

March 31, 2010

US family finds traces of slave-trade past in Cuba

By WILL WEISSERT
Associated Press Writer

James DeWolf Perry VI's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather used African slaves to grow coffee on this rocky hillside outside Havana, and to him its thorny weeds and small sugar plots feel haunted.

"Do you feel the ghost of James DeWolf out here?" asks Katrina Browne, Perry's distant cousin.

"Yes," he replies, drawing out the word in a long, awkward breath.

Both are descendants of the DeWolfs of Bristol, Rhode Island, who became the biggest slave-trading family in U.S. history, shipping well over 11,000 Africans to the Americas between 1769 and 1820. It was a business that made the family patriarch, James DeWolf, America's second-wealthiest man.

The cousins came to Cuba this week as part of a visit by the U.S. replica of the 19th-century slave ship *Amistad* — which on Wednesday wrapped up a 10-day educational mission to the island.

For Perry and Browne it's been a journey into their family's troubling past that is far more personal than scouring genealogy records or government archives.

Between 1790 and 1821, more than 240,000 enslaved Africans were brought to Havana, according to customs data, including the 53 captives who rebelled aboard the original *Amistad* in 1839, seizing the ship and sailing up the U.S. East Coast. The Supreme Court eventually granted them freedom — an inspiring end to a shameful chapter in America and Cuba's shared history.

Perry and Browne visited the sugar-growing, cattle-raising town of La Madruga, 30 miles southeast of the capital, hoping to find vestiges of what was once a family plantation called "Mount Hope."

"To gaze at these hills, to be in his fields, on the land that was his holdings, it's another way to make a tangible connection," Perry, a Harvard University Ph.D. candidate concentrating on the Rhode Island slave trade, said of James DeWolf.

"There's no hiding the reality when you see the land."

Browne, who made a documentary of her ancestors' rum-for-slaves business, noted how the royal palm trees swaying in the hot breeze matched drawings in the diary of one of the family's overseers.

"It's sheer evil," she said.

Some of what likely encompassed Mount Hope is now land controlled by Cuba's armed forces. But a dusty back road, deeply rutted by tractors and horse-drawn carts, leads to stony highlands described in family records.

There isn't much there now, apart from scarecrows guarding cane fields and banana trees, and an occasional cow. A nearby village is known today as "La Esperanza," or "Hope," though locals are unsure whether the name has anything to do with the DeWolfs.

James DeWolf owned Mount Hope until his death in 1837. He represented Rhode Island in the U.S. Senate, and though the state outlawed the slave trade in 1787, it continued to profit enormously for decades afterward — belying the popularly held belief that slavery was strictly a southern phenomenon.

Most of the DeWolfs' African captives were sold at auction in South Carolina or Havana. If prices in the U.S. fell, the family would work the slaves on at least five Cuban plantations producing coffee, sugar and molasses until they could fetch higher prices.

Perry said the Cuban operations were a key source of income, but mostly served as a side business to stoke the

DeWolfs' U.S. slave trade operation.

The U.S. banned the slave trade in 1808, but Browne said family letters indicate the DeWolfs continued dealing in African captives until the 1840s by going through Cuba. They also got help from a DeWolf brother-in-law, who served as a customs inspector in Bristol — thus ensuring family slave ships continued to come and go.

Browne wrote, co-directed and co-produced "Traces of the Trade," a 2008 documentary detailing how her ancestors used a Bristol distillery to make rum, which they traded for African captives.

She learned of the DeWolf past 14 years ago, when her 88-year-old grandmother compiled a family history. Browne began digging and found she had been exposed to her family's ugly secrets as a child. A favorite family nursery rhyme "Adjua and Paulemore," she discovered, was really about child slaves James DeWolf gave his wife for Christmas one year.

"Everything I learned just got worse and worse," she said, "and flew in the face of my image of my family as good, sensible northerners."

For her documentary, Browne contacted 200 DeWolf descendants. In 2001, she, Perry and eight other cousins retraced the so-called "Slave Triangle," traveling from Rhode Island to the coast of Ghana and then to Cuba.

While on the island, they used machetes to hack through jungle south of Havana, reaching ruined walls and other relics of another family plantation called "Noah's Ark."

For that trip, Browne hired a Cuban producer who put together a film crew, obtained necessary government permits and scouted locations.

This time, the communist government was even more cooperative — as it often is on U.S. historical projects, especially those exploring unsavory aspects of America's past.

Authorities granted Browne and Perry special access to archives, and the pair was featured on state television. That support helped them search customs books for records of Bristol-registered vessels at Cuba's National Archives and to screen her documentary. When shown the film, some Afro-Cubans choked back sobs.

Perry and Browne, both 42, say they did not inherit proceeds from the slave trade because family records indicate James DeWolf's immediate descendants squandered the fortune within two generations.

"To that, I say, 'Thank goodness.' I would not want to find out that I grew up wealthy because of that," Perry said.

Still, he said there is no doubt his family name and roots opened educational and professional doors. Other branches of the family did receive large inheritances, and establishing whether any of DeWolf's thousands of descendants got slave proceeds is difficult.

Browne said 140 of the 200 relatives she contacted for the documentary didn't respond. Many who did expressed concerns, including worries activists might demand reparations.

Browne supports payments to Americans of African descent to "level the playing field," not "out of guilt, but grief," though she is not in favor of cutting personal checks to individuals.

"The idea is 'repair,'" she said. "And that is best done through more systemic efforts — public and private — to help people access the American dream."

While both she and Perry have worked to uncover their family's role, they say no Americans — even those whose descendants came to the U.S. after slavery was abolished — should feel unaffected. The early U.S. economy so relied on slavery that it fueled a boom, making America an attractive destination for immigrants, they maintain.

"None of us," Perry said, "are untouched by the legacy of slavery today."





In this March 27, 2010 photo, Katrina Browne, left, who made a documentary of her ancestors' rum-for-slaves business, and her cousin, James DeWolf Perry VI, visit an exhibition at Havana's Africa House, where Browne showed her film to a Cuban audience. (AP Photo/Franklin Reyes)



In this photo taken March 27, 2010, Katrina Browne, center, who made a documentary of her ancestors' rum-for-slaves business, her cousin James DeWolf Perry VI, left, and coordinator Tulaine Marshall look at an exhibition at Havana's Africa House, where Browne showed her film to a Cuban audience. (AP Photo/Franklin Reyes)