

Africa to Carolina: Mapping Forced Journeys & Building Connections

Overview

This lesson invites students to explore how contemporary artists interpret the history and legacy of the Africa to Carolina journey. Students will examine artworks that memorialize the transatlantic slave trade, use visual analysis to understand how artists convey themes of history, memory, and identity, and connect these artistic expressions to primary historical sources such as slave narratives and ship manifests.

Because the history of the slave trade is often recorded in documents that reduce human lives to numbers and property, this lesson highlights the vital role of artists, including Stephen Hayes, Bisa Butler, Lubaina Himid, and Toni Scott, who restore humanity, dignity, and emotional depth to these stories. Through their work, students will consider how art helps us see what the historical record alone cannot: the lived experience of enslaved Africans and the ongoing legacy of their forced migration to North Carolina.

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Investigate the role of North Carolina’s ports in the transatlantic slave trade.
- Analyze how forced migration reshaped both the lives of Africans and the development of NC.
- Engage in critical inquiry by connecting maps, stories, and artifacts to the lived experience of enslaved people.
- Collaborate to create a narrative of a port city that reflects both the history and human impact.

Central Question

How did enslaved Africans shape North Carolina’s history, economy, and culture—while also carrying their own stories, traditions, and resilience across the Atlantic?

Course

Social Studies

Grades

7th & 8th grade

Duration

60 minutes

Vocabulary/Key Topics:

- Forced migration
- Disembarkation
- Naval Stores
- Tar
- Pitch
- Turpentine
- Resistance
- Kinship

Materials

- Large classroom map of North Carolina (poster, digital projection, or butcher paper with markers)
- [Africa to Carolina website](#)
- [Slave Voyages Database \(for maps/ship diagrams\)](#)
- Primary source excerpts:
 - Olaudah Equiano, *Interesting Narrative* (middle passage excerpt)
 - Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Edenton connection)
 - St. Philip's Church plaque (Brunswick)
 - [Wilmington port quote](#) from Confederate officer John Johns
- Port Investigator Packets (for each group):
 - Port-specific map excerpt
 - Short primary source excerpt

- Guiding inquiry questions (e.g., “Why was this port important economically? What stories are hidden here?”)
- [A Story of Slavery and a Failed Flight Towards Freedom](#)- Cape Fear Museum
- [\[Bath\] North Carolina’s First Town](#)- North Carolina’s Historic Sites
- [New Bern] [From Document to Drama: Interpreting Slavery at Tryon Palace](#)
- [North Carolina Gazette Slave Advertisement and House of Lords Speech](#)
- [Primary Sources: Advertising Recapture, and Sale of Enslaved People](#)
- Chart paper or poster paper + markers for group exhibit posters
- Exit tickets (index cards or sticky notes)
- Optional/Extension:
 - Digital tools like [HistoryPin](#), [Google My Maps](#), or [ArcGIS StoryMaps](#) for mapping exercises.

Additional Resources

Africa to Carolina: Overview & Historical Context

[Africa to Carolina](#) is an initiative of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission, part of the North Carolina Department of Natural & Cultural Resources, that traces and interprets the arrival, experiences, and enduring impact of enslaved Africans in North Carolina.

The forced migration of enslaved Africans to North Carolina began in the early sixteenth century, bringing approximately 2,000 individuals through the colony’s major ports at Bath, Edenton, Brunswick, Wilmington, New Bern, Roanoke, and Beaufort, with Portsmouth Island and Battery Island also serving as stops along importation routes. This number does not include the many lives lost on board these vessels before disembarking.

From 1759 to 1787, eleven documented voyages carried enslaved Africans directly from the continent and additional ships arrived from the Caribbean and other parts of the United States.

In an unfamiliar land and facing horrific conditions, these previously free people resisted, survived, and helped build the foundations of North Carolina’s society. Their labor created intercoastal canals vital to trade; they cleared land and cultivated crops using agricultural expertise from West Africa; and they contributed specialized skills as coopers, shipbuilders, river pilots, carpenters, blacksmiths, and brick masons whose craftsmanship endures in the colony’s oldest structures. Enslaved Africans built much of the physical infrastructure of North Carolina’s earliest settlements and, despite being transported thousands of miles from their homes, rebuilt kinship networks that formed the basis of a distinct African American community.

Together, the documented voyages and the profound contributions of these individuals illustrate the direct connection between the African continent, the development of the institution of slavery, and the North Carolina colony.

See also:

- [Africa to Carolina](#) -This project page by the NC African American Heritage Commission includes county records and background essays.
- [Evolution of the Map of Africa](#)- This resource from Princeton University shows how maps of Africa have evolved throughout history.

North Carolina Social Studies Standards

7th Grade (World History)

- 7.H.1.1 Construct charts, graphs, and historical narratives to explain particular events or issues.
 - 7.H.1.3 Use primary and secondary sources to interpret historical perspectives.
 - 7.H.2.1 Analyze the effects of social, economic, military, and political conflict on societies.
 - 7.G.1.2 Explain how demographic trends (migration, urbanization, population growth) are influenced by physical geography and human interaction.
 - 7.E.1.2 Explain how supply and demand influence price and production in a market economy.
- 8th Grade (American History)
- 8.H.1.3 Use primary and secondary sources to interpret various perspectives of past events.
 - 8.H.2.2 Summarize how resistance to slavery, opposition to discriminatory laws, and civil rights movements influenced NC's history.
 - 8.H.3.1 Explain how migration and immigration contributed to the development of NC and the US.
 - 8.G.1.1 Explain how location and place have presented opportunities and challenges for the movement of people, goods, and ideas in NC and the nation.
 - 8.E.1.1 Explain the impact of human capital, natural resources, entrepreneurship, and specialization on NC's economy.

Preparation

Set a thoughtful tone, emphasizing the themes of resilience, humanity and truth, and refrain from only addressing the trauma experienced by those enslaved. Teachers should anticipate a range of emotional responses and build in brief moments for reflection, discussion, or grounding as needed.

Tips for framing:

- Center *humanity and agency*, not just trauma.
- Use terms like *enslaved person* rather than *slave*.

- Remind students that enslaved Africans contributed essential skills (farming, building, craftsmanship) that built NC’s economy.
- Build in time for reflection (journals, circle shares, art responses) to help students process emotional weight.

For additional support, consult:

- [“How Can Teachers Explain Slavery to Students?”](#) – Harvard Graduate School of Education
- [“Teaching About Slavery in the United States? Start With Honesty”](#)- EdWeek
- [Teaching Hard History – American Slavery](#)– *Learning For Justice*. Offers a grade-band framework, key concepts, and sample strategies for teaching slavery with accuracy and care.

Procedure:

1. Hook (5 min)

Show students an image of a **slave ship diagram** (from *SlaveVoyages.org*) alongside a map of NC ports. Ask:

- If you were looking at this ship and this coastline, what questions come to mind?
- What do you think people felt as they stepped onto NC soil for the first time?

Jot student questions on the board — these become the anchor for the lesson.

2. Activity I: Port City Investigation (25 minutes)

Split into groups, each assigned an NC port (Bath, Edenton, New Bern, Beaufort, Brunswick, Roanoke, and Wilmington). Give each group a **“Port City Investigation Packet”** with:

- A map excerpt to mark and annotate.
- At least one primary source excerpt (e.g., Harriet Jacobs on Edenton, a plaque from Brunswick, or a historical marker).
- A “voices” prompt: imagine what an enslaved person, a trader, or a resident might have noticed at this port.

Each group will research the Africa to Carolina site and create a quick exhibit poster answering:

- a. Why was this port important in trade & slavery?
- b. What is one surprising or little-known fact?
- c. What human story might we tell from this port?

3. Activity II: Humanizing the Map (15 minutes)

Groups place their posters on a **large classroom map of NC ports**.

- Each group shares its key findings (2 minutes each).
- As they present, draw arrows from Africa → Caribbean → NC ports to visualize forced migration routes.
- Encourage them to connect economic history (tar, turpentine, crops) to **cultural survival** (kinship, resistance, music, craft).

4. Activity III: Digitizing our Port Investigation (Optional)

After groups finish their Port City Investigation posters:

- Students upload (or teacher curates and uploads) their port findings into a [Historypin collection](#) labeled “Africa to Carolina: NC Ports.”
- Each pin should include:
 - A short description (from the group’s poster: economic role + human story).
 - A primary source excerpt (Equiano, Jacobs, plaque, quote).
 - A map of the port.
- Result: students see a **collective digital map** of NC ports they helped create.

5. Reflection & Discussion (10 minutes)

Facilitate with prompt:

- How does seeing these ports as both economic hubs and human arrival points change the way we understand NC history?

6. Exit Ticket (5 min)

- Prompt: Write one sentence beginning with: “This history matters today because...”

7. Assessment

Evaluate students using a teacher-created rubric:

- Inquiry (Did they ask strong questions?)
- Evidence (Did they use maps, sources, and facts well?)
- Voice (Did they bring a human perspective into their poster?)
- Collaboration (Did the group work together to share ideas?)

Culminating Activity Options

- Create a digital story map (using **Google My Maps** or **ArcGIS StoryMaps**) tracing enslaved Africans’ forced journeys.

- Compare NC’s Africa to Carolina project with another state’s memorial work
 - Ask: How do we remember difficult history?

Works Cited

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