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## Slave-trade database makes hidden history accessible

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ATLANTA — Historians hope a new Web database will help bring millions of blacks closer to their African ancestors who were forced onto slave ships, connecting them to their heritage in a way that has long been possible for white Europeans.

### on the net

"Voyages": [www.slavevoyages.org](http://www.slavevoyages.org)

"Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database" launched Friday in conjunction with a conference at Emory University marking the bicentennial of the official end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1808. Emory spearheaded the two-year interactive project, which is free to the public.

"It's basically doing for people of African descent what already exists for people of European descent in the Americas," said Emory history professor David Eltis, who helped direct the project.

"Voyages" documents the slave trade from Africa to the New World that took place over three centuries — between the 1500s and 1800s — and includes searchable information on nearly 35,000 trips and the names of 70,000 human cargo. The voluminous work includes data on more than 95 percent of all voyages that left ports from England — the country with the second-largest slave trade — and documents two-thirds of all slave trade voyages between 1514 and 1866.

Genealogy and DNA tracing have gained popularity for blacks looking to trace their slave roots, and "Voyages" could help give a fuller picture of slavery for a culture stripped of its heritage, Eltis said.

"It's not a super tool for genealogists because you cannot make that connection from ancestor to voyager, but it does give a context," he said, explaining that because the database lists the slaves' African names — which were later Westernized — researching is difficult.

Still, for someone who knows that an ancestor was enslaved in a certain part of the South, the database might help them trace from where in Africa they most likely came, said Emory history professor Leslie Harris, author of the book "In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863."

"When people study the slave trade, they often talk about the large numbers," said Harris, one of the organizers of this weekend's conference. "It's just one of those human things to want to know where we came from and who our ancestors were."

Harris explained that the database could be most helpful to those who have an understanding of their families, in that it could add layers to ancestors' stories.

"Not that everyone will now be able to point to a name and say, 'That's my great, great, great grandfather,' but it helps give a greater sense of who these folks were or the culture they came from," she said.

Chronicling voyages that ended in Europe, the Caribbean, North America and Brazil, visitors to the site can search the database by voyage or name, or look at estimates of how many people were transported and enslaved.

Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates said "Voyages" sheds an important light on the hidden history of 12.5 million slaves.

"Their ancestries, their identities, their stories were lost in the ships that carried them across the Atlantic," Gates said. "The multi-decade and collaborative project that brought us this site has done more to reverse the Middle Passage than any other single act of scholarship possibly could."

The project expands on "The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," a CD-ROM completed in 1999 that included more than 27,000 slave trade voyages. Gates called "Voyages" the most important tool for blacks looking to research their past in decades, that holds as much benefit to the general public as for scholars.

He said the project is a bittersweet one.

"It's a hell of a lot of people, an enormous forced migration of human beings — one of the largest in human history — for nefarious purposes, for their economic exploitation," Gates said.

#### **on the net**

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