



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

EFLA STUDY GUIDE

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

CLASS 8: Free During Slavery

OVERVIEW

There are many misconceptions about slavery. One is that *all* Blacks were enslaved and *all* whites owned slaves. This is far from the truth. According to the 1860 census, for instance, there were 250,000 free Blacks living in the South and another 250,000 free Blacks in the North. Interestingly, less than 10% of the white population owned slaves.

The first Africans to arrive in Jamestown on a Dutch ship were considered indentured servants (even though many would argue that the conditions of indentured servitude were just as bad as slavery). 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 in 1655, Johnson was able to retain John Casor, another African, as his slave for life.

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 obtained their freedom by escaping. It is estimated that over 20,000 enslaved Blacks ran away each year. The Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850 were enacted to help southern slave owners recapture Africans 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 some 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-one Petersburg Blacks each owned property worth \$1,000 and continued to purchase more despite the war...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.

Indeed, not all free Blacks supported their enslaved brothers and sisters. In some instances, free Blacks like April “William” Ellison of South Carolina amassed great wealth and became slave owners themselves. Although born a slave, Ellison gained his freedom through manumission and sought to imitate the white planter class. He started a successful business manufacturing cotton gins and also worked as a cotton planter and slave “breeder.” Ellison 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 Confederacy.

The case of April “William” Ellison is an extreme one. In reality, many free Blacks fought against the enslavement of other Blacks. They participated in the Underground Railroad, purchased enslaved Blacks out of slavery when possible, and taught slaves how to read and write against the will of the law. 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 also started anti-slavery petitions and weekly magazines and newspapers including *Freedom’s Journal*, founded in 1827.

Despite independence, free Blacks were not free in the same sense as whites. There were many restrictions placed upon them and some states even prohibited free Blacks from settling within their borders. In the face of racial discrimination, a number of free Black families, like the Hodges, were able to amass substantial fortunes that they passed onto their children. They also fought tirelessly against the enslavement and mistreatment of other free Blacks. In this lesson, students 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 white supremacy.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- ✓ Understand the quality of life for free Blacks in the South
- ✓ Identify the restrictions placed on free Blacks in the North and South

- ✓ Discuss ways in which many free Blacks used their status as free persons to fight against slavery and racial oppression
- ✓ Recognize the legacies free Blacks passed down to future generations

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Read the following materials:

African American Odyssey Exhibit: Free Blacks in the Antebellum Period Library of Congress, American Memory

Link: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart2.html#0214>

Study Questions

1. The word “antebellum” refers to what time period?
2. How did the quality of life for free Blacks in the South differ from the life led by free Blacks in the North?
3. What role did free Blacks play in the “Underground Railroad”?
4. Briefly identify the following individuals: *Phyllis Wheatley*, *Benjamin Banneker*, *Henry Bibb* and *Paul Cuffe*.

Free Man of Color, The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges. Excerpt extracted by the National Humanities Center. (40 min)

Link: <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text3/hodgesfreeman.pdf>

Study Questions

1. How did free Blacks, such as the Hodges family, contribute to the struggle to free enslaved Blacks? What were the risks involved?
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?
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?
4. What was the link between freedom and economic progress?

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

The Will of Charles Augustus Hodges (10 min)

Link: <http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/g/r/e/David-H-Green-New-Jersey/WEBSITE-0001/UHP-1118.html>

Study Questions

1. How much wealth did Charles Hodges accumulate and pass on to his wife and children?
2. How did this accumulation of wealth benefit his heirs beyond economic gain?

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Quick Facts About Free Blacks:

- In 1860, there were approx. 500,000 free Blacks in America (250,000 South, 250,000 North)
- In general, as the population of color became larger and more threatening to the white ruling class, governments put increasing restrictions on manumissions and curtailed the rights of free Blacks.
- Many free Blacks were born free. Others acquired freedom by way of manumission (which could itself occur for a variety of reasons), purchasing their freedom, winning lawsuits for their freedom or escaping.
- By the 19th century, there were flourishing families of free Blacks who had been free for generations. In the United States, some free Blacks achieved a measure of both wealth and societal participation, owning property, paying taxes, publishing newspapers and, in some Northern states, voting.
- Free Blacks had restrictions on both their civil and political rights in most states. Property rights were sometimes respected, but also curtailed in some places.
- Free Blacks were often hired by the government as rural police, to hunt down runaway slaves and keep order among the slave population.
- By 1776, approximately 8 percent of African Americans were free. By 1810, 4 percent of Blacks in the South (10% in the Upper South), and 75 percent of Blacks in the North were free. On the eve of the Civil War, free Blacks comprised about 10% of the population.

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- Free people of color often were hired by the government as rural police, to hunt down runaway slaves and keep order among the slave population.
- Free Blacks established independent Black institutions like the A.M.E. Church started by Richard Allen in Philadelphia.
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- When the end of slavery came, the distinction between former free coloreds and former slaves persisted in some societies.

Source: Boundless. "Free Blacks in the South." Boundless U.S. History. Boundless, 27 June 2014. Retrieved 20 Feb. 2015 from <https://www.boundless.com/u-s-history/textbooks/boundless-u-s-history-textbook/slavery-and-reform-1820-1840-16/slavery-in-the-u-s-122/free-blacks-in-the-south-654-3160/>

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.

A Contested Presence: Free Blacks in Antebellum Mississippi, 1820–1860

Link: <http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/45/a-contested-presence-free-blacks-in-antebellum-mississippi-18201860>

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.

Encyclopedia Virginia: Free Blacks in Colonial Virginia

Link: http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Free_Blacks_in_Colonial_Virginia

Encyclopedia Virginia: Free Blacks During the Civil War

Link: http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Free_Blacks_During_the_Civil_War

Free People of Color in Louisiana: Revealing An Unknown Past

Link: <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special/fpoc/history.html>

Slavery In the North: Exclusion of Free Blacks

Link: <http://slavenorth.com/exclusion.htm>

Texas State Historical Association: Free Blacks in Texas History

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

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

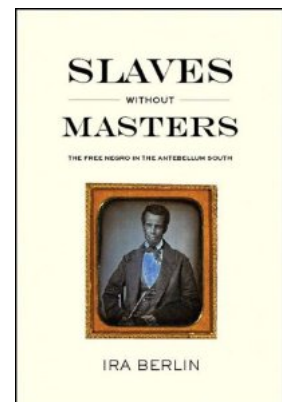
Link: <http://www.ushistory.org/us/27d.asp>

Books

Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*

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.

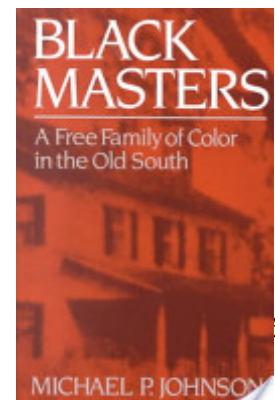
First published to great acclaim in 1974, *Slaves Without Masters* established Berlin in his field and went on to win the National History Society's Best First Book Prize. It tells the moving story of the quarter of a million free black men and women who lived in the South before the Civil War, portraying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



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

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

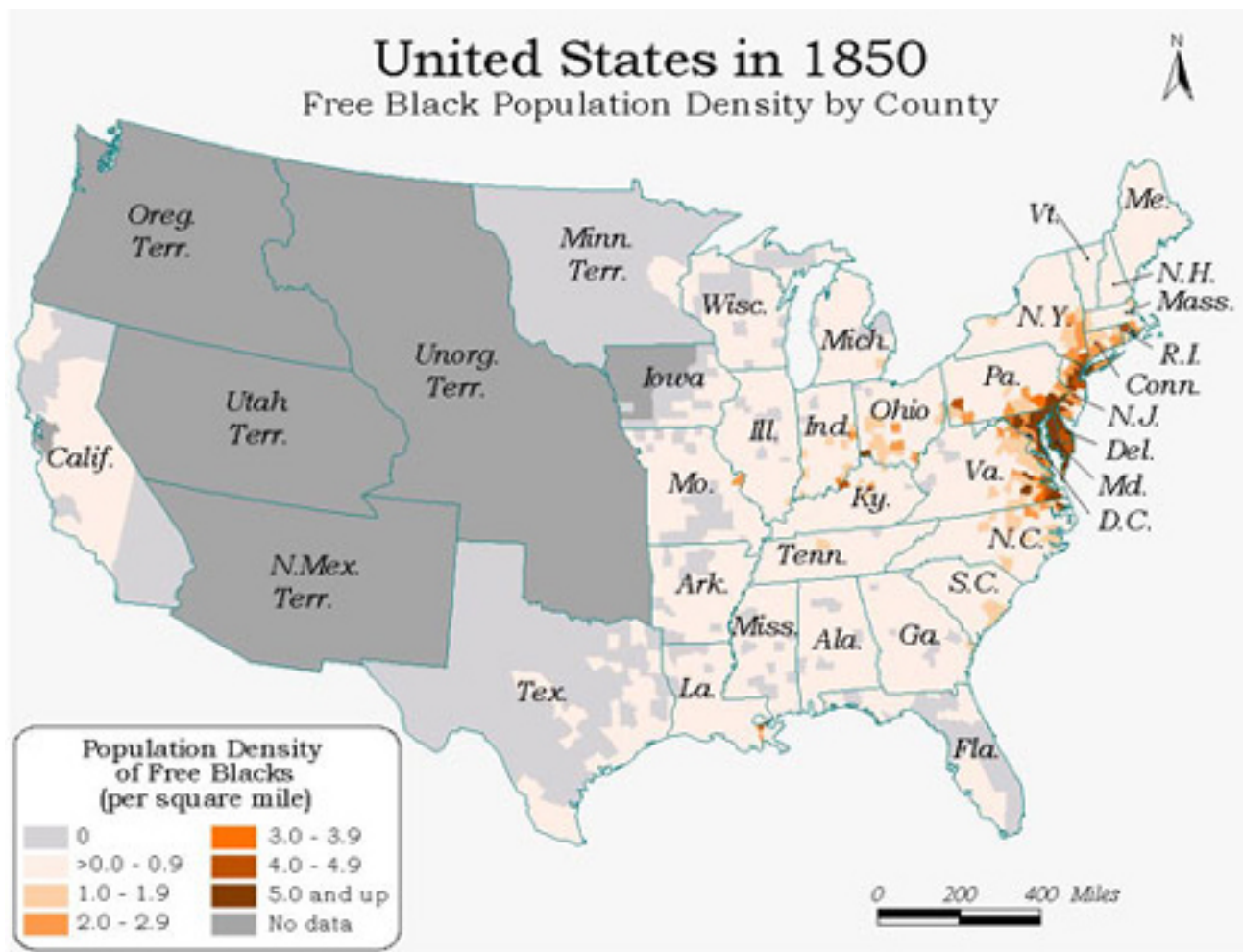
In 1860, when four million African Americans were enslaved, a quarter-million others, including William Ellison, were "free people



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.

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