

Inheriting the Trade

A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U.S. History

Author: Thomas Norman DeWolf

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Author Bio:

Thomas Norman DeWolf was born and raised in Pomona, California. In 1972, he moved to Eugene, Oregon to attend college. He graduated in 1978 with degrees from both Northwest Christian College and the University of Oregon. Tom served on the Oregon Arts Commission for nine years and as a local elected official for eleven. His years of public service focused on the arts, literacy, children's issues, and restorative justice. Tom began writing *Inheriting the Trade* in 2001, during the summer in which he joined Katrina Browne and eight additional distant cousins on their life-altering journey to Rhode Island, Ghana, and Cuba, to make Katrina's film *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, which was chosen as an Official Competition Selection for the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. Tom has been writing full time since 2005. He and his wife, Lindi, live in Oregon. They have four grown children and three grandchildren.

Description of *Inheriting the Trade*:

In 2001, at age forty-seven, Thomas Norman DeWolf was astounded to discover that he was related to the most successful slave-trading family in United States history, responsible for transporting at least 10,000 Africans to the Americas. His infamous ancestor, U.S. Senator James DeWolf of Bristol, Rhode Island, curried favor with President Thomas Jefferson to continue in the trade after it was outlawed. When James DeWolf died in 1837 he was reportedly the second-richest man in America.

When Katrina Browne, Tom DeWolf's distant cousin, learned about their family's history, she resolved to confront it head-on, producing and directing a documentary feature film, *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*.

Inheriting the Trade is Tom DeWolf's powerful and disarmingly honest memoir of the journey in which ten family members retrace the steps of their ancestors and uncover the hidden history of New England and the other northern states.

Their journey through the notorious Triangle Trade—from New England to West Africa to Cuba—proved life-altering, forcing Tom to face the horrors of slavery directly for the first time. It also inspired him to contend with the complicated legacy that continues to impact black and white Americans, Africans, and Cubans today.

Inheriting the Trade reveals that the Northern involvement in slavery was as common as it was in the South. Not only were black people enslaved in the North for over two hundred years but the vast majority of all slave trading in the United States was done by Northerners. Remarkably, half of all North American voyages involved in the slave trade originated from Rhode Island, and all the Northern states benefited.

With searing candor, DeWolf tackles both the internal and external challenges of his journey—writing frankly about feelings of shame, white male privilege, the complicity of churches, America's historic amnesia regarding slavery—and our nation's desperate need for healing. An urgent call for meaningful and honest dialogue, *Inheriting the Trade* illuminates a path toward a more hopeful future, and provides a persuasive argument that the legacy of slavery isn't merely a Southern issue but an enduring American one.

Advance Praise for *Inheriting the Trade*:

“Tom DeWolf’s deeply personal story, of his own journey as well as his family’s, is required reading for anyone interested in reconciliation. Healing from our historic wounds, that continue to separate us, requires us to walk this road together.”

--**Myrlie Evers-Williams**, civil rights leader, chairman emeritus of the NAACP (1995-98), and author of *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, *Watch Me Fly*, and *For Us The Living*.

“*Inheriting the Trade* is a candid, powerful and insightful book about how one family dealt with the infamous slave trade. This book is jarring in its candor, and revealing in its honest assessment of slavery and the Dewolf family. We must read important books like this one, if we dare to appreciate every aspect of our history, and as the Dewolf family does, dare to change our judgments about the wretched history of slavery.”

--**Professor Charles J. Ogletree, Jr.**, Executive Director, The Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School

“[*Inheriting the Trade* is] like a slow-motion mash-up, a first-person view from within one of the country’s founding families as it splinters, then puts itself back together again.”

--**Edward Ball**, author of the National Book Award winner, *Slaves in the Family*

“Thomas DeWolf’s personal journey into his family’s long hidden slave trading past is a compelling invitation to explore how our country and many institutions, including churches, benefited from this dark chapter. Such exploration is essential if we are to move forward to a place of repair and racial reconciliation. “

--**Frank T. Griswold**, 25th Presiding Bishop, Episcopal Church of the U.S.A.

“Exploring the links between a grand Rhode Island mansion and dungeons in Ghana, Tom DeWolf traces the infernal trade that gave his family, and this country, great wealth and power. His journey into the past forces painful questions to the surface, and illuminates our present.”

--**Henry Wiencek**, Winner of the National Book Critics' Circle Award & author of *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*

“In ongoing efforts to promote racial reconciliation, this contemporary white family’s journey stands out. It represents the kind of honesty and courage that is so urgently needed to forge new ways of talking and thinking about the legacy of slavery in American life.”

--**Sherrilyn Ifill**, author of *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-first Century*

Interview with the author:

Q. You joined nine distant relatives to learn about your slave-trading ancestors by retracing their steps through the notorious Triangle Trade, from New England, to West Africa, to Cuba, and back. Why would anyone choose to spotlight such a sordid family history?

A. The point isn't to spotlight our family's history so much as to use our family's story as a springboard to a deeper conversation. It can be traumatic to discover ancestors who did horrible or embarrassing things. But I'm pretty sure that if you look, most of us will find both heroes and horse thieves somewhere along the line. My cousin, Katrina Browne, learned that she was descended from the largest slave-trading family in U.S. history. Three generations of our family participated in the slave trade. They transported more than 10,000 African people to the West Indies and North and South America. The most successful was James DeWolf, a prominent business man, philanthropist, and community leader who became a U.S. senator from Rhode Island, which I've always found horribly ironic. He died the second richest man in America in 1837. Rather than succumb to the guilt she initially felt, Katrina confronted this history by inviting several of us to join her in facing our family's—and our nation's—hidden past. She produced and directed a documentary feature film about our journey, *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, and I decided to write a book. The journey Katrina created is actually an invitation to readers and filmgoers to explore the legacy of slavery and how it continues to impact us today. Deep wounds exist that have never healed properly. If people are willing to honestly confront these issues, we'll find a path that leads to reconciliation, and, consequently, to a more peaceful world.

Q. Your book is called a memoir, yet it's more than a description of your travels with your cousins and what you learned along the way. For instance, you incorporate details of American history that aren't well known.

A. In fact, I believe many of those details have been deliberately down-played. I understand it because what has been hidden is shameful and embarrassing. But not knowing those facts has impacted the way we think about our country and about our fellow citizens, often in unfair and unrealistic ways. So I included relevant historical events that I hadn't learned about in school. Through discussions with many people over the past several years, I learned that I wasn't alone in not knowing that almost all U.S. slave-trading was done by northerners and that slavery itself existed in the North for over two hundred years, among other things.

Q. Though your “family of ten” is all white people, you also interacted with people of color throughout your journey. Did you feel guilty around black people, knowing what your ancestors did?

A. Not really. There were definitely powerful, tense, and emotional moments. We met with both black and white scholars. We participated in interracial dialogues in all three

countries we visited. There was no intention to make us feel guilty. Some believe that white people have been coddled throughout history and that we shouldn't be allowed to feel safe. But I disagree. I don't believe we can impact the hearts and minds of people who are paralyzed by feelings of guilt or fear. The way to successfully break down the barriers that separate us—whether by race, class, gender, or religion—is to create safe spaces in which to establish and nurture relationships with people who are different, or believe differently, than us.

Q. What was your most powerful moment in Ghana?

A. There were many such moments, especially for me, as I had never traveled internationally before. The interracial group conversations we participated in, the ceremonies we attended, standing at the Door of No Return, and other sites we visited that were connected to the slave trade, and which our ancestors had also been to two centuries earlier, had a strong impact on me. But the most powerful moment was when we entered one of the male dungeons beneath Cape Coast Castle—a 450 square foot stone cell that held up to 200 enslaved African men at a time—and the battery pack for the camera lights died and plunged us into pitch black darkness. There was no electricity in the dungeon, and rather than turn on our flashlights, Katrina invited us to wait quietly in the darkness. So we sat in the dark while a film crew member went to get a replacement battery. Ten minutes felt like an hour as I imagined what it must've been like to be confined in this space 200 years ago. I've never felt so close to utter despair and hopelessness in my life, knowing, of course, that the lights would soon come on and I'd walk out, which wasn't the case for the people who were once imprisoned there. That moment shifted my consciousness more than any other on our entire journey.

Q. With the embargo the United States has had in place since the early 1960's, few Americans travel to Cuba. Was being there what you expected?

A. First off, I didn't know Americans could even go to Cuba legally but we did. We flew right out of JFK in New York City directly to José Martí in Havana. Then once we were in Cuba, most of my preconceived notions were off the mark. I thought there would be a more ubiquitous military or police presence than I saw. I expected a country filled with sad, oppressed people living under the heels of authoritarian rule, and we certainly encountered people who spoke with us about conditions I find heartbreaking and unconscionable. But what I also found, particularly with most of the people I interacted with—and we got out there in the streets, walking along the Malecón, in poor and not-so-poor areas, rural and urban communities—is that they appeared to be normal and happy with similar concerns as people anywhere else. We were free to go where we wanted to go at any time. I was never stopped and asked for my identification. Don't get me wrong. I'm fully aware that Cuba is ruled by a military dictatorship that clearly limits the freedom of its citizens. I guess what I'm trying to say is that like anything we read or hear the reality is more complicated. It simply wasn't what I expected based on what I learned in school and read in the U.S. media. I was pleasantly surprised by my experiences. I loved being in Cuba and would like to return. I met some wonderful people I'd like to spend time with again.

Q. Doesn't rehashing the subject of slavery keep us stuck in the past? Why can't everyone just get over it?

A. Many people of African descent that we spoke with during our journey say that the reason they can't 'just get over it' is because it isn't over. In general, there exists today a profound lack of trust between white people and people of color. White people typically aren't even aware of it, or else we do our best to ignore it. This is our training, our birthright. In Cape Coast, we met with Professor Kofi Anyidoho from the University of Ghana. He encouraged us to wrestle with history because in order to understand where we are we need to understand how we got here. I was blown away by one particular statement he made, and I use part of this quote as the title for one of the chapters in *Inheriting the Trade*. He said, "Slavery is a tragic accident in which people today are still bleeding to death. Slavery is the living wound under a patchwork of scars. The only hope of healing is to be willing to break through the scars to finally clean the wound properly and begin the healing." I believe this is the work of every person who believes in liberty, equality, and grace. Reckoning with events in history that have ripped people apart is how we can clean centuries-old wounds and heal together.

Q. Many white people will say this has nothing to do with them. Their ancestors didn't own or trade slaves. They came after the end of the Civil War. They also suffered, whether they were Jews being forced from Russia during the pogroms of the late 19th century, or poor Irish potato farmers coming here after the famine with nothing but the shirts on their backs. They'd say this isn't their problem.

A. I recognize that many families have ancestors who suffered to scratch their way toward the American Dream, including other branches of my own family. But the fact remains that people with white skin have always been able to rise toward prosperity in this country more easily and rapidly than people with dark skin. And it continues. Look at almost any significant social indicator—wealth, infant mortality rates, the likelihood of imprisonment, homicide rates, having health insurance, access to housing, employment, and higher education, and so on—and blacks fall on the negative side of the dividing line. This is a legacy of slavery, and it is systemic. If we truly aspire to live up to the ideals established by our nation's founders—democracy, equality, and the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—then we have a lot of work to do. I'm sure most people would agree that inequality harms its victims. But it also harms those of us who are privileged to be on the upper tier of the dividing line. The harm is different, but it exists. If we pay attention, we will see the many privileges we enjoy due to our white skin. We can also see the harm we experience due to the fear and guilt that hover in and around our lives. These are our unclean wounds. This is everyone's problem and everyone can contribute to, and benefit from, the process of healing.

Q. What do you hope readers will gain from your experiences?

A. My intention in writing the book was to use the example of what I and my cousins experienced as an invitation to readers to explore their own lives. A counselor told me once that we all have parallel experiences with which we can connect with what we need

to learn. Everyone can understand more about racism and the legacy of slavery by paying attention to their own parallel experiences. Over the past seven years, I've learned how closely racism, religious intolerance, sexism, and so many other "isms" are connected. I've tried to show this connection in *Inheriting the Trade* so that readers can examine their own lives in order to become more aware of how we walk in the world, the importance of recognizing our kinship with each other, as equals, and the critical need in these troubled times to truly develop compassion for each other, especially with those who differ from us. The journey through *Traces of the Trade*, for me at least, began with a fair amount of trepidation. But the initial journey, followed by many related experiences, both with my cousins and on my own, became this amazing blessing. I really do believe we can repair damage we have caused and experienced. We can train ourselves to be kinder, always, in all situations. We all want fulfilling relationships based in trust. We want to love and to be loved. When we choose to live our lives with this focus, life becomes all it can be. That's what I hope readers will gain.

Q. One of the big questions implicit in *Inheriting the Trade* is, "What's next?" What do you do with your newfound knowledge or awareness?

A. Each of us who went on the international journey focuses on different efforts in our lives and communities, but we agree on one overall direction: we support a national dialogue and education process to lead the people of the United States toward racial reconciliation and the healing of our collective wounds. Politically, several family members are supporting several bills that are currently before Congress. One would study the lingering damage caused by slavery and what remedies should be employed. Another would have Congress follow the lead of several states—including Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, Alabama, and Arkansas—and apologize for the United States' role in slavery. A third would establish a commission to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in January 2008. *Inheriting the Trade* is being published by Beacon Press in January specifically to coincide with this anniversary. Family members will participate in an extensive outreach campaign that will utilize both the film and the book as resources to confront racism in our country. We will visit schools, churches, and community groups throughout 2008. If anyone would like to contact us to schedule an appearance in their community, they can do so at www.inheritingthetrade.com. We're working with Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training (<http://www.crossroadsantiracism.org/>) to develop curriculum for outreach efforts and most family members who went on the journey will participate in a 2½ day anti-racism training program in late December. One African American man we met with in Ghana really nailed it for me when he said, "The direction you're going is great, but if you're not going to devote your life to it, they'll never take you seriously. [Confronting racism] is not something you can turn on and off. It has to be a path, a walk of life."

Q. It sounds like you're on a mission to save the world or something. Do you really think we can end racism?

A. It does seem pretty daunting, doesn't it? But look around. Not a day goes by that we don't bear witness to war, sectarian conflict, intolerance, and other forms of oppression in

our own nation and around the world. Hate crimes in 2006 in the United States were up 8% over 2005. There were over 7,500 criminal incidents reported in 2006 that were directly linked to discrimination against a victim's race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or disability. I don't believe the rash of nooses being hung in public places around the United States, or celebrities spewing hateful, racist language, are isolated incidents. They are indicative of the systemic nature of the challenge we face. Katrina, our cousins, and I have done our best to tell our family story, through the film and the book, with honesty, as well as with gentleness and a bit of humor. Part of our nation's history is horrific, but we don't have to be afraid to face it. Avoidance is a powerful piece of our inheritance. I know now that I'm not so alone in my inclination toward avoidance. Welcome to the human race, right? But in order to heal, to be reconciled, we have to be willing to wake up, to face things we have been taught to fear. I don't actually think in terms of saving the world or ending racism because it feels impossible. I think about what I can do, what we together can do, on this day, today, to live our lives—and to teach our kids and grandkids to live their lives—with more tolerance, more gentleness, and grace. It will make a difference. It will.

Family of Ten bios:

Ten descendants of Charles D'Wolf of Guadeloupe (born 1695), ranging from siblings to seventh cousins, participated in the international journey that forms the core of the documentary film *Traces of the Trade* and the book *Inheriting the Trade*. They became known as The Family of Ten. In addition to **Tom DeWolf** (bio above), they are:

Katrina Browne

Prior to launching this film and family process, Katrina served as Outreach Planning Coordinator for the film adaptation of Anna Deavere Smith's play *Twilight: Los Angeles*. Previously she was a senior staff person at Public Allies, an AmeriCorps program operating in 13 cities that she co-founded in 1991. She has an M.A. in Theology from the Pacific School of Religion where she wrote a thesis on film and democratic dialogue. She now lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

Keila DePoorter

Keila and her sister Holly Fulton (below) both grew up in Bristol, Rhode Island. Keila currently lives with her husband Jerry on a small ranch outside of Boulder, Colorado. In 1998, Keila and Jerry led a group of 20 students to South Africa for a month. They visited mining sites, traveled and studied South Africa's current social, economic and political issues.

Holly Fulton

Holly teaches English as a Second Language and French, and currently resides in Peabody, Massachusetts with her husband, Bill. Prior to teaching, she was an interpersonal skills and diversity trainer for public and private industries, which included running her own practice and delivering programs for training companies.

Ellen DeWolfe Hale

Elly grew up in Reno, Nevada. After studying East Asian Studies and living in Tokyo, she and her husband Brad now live in Seattle, Washington where she works at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Superfund cleanup projects. Elly has a passion for music of all kinds.

Ledlie Laughlin

Ledlie has been an Episcopal priest for 50 years, with parishes in Jersey City, Newark, Greenwich Village and Florence, Italy. Ledlie and his wife, Roxana, have three grown children and seven grandchildren. While Ledlie was Dean of the Cathedral in Newark, he helped bring about the merger of a small, white cathedral congregation with a large black middle class congregation. Ledlie and Roxana reside in Connecticut.

Dain Perry

Dain participated in the documentary along with his brother, Jim, and nephew, James (below). He spent his formative years growing up in Charleston, South Carolina. He and his wife Constance live in Boston, where he works as a financial representative. During the 1970s, he worked for a non-profit agency that promoted reform in the criminal justice system, particularly prison reform. Dain has been a member of the vestry at his church and has been an active volunteer in his community for many years, including serving on the boards of several nonprofit organizations.

James DeWolf Perry V

Jim was born in Providence, Rhode Island and is now retired with his wife, Shirley. In his career, Jim served as a Foreign Service Officer (in Vietnam, Belgium, and Laos), as a manager for several non-profit organizations, and then as a management consultant. Jim was the Executive Director of the Big Brother Association of Boston when the association shifted to recruiting large numbers of African American men as big brothers.

James DeWolf Perry VI

James is currently earning his Ph.D. in political science at Harvard University. His work focuses on international security and global civil society, with an emphasis on international legal institutions and the evolution of norms in international relations. As part of his work, James has spent time investigating the history of the Atlantic slave trade and its abolition during the 19th century. James attended law school at Columbia University and has done extensive volunteer work.

Elizabeth Sturges Llerena

Elizabeth grew up in Bristol, Rhode Island. She studied Chinese and art at the University of Massachusetts and received her teaching degree from Rhode Island School of Design. She lived in China for two years and now lives with her family in New York City where she works as both an artist and a public high school art teacher.