

# African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

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Volume 11  
Issue 4 *December 2008*

Article 21

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12-1-2008

## Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep South

Katrina Browne

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### Recommended Citation

Browne, Katrina (2008) "Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep South," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol11/iss4/21>

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## New Film

*Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep South*

By Katrina Browne, Producer and Director.

California Newsreel, 86 mins., DVD, <http://www.newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0222>, 2008.

### Description from the Publisher:



**Katrina Browne uncovers her New England family's deep involvement in the Triangle Trade and, in so doing, reveals the pivotal role slavery played in the growth of the whole American economy. In this bicentennial year of the federal abolition of the slave trade, this courageous documentary asks every American what we can and should do to repair the unacknowledged damage of our troubled past.**

**Katrina Browne was shocked to discover that her Rhode Island forebears had been the largest slave-trading dynasty in American history. For two hundred years, the DeWolfs were distinguished public servants, respected merchants and prominent Episcopal clerics, yet their privilege was founded on a sordid secret. Once she started digging, Browne found the evidence everywhere, in ledgers, ships logs, letters, even a family nursery rhyme. Between 1769 and 1820, DeWolf ships carried rum from Bristol, Rhode Island to West Africa where it was traded for over 10,000 enslaved Africans. They transported this human cargo across the Middle Passage to slave markets from Havana to Charleston and beyond, as well as to the family's sugar plantations in Cuba. The ships returned from the Caribbean with sugar and molasses to be turned into rum at the family distilleries, starting the cycle again.**

**This film explains how the New England slave trade supported not just its merchants but banks, insurers, shipbuilders, outfitters and provisioners, rich and poor. Ordinary citizens bought shares in slave ships. Northern textile mills spun cotton picked by slaves, fueling the Industrial Revolution, and creating the economy that attracted generations of immigrants. It was no secret; John Quincy Adams, sixth president, noted dryly that independence had been built on the sugar and molasses produced with slave labor. <="" i=""> decisively refutes the widely-accepted myth that only the South profited from America's "peculiar institution."**

**Browne invited two hundred descendants of the DeWolfs to join her on a journey to explore their family's past; only nine came, ranging from a 71 year old Episcopal priest to a County Commissioner from Oregon.**

**Intrepid, intellectually and morally engaged, and a little too polite and "Protestant" for at least one among them, they retrace the Triangle Trade from their ancestors' Bristol**

**cemetery to the slave castles of Ghana and the ruins of a family plantation in Cuba. In Ghana, they discuss the impact of the slave trade on Africa with leading scholars, meet students who pointedly ask if they are ashamed of their family's past, and encounter African-Americans on homecoming pilgrimages. They are surprised and humbled when their good intentions are sometimes met with hostility but, exhausted and shaken, they press on.**

**On their return they have a clearer insight into this country's persistent racial chasm, why black and white Americans have two versions of their common history. They join the growing discussion around restorative justice and racial reconciliation. Harvard law professor, Charles Ogletree, co-chair of the Reparations Coordinating Committee, argues for a fund to benefit the descendants of slaves still excluded from American prosperity. Brown economist, Glenn Loury, counters that reparations might alienate more Americans than it would attract. But Harold Fields, facilitator of a ten year long multi-racial, city-wide dialogue in Denver, points out that "maybe reparations is a process not necessarily an event." This compelling film has become a valuable part of that process.**