



DiversityInc

MEETING IN A BOX: Black History Month



Black History Month takes place in February to celebrate the history, culture, achievements and resilience of the Black community in the United States. The month of reflection and celebration recognizes the Black community's contributions to U.S. history, despite the racism, violence and other systemic obstacles Black people have overcome since the country was founded.

This Meeting in a Box is designed to be a valuable tool you can share with your staff to enhance your team's cultural competence skills and celebrate the contributions Black Americans have made to the U.S. as well as the entire world.



Black Americans Tracing Their Roots

Andre Kearns says his love of genealogy began in 1977.

"I remember watching Alex Haley's Roots miniseries as a young child," he says. "I was inspired that he traced his family history to a named African ancestor, Kunta Kinte. As I look back on it, that experience was shaping for me. It planted a seed in me that has grown into a life's passion."

Seventeen years ago, that seed was watered. The genealogist, public speaker and writer organized a family reunion. As part of the event, he built a family tree.

"As I built that initial tree, it expanded my curiosity about our entire family history," he says. "I continued researching beyond the family reunion."

"As I researched, my interest in learning more continued to grow. Fast forward to today and it's been an amazing journey."

Challenges of Tracing Black Ancestry

An estimated 10 million to 12 million Africans were transported across the Atlantic Ocean during the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade and almost 400,000 were brought to North America. Most Black adults say their ancestors were enslaved. But because of poor record keeping during slavery, it was often difficult for Black people to trace their lineage before the 1870 Census, the first Census that listed Black people by name. But it's not impossible.

"I don't want people to be dismissive and say I can't do it because my ancestors were enslaved," says Kearns. "You can do it, but it takes persistence."

Roughly three-quarters of Black Americans have learned about their family history and ancestors from their relatives.

"Family oral history is invaluable to guide your research," Kearns says. "It's rarely 100% correct, but it almost always has some inkling or clue of truth."

One-third of Black adults have used multiple methods to research their family history, like conducting research online or mail DNA services. Since the first public genetic genealogy test debuted in 2000, millions of consumers have used at-home testing kits. The accessibility has opened the door for more Black Americans to learn about their lineage.

Tracing Black History Before Slavery

Kearns has traced his family tree back 12 generations to named African ancestors Emanuel and Joan Cumbo. They were among the first Africans arriving in Virginia before 1630.

"They were born in the kingdom of Ndongo," he says. "They arrived in Fort Monroe between 1619 and 1628, which back then was Port Comfort. They had a son named Emanuel Cumbo, who lived in James City, Virginia. He was able to achieve his freedom in 1665. He became a landowner in 1667. From that point on, the Cumbos lived as free people of color in this country."

Kearns believes his ancestors planted the seeds of values around faith and service to the community in his family.

"My mom was a teacher," he says. "Her great, great grandmother, who was enslaved in the house, somehow learned how to read. When slavery ended, she became a teacher in a Freedman school. It was

inspiring that once this woman became free, she dedicated her life to helping formerly enslaved people learn how to read and write, so they could build new lives for themselves."

Kearns acknowledges the complexity of his lineage. John Schmeyer, his fifth great-grandfather, was a German immigrant, merchant, Patriot of the American Revolution and slave owner. Schmeyer had a grandson, Henry Johnston, who was born enslaved in 1848. Johnston was never acknowledged by the Schmeyer family because they owned him.

"I've done all of the DNA services, so I did see a connection to the family," he says. "There was always this family story that Henry Johnston's father – my third great-grandfather – was known as Master Schmeyer. That's all we knew from our family oral history. It took years to build the details, but it all started with that family history clue."



Importance of Oral History & Record Keeping

Kyle Battle's great-grandmother – who was born in 1914 and lived until age 96 – would tell him stories about some people she knew who were former slaves.

"I like to bridge generations," he says. "I knew my great-grandmother for 20 years; we had a relationship. This wasn't a picture we had together when I was a baby. She taught me things about people who were former slaves. That's not that far away for me."



Battle's family has meticulously kept track of their history. Marriage licenses, family recipes and an old family tree are among the records that have been saved. Most notably, his grandmother has the original freedom papers issued to Battle's seventh great-grandfather Peter Barnett in 1845. During slavery, legally free African Americans were required to carry freedom papers to avoid being mistaken as fugitives.

"I've seen it, I've touched it," he says. "How can I distance myself from that? The heirloom that your family kept from Ireland, the crest of where your people emigrated from, that's important to you. This is that for us."

Battle has always been aware of his family history in Georgia but couldn't go back any further. After he was gifted a mail-in DNA service, he decided to trace his ancestry. Battle discovered he is 58% West African, 34% European and 0.6% Western Asian and North African.

"Knowing that empowers you, that's a part of who you are," he says. "I'm gonna assume that most people want to do better generation after generation. You want to improve, you don't want to go backward. If you don't know what the previous generation has done, how do you know if you're moving forward?"

Beginning the Genealogical Journey

The best way to start tracing ancestry is with a family tree. Begin documenting the findings the old-fashioned way with pen and paper or with software packages and genealogy services. The next step is to speak to family members, especially the elders.

"Start with what they know and have them work their way back as far as they can," says Kearns. "Record the clues they're providing you – first and last names, maiden names for women, birth dates, death dates and locations where people were born and lived."

Lack of documentation can present challenges for African Americans when tracing their lineage. Battle says his seventh great-grandfather's freedom papers and copies of other relatives' freedom papers are stored in his grandmother's safe, but he's thinking about the future.

"I'm pushing for when it's my turn, putting it in a museum and letting somebody else take care of it. To make sure it's preserved appropriately and nothing happens," he says.

Historical and government records like the Census are free resources that can contain an abundance of information. The names of the enslavers can also be valuable clues.

"Research the wills, probate records and the deeds of those families," says Kearns. "Those documents sometimes named enslaved people because they were considered property. A will may list enslaved persons that someone's passing down to their children. A deed record may list an enslaved person that a family is sold to someone else. In those instances, they're listing that enslaved person by name."

While privacy concerns exist with at-home direct-to-consumer-genetic-tests, DNA testing can help confirm the information that's been discovered.

"DNA testing has provided me with a lot of clues and also a validation of my research," says Kearns. "It can be a very powerful tool for uncovering family history as well."

While he has uncovered a lot about his family history, the genealogist says the journey of discovery and research into his family history is ongoing. Kearns feels like his ancestors are calling him to continue telling their stories.

"Our ancestors helped to build this country," he says. "You don't know American history until you know all of it. Genealogy is a powerful way to uncover stories of brave, marginalized people who built this country and share that so that Americans truly can get the full view of our history and our full American mosaic."