

# African American Voices Lesson Plans

**Lesson Plans:** Bahamian Contributions to South Florida

**Subject:** Social Studies

**Grade:** Fifth

**NGSSS:** **SS.5.A.1.1- Use primary and secondary sources to understand history.**



**Description/  
Abstract:**

The students will:

- Read to learn how different immigrant groups have contributed to the community's rich cultural heritage.
- Interview family members and/or neighbors to identify changes that have taken place in the community in the past 20 years.
- Present findings to the rest of the class.

**Objective(s):**

The students will:

- Recognize that communities contain groups of people who have contributed to their rich cultural diversity.
- Recognize that the cultural and physical make up of communities change over time.

**Materials:**

Internet  
PDF Images of Bahamian "shotgun" houses  
Questionnaire

**Duration:**

Two days

**Lesson Lead In/  
Opening:**

1. The teacher will display images of Bahamian "shotgun" houses in Coconut Grove either on an overhead projector or a Smart Board. The teacher will explain how Bahamians came to South Florida at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century seeking better opportunities and how they built houses that resembled the ones they lived in back home.

The teacher will inspire discussion by asking the students higher order thinking questions. The following are examples:

- Why do you believe Bahamian immigrants designed their houses in Coconut Grove similar to their Bahamian homes ?
- Do you think moving from one place to another is something easy to do? Explain.
- Do you think it would be harder to move from one country to another? How so?
- If you were to move to a completely new area what kinds of things would you do to make yourself feel more comfortable?

**Activity Outline:**

**Day 1**

1. The teacher will read to the students the first two sections of the article *The Bahamian Influence on the South Florida Shotgun House* by Denise Andrews. The article can be found on-line at <http://www.kislakfoundation.org/millennium-exhibit/andrews1.htm>.

While reading the article, the teacher and the students will define the following words found in the article:

Yoruba  
Western  
Intimate  
Communal  
Discreet  
Linear  
Folklore

The words and the definitions should be written on the board (or written on index cards and posted on a “word wall”).

2. After reading the first two sections of the article, the teacher will review with the students key points of the article by asking the following questions:

- According to the author, where does the idea of the “shotgun” house come from?
- What is the name of the culture from which the “shotgun” houses come from?
- How are “shotgun” houses different from “Western” houses? According to the author, why is this?
- According to American folklore, why were these houses called “shotgun” houses?
- Where is it believed that the name for the houses actually came from? What does it actually mean?

3. The teacher will explain the home learning assignment to the students and how it would be used for the following day’s lesson.

- The students will interview a family member and/or neighbor that have lived in the community for at least 20 years. The students are to use the questionnaire to identify changes that have taken place in the community in the past 20 years.
- Students will share their findings with the class the next day.

## Day 2

1. Have students share their findings from the home learning assignment with the class. The teacher should facilitate student understanding concerning how the introduction of new cultures change the community.
2. Post completed questionnaires on the board.

### **Extended Lesson:**

1. Read the last section of the article *The Bahamian Influence on the South Florida Shotgun House*. Discuss with the students how Bahamians have played an integral part in the political and cultural development of Miami.
2. Quiz on key terms from the article *The Bahamian Influence on the South Florida Shotgun House*.
3. Organize a Black History bus tour with Miami-Dade County Transit in February, which covers historic Black communities such as Overtown and Coconut Grove. For more information visit <http://www.miamidade.gov/transit/blackhis.asp>.

### **Higher Order**

#### **Thinking Questions:**

1. In what ways do you think an immigrant culture can change a community?
2. In what other ways besides architecture did Bahamians have a strong influence over in South Florida?
3. Why are shotgun houses ideal for the South Florida climate?
4. According to the author, why were Bahamians highly noticeable in the Black community?

### **Assessment:**

- Evaluate interviews according to lesson relevance, grammar and neatness.
- Consider class participation grade when presenting interview results and answering questions.

### **Suggested Books In Lesson:**

- Dunn, M. (1997) Black Miami in the Twentieth Century, University Press of Florida.
- Portes, A. & Stepick, A. (1994) City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami, University of California Press.

# The Bahamian Influence on the South Florida Shotgun House

By Denise Andrews

From <http://www.kislakfoundation.org/millennium-exhibit/andrews1.htm>

If the family represents the soul of the community, then the house is the soul's vessel. In West African culture, religious rituals made clear the belief that the traditional clay artifact -- the home -- contained the soul of the ancestors.

In many ways, the simple nature of the shotgun houses -- long, straight and narrow -- found in Miami and other southern cities, affirms the lives of intimacy that the Bahamian builders' West African ancestors led. The structure of the shotgun house is illustrative of cultures where concepts of personal space suggest a closeness among family members that was uncommon in Western societies.

The earliest models for the shotgun house clearly can be traced to West Africa. It is an architectural form that enslaved Africans, particularly the Yoruba, brought with them to the countries of the Caribbean and to the United States. It was a form that fostered physical togetherness and emotional intimacy -- two values that laid the foundation upon which these Africans' new architecture was designed.

The history of African people suggests that members of a community were families, or clans -- a single lineage. The communities basically were composed of one head of household and the extended family members of the household -- which could be hundreds of people. Compounds were created so that families could live together communally. Traditionally there was no concept of privacy or single mindedness as we know today. Family and family life was central, intimate and communal.

The Africans who eventually were enslaved came from a vast area encompassing almost 4,000 miles of coastline, but they were not without a basic unity. Much of western Africa shares the same rectangular gable-roofed house form. Despite their linguistic and social differences, most enslaved Africans could have considered rectangular plantation cabins a logical solution to the problem of shelter.

But the shotgun house involves more than a discreet building form. There is a philosophy of space, a culturally determined sense of dimension. The idea of a house form is closely associated with the way a people seek to order their world. The design of the house draws individual family members into prolonged daily contact. The two-room rectangular house -- which became three rooms when indoor plumbing was added -- provided an intimate setting. Most living is done in full view of family members in the communal space that connects separate rooms.

The Yoruba came to the Caribbean with their entire architectural repertoire, but they only were allowed to use the smallest part of it. They were not allowed to build the large compounds that they had known in their town settlements in West Africa.

The shotgun house was an innovative solution to the challenge of providing shelter, family closeness and community interaction. The front door opened directly on to the path, inhabitants

are channeled directly into the public domain. The tiny rooms provided intimacy and the gable door and porch reintroduced the group aspect of the compound that had been denied slaves as an architectural option. Groupness was then reinterpreted as a more-encompassing ideal; the group was expanded to embrace the community instead of a single lineage.

The shotgun house represents the slaves' reaction to adversity, making sense of their new environment by modifying familiar living patterns. Cultural contact did not necessitate massive change in architecture; but rather an intelligent modification of culture. The shotgun house form is the result of a kind of mental transposition.

The house form successfully met the physical need for the family while providing a psychologically comfortable social environment. This rectangular two-room module that was the basis for all Yoruba houses became, in the Caribbean, the basis for an Afro-American architecture.

### THE CONTEMPORARY SHOTGUN HOUSE

If you ask someone to draw a house, it's likely the person will start with a simple square topped with a triangle. This is a basic outline of a shotgun house when seen from the front; when viewed from the side, it is long and narrow.

According to American folklore, the shotgun house acquired its name because a bullet fired through the front door would pass straight through house and out the back. Though this name is commonly applied to this architectural form, it is also suggested that the name is a corruption of the word shogun. Among the Yoruba people in West Africa, shogun means "God's house."

Upon climbing a pair of cement stairs from the sidewalk, crossing the open porch and passing through a two-panel screen door that swings open during a cooling summer breeze, you enter the living room of the two-room house. This small, cozy room off provides a view of the outside world and the bustling movement of neighbors riding bicycles or walking narrow paths.

Two small windows on either side of the front door let air circulate inside and out of the back door. Upon leaving the living room, you are facing the bedroom space. The area is ample enough for a bed, lamp and possibly a bureau for the residents' daily work clothes.

The last room in the house is the kitchen which is the most important part of the small house. Most kitchens were added to the two-room house as families prospered and America became more industrialized.

Henry Glassie, the distinguished folklorist, noted during his graduate study, how the path of the shotgun house differed from those of other architectural house forms in North America. For instance, the East Anglian frame house, in becoming the New England frame house, traveled east to west; so did the Swedish log cabin. But the shotgun house, Glassie said, moved from south to north, the path of the black migrants. Glassie turned the study over to a graduate student, John Vlach, whose doctoral study argues that the shotgun house derived from the narrow one-room unit of the Yoruba compound in West Africa.

Shotgun houses generally are clustered in a linear pattern that creates a community kindred to those simple houses with thatched walls and roofs made of woven grass found in West Africa. The wooden constructions built in the western hemisphere constitute a distinct architectural landscape and can be found in many southern cities, such as Galveston, Texas; New Orleans; Athens, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; and, of course, Miami.

The significance of the shotgun house rests not only on its uniqueness as a architectural form but also in its manifestations as an artifact of cultural memory which served as a strategy for survival. Much has been suggested about the lost culture of the New World African, and yet the shotgun house is a primary and visible example of cultural retention.

In South Florida, shotgun houses can be found in several communities, particularly in Key West and Coconut Grove. Overtown, once a vibrant and unique African-American community built near downtown Miami, was landscaped by rows of shotgun houses central to the communal aspects of the people who worked as laborers while the area developed an entertainment and tourist industry on its "gold coast," Miami Beach.

Miami was chartered as a city in 1896, and as the tourist industry grew neighboring communities such as Coconut Grove became home to many pioneer families. The Grove primarily was occupied by Bahamian immigrants. The "Mariah Brown" house, on Charles Avenue, is the oldest building in the area. The Browns a Bahamian family, built the house in 1897. Made of Florida pine, resistant to termites and cut in various widths, the house now shows the different periods of repair and additions.

It was designed for a hot climate -- opening the front and back doors allowed breezes to blow through, while the porch, an African-American phenomenon, provided outside shade and opportunities for communal gatherings of friends and neighbors. The Coconut Grove community represents the earliest formation of this style of house in a classic village setting.

However, shotgun houses are not the first, but just a more-recent, reminder of the African presence in South Florida.

## THE AFRICAN PRESENCE

Africans began to arrive in South Florida in the late 1600s. Many traveled with Spanish explorers in search of a new world. One of the most famous was Black Caesar, a pirate according to legend. Caesar captured and took loot from sailing ships off the Great Reef near present-day Miami. His exploits on Biscayne Bay featured tales of violence and ingenious feats of seamanship. In the early 1700s a Black Caesar left Biscayne Bay to join the pirate Captain Edward Teach, alias Blackbeard, who was operating on the west coast of Florida near Tampa.

Florida remained under control of the Spanish, whose government was awarding tracts of land to Spanish citizens, particularly those living in St. Augustine, to resettle on the lower east coast of Florida, which they called Key Buskin. A hundred acres were awarded to each male head of household, 50 acres for each child and 25 for each enslaved African.

In 1790, Pedro Fornills received 175 acres on uninhabited Key Biscayne, he was accompanied by his family, two companions and several enslaved Africans. Fornills used the Africans to

cultivate his land. But the venture was cut short by marauding English and French invaders. When Fornills fled to St. Augustine, some of the enslaved Africans escaped to the nearby swamps.

Andros Island and several other Bahamian islands ultimately were settled by escaped Africans from Florida who launched their trip to freedom from Key Biscayne long before English-speaking Europeans settled the island. An Englishman, Captain William Sayle, led a group of English settlers to a Bahamian island named Segatoo by Christopher Columbus and renamed Eleuthera by Sayle.

The white settlers arriving in Eleuthera from England wanted more religious freedom. Many were religious zealots or revolutionaries seeking refuge, contributing to the laissez-faire propensities of the colonists. These adventurers were cockney fisher folk and became known as Conchs, named after a shellfish found abundantly in the Florida Keys and the Caribbean. These seafaring Conchs migrated from the Bahamas to Key West and up the Florida Keys.

Many of the blacks on Eleuthera were runaway slaves from West Indian plantations. Others were dropped there after slaves ships were liberated by British sailors when England abolished slavery in 1807. The descendants of these former slaves moved through the Florida Keys with the Conchs becoming accomplished fisherman and seaman off the Florida coast, not unlike their forefathers who lived as freemen on the sea coast of West Africa.

By 1892, according to a recent study of blacks in the city, "8,000 of the 25,000 people in Key West were Bahamians and sponging was their mainstay. In addition to fishing, many Bahamians worked as steamers and some were ship captains. The islands' economy and lifestyle were built around shipwrecks as well. Whatever could be salvaged they would either sell or use themselves. Black and white wreckers supported and participated in the shipwreck industry. There were other good jobs to be had in agriculture, sponging, and turtling. Turtling provided food. Regarding agriculture, scrubby pine and oolitic limestone topography of South Florida were similar to that of the islands. The Bahamians knew how to plant this land, and they brought in their commonly used trees, vegetables, and fruits. They demonstrated to native American planters the rich agricultural potential of what seemed at first a desolate and forbidding land.

Some of the Conchs and Bahamians moved to the Florida Keys to grow pineapples, a remarkable commercial venture. They cut down virgin mahogany and dogwood forest of the upper Keys to plant pineapples. There were stories told in Coconut Grove by a local historian and native, the late Esther Mae Armbrister, about the selection of a special mahogany tree used as coffins and the burial practices of black people. These people made up the bulk of the labor force in this lucrative industry as more migrated from the Bahamas to the Florida Keys. As the 19th century grew to a close, black workers in the Keys were looking north for new jobs.

The Bahamian immigration to Florida in the early 20th century represented only one aspect of a larger pattern of Caribbean migration. West Indians have for generations migrated from and returned to their islands to sustain their local societies. On smaller Caribbean islands, migration traditions are so pervasive and of such long standing that they are a way of life. Centuries of plantation agriculture in the Caribbean islands resulted in extensive deforestation and consequent soil erosion. These ecological disasters severely affected island agricultural patterns, making it difficult to produce a sufficient food supply and provide full agricultural employment. As a result, migration became a form of economic adaptation.

In 1896, when Miami was chartered as a city, more than 40 percent of the black population was Bahamian. There were Bahamian communities in Lemon City, Coconut Grove and Cutler in far south Miami-Dade County. The Bahamians were noted for their masonry skills. In particular, they were adept as builders with oolitic limestone common to the Bahamas and South Florida. Bahamians found work in the burgeoning construction industry.

As Henry Flagler pushed his railroad south into the Keys, some of the heavy clearing and grading work was assigned to skilled Bahamians, along with other groups of West Indian laborer migrants, especially Cayman Islanders. On March 31, 1896, Flagler dispatched his top foreman, John Sewell, and 12 handpicked black men as laborers and three white men to clear the mangrove hammock on Biscayne Bay.

This area at the mouth of the Miami River was cleared for the Royal Palm Hotel, built on what currently is the parking lot of the Dupont Plaza Hotel in downtown Miami. Top priority was given to clearing the land in this area along with the removal of skeletons from a Tequesta Indian burial ground. Sewell was ordered to estimate how many people lived on the shores of Biscayne Bay. After physically visiting every shack, tent and boarding house, he reported 3,000 men, women, and children. The Miami Metropolis, the newspaper of the day, reported there were 438 registered male voters in the precinct, of whom 182 -- 41.5 percent -- were black.

Flagler's supervisors encouraged black workers to attend the city's incorporation meeting. Miami was incorporated on July 28, 1896 by 367 votes, 162 were black. Women were disenfranchised at the time and were not included in the vote to incorporate the city. By 1900, the population had increased by 1,681, including a sizable number of black immigrants from the Bahamas. Over the next twenty years, the Bahamian influx helped to swell the population. By 1920, when Miami's population stood at 29,571, the foreign-born made up one-quarter of the total population. More than 65 percent of Miami's foreign born residents were blacks from the West Indies. Black islanders, almost all from the Bahamas, totaled 4,815. They comprised 52 percent of all Miami's blacks and 16.3 percent of the city's entire population. Black immigrants from the Bahamas, in particular, gave immigration to Miami its special character in the early years of the twentieth century. The Bahamians thought that Miami was a young Magic City where money could be 'shaken from trees.'

Although British officials preferred to keep Bahamians on the island to maintain population stability, it was not to be. The Bahamian economy was in the midst of a big squeeze, as new citrus and vegetable production in Florida competed with the output of the Bahamas. Rising American import duties on Bahamian agricultural production, as well as on sisal (hemp) and sponges, caused these industries to fall on hard times. New economic opportunity beckoned in Florida, by the early twentieth century regular steamship service between Miami and Nassau made the trip to Florida cheap and convenient for Bahamians. It was a classic case of immigration prompted by the same kinds of economic forces that lay behind the massive European migration to the United States during the same era. The changing economic pattern had a powerful impact on Bahamian migration trends.

In Florida, the Bahamian newcomers found jobs in a variety of occupations and activities. While most of the earlier Bahamians were men, soon the emergence of Miami as a resort provided special opportunities for Bahamian women, especially as maids, cooks, laundry and service workers in the city's new hotels and restaurants. In addition, Bahamians worked as domestic servants and caretakers for wealthy white families with permanent winter residences in Miami.

Agriculture prospered in the Miami area along with tourism. Many Bahamians worked in the local citrus industry, particularly around Coconut Grove, a community where Bahamians lived since the



1880s. The Bahamian presence in West Coconut Grove gave the area's black community a distinctively island character that is evident today.

The small community originally built by Bahamians became more segregated as the Grove expanded and prospered. The descendants of Bahamians lived on Charles Avenue behind the Coconut Grove Playhouse. E.F.W. Stirrup built a large family home that stands today. Stirrup is also the builder of the shotgun houses on Charles Avenue. Most have survived over a seventy-year period which is evidence of the sturdiness of the Florida pine. This wood is invincible against termites and strong enough to withstand major hurricanes.

The survival of this type of house is not just the survival of technology. In fact, it may not involve the continuation of the skills and techniques of house building at all since architecture is the form which it gives to space -- the order which it imposes both on humans and their physical surroundings. Houses are microcosms of the bigger society and provide, by virtue of their moulding and shaping walls, a context in which other aspects of culture are learned. The importance of architectural form to comprehend the value of a society is well articulated by Glassie: "It is easy and vogueish but incorrect to think of these basic [house] forms as following function....both economically and aesthetically. But they were traditional components, structured into traditional organizations of space required for psychological comfort. It is definitely characteristic of folk buildings. . . . to be examples of types that persist with little change through time. The invariant aspects of form are the deepest necessity to the people who must use the form."

In order to see more clearly just how an African architectural legacy influences the formation of the shotgun house we must understand the shotgun house as a product of discernible cultural process rather than an accident of history. The Bahamian islands, as a physical environment, were similar in climate to Africa. Africans brought to the Bahamas, quickly developed resilience, knowledge and pride in their collective cultural selves, which transcended and survived the psychological and emotional devastation of forced servitude. As people on the move, the migration to the Americas brought Bahamians face to face with other displaced Africans. The strength of the Bahamians was asserted in their numbers and willingness, demonstrated determination to master this new environment. It must be remembered that Bahamians came to South Florida voluntarily seeking a better life for themselves not as enslaved humans forced to create wealth for a master. There is heartiness in the spirit of a people who decide to leave their homeland and venture elsewhere. It is this heartiness and resilience that form the bedrock of the contribution of Bahamians to African-American culture and to the Florida way of life.

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#### Image Citations

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0215 Farm workers carrying sacks of peas. State of Florida website n031473

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