

Living History: The Walls Family Oral History Lesson Plan

Dr. Bryan Walls and The John Freeman Walls Historic Site And Underground Railroad Museum

Dr. Bryan Walls is a dentist who lives in Windsor, Ontario. He established a museum in southwestern Ontario called the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. It is located near Windsor, in a rural area off the 401, Exit 28, North one mile. The Museum is an Underground Railroad museum, which means that the site and buildings that make up the museum were once owned by a family that actually escaped slavery and made a trip on the Underground Railroad to Canada. Dr. Walls is a descendant of this family and through his museum and book, *The Road That Led to Somewhere*, he is keeping the story of his great great grandparents and their harrowing flight alive.

When Dr. Walls was a young boy in the 1950s, his great Aunt Stella Butler told the family stories about his great great grandparents, John and Jane Freeman Walls. He calls Aunt Stella the family *griot*. *Griot* is a term in West African culture which means keeper of the oral history. Such a person is very important because their job is to recite the family names from beginning to end over many many generations so that they are never forgotten. In this way, the *griot* guards the family history and preserves its memory for future generations.

Aunt Stella was such a person in Dr. Walls' family. However, in 1976, at the age of 92, she sold the property of his great great grandparents, which included the original house and family burial plot. She thought that the family would not want to hang onto it. Dr. Walls had grown up right next to the property. The original home of John and Jane Walls meant everything: freedom and the sacrifice of his ancestors for a better life not only for themselves but also for their children's children. He sprang into action and bought back the property, paying more for it than Aunt Stella had received.

Dr. Walls and his father, brother and uncles then went to work. They stripped the siding off the log cabin and restored it to its original 19th century condition. They received a donation of a large log cabin from the Government of Ontario for which they laid a foundation and erected a new roof. They also built furniture for the buildings.

Today at the museum, there is the original log cabin that John Walls built. There is also a meeting house called the John Graves Simcoe House, which is a meeting place where visitors to the museum can watch a video about the museum and how it came about. There is a small church called the Peace Chapel and the family cemetery. You can also take a guided tour through the grounds which is like taking a trip back in time on the Underground Railroad itself.

At the entrance there is plaque that reads:

IN 1846 JOHN FREEMAN WALLS A FUGITIVE SLAVE FROM NORTH CAROLINA BUILT THIS LOG CABIN ON LAND PURCHASED FROM THE REFUGEE HOME SOCIETY. THIS ORGANIZATION WAS FOUNDED BY THE ABOLITIONIST HENRY BIBB PUBLISHER OF THE *VOICE OF THE FUGITIVE* AND THE FAMOUS JOSIAH HENSON. THE CABIN SUBSEQUENTLY SERVED AS A TERMINAL OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AND THE FIRST MEETING PLACE OF THE PUCE BAPTIST CHURCH. ALTHOUGH MANY FORMER SLAVES RETURNED TO THE UNITED STATES FOLLOWING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, WALLS AND HIS FAMILY **CHOSE TO REMAIN IN CANADA**. THE STORY OF THEIR STRUGGLES FORMS THE BASIS OF THE BOOK, "THE ROAD THAT LED TO SOMEWHERE" BY DR. BRYAN E. WALLS."

In a speech in 2007, Dr. Walls told the audience about this legendary secret movement of people flowing northward. "The Underground Railroad was the first great freedom movement in the Americas and the first time that good people, Black, white and of different races and faiths, were able to work together in harmony for freedom and for justice.

"Just to give you a few highlights I am told that the Underground Railroad was not a train running under ground from the South to the North. However it was a secret network of courageous people willing to risk their lives for the cause of freedom. I am told it was first formally organized in 1787 by a young Quaker abolitionist by the name of Isaac T. Hopper in Pennsylvania. The Quakers were very witty people who believed that all men should be treated equal, that they were not animals but human beings. After the war of 1812, the soldiers went back south and reported that they did not see slavery in Canada. In fact, some even reported fighting against "coloured" free regiments in the Niagara and Detroit areas. By the early 1800s, there were definite routes of the Underground Railroad making their way to freedom. This is a fascinating period in history, made more personally exciting for me because in 1846, my ancestors crossed the 49th parallel to freedom."

What was the original story that Aunt Stella told the family? This is what she said:

John was born in 1813. He was born on the same day that Daniel, the slave master's son, was born. However, Daniel's mother died in childbirth, so John's mother, Jubil, suckled both boys. A close bond of friendship developed between the two that would strengthen throughout their lives, made stronger by mutual respect. When John grew up he married Sarah, an African American woman on a nearby plantation. The couple had two children. But John lost Sarah and his children when they were sold and forced to move further south. Meanwhile, his boyhood friend Daniel married Jane King, a young woman of Irish and Scottish descent. They produced four children. However, at some point Daniel took seriously sick. On his deathbed, Daniel asked John to take care of his family, because he knew that John would guard them with his life. After Daniel died, John and Jane fell in love. Although Jane also had an abolitionist spirit, they could not marry due to the slave laws in North Carolina of 1715, and reinforced in 1838, preventing interracial marriage. So they left with Jane's three daughters and son and a fourth young slave girl

who helped Jane with the children. They travelled at night through the forests of North Carolina and Kentucky. They made their way to Indiana, where white Quaker abolitionists by the name of Ephraim and Mary Stout, hid them. They stayed with the Stouts approximately one year, then continued on to Toledo, Ohio, and then crossing over to Amherstburg, Ontario. They stayed in Amherstburg for about one year. John was so worried that slave catchers were coming to take him back that they moved inland to the Puce Road, which in those days was a full day's ride away on horseback.

Aunt Stella passed away in 1986 at 102 years of age, her mind sharp up to the end. Now Dr. Walls and his family members are the modern-day griots of their history. Dr. Walls makes many speeches throughout North America keeping this important story of his ancestors alive. Inspired by the interracial aspect of his history, he has also taught cross-cultural training at the Toronto Police Services and teamed up with the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, the National Alliance of Faith and Justice, and other African American organizations that are trying to make a difference among the youth. He has also written *The Key To The Road That Led To Somewhere*, a genealogical manuscript to support the truth of the story told to him by Aunt Stella. Amazingly, he is also working on a libretto of the story for Broadway and a screenplay for the movies.

Bryan Walls has been honoured with many awards for his work, including the Order of Ontario and the Order of Canada. As Bryan Walls stated, "I stand on the shoulders of great men and women who have gone before. The personal story of the Underground Railroad has become my shield and my sword is words like mutual respect, reconciliation, cooperation and love, against which, in our perilous post-9-11 world, there is no argument." His motto is, "Never, never, never give up!"

Glossary of Key Words/Vocabulary

- Descendant - a person who is a child of a particular family, however distant in the line of descent
- Ancestor - any person from whom one is descended
- Generation - A stage or period of time in the line of natural descent, such as a mother, daughter and granddaughter
- Quaker - a religious sect that was opposed to slavery
- Abolitionist - someone who was against slavery
- Regiment - a military unit consisting of two or more groups of soldiers

- Plantation - a large farm that grows crops cultivated by workers living on it
- Interracial - involving members of different races
- Genealogy - the study of family history using a chart or record of the descent of a person or family from one or more ancestors
- Libretto - the words of an opera
- Reconciliation - the settling of differences among people

Vocabulary Activity

Find a word from the above glossary that is a synonym for the following:

1. offspring
2. forerunner
3. estate
4. anti-slavery activist
5. lineage
6. harmony

Student Activity Package - Living History: The Walls Family Oral History Lesson Plan

Your Task

Using the historical background handout as an example of how history comes alive through the tradition of oral history, interview an older person in your family or community. Document this person's story by taping (audio or video) or writing down significant events in his/her life and then share this information with the class. This can involve the creation of a PowerPoint presentation, a videotape of your experience, a physical book or a Bristol board presentation and/or timeline.

Completing an Oral History Interview

1. Select a person to interview.
2. Obtain their permission.
3. Set up an interview time and location.
4. Do some background research on the era of this person. If he/she comes from a different country, research the country of origin.
5. Prepare a list of interview questions. Try to ask questions that involve more than a yes/no answer.
6. If possible, tape record or videotape the interview. Otherwise, take notes during the interview.
7. Be on time.
8. Make sure your equipment works properly and that you have extra tapes (audio or video) and extra batteries.
9. Be polite.
10. Before you begin the interview, do a practice question to make sure the recorder is working.

11. Start the interview by stating your name, the interview subject's name, the date and time of the interview.
12. Keep your recording session to about 30-40 minutes.
13. Thank your subject for his/her time.

Areas of Interest and Sample Questions

When conducting the interview, you should have a list of question to help guide the discussion with the interview subject

- Ancestry (Who were your grandparents, great grandparents, where were they born and what were their accomplishments?)
- Place and date of birth (Where were you born and what is your date of birth?)
- Family (What are the names of your parents, brothers and sisters, and when were they born?)
- Places lived in (Where did you live? What country did you come from?)
- Education (How far did you go in school? What were your educational experiences like?)

- Occupation and accomplishments (What work do/did you do? What accomplishments do you feel you have achieved in your life?)
- Special skills and interests (Do you have any special skills or interests?)
- Community and religious activities (including specific customs involving food and cooking, marriage, death, celebrations and recreational activities related to specific racial/ethnic/religious groups etc.)
- World events (What world events took place during your lifetime and how did you react to them? How did you feel about them?)

Presentation of Findings

Your presentation, whether it be in book form, video, PowerPoint or Bristol board presentation, should be a synopsis of the interview subject's personal history, and include visuals (e.g., subject portrait, family photographs and/or images of world events of the time period of the subject). Feel free to be creative. You will be asked to present it for the class.