

Family History Research Instructions

Who are your ancestors? What do you know of their stories and journeys?

The goal of this homework is to help us understand the ways our families have perpetuated, assimilated into, and resisted white supremacy.

Please use the questions on this sheet to explore your own family of origin or the family in which you were raised. If different branches of your family have very different experiences, write what you know about two sets of ancestors. Some things to keep in mind:

1. We acknowledge that, for a number of reasons including trauma, death, gender identity and sexual orientation, not everyone has access to their families of origin. We encourage you to research the family history of the family you were raised in, whether or not they are your biological ancestors. *If calling family members is too difficult or not possible for you emotionally, financially, or otherwise, here are some ideas: ask a relative, family friend or anyone else who knew you as you were growing up; or look at the resources and ideas under #9.*
2. The goal of this exercise is to obtain information about our families, to hear the family myths and stories that have been passed down through the generations.
3. The goal of this exercise is not to confront, or create defensiveness (though these dynamics may already exist in your family). You are the best judge to know whether or not to engage your family members during this exercise in larger conversations about the roles white privilege and white supremacy have played in your family's history. If it feels appropriate to you and there is an opportunity to have these conversations, then go for it. If it feels like trying to have those conversations will inhibit your ability to get the information you are looking for right now, that's okay too.
4. Use the research questions as an interview tool, tailoring them to your subject. Ask questions that you think will help the person open up. You may not be able to answer all of the questions.
5. If there is a storyteller in your family, start with that person.
6. Use active listening and ask follow up questions.
7. Look for differences in experience based on gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation.
8. Remember that this can be a very challenging, and on-going exercise. There are many complicated emotional issues that exist in our families. Take care of yourself as you do your research. Be aware that it may bring up a lot for you emotionally, and seek out support from a friend if you want to talk about it.
9. Optional: If you are interested in doing more research about where your family came from, where they settled, or more about the political and historical context your family experienced, here are some resources that might be helpful for you:
 - a. www.rootsweb.com
 - b. www.ancestry.com
 - c. www.ellisland.org
 - d. www.cyndislist.com

- e. Local libraries or state/local historical societies of the town your family lived often have lots of information about specific families and the history of the town. They often have archives including photos and other historical documents.
- f. Some small towns have a local historian – the local librarian can usually put you in touch with them.

Family History Research Questions

1. Where did your ancestors come from and when did they come to what is now the U.S.?
2.
 - a. If your ancestors came from another continent, what circumstances (political, social, economic) impelled them to come to what is now the U.S.?
 - b. If you have Indigenous ancestors, how and when did your ancestors' homeland become part of the U.S.?
3. If your ancestors weren't Indigenous, where did your ancestors first settle? Who's land did they settle on? Did they participate in violence against indigenous people?
4. What kind of work (paid/unpaid, men/women) did they do? How were women's and men's work remembered and/or valued differently?
5. Did they get paid to work while African and African-descendant people were enslaved? If your family was in the US before 1865, can you uncover if and how they benefitted from slavery? White benefits from slavery were deeply differentiated by class and sometimes ethnicity. Some examples of ways white people benefitted included:
 - a. Owning enslaved people
 - b. Merchants or factory owners or workers who benefitted from cheap cotton, tobacco, rum, etc.
 - c. Shipbuilders
 - d. Financiers/Bankers
 - e. People who worked at or attended universities who used enslaved labor
 - f. Overseers and slave-catchers
6. Have members of your family benefitted from U.S. war against other peoples/nations? Some examples include:
 - a. served in federal government during a time of war
 - b. participated in industries that were directly invested in war-making, such as oil & gas, weapons manufacturing, etc.
 - c. participated in industries that relied on cheap labor and/or raw materials from countries the US has militarily intervened in
 - d. worked for the armed services or government intelligence of any kind
 - e. benefitted from the GI bill, which gave benefits like housing and education to white soldiers post world war II

- f. studied or worked in science, technology development, or another field where the US Pentagon/Department of Defense has directed a lot of funding post WWII
7. Describe any obstacles your ancestors faced, noting differences based on gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, language, culture or ability:
 - a. Finding work
 - b. Finding a place to live
 - c. Traveling to places where they might find work
 - d. Going to school
 - e. Marrying and raising a family
8. Were they targets of violence? If so, why were they targeted?
9. Were they eligible to become U.S. citizens? Did they do so? Do you know why or why not? Did any of your ancestors lose their U.S. citizenship or have their rights as U.S. citizens violated?
10. What kind of organized support networks did they have to survive and resist oppression?
 - a. Familial, extended family
 - b. Religious and cultural
 - c. Social
 - d. Neighborhood
 - e. Economic (co-ops. Credit unions, business associations, labor unions, etc)
 - f. Political (community organizations, neighborhood associations, political parties, etc)

Questions 11, 12 and 13 are intended for you to answer after you have completed your research. Or there may be a family member you feel would like to answer these questions.

11. If some of your ancestors are of European origin, how did institutions of white supremacy benefit them? List three specific examples of power, privilege, or wealth relative to families of color in the same time period.
12. If some of your ancestors are of African, Native American, Latino/a, Asian or Pacific Island, Arabic, or mixed racial/continental origin:
 - a. How did institutions of white supremacy oppress them?
 - b. Did organized networks of European Americans fighting against their own oppression also oppress them?
 - c. How did they resist these different forms of oppression?
13. What is the power of knowing your own family history? What are the strengths that you can draw from your ancestry? How does knowing this history support your development as an anti-racist organizer and leader?