African Americans: Pursuit of Equality

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Teachers hold the potential to present history in a nuanced and multifaceted manner and motivate students to learn fascinating perspectives on United States history. One way to accomplish this feat is to present African American history within its proper context to the formation of the United States. For students to understand history, they need a starting reference to help them grasp the goals of any given societal group that lacks power and representation.

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution serve as the perfect starting points to frame how African Americans were active players in ensuring that they had access to the rights and liberties that form the backbone of the United States democracy. Starting with these documents can also highlight how individuals and groups sought to restrict African American access to these rights and liberties. The founding documents detailed what rights and freedoms were due to the inhabitants of the United States. From the colonial era to the beginning of the twentieth century, African Americans sought to hold the United States government accountable to these documents. Rather than make arguments based on racial lines, African Americans rooted their fight for representation and participation in their humanity as lawful citizens of the country they called home.

Educators should possess the ground-level knowledge that centers African American agency within the United States historical narrative. Scholars of Black Studies and History have written great works that provide a holistic view into the long fight for freedom, equality, and inclusion. This article explores African American agency from the colonial period to the twentieth century and references important scholarship and resources that can aid teachers in their classroom instruction.

CLAIMING HUMANITY IN SLAVERY

Since the colony of Virginia established the first laws creating race-based slavery in 1641, enslaved Africans developed a strategy to humanize their chattel status. They sought to seize as much control of the institution of slavery as possible to create an existence where enslaved people could assert themselves as free-thinking people entitled to reap the benefits of personhood. Slavery was a condition placed upon enslaved Africans and their descendants; slavery was not their identity. It is important to stress this concept so that this group is not presented solely through the lens of the people who enslaved them. Works such as *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America, Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, and *American Negro Slave Revolts: Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel, and Others* explain that enslaved people developed an identity similar to the slaveholding class and similarly constructed their lives.

The slaveholding class possessed the greatest access to freedoms and rights. By knowing how the system of slavery operated, enslaved people learned how to negotiate with slave owners to better their living conditions. Enslaved people understood their personhood and used labor negotiation to access improved treatment and rights within the slave system. Tactics such as slowing down work, refusing to work, destroying property, or rendering oneself incapable of work were acts of resistance that caused work stoppages and impacted slavery's profitability.[1] When the Founding Fathers wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal, the words did not escape enslaved people. They had long developed a mindset that positioned them no less than any other person.

DEMANDING RIGHTS AND EQUALITY

The ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, in conjunction with the Declaration of Independence, laid the foundation for which African Americans held the United States government accountable for ensuring rights to all people. The Constitution makes no reference to slave or slavery; however, the Three-Fifths Compromise allowed Southern states to count their slaves as 3/5 of a person.[2]

Despite the abolition of slavery in northern states, free Black people in the North faced limited freedoms. They advocated for the abolition of many forms of inequality, which included rejecting colonization and voter disenfranchisement. The scholarship of Benjamin Quarles and James and Lois Horton underscores the importance of Black intellectual agency in the early nineteenth century. Free Black people banded together to tackle issues that members of their communities faced. They took control of their causes because they did not trust that others would do it for them. The evolution of the Black press provided an invaluable platform and voice. *The Colored American, The Mirror of Liberty,* and *The North Star* captured the spirit and politics of the time and serve as valuable primary resources today. [3]

Analyzing state constitutions and court rulings provides a first-hand account of how and why Black people used the law to fight injustices—but also how the law was used to prolong injustices. Obtaining access to uninhibited suffrage was the first step toward a society where equality was not just a notion but a fact. Abolition became more than abolishing slavery but abolishing inequality.[4] Abolitionists' greatest threat was not public opinion but the courts. The courts played a critical role in hindering the full enjoyment of rights and liberties. Northern state legislatures either limited or fully eliminated Black men from the ballot box. In the 1837 *Hobbs v. Fogg* case, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled "that a free negro or mulatto is not a citizen within the meaning of the constitution and laws of the United States, and of the state of Pennsylvania, and, therefore, is not entitled to the right of suffrage" after William Fogg, a Black man, sued based on his right to vote being violated.[5]

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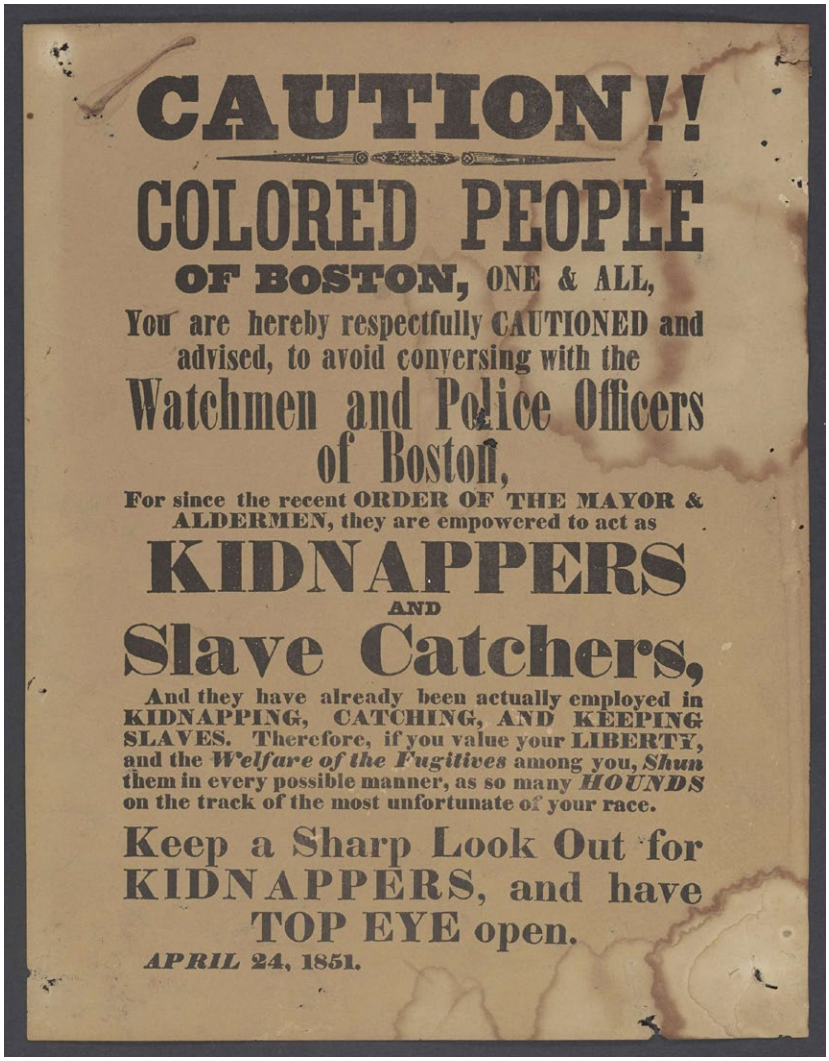
[1] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, Press, 1998), 34–38. Berlin also discusses the slaveholding class stripping away rights from enslaved peoples. This point is important because Herbert Aptheker wrote that slaves believed that liberty belonged to all people, not just White people. Eugene Genovese. *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 3, 5–6, 217–218, 317; Herbert Aptheker. *American Negro Slave Revolts: Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel, and Others* (New York: International Publishing Co., 1983), 18–19, 83–84, 141–142.

[2] John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 100–101.

[3] James O. Horton and Lois Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 125, 129, 139; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 87. David Walker's, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/walker.html) and Robert Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto*: *The Black Abolitionist Papers Vol. I: The British Isles*, 1830–1865 provide primary accounts of the politics of slavery during the antebellum era.

[4] Quarles, *Black Abolitionist*, 168–169. Also see Martha Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) for an intersectional analysis of how Black women sought to include women's issues within the larger debate for race equality.

[5] Franklin and Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 162–163.



An April 24, 1851 poster warning the "colored people of Boston" about policemen acting as slave catchers. Papers of Anne Spencer and the Spencer Family, University of Virginia Special Collections (14204).

The Hobbs case exemplified the call-and-response struggle for civil rights. Black people's calls for freedom often led to a response that limited freedoms. The Underground Railroad, a complex system that aided escaping slaves to freedom, disrupted the slave institution and played a key role in a Fugitive Slave Act being passed. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act required all individuals to participate in the return of escaped slaves, even in free territory.[6]

When Dred and Harriet Scott sued for their freedom after living in a free state, the Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) that no Black person, free or enslaved, was a citizen and had no rights or access to democratic processes.[7] These legislative and judicial milestones resulted from Black people's demands to change the status quo.[8]

[6] "The Fugitive Slave Act (1850)," National Constitution Center, accessed March 10, 2023, https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/the-fugitive-slave-act-1850.

[7] "*Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857)," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed March 10, 2023, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/dred-scott-v-sandford.

[8] See Hanes Walton Jr.'s *Black Republicans: The Politics of the Black and Tans* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1975) for a discussion of how before being firmly affiliated with the Republican Party, African Americans understood their alliance to any party was their opportunity to create a platform that would benefit the race. The Republican Party was eager to have African Americans to build their numbers but had little interest in tackling the issue of slavery or the Fugitive Slave Act. Another valuable resource is the 1989 film, *Glory*, which chronicles the debate of the Union using Black soldiers in Civil War combat. The film showcases the desire for Black peoples to assist in their freedom struggle.

Engraving of a photograph of Dred and Harriet Scott, c. 1857, published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, June 27, 1857. Library of Congress (2002707034).

LIBERATION IN THE AGE OF EMANCIPATION

Teaching the difference between emancipation and liberation is crucial for teachers to explain the continued Black freedom struggle after the Civil War. Emancipation and liberation are not interchangeable. The post–Civil War era was a struggle for liberation. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery (except as a criminal punishment). The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments gave citizenship and ballot protections. As the Constitution expanded, so did Black people's expectations that their rights and liberties be respected and protected. Legislation did not equate to compliance. While legally free, the United States struggled to create a society rooted in equality because many White people would not accept being equal to Black people.

The racialization of U.S. society cemented the concept of racial superiority in the American psyche. Black Codes subjected African Americans to a near replicate of the slave institution. African Americans constructed their lives along the lines of their constitutional protections. They purchased land, built schools, created community organizations, formed positive interracial partnerships, and participated in politics to cement their presence at the local, state, and federal levels.[9] As African Americans continued to etch their pathways in U.S. society, anti-Black forces created mechanisms to curtail their forward advancement.

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[9] See W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*; Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*; and Evan Howard Ashford's *Mississippi Zion: The Struggle for Liberation in Attala County, 1865–1915* for a nuanced examination of the active role African Americans took to establish the foundations of liberation.

The evolution of Jim Crow society grew from the successes that African Americans achieved in liberating themselves in slavery's aftermath. Jim Crow sought to firmly establish racial hierarchy. After the Supreme Court overturned the 1875 Civil Rights Act, states passed laws establishing color lines in public spaces such as streetcars, parks, and theaters. States stripped funds from African American schools to increase the quality of White education. During the 1890s and continuing into the twentieth century, Southern states passed new state constitutions that targeted voting. Literacy tests, comprehension tests, residency requirements, and poll taxes headlined the new requirements aimed to eliminate the influence of African American voters. These tactics alone could not eliminate educated and economically stable African Americans. The disenfranchisement of Black people's influence in elections occurred with the primary system.[10] Jim Crow halted the United States' responsibility to uphold its framework of liberty and justice for all.

Understanding the twentieth-century freedom struggle to defeat Jim Crow requires a familiarity with late-nineteenth century Black politics. The last decade of the nineteenth century centered on the accommodation versus agitation "debate." *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) made "separate but equal" the law of the land.[11] *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898) declared that Mississippi's voting regulations were constitutional.[12] These rulings eroded rights granted to African Americans in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The attack on Black freedoms left African Americans in a vulnerable position by making it difficult for the collective race to create thriving political, social, and economic identities and institutions because, at every turn, they were faced with some form of suppression.

Booker T. Washington, with whom accommodation is famously associated, assessed the southern African American situation and understood that Black Americans had to find a way to deal with White resistance until they were in a better position to take back control of their situation. By "accommodating," African Americans would provide additional time and opportunities to secure their rights by using the laws intended to oppress them, turning these laws against their oppressors Agitation served as a competing strategy to accommodation. African Americans, such as Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. Du Bois, William Monroe Trotter, and Timothy Thomas Fortune, believed that taking a slower pace, advocated by Washington, only emboldened those seeking to oppress the Black race.

Photograph of Booker T. Washington c. 1905. Library of Congress (2016857180).

[10] See Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Disenfranchisement of the Negro," *The Negro Problem: Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Others* (Milwaukee: Centennial Press, 2003), 24–26.

[11] "*Plessy v. Ferguson*," HISTORY®, updated January 11, 2023, accessed March 10, 2023. https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/plessy-v-ferguson.

[12] Amanda Brown, "*Williams v. Mississippi*," Mississippi Encyclopedia, accessed March 10, 2023. https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/williams-v-mississippi/.

Journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett exposed the reality of lynching and made it an international issue. African Americans understood that an organization would give them a voice to regain the rights taken from them. National organizations arose to respond to the loss of voting rights and the increased violence toward African Americans. The Afro-American League and National Afro-American Council were early attempts at national organizing.[13]

Photograph of Ida B. Wells-Barnett taken by Sallie E. Garrity, c. 1893. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (NPG.2009.36).

CONCLUSION

History is not one note, and teachers are positioned to add nuance to United States history by explaining how African Americans held the country accountable to protect all its citizens. While it is easy to frame their mission as a struggle, struggle is not always negative. Struggle indicates that a group is logically and intellectually making progress toward their goals, evidenced by the response from the dominant group seeking to maintain the status quo. African Americans of the nineteenth century framed the twentieth-century freedom struggle by making the civil rights question a referendum on how the United States presented itself to the world versus its domestic practices. The African American presence guaranteed they would always be active players in shaping U.S. democracy to live up to its true definitions of liberty and justice for all.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

- Shawn Leigh Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP*
- Evan Howard Ashford, *Mississippi Zion: The Struggle for Liberation in Attala County, 1865–1915*
- Christopher James Bonner, *Remaking the Republic: Black Politics and the Creation of American Citizenship*
- Thulani Davis, *The Emancipation Circuit: Black Activism Forging a Culture of Freedom*
- P. Gabrielle Foreman, Jim Casey, and Sarah Lynn Patterson, Editors, *The Colored Conventions Movement: Black Organizing in the Nineteenth Century*
- Alton Hornsby, Jr., *Black Power in Dixie: A Political History of African Americans in Atlanta*
- Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South*

To learn more about National History Day's Inclusive History Initiative,go to nhd.org/inclusivehistory.

[13] Shawn Leigh Alexander. *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 4–7, 26–27, 47, 69, 72. Other key readings on Black politics include *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography, Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion*, and *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. The National Association of Colored Women (NACW), founded by Mary Church Terrell, grew from the organizational success women enjoyed through the church. African American women found success by uniting women from all classes and showed that they would be instrumental in securing civil rights along race, class, and gender lines.