Teaching Enslaved People's History

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The histories of enslaved people have come a long way over the past several decades. Jim Crow-era thinking dominated mainstream scholarship for the first half of the twentieth century, and scholars often dismissed the historical significance of Black people, particularly those who were enslaved. Contemporary scholars have not only integrated the study of slavery into mainstream history but also encouraged us to view enslaved individuals in new, more insightful ways.

No longer assuming that legal social status has ever been a valid predictor of one's humanity, historians now recognize what slaveholders had known all along: that enslaved people were powerful historical actors, agents of change no less than the free people around them. Enslaved people, this new scholarship tells us, laid the groundwork for today's nation, sometimes literally when we think in terms of railroad lines or the levees that tame the lower Mississippi River. It is a cognitive and interpretive shift that works to educators' advantage. Rather than teaching about a category called "slaves" and the institution that enthralled them, abstractions that distance our students from the lived realities of human bondage, we are now free to teach about a people: women and men, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, friends and foes, all of whom were, at their core, irrepressibly human with all that status entails.

Much of this interpretive shift has occurred since the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement forced us to reassess Black Americans' roles in creating and shaping our nation. At first, this scholarship asserted that Black Americans had a past worth examining. In short order, historians were branching out, using ideas and questions developed in other academic fields to better understand enslaved people's histories. Among the first of these branches began the work of distinguishing Black women's experiences in bondage from those of Black men, a strand of scholarship that has further developed into nuanced investigations into the gendered lives of enslaved people. A more recent example of scholarship from this subfield includes Thavolia Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* published in 2008.

Inspired, in part, by economic and technological events during the early 2000s, many historians have also been digging into the records of slave traders. As they unraveled a commercial system that became the model for today's integrated supply-chain management practices, they discovered that enslaved people flatly refused to play the part of a commodity. Instead, as demonstrated in Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (2000) and Calvin Schermerhorn's *Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South* (2011), enslaved Americans weaponized the slave market whenever they could. Some played sick while standing on the auction block, hoping to lower their appeal and maybe avoid sale altogether. Others, like Solomon Northup, met and made friends and even plotted rebellion while chained together on coffle lines or locked inside slave traders' jails.[1] Maria Perkins, whose letter is accessible online, seized an opportunity in 1852. She attempted to use the existing market dynamics to her advantage by urging her husband to persuade his owner to purchase her and their youngest child. In this situation, she viewed the market as a potential way to keep her immediate family together.[2]

[1] Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853*, Documenting the American South, https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html.

[2] "'My Master Has Sold Albert to a Trader': Maria Perkins Writes to Her Husband, 1852," History Matters, George Mason University, accessed July 13, 2023, https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6380/.

Some of the most exciting scholarship has resulted from a late twentieth-century effort to draw together histories of economics and enslavement. It has long been understood that cotton of the kind enslaved people produced on plantations from the Carolinas to Texas drove the antebellum national and global economies. A driving force in a tightly integrated system that raises its own questions about the antebellum existence of a "North" pitted against a "South," New England textile mills and tool makers, New York clothiers, shipping companies, insurance companies, and banks both domestic and foreign, raked in enormous profits from the cultivation and sale of cotton. In turn, southern planters used their cotton profits to purchase finished products from North American and European merchants.

What we only more recently have come to see is that those same enslaved people who could wreck enslavers' sales by holding their bellies and feigning sickness could just as easily wreck a year's crop. Exploring this reality has revolutionized the study of American slavery. No longer casting enslaved people as prisoners pinned to plantations by the weight of a slaveholder's oppression (and the always looming threat of the whip), historians are beginning to understand that enslaved people did much more than simply produce the cotton that filled their owners' coffers—and the nation more generally. They drove the wagons, crewed the boats, ran endless errands, and, in a sense, functioned as the primary gears in a vast global machinery. American planters needed enslaved labor, and enslaved laborers knew it.

None of these observations are meant to say that enslaved people had garnered enough power to revolt against and forcibly squash the system of human bondage, at least not yet. But it did mean they had the means to interfere with and sometimes upset the plans of their enslavers. Shelling out a part of cotton's profits to purchase runaway advertisements in regional newspapers was not an expense slaveholders liked to pay, neither did losing a part of a crop to a wave of runaways or having a teamster return to their home full of news gathered while they were depositing the cotton in a nearby city. Enslaved people, their owners knew, had the means to change the rules of what was always an awful game. Ira Berlin was among the first American historians to put this tension and its consequences into words when, in his magisterial study, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (2000), he likened the relationship between enslaver and enslaved to the "meanest of all contests," one in which slaveholders held the best cards, but never held *all* the cards. "Slaves held cards of their own," Berlin reminds us, and they were never averse to using them.

Berlin's analogy plays right into educators' hands. In inviting our students to search the historical record for the "cards" or forms of leverage that enslaved people had at their disposal, we can raise a host of subsequent questions. When answered, these questions can continue to open new understandings about the practice of human bondage on U.S. soil. Did women, for instance, hold different cards than men? Did the kind of crop enslaved people made or the work they were ordered to do outside of the field affect what and who they knew and what they could do to advance their interests? How about marital status? What difference did marriage make? And what about urban workers and factory workers of the kind Calvin Schermerhorn studies? Did these two groups share aspirations, or did life experiences give them different sets of priorities and different means to achieve them? We know from her letter that Maria Perkins was literate and that she used those skills in a desperate attempt to protect her small and vulnerable family. But since she and her remaining child were so close to the free states, why didn't she just run away? What does it mean that she found her solution in the same slave market that otherwise threatened to fracture her family? And how did she learn to read and write in the first place? Such questions drive our scholarship as well as that of our students, helping us all better understand our national past.

All this asking and answering questions about the experiences of enslavement has never been easier. Because few enslaved people left their own written record, studying their history has always demanded a lot of digging and heavy applications of critical thought as we fight through a labyrinth of primary sources, a wide range of perspectives, competing priorities, and more than a little prejudice. While we still must ask those basic critical questions about authorship, agenda, perspective, and purpose, the proliferation of digital archives eases our work considerably. Going to the archives now often means going no farther than the nearest tablet or computer. But as is the case with all historical research, the quality of our primary sources determines the quality of our finished projects.

Archives maintained by federal, state, and educational institutions remain our best bets. Like the highly acclaimed Southern Historical Collection (library.unc.edu/wilson/shc/) at the University of North Carolina (now largely digitized), government and educational archives are staffed by librarians and archivists who know how to manage their collections without altering the content or meaning of the primary sources they contain.

Most of the sources we have that pertain to the history of enslavement and enslaved people have not been transcribed, making them a little more challenging for students to use. But reading sources in the original is not all that difficult. As my students are quick to figure out, the alphabet has only 26 letters, and between a process of elimination and an eye to context (historical and within the document itself), most original sources can be made to yield their secrets.

For instance, I routinely assign Prince Woodfin's 1853 letter to his owner because it challenges many of the preconceived ideas students (and adults) have about enslaved people and slavery.[3] Writing from Tuolumne County, California, at the height of the gold rush, Woodfin, an enslaved man, reports to his master about how he has been getting along since the latter returned to North Carolina. After filling his master in on the latest gold mining news, Woodfin commands the man to "State to me whether you had rather I would Send you what gold dust I make between now and next winter or if you reather [*sic*] I sell the gold and bring you the money." Once my students "crack the code" (which usually does not take more than a few minutes), they are off and running, asking those questions that yield the most information, not least of which is "What happened out West that made an enslaved person believe and behave as though they were equal to an owner?" and "What's going on that Woodfin didn't tell his owner how much gold was actually in his pocket?"

As much as my own historical work depends on original copies of my sources, any transcriptions that can be found make our teaching much easier. Please feel free to use them. But as is the case when working with originals, ensure that historically literate specialists have produced the transcriptions your students use. Distinguishing between an "a" and a "c" is often an intellectual decision that requires a level of contextual knowledge that, once again, only comes from years of study. Similarly, a misplaced comma can turn the meaning of a sentence, or even a document, inside out and upside down. Even names can be tricky. "Judy" is commonly a woman's name today; that was not necessarily the case in the antebellum era. And imagine the damage to our understanding if the transcriber got the dates wrong! With that in mind, the same advice applies to transcriptions as to the originals: work only with those that come from reliable institutions and were produced by knowledgeable scholars. George Mason University's digital archive, *Many Pasts* (historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/manypasts/), is one of many that meets that criteria and is replete with accurately rendered primary sources that cover the length and breadth of the American past, including its history of slavery.

[3] Letter, Prince Woodfin to his master, April 25, 1853. Nicholas Washington Woodfin Papers, 1795–1919, 1950 (folder 4), Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/01689/#folder_4.

Antebellum slave narratives are another fine source. Nowhere near as problematic as those collected under the auspices of the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, this earlier set of narratives was written by people who lived in enslavement for decades and whose memories had not been distorted by time. Many are available on Google Books. Many more have been made available at *Documenting the American South* (docsouth.unc.edu/), a vast library of nineteenth-century narratives maintained by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. On this site, you will find the familiar: works by Frederick Douglass, including *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, *My Bondage and My Freedom*,[4] Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*,[5] and William Wells Brown's *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*.[6] You will also find hundreds of more obscure but no less insightful and compelling life stories there, including Benjamin Drew's compilation of mini-narratives that he assembled from interviews conducted among the fugitives who made their way to Canada in the 1840s and 1850s.[7] These narratives draw us into the lives of enslaved Americans. When read against one another, they also underscore the complexity of the experiences of enslavement. There was no single slavery, just as there is no single freedom, a realization that invites a deeper consideration of historical context and change over space and time.

Many university and government archives have developed primary sources for classroom and public use. Sometimes, these materials take the form of complete lessons.[8] In other instances, archives transcribe and digitize individual documents that they think have classroom applications, such as Vilet Lester's 1857 letter to her mistress, which you can find on the Duke University library website.[9] Other institutions digitize around a theme, and though the primary sources found on the *Freedmen and Southern Society Project* (freedmen.umd.edu/sampdocs.htm) webpage were produced during or shortly after the Civil War, they can be read backwards into an era in which the system of slavery was alive and well. For instance, the letter Maryland resident John Boston sent to his wife in January 1862 raises questions about how, as an enslaved man, he came to know that the shortest path to personal freedom ran south, not north.[10] Savvy students can mine another post-Civil War digital archive, *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery* (informationwanted.org), to gain a deeper understanding of enslaved people's families, what those families looked like, how they were constituted, how often they were broken apart by sale, and the lengths to which people in slavery, as well as freedom, went to keep them intact. Personally, I'm itching for an opportunity to ask my students to transfer information from these ads into a spreadsheet where they could then sort them by region, date, years since last seen, etc. Analysis like this almost always pays off in new insights and new understandings.

Local newspapers in the antebellum era, primarily accessible through *Chronicling America* (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov) and state and university library websites, contain a wealth of information. They cover a wide range of local news, including grand jury reports that shed light on the activities of enslaved individuals, advertisements for slave labor, and accounts of legislative efforts to control the enslaved workforce, which was crucial for generating profits.

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[4] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself,* Documenting the American *South*. https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html and Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Documenting the American South, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass55/douglass55.html.

[5] Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, Documenting the American South, https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html.

[6] William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself*, Documenting the American South, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brown47/brown47.html.

[7] Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery . . .*, Documenting the American South, https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/drew/drew.html.

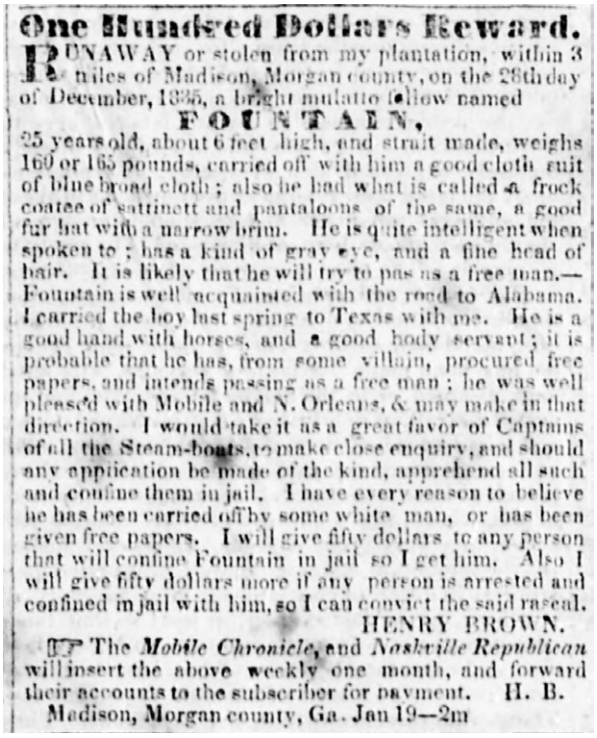
[8] "The Making of African American Identity," National Humanites Center, accessed July 13, 2023, https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/index.htm.

[9] Vilet Lester Letter, 1857, Joseph Allred Papers, Duke University, https://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/lester/.

[10] "Maryland Fugitive Slave to His Wife," Freedmen and Southern Society Project, University of Maryland, http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/boston.htm.

Enslavers turned to newspapers to communicate that the people they held in bondage ran away, and every issue of every local and regional paper contained at least one runaway slave advertisement, a wide assortment of which are featured on the Cornell University website, *Freedom on the Move* (freedomonthemove.org/). Typically straightforward pieces of historical evidence, advertisements provide information about a person's physical characteristics, age, dates of departure, and thoughts about where the so-called "fugitive" may have gone. However, some offer a good deal more. Reading like miniature biographies, they lay out the fugitive's past, their skills, their family connections, and their ambitions.

The advertisement that slaveholder Henry Brown took out in *The Georgia Journal* when his enslaved worker, Fountain, ran away is a good example of the latter.[11] In it, we learn Fountain's age, weight, and posture, the clothes he wore when he absconded, and the color of his eyes. We learn that Fountain was a skilled horseman and a personal servant. Most importantly, we learn something about the places Fountain had been and the things he had seen. Fountain, the advertisement tells us, was a well-traveled man who, in accompanying his owner from Georgia to Texas and back again, had developed a fondness for big city life. "He was well pleased with Mobile and N. Orleans, & may make in that direction," Brown cautioned those who read the advertisement.



One Hundred Dollars Reward.

RUNAWAY or stolen from my plantation, within 3 miles of Madison, Morgan county, on the 28th day of December, 1835, a bright mulatto fellow named

FOUNTAIN,

25 years old, about 6 feet high, and strait made, weighs 160 or 165 pounds, carried off with him a good cloth suit of blue broad cloth; also he had what is called a frock coatee of sattinett and pantaloons of the same, a good fur hat with a narrow brim. He is quite intelligent when spoken to; has a kind of gray eye, and a fine head of hair. It is likely that he will try to pas as a free man.—Fountain is well acquainted with the road to Alabama. I carried the boy last spring to Texas with me. He is a good hand with horses, and a good body servant; it is probable that he has, from some villain, procured free papers, and intends passing as a free man; he was well pleased with Mobile and N. Orleans, & may make in that direction. I would take it as a great favor of Captains of all the Steam-boats, to make close enquiry, and should any application be made of the kind, apprehend all such and confine them in jail. I have every reason to believe he has been carried off by some white man, or has been given free papers. I will give fifty dollars to any person that will confine Fountain in jail so I get him. Also I will give fifty dollars more if any person is arrested and confined in jail with him, so I can convict the said rascal.

HENRY BROWN.

☞ The *Mobile Chronicle*, and *Nashville Republican* will insert the above weekly one month, and forward their accounts to the subscriber for payment. H. B.

Madison, Morgan county, Ga. Jan 19—2m

***The Georgia Journal*, Milledgeville, Georgia, January 26, 1836.**

Finally, there are countless volumes of published collections of primary sources, planter journals, and travelers' memoirs, all of which can shed additional light on enslaved people's pasts. Not quite as accessible to today's students (conducting research in books may require a trip to the library!), they are nonetheless invaluable sources of information that no historian of the enslaved past would dare ignore. Frederick Law Olmsted's *A Journey through the Southern Backcountry* and James Redpath's *The Roving Editor: Or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* are both antebellum travel memoirs, and they both include accounts of long conversations between the authors and the enslaved people they encountered, conversations that nearly always included probing questions about the enslaved person's experiences in bondage and their hopes for the future.[12] The Freedmen and Southern Society Project (freedmen.umd.edu/fssppubs.htm) has produced six main volumes of primary sources to date along with several smaller collections, all of which, like John Boston's letter to his wife, say as much about slavery as they do freedom. Another source that requires a trip to the library is a searchable microfilm collection (dlas.uncg.edu/petitions/) created by the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, historian Loren Schweninger. The result of years spent mining courthouse collections across the former slaveholding states, the *Race and Slavery Petitions Project* brings together more than 18,000 legislative and county petitions on virtually any subject related to enslaved people, slaveholders, and slavery. If detail is what you want, detail is what you'll get when you dive into this collection!

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[11] "One Hundred Dollar Reward," *The Georgia Journal* [Milledgeville, Georgia], January 26, 1836, https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu/lccn/sn82014251/1836-01-26/ed-1/seq-4/.

[12] Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (Boston: Harvard University, 1860), https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_Journey_in_the_Back_Country/aHIYAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0 and James Redpath, *The Roving Editor Or, Talks with Slaves in Southern States* (Boston: Harvard University, 1859), https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Roving_Editor/qfKuKEPr8u0C?hl=en&gbpv=0.

Finding enslaved people's history is no longer the hard part. Neither, frankly, is teaching it. In starting our studies with an acknowledgment of our shared humanity, the job becomes far less fraught. Anyone who is a part of a family today can relate to Maria Perkins's fear of losing hers. Anyone who has traveled for work or vacation can relate to Fountain's careful study of the places he saw. In starting our studies at the level of people (something easily achieved with our ever-growing access to primary sources), it becomes clear that people are people, no matter the horrors inflicted upon them. We are no longer confined to studying a faceless, nameless, generic "slave." We can now study individual women, men, children, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, workmates, and friends. We can ask what they did, where, when, with whom, why, for how long, and under what kind of conditions—questions that lie at the heart of any attempt to do social history. In asking and then finding answers to these questions, students' understanding of a people who played a significant role in the making of this nation can only deepen. But please tell your students to expect to be surprised. Studying history from the bottom up often changes and challenges the conventional story. We see the past through a different set of eyes, a shift in perspective that almost invariably leads us to new knowledge. This is, of course, the whole purpose of studying the past: to get to know that foreign land from which we all arose.

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