



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

EFLA TEACHING GUIDE

UNIT 5: Slavery in the U.S. (1619 – 1865)

CLASS 8: Free Blacks During Slavery

OVERVIEW

All servants imported and brought into the Country. . . who were not Christians in their native Country. . . shall be accounted and be slaves. All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves within this dominion. . . shall be held to be real estate. If any slave resists his master. . . correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction. . . the master shall be free of all punishment. . . as if such accident never happened.

- Virginia General Assembly declaration, 1705

There are many misconceptions about slavery. One is that all Blacks were enslaved and all whites owned slaves. This is far from the truth. For example, according to the 1860 census, there were approximately 250,000 free Blacks living in the South and another 250,000 free Blacks in the North. Furthermore, $\frac{3}{4}$ of all Southern whites never owned any slaves. And only the top 5% owned 5 or more slaves. The majority of whites and blacks never owned more than five slaves.



The first Africans to arrive in Jamestown on a Dutch ship were considered indentured servants (even though many would argue that they still were treated like slaves). Racism and race-based slavery had not yet been invented. In fact, one of those Africans, Anthony Johnson, was able to gain his freedom, own property, and buy slaves of his own. Through a successful lawsuit that he filed, Johnson was able to retain John Casor, another African, as his slave for life in 1655.

The majority of free Blacks were born free. Some received their freedom through manumission, or the granting of freedom by the master, usually upon the death of the master. Others worked and purchased their own freedom, and often that of relatives. Yet and still, people like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman earned their freedom by escaping. In fact, it is estimated that over 20,000 enslaved blacks ran away a year. The Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850 were enacted to help Southern slaveowners

re-capture slaves who ran away to the “free” North.

Free Blacks were often highly skilled artisans, doctors, educators, entrepreneurs, planters, entertainers, writers, cooks, and hairdressers. They owned a significant amount of land – in many cases more than the average whites around them. This was certainly the case in Virginia. In his book, *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*, Ervin L. Jordan Jr. notes, "Free Afro-Virginians were a nascent black middle class under siege, but several acquired property before and during the war. Approximately 169 free blacks owned 145,976 acres in the counties of Amelia, Amherst, Isle of Wight, Nansemond, Prince William and Surry, averaging 870 acres each.

Twenty-rune Petersburg blacks each owned property worth \$1,000 and continued to purchase more despite the war." He writes that, "some free black residents of Hampton and Norfolk owned property of considerable value; 17 black Hamptonians possessed property worth a total of \$15,000. Thirty-six black men paid taxes as heads of families in Elizabeth City County and were employed as blacksmiths, bricklayers, fishermen, oystermen and day laborers. In three Norfolk County parishes 160 blacks owned a total of \$41,158 in real estate and personal property."

Yet, not all free Blacks supported their slave brethren. Some free Blacks like April “William” Ellison of South Carolina amassed great wealth and became slave owners themselves. Although born a slave himself, once April gained his freedom through manumission, he sought to imitate the white planter elite. He started a successful business manufacturing cotton gins, and was also a cotton planter and slave “breeder.” He invested heavily in Confederate war bonds and even had his sons fight in the Confederate army to preserve the institution of slavery. After the war, his fortune declined. He died a friend of the Confederate.

Although free, many free Blacks fought against the enslavement of other Blacks, helped plan escapes (Underground Railroad), purchased enslaved Blacks out of slavery when possible, taught slaves how to read and write against the will of the law, and started anti-slavery petitions, weekly magazines and newspapers including Freedom's Journal, founded by Rev. Peter Williams Jr. and other free Black men in New York City. It was published weekly first on March 16, 1827. In 1794 Richard Allen, a free Black man from Philadelphia, started the first independent Black church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Other free Blacks became ministers who preached a revolutionary gospel, even though preaching was illegal for free Blacks in many Southern states. Furthermore, thousands of free Blacks literally went back to Africa and colonized Liberia through the aid of the controversial American Colonization Society.

Free blacks were not free in the same sense as whites. There were many restrictions placed upon them and some states even forbid free blacks from settling in their state. Despite these restrictions, many free Blacks, like the Hodges family, were able to amass substantial fortunes that they passed on to their children. They also fought tirelessly

against the enslavement and mistreatment of other free Blacks. In this class you will read a first-hand account of the trials and tribulations of a free Black family from Virginia, and how they worked to overcome and undermine slavery and racism. In the supplementary material section of the Teaching & Study Guides you will find a list of notable free Blacks as well as pertinent statistics and other books on free Blacks during slavery.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- ✓ Understand the nature of life for free Blacks in the South.
- ✓ Discuss ways in which many free Blacks fought against slavery and racial oppression despite their free status.
- ✓ Examine how the money free Blacks earned benefitted future generations.

ASSIGNMENT

Read the following materials:

- PBS: Africans in America: From Indentured Servitude to Racial Slavery (15 min)
- Free Man of Color, The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges. Excerpt extracted by the National Humanities Center. (40 min)
- The Will of Charles Augustus Hodges (10 min)

EFLA QUIZ 5.8

1. How did free blacks such as the Hodges family contribute to the struggle to free enslaved blacks? What were the risks involved?

Many participated in the Abolitionists movement in varying degrees. Some went beyond advocacy and helped escaped slaves make it North through the Underground Railroad and some even helped plan violent revolutions to overthrow slavery. It was rumored that the Hodges family was planning “a second Nat Turner rebellion.” Willis Hodges also started a weekly black paper called *The Ram’s Horn*, to discuss matters that concerned all black people, free and enslaved. In addition, Willis and William advocated for abolition through their ministries and Willis served as a delegate to a convention of colored people in Albany and Troy, New York.

2. What was the significance of free blacks knowing how to read and write? What was the literacy rate of white Americans during the time Willis Hodges wrote his autobiography?

Learning to read and write enabled free blacks the opportunity to read the Bible for themselves. In doing so, they discovered a messianic message in Christianity and used it to fight against slavery and to inspire downtrodden blacks with hope of redemption in heaven and on earth. Two of the Hodges sons became ministers, preaching an anti-slavery gospel to blacks, in contradiction to the pro-slavery scriptures often quoted by white ministers sympathetic to slavery.

Learning to read and write enabled free blacks the power to undermine the system of slavery by writing “free papers” for slaves and falsifying documents on their behalf. It also protected them when dealing with the legal system and negotiating contracts with whites.

In 1848-49 when his autobiography was being written, the literacy rate of whites was 10%.

3. What types of oppression did free blacks face in the South as well as the North? How did free blacks like the Hodges family prosper in such a hostile environment?

Many attempts were made to cheat them out of their land and property, as seen with the Hodges family (see National Humanities Center excerpt). Because of their success, they were the targets of violence and intimidation by whites, who also feared they had the capacity and interests to incite slave revolts.

4. How was freedom connected to economic progress?

Free blacks like the Hodges family were able to buy land, grow cash crops and start lucrative businesses. They were then able to leave their accumulative wealth to their children. Their enslaved brethren did not have this luxury.

Also, free blacks had the free labor of their children to help build farms and start business enterprises. Enslave blacks could not benefit from the labor of their children; their slave masters did instead.

5. How did pride in family history play a role in Willis Hodges’s success?

It gave him self-esteem and self-respect. It gave him a reputation to live up to that was based on hard work, struggle, and activism on behalf of enslaved blacks. Knowing of the history of his

family's involvement with abolition undoubtedly contributed to his activism. Because he believed his family to be of old aristocratic Virginia stock, he felt compelled to assume a leadership position within the race.

THE WILL OF CHARLES HODGES (FATHER OF WILLIS HODGES)

1. How much wealth did Charles Hodges accumulate and pass on to his wife and children?

Charles Hodges passed along more than 300 acres of prime farmland complete two with homesteads, as well as dozens of animals, farm equipment, furniture and other usable goods.

Discussion note: Imagine if all 4.5 million enslaved Africans were able to have bought land, educate their children, and profited from their own labor, “where would African Americans be today?”

2. How did this accumulation of wealth benefit his heirs beyond economic gain?

As a free black, Charles Hodges was able to educate his children, when only 10% of the white population could read and write at the time. His wealth and education helped him successfully win acquittals on two serious criminal charges. His children went on to become influential abolitionists, independent farmers, merchants, ministers, journalists, authors, and statesmen.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Quick Facts About Free Blacks:

- In 1860, there were approx. 500,000 free Blacks in America (250,000 South, 250,000 North)
- Free Blacks actively fought against slavery
- Free Blacks established independent Black institutions like the A.M.E. Church started by Richard Allen in Philadelphia.

Notable Free People of Color

- Frederick Douglass, American slave who escaped to the North, earned his education and led the abolitionist movement in the U.S.
- John Sweat Rock, born free in New Jersey, 19th c. teacher, doctor, lawyer, abolitionist, first black admitted to the U.S. Supreme Court Bar.
- James Forten, born free in Philadelphia, became a wealthy businessman (sail maker) and strong abolitionist.
- Charles Henry Langston, abolitionist and activist in Ohio and Kansas
- John Mercer Langston, abolitionist, politician and activist in Ohio, Washington, D.C. and Virginia. First dean of Howard University Law Department, first president of Virginia State University and in 1888, first black elected to US Congress.
- Robert Purvis, born free in Charleston, became active abolitionist in Philadelphia, supported the Underground Railroad and used inherited wealth to create services for African Americans.
- John Chavis, born free c. 1762 in North Carolina. Chavis was a teacher and a preacher among both white and free blacks until the mid-19th century when laws became stringent.
- Thomas Day, born free c. 1801 in Virginia. Famous furniture maker/craftsman in Caswell County, North Carolina.

Websites

African American Odyssey: Free Blacks During the Antebellum Period.

Link: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart2.html>

Free Blacks in the Antebellum Period presents the commentary of blacks in both the North and South who spoke out on the injustice of slavery, and illuminates the role of the church, and the importance of education, the Underground Railroad, and the Back-to-Africa Movement.

Texas State Historical Association: Free Blacks in Texas History.

Link: <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/pkfb>

Explores free Blacks throughout Texas history.

U.S. History.org: Free Blacks in America

Link: <http://www.ushistory.org/us/27d.asp>

Explores the presence and role of free Blacks throughout the North and South

Data Analysis: African Americans on the Eve of the Civil War

Link: <http://www.bowdoin.edu/~prael/lesson/tables.htm>

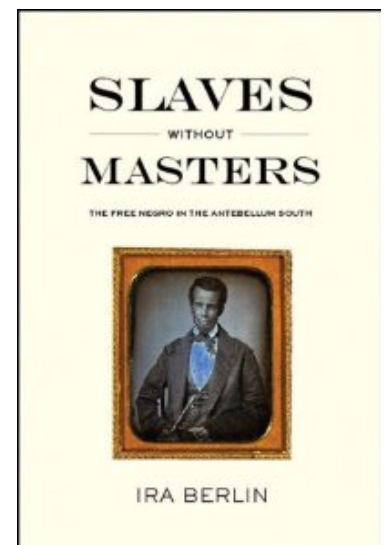
These tables offer a range of basic statistics on black life, including free Blacks. They are drawn from the federal census of 1860. Every ten years, the government collects basic information on the American population. The resulting census data offers historians a treasure-trove of information about everyday Americans who might not otherwise have left traces in the historical record.

Books

Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South. By Ira Berlin.

Widely recognized as "one of the nation's foremost scholars on the slave era" (Boston Globe), Bancroft Prize-winning historian Ira Berlin has changed the way we think about African American life in slavery and freedom. This classic volume, now available in a handsome new edition, is an indispensable resource for educators and general readers alike.

First published to great acclaim in 1974, *Slaves Without Masters* established Berlin in his field and went on to win the National History Society's Best First Book Prize. It tells the moving story of the quarter of a million free black men and women who lived in the South before the Civil War, portraying "with careful scholarship, acute analysis, and admirable historical imagination" (The New Republic) their struggle for community, economic independence, and education within an oppressive society.

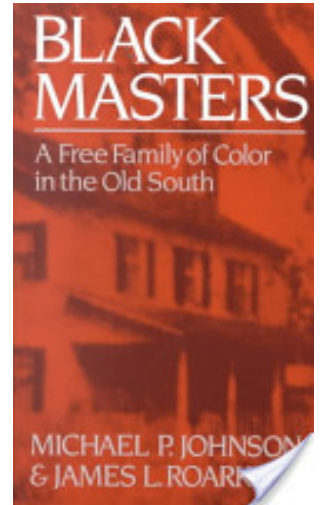


Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South. By Michael P. Johnson.

"A remarkably fine work of creative scholarship." —C. Vann Woodward, New York Review of Books

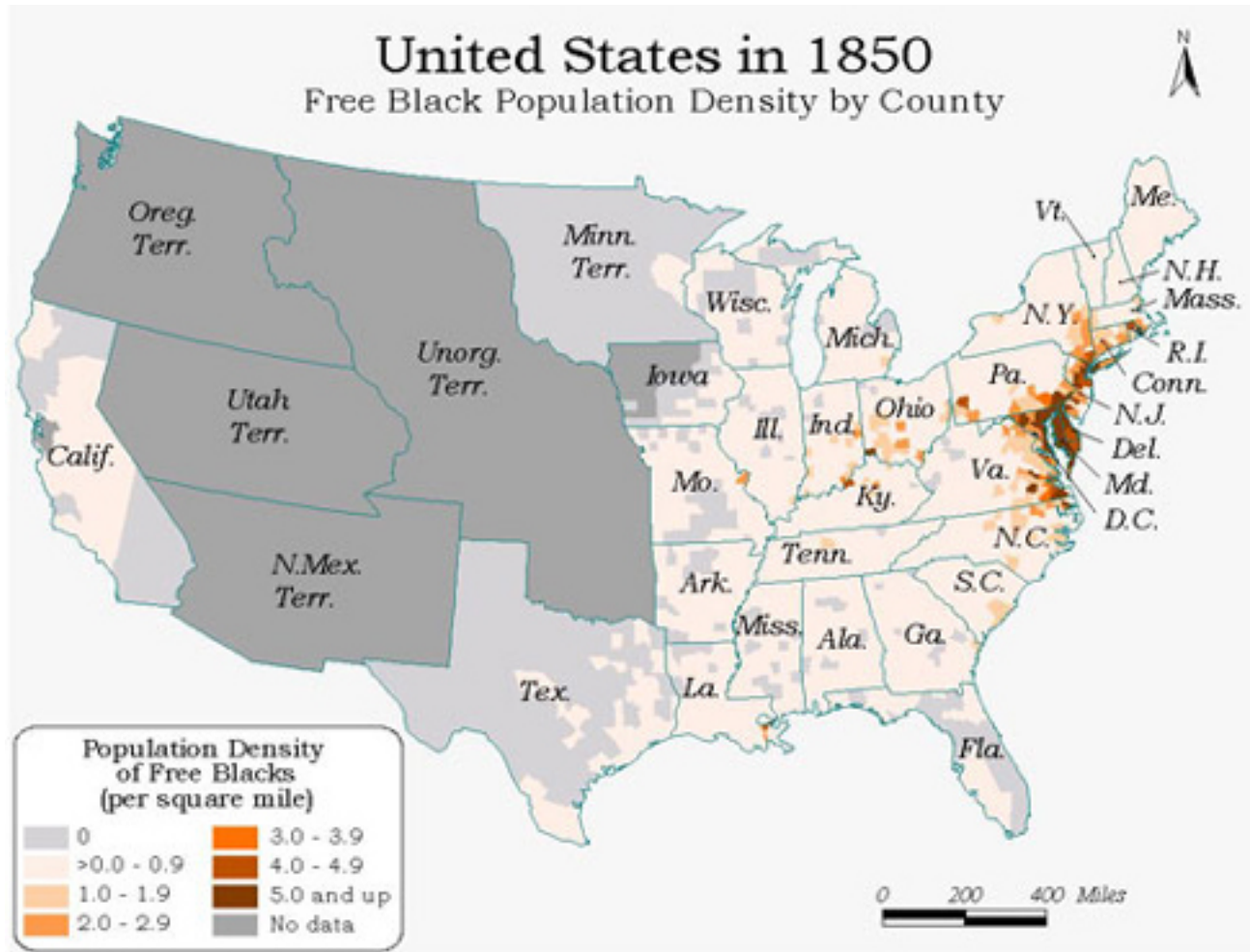
In 1860, when four million African Americans were enslaved, a quarter-million others, including William Ellison, were "free people of color." But Ellison was remarkable. Born a slave, his experience spans the history of the South from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis. In a day when most Americans, black and white, worked the soil, barely scraping together a living, Ellison was a cotton-gin maker—a master craftsman. When nearly all free blacks were destitute, Ellison was wealthy and well-established. He owned a large plantation and more slaves than all but the richest white planters.

While Ellison was exceptional in many respects, the story of his life sheds light on the collective experience of African Americans in the antebellum South to whom he remained bound by race. His family history emphasizes the fine line separating freedom from slavery.



Maps

Map of Free Black Population in 1850



Free Black Population Density in 1850

This map shows that the vast majority of African-Americans who were not slaves in 1850 lived in the mid-Atlantic and northeastern states. Small pockets of free blacks existed in the South, especially in New Orleans, Louisville, and the tidewaters of South Carolina, Virginia and Maryland. But the map also shows that few African-Americans lived in Illinois or other states of the Old Northwest.

Image source: Northern Illinois University©Copyright 2002 Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project