

African American Survival and Responses to Slavery

MUSEUM CONNECTION: FAMILY and COMMUNITY

Purpose: In this lesson, students will analyze a set of primary source documents to find evidence to support or reject generalizations about the various ways in which African Americans responded to slavery.

Grade Level and Content Area: **M** Middle, Social Studies

Time Frame: 3 to 5 class periods

Social Studies Standards:

- USH 2.7.8.5 Describe the origins and development of the institution of slavery.
- PNW 7.1.8.3 Analyze situations that illustrate conflicts between conscience and respect for authority
- PNW 7.2.8.4 Describe the impact of prejudice and discrimination on individuals and groups

Social Studies VSC:

- 2.B.1.a (Grade 8) Describe the effects of cultural exchange and interactions among Europeans, Africans and Native Americans on the development of the United States
- 5.C.5.b (Grade 8) Analyze the experiences of African-American slaves, free blacks and the influence of abolitionists
- 6.F.1 (Grade 8) Interpret information from primary and secondary sources

Reading and English Language Arts VSC:

- 2.A.4.c (Grade 8) State and support main ideas and messages
- 2.A.4.d (Grade 8) Summarize or paraphrase

Objective:

Students will analyze the various ways in which enslaved African Americans responded to the institution of slavery.

VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS

Cultural Characteristics – Cultural characteristics are distinguishing or typical traits of a society that may include its customs, clothing, religion, arts, language, education, government, and family structure.

Culture – Culture is the learned behavior of people that includes belief systems, social relationships and languages; institutions and organizations; and material goods such as food, clothing, buildings, tools, and machines.

Middle Passage – The term Middle Passage describes the forced transatlantic voyage of slaves from Africa to the Americas.

Overseer – An overseer is a person who supervised the work of enslaved Africans on a plantation.

Petition – A petition is a formal written request, sometimes signed by many people.

Resistance – Resistance is the act of refusing to obey or comply.

Social status – Social status refers to the position a person has in relation to other people within the community or society. Social status may change as the individual's situation changes.

Slavery – Slavery is the institution of owning slaves or holding individuals in a condition of servitude.

MATERIALS

FOR THE STUDENT:

- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 1 — Generalizations about Slavery
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 2 — Investigating Generalizations about Slavery
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 3 — Harriet Jacobs, Former Slave

GROUP 1 Resource Packet – Family Life

- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 4 — Letter from Maryland Fugitive Slave to His Wife
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 5 — “Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands”
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 6 — “The Old Plantation”
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 7 — Former Slaves Remember

GROUP 2 Resource Packet – Culture

- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 8 — Yach Stringfellow, Former Slave
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 9 — Wash Wilson, Former Slave
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 10 — Lucindy Lawrence Jurdon, Former Slave
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 11 — “Bible Quilt,” 1886

- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 12 — Songs Sung by Slave Children
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 13 — Church Service at Plantation, South Carolina, 1863

GROUP 3 Resource Packet – Social Status

- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 14 — Cato Carter, Former Slave
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 15 — Rosa Starke, Former Slave
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 16 — Sylvia Cannon, Former Slave
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 17 — Rebecca Jane Grant, Former Slave
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 18 — Josiah Henson, Former Slave

GROUP 4 Resource Packet – Resistance

- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 19 — Henry “Box” Brown
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 20 — A Bold Stroke for Freedom
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 21 — Former Slaves Remember
- ☐ Student Resource Sheet 22 — Josie Jordan, Former Slave

RESOURCES

PUBLICATIONS:

Thomas, Velma Maia. *No Man Can Hinder Me: The Journey from Slavery to Emancipation Through Song*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2001. (*This book contains a CD of the songs used in this lesson.*)

Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2002.

Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Christian, Charles M. *Black Saga: The African American Experience, A Chronology*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.

Gutman, Herbert. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

Hine, Darlene Clark, William Hine, and Stanley Harrold. *The African American Odyssey*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003.

Owens, Leslie Howard. *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Schwartz, Marie Jenkins. *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Stampp, Kenneth M. *The Peculiar Institution*. New York: Vintage Books, 1956, 1989.

TEACHER BACKGROUND

Africans who survived the Middle Passage faced the degradation and cruelty of lives lived

in bondage while producing staple crops in British North America. The work and conditions of enslaved labor varied considerably and the responses of those in servitude were as numerous as their circumstances. There were cruel and generous masters and mistresses and overseers of every demeanor. Geographic differences and the extremes of weather and temperature influenced the quality of life as did the tasks enslaved people performed, whether they lived on a farm, on a plantation, or in an urban setting. Personal and individual situations mattered, too. Working alongside one's family or suffering from the sadness of a loved one's sudden departure surely affected how people withstood the hopelessness of being enslaved. In general, some slaves were more passive than others, and some were more aggressive; others were quick to anger while many kept their anger inside. Nevertheless, African slaves and their descendants created a culture among themselves that helped them resist the humiliation and misfortune of captivity in the New World.

In his classic study of the slave community, J. W. Blassingame argues that the family served as a survival mechanism. Historian M. J. Schwartz further states that slaves:

...resented any usurpation of parental rights by slaveholders, and they advanced their rights in ways that were subtle but determined. The willingness of slaves to protest conditions of servitude that deprived them of parenting roles influenced owners to allow women and men time for their families. (p. 3)

When enslaved parents could not fulfill their responsibilities, they desired the extended family to do so. Historians note that slaves courted one another before marriage. Despite slave marriages not being legally recognized, slaves asked elders for their blessings and held ceremonies with or without their owner's permission. When children were born, enslaved parents taught them vital lessons of survival. For instance, children were taught to avoid punishment, to keep quiet in front of white people about what enslaved people said or did, and to cooperate with other enslaved persons. Parents helped their children build self-esteem and showed them love and appreciation to counter the teachings of the slaveowner.

Some slaves held respected positions within the slave quarters. Elders were looked up to, as were artisans, skilled slaves, and seamstresses. House slaves were often viewed with varying degrees of suspicion and status. Those slaves who learned to read and to write were valued and were expected to teach other slaves—no matter what the cost.

Slaves used folktales and music for therapeutic and educational purposes. In the telling of folktales, slaves could enjoy a break from labor, worry, and concern for their circumstances. Folktales provided brief moments of laughter and a sly critique of their owners—Whites, in general, and discreditable Blacks. Folktales were frequently used to teach children values and life lessons, such as not cheating other slaves, sharing resources, not telling everything you know, and keeping humble.

Slaves used and adapted the Christian religion as a way of coping with day-to-day travails. Many prayed enthusiastically for Jesus to deliver them from evil as personified by owners, overseers, and their lives in slavery. The slaves' view of a Christian afterlife provided them with hope that they would be reunited with their families and that the future would be without chains.

Another aspect of slave culture was the resistance of individuals to their circumstances.

Slaves showed their discontent by running away, being disobedient, feigning illness, staging work slowdowns, arson, breaking tools, harming animals, and participating in rebellions. Attempts to force slaves to work beyond the limits they fixed for themselves proved “unprofitable and unmanageable.” A planter in Virginia wrote:

The most general defect in the character of the Negro is hypocrisy; and this hypocrisy frequently makes him pretend to more ignorance than he possesses; and if his master treats him as a fool, he will be sure to act the fool’s part. This is a convenient trait, as it frequently serves as an apology for awkwardness and neglect of duty.

Even when the “master’s” behavior was cruel and unusually harsh, the slave could exact revenge by being careless and tardy in return. In a letter from Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright of Louisiana in the *De Bow’s Review* in 1851, Cartwright complains of his slave’s habit of “treading down with his feet or cutting with his hoe” the very crops he was to cultivate.

The slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, Caroline Hammond, Charles Coles, Josiah Henson, and other Marylanders are essential reading for a broader understanding of how slaves reacted to and coped with slavery.

From “Remarks on Overseers, and the Proper Treatment of Slaves,” *The Farmers’ Register: A Monthly Publication Devoted to the Improvement of the Practice, and Support of the Interests of Agriculture* (September 5, 1837), p. 301-302. Available online at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5801/>.

LESSON DEVELOPMENT

1. **Motivation:** Distribute **Student Resource Sheet 1**, Generalizations about Slavery, and give students time to complete it independently. As a class, briefly discuss student answers. Tell the class that they will be using primary source documents to examine the institution of slavery and the responses of those trapped in it. Tell them that, at the end of the lesson, they will be asked to reexamine their answers to the true or false questions.
2. Distribute **Student Resource Sheet 2**, Investigating Generalizations about Slavery, and **Student Resource Sheet 3**, Harriet Jacobs, Former Slave. Direct students to read the generalization about slavery and family life on **Student Resource Sheet 2**. Read the excerpt about Harriet Jacobs with the class. Ask: Does this excerpt accept or refute the first generalization? Why or why not? Discuss. Have students fill in the appropriate section of their graphic organizer with evidence from **Student Resource Sheet 3**.
3. Divide the class into four groups. Distribute Resource Packet 1 to Group 1, Resource Packet 2 to Group 2, etc. Explain to students that they will examine each of the documents in their packet and complete the corresponding portion of **Student Resource Sheet 2**, Investigating Generalizations about Slavery.
4. After all groups have finished investigating their generalization, groups will report out to the class. As groups report out, complete on the overhead a “master” copy of **Student**

Resource Sheet 2, Investigating Generalizations about Slavery.

5. Direct students to return to **Student Resource Sheet 1, Generalizations about Slavery**. Have them independently revisit their original answers and change them if necessary. With a partner, have students rewrite each of the four generalizations about slavery based on the information they learned from this lesson. Discuss those revised generalizations as a class, and create a class master list.
6. **Assessment:** Individual students will write an essay on the various responses of enslaved African Americans to their enslavement. They should choose one of the four revised generalizations about slavery and write a three-paragraph essay defending that statement. They should incorporate evidence from the primary sources that they investigated.
7. **Closure:** Have students revisit **Student Resource Sheet 1, Generalizations about Slavery**, and the class list of revised generalizations. Have them complete the following statement:
This lesson has changed my perception of slavery because . . .
Discuss student responses.

THOUGHTFUL APPLICATIONS

- Revisit the cultural characteristics that helped enslaved people survive. Do any of those characteristics exist in American society today? Give examples.
- Choose a cultural characteristic, and trace its origin and how it came to be a part of enslaved life. Research the origins of that characteristic.
- Create an essay, poem, song, or piece of artwork reflecting your changing perception of slavery.

LESSON EXTENSION

- The “Lines Hold, Things Connect” gallery of the permanent exhibition in the Reginald F. Lewis Museum features the stories of Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass, and others coping with the circumstances of slavery. Ask students the following: What examples of anguish and triumph can you identify? What are some of the ways in which “home” is depicted in the displays of living conditions before the Civil War.

Generalizations about Slavery

Slavery destroyed African American family life.	True False
Slaves were not permitted to develop their own cultural characteristics.	True False
A social system evolved within the institution of slavery in which some slaves enjoyed higher status than others.	True False
Resistance to slavery was uncommon and usually passive.	True False

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Investigating Generalizations about Slavery

Slavery destroyed African American family life.		Slaves were not permitted to develop their own cultural characteristics.	
Accept	Refute	Accept	Refute
Evidence:	Evidence:	Evidence:	Evidence:

A social system evolved within the institution of slavery in which some slaves enjoyed higher status than others.		Resistance to slavery was uncommon and usually passive.	
Accept	Refute	Accept	Refute
Evidence:	Evidence:	Evidence:	Evidence:

Harriet Jacobs, Former Slave

I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skilful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment. I had one brother, William, who was two years younger than myself—a bright, affectionate child. I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother, who was a remarkable woman in many respects.

From *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), p. 1.

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Letter from Maryland Fugitive Slave to His Wife

Upton Hill [Va.] January the 12 1862

My Dear Wife it is with grate joy I take this time to let you know Whare I am
i am now in Safety in the 14th Regiment of Brooklyn this Day i can Adress
you thank god as a free man I had a little truble in giting away But as the lord
led the Children of Isrel to the land of Canon So he led me to a land Whare fre-
dom Will rain in spite Of earth and hell Dear you must make your Self con-
tent i am free from al the Slavers Lash and as you have chose the Wise plan Of
Serving the lord i hope you Will pray Much and i Will try by the help of god To
Serv him With all my hart I am With a very nice man and have All that hart
Can Wish But My Dear I Cant express my grate desire that i Have to See you
i trust the time Will Come When We Shal meet again And if We dont met on
earth We Will Meet in heven Whare Jesas ranes Dear Elizabeth tell Mrs
Own[ees] That i trust that She Will Continue Her kindness to you and that god
Will Bless her on earth and Save her In grate eternity My Acomplements To
Mrs Owens and her Children may They Prosper through life I never Shall
forget her kindness to me Dear Wife i must Close rest yourself Contented
i am free i Want you to rite To me Soon as you Can Without Delay Direct your
letter to the 14th Reigment New york State malitia Uptons Hill Virginea In
Care of M^r Cranford Comary Write my Dear Soon As you C Your
Affectionate Husban Kiss Daniel For me

John Boston

Give my love to Father and Mother

From "Freedmen and Southern Society Project," a digital archive developed by the Department of History at the University of Maryland, College Park, and available online at <http://www.history.umd.edu/Freedmen/>.

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**Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands
Office of the Asst. Superintendent of Marriages.
June 29, 1867**

Rev. John Kimball, Superintendent of Marriages, District of Columbia.

I have the honor to submit the following report of "Marriage Certificates" issued by me during the month of June, 1867.

Respectfully, Rev. W. Wright, Asst. Supt. Marriages.

Robert Cunanay m. Mary Wood. Original marriage date: 1855. Former residence: Prince William County, Virginia. Two children.

Ham Newman m. Lucy Robinson. Original marriage date: 1852. Former residence: Frederick County, Virginia. Four children.

Charles Jones m. Jane Carey. Original marriage date: 1847. Former residence: Charles County, Virginia. Sixteen children.

Edward Lee m. Mary Lee. Original marriage date: 1853. Former residence: Prince George County, Virginia. Two children.

Cyrus Fantroy m. Maria Waddy. Original marriage date: 1849. Former residence: Lancaster County, Virginia. Two children.

Ned Johnson m. Maria Hawkins. Original marriage date: 1862. Former residence: Maryland. Two children.

Joseph Kent m. Eliza Thomas. Original marriage date: 1850. Former residence: Virginia. Three children.

Jeff Rowe m. Lucy Walters. Original marriage date: 1851. Former residence: Culpepper County, Virginia. One child.

Albert Miller m. Ann Wilson. Original marriage date: 1863. Former residence: District of Columbia. Two children.

Charles Burgess m. Harriet Grosher. Original marriage date: 1857. Former residence: Maryland. No children.

Samuel Steward m. Eliza Hall. Original marriage date: 1860. Former residence: Prince George County, Virginia. One child.

William Gilbert m. Charlot Lee. Original marriage date: 1857. Former residence: Bladensburg, Maryland. Six children.

George Hopkins m. Sarah Adison. Original marriage date: 1840. Former residence: Montgomery County, Maryland. Seven children.

Daniel Anderson m. Maria Folsom. Original marriage date: 1857. Former residence: Prince George County, Maryland. Five children.

From Freedmen's Bureau Online (<http://www.freedmensbureau.com/>).

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The Old Plantation



The Old Plantation. (Possibly South Carolina, 1790-1800) Courtesy of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia.

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Former Slaves Remember

I was a housemaid and my mammy run de kitchen. They say I was a pretty gal then, face shiny like a ginger cake, and hair straight and black as a crow. One springtime de flowers git be blooming, de hens to cackling, and de guineas to patarocking. Sam come along when I was out in de yard wid de [white] baby. He fust talk to de baby, and I asked him if de baby wasn't pretty. He say, "Yes, but not as pretty is you is, Louisa." I looks at Sam, and dat kind of foolishness wind up in a weddin'."

* * *

My Pa uster come evy Sadday evenin' to chop wood out uv de wood lot and pile up plenty fur Ma tell he come agin. On We'nsday evenin', Pa uster come after he been huntin' and bring in possum and coon. He sho could get 'em a plenty.

My Pa b'longin' to one man and my mammy b'longin' to another, four or five miles apart, caused some confusion, mix-up, and heartaches. My pa have to git a pass to come to see my mammy. He come sometimes widout de pass. Patrollers catch him way up de chimney hidin' one night; they stripped him right befo' mammy and give him thirty-nine lashes, wid her cryin' and a hollerin' louder than he did.

From *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Dorothy Sterling (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), p. 33, 42-43.

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Yach Stringfellow, Former Slave Texas

Come Christmas us slaves have de big dinner and eat all day and dance till nex' mornin'. Some de n--- from near plantations git dey passes and come jine us. Course dey a drop egg nog round and candy for de chillen. De white folks have dey big carriage full of visitors and big goin's on dey come to from miles round. Us didn't have no money, but didn't have no place to go to spend it, neither.

From *Unchained Memories: Readings From the Slave Narratives* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2003), p. 117.

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Wash Wilson, Former Slave
Texas

When de n--- go round singin' "Steal Away to Jesus," dat mean dere gwine be a 'ligious meetin' dat night. Dat de sig' fication of a meetin'. De masters 'fore and after freedom didn't like dem 'ligious meetin's, so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewheres. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.

Dere wasn't no music instruments. Us take pieces a sheep's rib or cow's jaw or a piece iron, with a old kettle, or a hollow gourd and some horsehairs to make de drum. Sometimes dey'd git a piece of tree trunk and hollow it out and stretch a goat's or sheep's skin over it for de drum. Dey'd be one to four foot high and a foot up to six foot 'cross. In gen'ral two n--- play with de fingers or sticks on dis drum. Never seed so many in Texas, but dey made some. Dey'd take de buffalo horn and scrape it out to make de flute. Dat sho' be heared a long ways off. Den dey'd take a mule's jawbone and rattle de stick 'cross its teeth. Dey'd take a barrel and stretch a ox's hide 'cross one end and a man sot 'stride de barrel and beat on dat hide with he hands, and he feet, and iffen he git to feelin' de music in he bones, he'd beat on dat barrel with he head. 'Nother man beat one wooden side with sticks. Us 'longed to de church, all right, but dancin' ain't sinful iffen de fouts ain't crossed. Us danced at de arbor meetin's but us sho' didn't have us fouts crossed!

From *Unchained Memories: Readings From the Slave Narratives* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2003), p. 114.

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Lucindy Lawrence Jurdon, Former Slave
Alabama

My mammy was a fine weaver and did de work for both white
an' colored...

I 'members dat wehn us courted us went to walk an' hunted
chestnuts. Us would string dem an' put 'em 'round our necks
an' smile at our fellers.

On Sattidy nights dey would have dances an' dance all night
long. Somebody would clap hands, beat pans, blow quills or
pick de banjer strings. When us had cornshuckin's dey would
pile de corn up, ring 'round it an' shuck, drink likker an'
holler: "Boss man, boss man, please gimme my time; Boss man,
boss man, fer I'm most broke down."

From *Unchained Memories: Readings From the Slave Narratives* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2003), p. 82.

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"Bible Quilt," 1886
By Harriet Powers, former slave



Courtesy of National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Image available online at <http://historywired.si.edu/images/objects/362.jpg>

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Songs Sung by Slave Children

Boys:

Ham Bone, Ham Bone

Aw Ham Bone, Ham Bone, where's you been?
All around the world an' back again.
Ham Bone, Ham Bone, what'd you do?
I got a chance an' I fairly flew.
Ham Bone, Ham Bone, where'd you stay?
I met a pretty girl an' I couldn't get away.
Ham Bone, Ham Bone what'd you do?
Hopped up to Miss Lucy doo'.
Ask Miss Lucy will she marry me.
I wouldn't care if her poppa didn't see.
Aw, Ham Bone.

Girls:

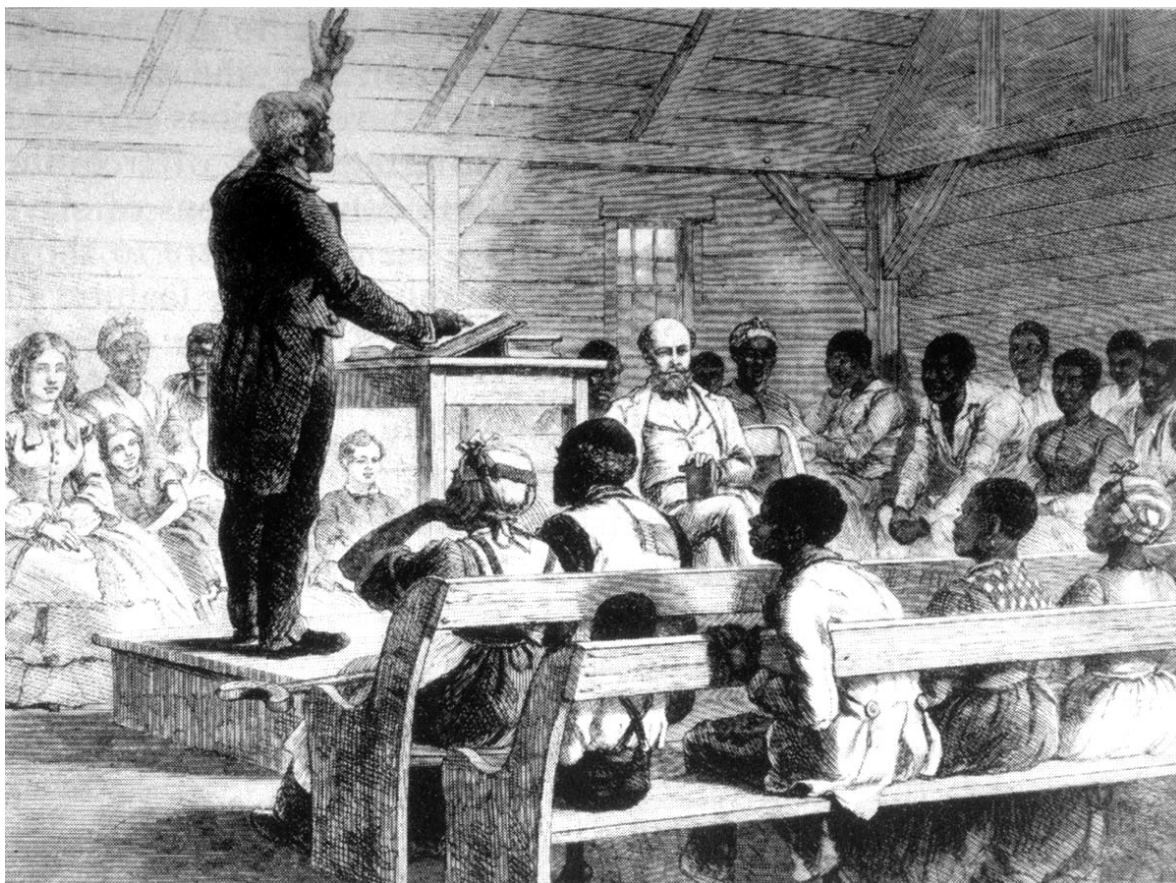
Little Sally Walker

Little Sally Walker
Sitting in a saucer
Rise, Sally, Rise
Wipe your weeping eyes
You put your hand on your hip
And let your backbone slip
Aah, shake it to the east,
Aah, shake it to the west,
Oh, shake it to the one that you love the best!

From *No Man Can Hinder Me: The Journey from Slavery to Emancipation Through Song*, by Velma Maia Thomas (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001).

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Church Service at Plantation, South Carolina, 1863



Church Service at Plantation, South Carolina, 1863, Illustration from *The Illustrated London News*, vol. 43, (Dec. 5, 1863) p. 561. From "The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record," by Jerome S. Handler and Michael L. Tuite Jr., an online exhibition available at <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/>.

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Cato Carter, Former Slave
Texas

Back in Alabama, Missie Adeline Carter took me when I was past my creepin' days to live in the big house with the white folks. I had a room built on the big house, where I stayed, and they was allus good to me, 'cause I's one of their blood. They never hit me a lick or slapped me once, and told me they'd never sell me away from them.

I had one brother and one sister I helped raise. They was mostly nigger. The Carters told me never to worry 'bout them, though, 'cause my mammy was of their blood and all of us in our fam'ly would never be sold, and sometime they'd make free men and women of us. My brother and sister lived with the niggers, though.

My massa used to give me a li'l money 'long, to buy what I wanted. I allus bought fine clothes. In the summer when I was a li'l one, I wore lowerin's, like the rest of the n---. That was things made from cotton sackin'. Most of the boys wore shirt-tails till they was big yearlin's. When they bought me red russets from the town, I cried and cried. I didn't want to wear no rawhide shoes. So they took 'em back. They had a weakness for my cryin'. I did have plenty fine clothes, good woolen suits they spinned on the place, and doeskins and fine linens. I druv in the car'age with the white folks and was 'bout the mos' dudish n--- in them parts.

From *Unchained Memories: Readings From the Slave Narratives* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2003), p. 78.

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Rosa Starke, Former Slave
South Carolina

Dere was just two classes to de white folks, buckra slave owners and poor white folks dat didn't own no slaves. Dere was more classes 'mongst de slaves. De fust class was de house servants. Dese was de butler, de maids, de nurses, chambermaids, and de cooks. De nex' class was de carriage drivers and de garderners, de carpenters, de barber, and de stable men. Then come de ne' class de wheelwright, wagoners, blacksmiths and slave foremen. De nex' class I members was de cow men and de niggers dat have care of de dogs. All dese have good houses and never have to work hard or git a beatin'. Then come de cradlers of de wheat, de threshers, and de millers of de corn and de wheat, and de feeders of de cotton gin. De lowest class was de common field niggers.

From *Unchained Memories: Readings From the Slave Narratives* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2003), p. 49.

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Sylvia Cannon, Former Slave

The white folks didn't never help none of we black people to read or write no time. They learn the yellow chillun, but if they catch we black chillun with a book, they nearly 'bout kill us. They was sure better to them yellow chillun than the black chillun that be on the plantation.

From *Before Freedom: When I Just Can Remember*, edited by Belinda Hurmence (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: John F. Blair, 1989).

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Rebecca Jane Grant, Former Slave

Didn't have no colored churches. The drivers and the overseers, the house-servants, the bricklayers, and folks like that'd go to the white folks' church. But not the field hands. Why, they couldn't have all got in the church. My marster had three or four hundred slaves, himself. And most of the other white folks had just as many or more. But them as went would sing. Oh, they'd sing. I remember two of them specially. One was a man and he'd sing bass. Oh, he'd roll it down! The other was a woman, and she'd sing soprano. They had colored preachers to preach in the fields down in the quarters. They'd preach in the street. Meet next day to the marster's and turn in the report. How many pray, how many ready for baptism, and all like that.

From *Before Freedom: When I Just Can Remember*, edited by Belinda Hurmence (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: John F. Blair, 1989).

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Josiah Henson, Former Slave

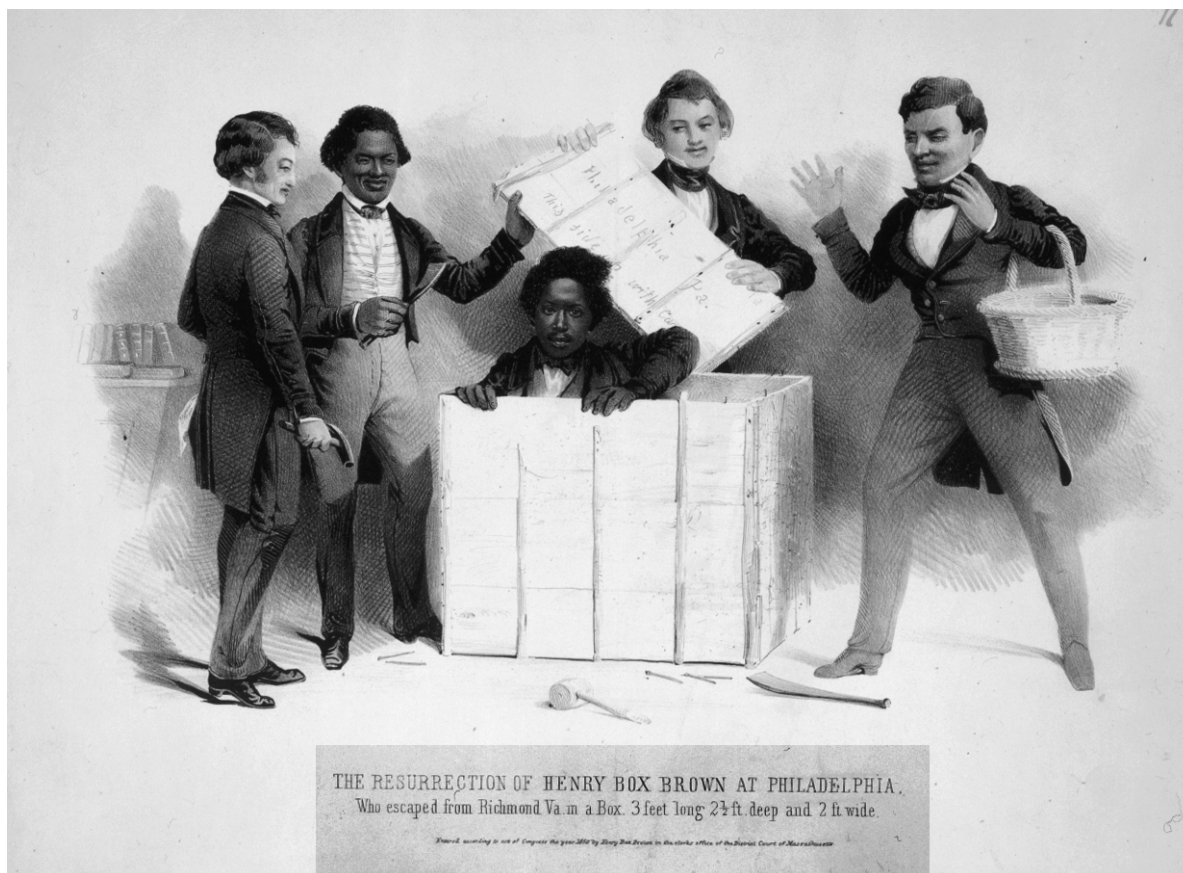
My situation, as overseer, I retained, together with the especial favor of my master, who was not displeased either with saving the expense of a large salary for a white superintendent, or with the superior crops I was able to raise for him. I will not deny that I used his property more freely than he would have done himself, in supplying his people with better food; but if I cheated him in this way, in small matters, it was unequivocally for his own benefit in more important ones; and I accounted, with the strictest honesty, for every dollar I received in the sale of the property entrusted to me....

Things remained in this condition for a considerable period; my occupations being to superintend the farming operations, and to sell the produce in the neighboring markets of Washington and Georgetown....

From *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave; Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* by Josiah Henson (Boston: Arthur D. Phelps, 1849), p. 18-20; encoded by Lee Ann Morawski and Natalia Smith (2001). Available online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/> as part of the digitization project "Documenting the American South" sponsored by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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Henry "Box" Brown



One day, while I was at work, and my thoughts were eagerly feasting upon the idea of freedom, I felt my soul called out to heaven to breathe a prayer to Almighty God. I prayed fervently that he who seeth in secret and knew the inmost desires of my heart, would lend me his aid in bursting my fetters asunder, and in restoring me to the possession of those rights, of which men had robbed me; when the idea suddenly flashed across my mind of shutting myself *up in a box*, and getting myself conveyed as dry goods to a free state.

— *Henry Box Brown*

Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-US224-4659].

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A Bold Stroke for Freedom



Illustration from *The Underground Railroad* by William Still (Philadelphia: Porter & Coales Publishers, 1872).
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-76205].

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Former Slaves Remember

[Mistress] set me to scrubbing up the bar-room. I felt a little grum, and didn't do it to suit her; she scolded me about it, and I sassd her; she struck me with her hand. Thinks I, it's a good time now to dress you out, and damned if I won't do it. I set down my tools and squared for a fight. The first whack, I struck her a hell of a blow with my fist. I didn't knock her entirely through the panels of the door, but her landing against the door made a terrible smash, and I hurt her so badly that all were frightened out of their wits and I didn't know myself but what I'd killed the old devil.

* * *

I knew a woman who could not be conquered by her mistress, and so her master threatened to sell her to New Orleans Negro traders. She took her right hand, laid it down on the meat block and cut off three fingers, and thus made the sale impossible.

* * *

He owned a woman who was the mother of several children, and when her babies would get about a year or two of age he'd sell them, and it would break her heart. She never got to keep them. When her fourth baby was about two months old, she just studied all the time about how she would have to give it up, and one day she said "I'm not going to let Old Master sell this baby; he ain't going to do it." She got up and give it something out of a bottle, and pretty soon it was dead.

From *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Dorothy Sterling (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), p. 57-58.

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Josie Jordan, Former Slave

...I remember Mammy told me about one master who almost starved his slaves. Mighty stingy, I reckon he was.

Some of them slaves was so poorly thin they ribs would kinder rustle against each other like corn stalks a-drying in the hot winds. But they gets even one hog-killing time, and it was funny, too, Mammy said.

They was seven hogs, fat and ready for fall hog-killing time. Just the day before old master told off they was to be killed something happened to all them porkers. One of the field boys found them and come a-telling the master: "The hogs is all died, now they won't be any meats for the winter."

When the master gets to where at the hogs is laying, they's a lot of Negroes standing round looking sorrow-eyed at the wasted meat. The master asks: "What's the illness with 'em?"

"Malitis." They tell him, and they acts like they don't want to touch the hogs. Master says to dress them anyway for they ain't no more meat on the place.

He says to keep all the meat for the slave families, but that's because he's afraid to eat it hisself account of the hogs' got malitis.

"Don't you all know what is malitis?" Mammy would ask the children when she was telling of the seven fat hogs and seventy lean slaves. And she would laugh, remembering how they fooled old master so's to get all them good meats.

"One of the strongest Negroes got up early in the morning," Mammy would explain, "long 'fore the rising horn called the slaves from their cabins. He skitted to the hog pen with a heavy mallet in his hand. When he tapped Mister Hog 'tween the eyes with that mallet, 'malitis' set in mighty quick, but it was a uncommon 'disease,' even with hungry Negroes around all the time."

From "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," part of "American Memory," an online exhibition created by the Library of Congress and available at <http://memory.loc.gov/>.

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