

Africa to Carolina: Mapping Journeys, Honoring Stories

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:

- Understand that enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to North Carolina through *forced migration*.
- Examine how geography shaped the economic, social, and political development of NC ports.
- Identify industries such as **lumber, turpentine, rosin, and rice** that depended on enslaved labor.
- Analyze simplified county records from the [Africa to Carolina](#) site.
- Retell and honor stories of resilience through art or narrative.
- Work cooperatively to create a classroom artifact that honors memory and resilience.

Central Question

How can we honor and remember the journeys of Africans brought to North Carolina?

Course(s)

- Social Studies
- Art

Grades

3rd -5th grade

Duration

2 Class Periods (45-60 minutes each)

Vocabulary/Key Topics:

- Forced migration
- Enslavement
- Enslaved person
- Port
- Lumber
- Turpentine
- Rosin
- Rice
- Resilience

Materials

- World map or globe
- Large outline [map of North Carolina](#) (poster-sized or projected on board)
- Yarn or string
- Sticky notes or small slips of paper
- Tape or pushpins
- Chart paper/markers (“What I Wonder” chart)
- Read-alouds: *Born on the Water* (Hannah-Jones/Watson) and *An American Story* (Kwame Alexander)

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- Short excerpt(s) from the *Africa to Carolina* site (simplified for kids, e.g., a county entry like “Africans were brought into Wilmington as early as the 1720s.”)
- Paper squares for “Memory Quilt” (or blank story sheets)
- Colored pencils/markers
- Industry Cards

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:

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- [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

3rd Grade – Regional Connections

- 3.H.1.1: Explain how the movement of people, goods, and ideas has influenced the development of regions and communities.
- 3.H.1.2: Summarize how cultural groups have shaped their communities.
- 3.G.1.1: Explain how location and physical features affect human activities.

4th Grade – North Carolina Focus

- 4.H.1.1: Explain how the experiences and achievements of diverse groups and individuals contributed to the development of North Carolina.
- 4.H.1.2: Summarize the changing roles of women, Indigenous, racial, and other minority groups in North Carolina across time.
- 4.G.1.1: Explain how the location and physical features of North Carolina influenced where and how people lived and worked.

5th Grade – U.S. Foundations

- 5.H.1.1: Explain how the experiences and achievements of different groups contributed to the development of the United States.
- 5.H.1.2: Summarize the roles of various cultural groups in shaping the United States.
- 5.C&G.1.3: Exemplify ways in which people can work cooperatively to resolve conflicts, make decisions, and build consensus.

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. For younger learners, the lesson can be scaled down by focusing on one artist (such as Stephen Hayes or Toni Scott) and pairing the artwork with age-appropriate texts like Kwame Alexander’s *An American Story* or Ashley Bryan’s *Freedom Over Me*.

Tips for framing:

- Center *humanity and agency*, not just trauma.

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- 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

Day 1- Asking Questions & Mapping Journeys

1. Launching Historical Inquiry (5–7 min)

Begin with a “What I Wonder” chart.

- Ask: “Where do you think the first Africans in North Carolina came from?”
- Ask: How could they have arrived here?”

This positions students as **historians asking questions** before they encounter sources.

2. Stories as Sources (10–15 min)

Read selections from *Born on the Water* (origins → journey → resilience).

- Pause to model “**sourcing questions**”:
 - “What does this story tell us?”
 - “Whose voices are missing?”

Emphasize that stories — like documents — help us feel and imagine the past.

3. Constructing a Journey Map (20 min)

- Move from global to local geography: West Africa → Atlantic Ocean → North Carolina.
- Use yarn to trace routes into Wilmington, Edenton, Bath, Roanoke, New Bern, Beaufort, Brunswick

- Each student adds a **“memory annotation”** on a sticky note — one word to honor resilience (courage, family, survival).
- Ask: “Which word best shows how people resisted, survived, and built new lives?” This models **annotation of a text or map**, scaled for elementary learners.

4. Industries & Enslaved Labor Map Activity (20 min)

Show images of NC products (lumber, turpentine, rosin, rice, shipbuilding tools). Ask: *“What do these have in common?”*

- On the NC map, major ports (Wilmington, Bath, Edenton, Brunswick, Roanoke, Beaufort, New Bern).
- In small groups, students place **Industry Cards** (icons for lumber, rice, etc.) at the ports where enslaved labor sustained those industries.
- Students write one word about the human contribution (e.g., “knowledge,” “strength,” “resilience”) on sticky notes and post near the industry.
- Connect industry cards back to Africa with yarn to visualize the forced migration of people and skills.

5. Reflection as Interpretation (5–10 min)

- Step back and “read” the map together.
- Ask: “What story does our map tell? How does it change how we think about North Carolina?” Students are practicing interpreting **evidence**.

Day 2 Analyzing Records & Honoring Stories

1. Revisiting Evidence (5 min)

Review the Journey Map as a collective source.

- Teacher prompt: “Yesterday, we mapped where people came from. Today we ask — what do the records tell us about their lives?”

2. Primary Source Snapshot (10–12 min)

- Provide a simplified county record from the Africa to Carolina project (kid-friendly text).
- Guide students with **historian’s questions**:
 - “What does this record tell us?”
 - “What do we not know from this?”

- “What feelings might people have had?”

This introduces **analysis and sourcing** in a concrete way.

3. Creating Historical Representations (20–25 min)

Students choose how to “publish” their interpretation:

- **Memory Quilt Square** — illustration + 1–2 sentences using their resilience word.
- **Mini Story Page** — short narrative imagining a child/family’s journey.

Both options mirror what older students would do in essays or projects — they’re **scaled-down interpretive products**.

4. Sharing & Civic Reflection (5–10 min)

Students share in a circle or gallery walk.

- Close with a passage from An American Story: “It is hard to tell this story, but we must.”
- Prompt: “Why is it important for us to remember this together?”
 - This connects their work to **civic responsibility and community memory**.

Assessment

- Day 1: Placement of industry cards, journey map contributions, sticky note reflections.
- Day 2: Quilt square or mini story page showing empathy and understanding.
- Participation in discussion and sharing circle.

Culminating Activity Options

1. **Class Memory Quilt** – Combine students’ quilt squares into a bulletin board or hallway display titled “Our Journey Map: Honoring Resilience.” This creates a lasting classroom artifact and visible reminder of resilience.
2. **Collaborative Poem** – Using the resilience words students wrote on sticky notes, create a class poem. Each student contributes one line, forming a collective reflection on the Africa to Carolina story.
3. **Port City Posters** – In small groups, students research (or are given kid-friendly fact sheets about) one NC port town such as Wilmington, Bath, or Edenton. They create simple

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posters answering: “Why was this place a landing site? What might it have looked like then?”

4. **“Why Remember?” Letters** – Students write short letters to next year’s class explaining why it is important to learn and remember the Africa to Carolina story. This empowers them to connect history to civic responsibility.

Works Cited

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