deep into the mud, which helped preserve much of it. It’s the most intact slave ship ever found.

People in the community kept saying “we need to find the ship,” says Sadiki, who was part of the search team. “They knew how important it was to find a tangible artifact that got them where they are to help tell their story.”

Most African Americans cannot trace their roots back to a slave ship. They hit what genealogists call the “1870 brick wall.” Before 1870, the U.S. census did not track living enslaved people with names and identifying details.

On one of my last days in Costa Rica, María Suárez, Kevin Rodríguez Brown, and some of the other young people take me out on a boat to see the wreck site for myself.

Mask and gear on, I descend. The water is murky blue and green. It feels warm against my skin. Schools of fish swim by. I descend deeper, feeling at home underwater.

Then I see it. The outline of an anchor. It is partially buried, encrusted in coral and surrounded by grasses on the ocean floor.



DWP was invited by the U.S. Virgin Islands’ state historic preservation office to map the remains of Coral Bay Shipwreck No. 1, a merchant ship from the 1700s that might have carried human cargo. This admiralty anchor, the manner of the ship’s construction, and an intact b... [Read More](#)
PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER HAYES, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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I hover and imagine the Yoruba, Fon, Asante people maybe, young, scared, and suddenly freed on these shores. And I feel this intense, desperate, crushing longing to know my own family's story.

I hire genealogist Renate Yarborough Sanders, who specializes in African ancestry research, and ask whether she can help me trace my family back to a slave ship.

"I don't ever like to say it's never gonna happen," she says. "But," she shakes her head, "it's not realistic."

Yarborough Sanders says she will try to find out what she can about my earliest known ancestor, my great-great-grandfather Jack Roberts, who was born enslaved in 1837.

My mom has a picture of Grandpa Jack and his wife, Mary. They are handsome. He has white cropped hair and a neatly trimmed white goatee, and she has on a bow tie.

Jack has these soft brown eyes. They are kind eyes. I think I might have liked to gather at his knee and hear his stories.

While I wait for a call, I decide to drive from my home in Atlanta to my family's hometown, [Edenton](#), in Chowan County, North Carolina.



Author Tara Roberts's great-great-grandparents Jack and Mary Roberts raised their family in Edenton, North Carolina.

My mom and her 13 brothers and sisters grew up in a big house with columns and a porch, out in the country. The house is still there and still in the family, but it is in a state. There is a big hole in a side wall—a hole I can actually walk through if I bend my leg and stoop down. The windows are broken. There is mold on the walls. Plaster and debris are everywhere.

When I used to visit as a kid, my impression of the place was miles of cornfields and lazy quiet, only the droning of bees and singing of crickets to break up the monotony of the day. The oppressive weight of the silent country rested upon my shoulders back then, and it depressed me to come back here.

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I get out of my car and stand on the property, looking around and watching the landscaper, Joseph Beasley, tend the yard, poking at weeds. I ask him about the fields.

"These little plants—those are soybeans," he says. "See that dark green stuff way back yonder? That's corn. Right across the edge here."

This just dawns on me now: My grandfather, who had only a fourth-grade education, managed to buy this house, a former plantation of an enslaver, and about a hundred acres of land in the 1930s.

Learning about Africatown has made me see this family history newly.

I book a room at a bed-and-breakfast on North Broad Street in downtown Edenton, which is considered one of the loveliest small towns in the South largely because of this area. The town sits right on the Albemarle Sound. Colonial mansions that likely housed enslaved people, or profited from the

tended lawns. In all my years coming to my grandparents' house, this is probably the second or third time that I have ever set foot downtown.

On a dive, I see it: the outline of an anchor on the ocean floor. I hover above and feel this intense, desperate longing to know my own family's story.

I expect ignorance, subtle racism, an intentional erasure of the complexity of the past. But I am surprised.

Friendly people wave at me as I cross streets. Shop owners and waitresses chat me up. The twang of the Deep South rings pleasantly in my ears. As I walk around town, I meet a Black birder walking his dog, who tells me about a local church's reconciliation group, a forum for both the victims and beneficiaries of an unjust society to tell their stories.

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Historical markers to African American rebellion and accomplishment line sidewalks, not far from a big Confederate monument.

The contradiction.

But then I remember what Bunch said to me. "What I think good history does is it teaches you nuance," he said. "It teaches you subtlety. It teaches you complexity. It teaches you ambiguity. Imagine what a contribution you could make, if all of America could embrace nuance and complexity, rather than simple answers to complex questions."

The most notable marker honors [Harriet Jacobs](#), a local woman who escaped slavery via the Maritime Underground Railroad. Jacobs went on to write one of the few known slave narratives, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in 1861 and became a revered abolitionist.

Edenton historical interpreter Charles Boyette tells me that the Maritime Underground Railroad was a "hidden network of connections and safe houses that allowed enslaved persons to seek their freedom along the waterways."

He says that Edenton was part of a network for thousands who escaped to the north with the help of sailors, dockworkers, fishermen, both free and enslaved, and others who made their living off the water and waterfront. I'd never heard of the Maritime Underground Railroad. I wonder whether my 12- and 13-year-old nieces Shi and Wu Murphy, who live only about 30 minutes away in the next town over, know about it. They don't.

Yarborough Sanders, the genealogist, calls on Zoom. She has results.

First, it turns out Jack bought even more land than my grandfather. At least 174 acres in total. Maybe it's in the family, because I managed to buy three homes by the time I was 31.

Second, he was a delegate to the 1865 [Freedmen's Convention](#) in Raleigh, a statewide assembly that took place after the end of the Civil War to consider aspirations and goals for the formerly enslaved.

That resonates. He tried to be part of the solution, despite the odds against him.

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Finally, there was evidence that Jack fought in the Civil War, in the [United States Colored Troops—Second Regiment, Company B](#).

Yarborough Sanders smiles at me. “If that’s your ancestor, it is a huge, big deal.”

She also tells me with laughter that he may have owned a speakeasy.

I feel a stirring of pride. I am not a descendant of sad people, of victims, of faceless people. Jack has become real to me—not perfect, just real.

As has Edenton.

Turns out, I am in Edenton on June 19, 2021, “Juneteenth,” the day the federal government just made an official holiday to celebrate the freedom of those who were enslaved. Oh, how the universe works.



Roberts, a National Geographic Explorer, visits her grandparents’ former home, now empty. Her research on the transatlantic slave trade inspired her to investigate her own roots. Among the facts she’s unearthed: Her ancestor Jack Roberts fought in the Civil War in the U.S. C... [Read More](#)

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And Edenton celebrates all out, with a soulful band, vendors, and food stalls right at the river. People of different races are communing. That evening, there is a vigil at the Confederate monument to get rid of the negative energy of plantation culture and bring in positive vibrations.

Curious eyes follow me as I walk around with all my recording equipment. People ask who I am and who my people are. And now I can say I am of Jack Roberts’s clan—Jack begot John H., who begot John A., who begot Lula, who begot me. And there is recognition, laughter, stories from the past of my mom, my aunt Mvrtle, my uncle George, my uncle Sonny.

Carol Anthony, a stranger passing by, upon hearing my name, tells me that she is married to my uncle Teeny's stepson.

How did I not know this place? Many African cultures believe that the ancestors never die, never lose their connection with the living. That their energy is still there, supporting us, pushing us, loving us. What if, I think, all African Americans could look back and claim their past? See their ancestors fully? Know their whole story? Would that change everything?

I'm not a scientist or a historian. I am a storyteller. And I can now see that the stories we find as we discover ourselves don't just belong to us as individuals. They also belong to the communities of which we are a part. And if those groups are brave, they can use those stories to expand the possibility of who we might all become together.

This history—our history—has sad notes. Like any good love story, it has pain and hurt. But this history, Black history, American history, also has lifting notes—crescendos—full orchestras that tug at the heart and make it soar.

I thought this search for slave ships might be hard. I thought I would need hands holding mine, rubbing my back, consoling my tears and my heartache. Instead I found strength. And power. And adventure. And camaraderie. I found laughter. Love. Life. Kinship. I found something strong and necessary to root and ground me.

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All from a picture in a museum.

Welcome home.

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Tara Roberts's maritime archaeology storytelling includes our six-part [podcast](#). **Wayne Lawrence's** photography, last featured in *National Geographic's* [Race Card Project](#) in June 2021, illuminates the complexities of the human experience.

This story appears in the [March 2022 issue](#) of *National Geographic* magazine.

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