

LESSON PLAN

Lesson 2: Enacting Freedom

Essential Question

What can we learn from the history of Reconstruction as we work to strengthen democracy today?

Guiding Question

What is freedom? What does it mean to be free?

Learning Objectives

- Students will understand that freedom is difficult to capture in a single definition, but individuals often experience it as independence in their daily choices about work, family, and religion, as well as in their exercise of political, economic, and social rights.
- Students will recognize that both laws and customs, as well as individuals' choices, influence a society's definition of freedom.

About This Lesson

In the last lesson, students examined the choices of freedpeople in naming themselves and reflected on how the beliefs and expectations of the society we are born into can influence how we think about others and ourselves. In this lesson, they will consider the frequently used but rarely defined concept of freedom. By learning about the choices and aspirations of freedpeople immediately after Emancipation, students will consider what it means to be free, and they will consider what role freedom plays in their own lives. They will also begin to reflect on the question of whether one who is excluded from full and equal membership in society is truly free.

Additional Context and Background

While the Civil War and Thirteenth Amendment ended the enslavement of 4 million people in the United States, they did not determine what would replace it. As historian Leon Litwack explains, the question on the minds of many Americans regarding the status of formerly enslaved people was, "How free is free?" While news of Emancipation caused celebration among millions of formerly enslaved Americans and their supporters, the lack

of definition of their freedom tempered some of the jubilation with realism about American society. George G. King, born into slavery in South Carolina, reflected on this reality when he learned that he was no longer enslaved: “The Master he says we are all free . . . but it don’t mean we is white. And it don’t mean we is equal.”¹

In this lesson, students will learn about the variety of ways that Black Americans sought to define freedom in their lives immediately after Emancipation. In particular, they will examine how such Americans attempted to give meaning to freedom through (1) the ways in which they thought about themselves and their lives, (2) the actions and choices they made in their day-to-day lives immediately after Emancipation, and (3) their longer-term political, economic, and social aspirations to be full and equal members of American society.

For many freedpeople, Emancipation brought immediate and drastic changes to their lives, while for others day-to-day life remained largely the same. Regardless, according to Litwack’s analysis, nearly all freedpeople experienced a profound change in how they thought about themselves and their lives: “Nearly all of them could subscribe to the underlying principle that emancipation had enabled them to become their own Masters.”² Four million Americans were no longer the property of another person, subject to another’s will. Even when freedpeople chose to stay and work on the plantations where they had been enslaved, at that point in time it was often their choice.

This shift in the way that freedpeople thought about their identities empowered them with a new sense of agency and possibility. They now perceived choices in their lives that they did not have before, even if some of the choices would once again be taken away in the months and years to come. These choices inspired many to begin to test their freedom. To know how it felt to be free, Litwack explains, “demanded that the ex-slave begin to act like a free man, that he test his freedom, that he make some kind of exploratory move, that he prove to himself (as well as to others) by some concrete act that he was truly free.”³

Such concrete actions that freedpeople took to define their freedom and demonstrate control over their own lives included:

¹ Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 224.

² Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 226.

³ Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 226–27.

- leaving the plantation
- negotiating wages and work conditions
- changing employers
- reuniting families split apart when some were sold away under slavery
- getting married
- changing their names
- learning to read
- establishing churches
- claiming land as their own

These day-to-day choices of freedpeople were met with opposition by some white Americans and support by others. According to Litwack, “To those accustomed to absolute control, even the smallest exercise of personal freedom by a former slave, no matter how innocently intended, could have an unsettling effect.”⁴ Throughout the Reconstruction era and for many decades after, white supremacists attempted through laws, intimidation, and violence to reestablish control over the Black laboring class in the South, reasserting severe restrictions on their ability to exercise many of the types of choices listed above. The resistance of many white Americans to the way freedpeople and their allies defined freedom will be explored in several lessons later in this unit.

Yet, in this unsettled environment, other Americans supported many of the ways in which ex-slaves sought to define their freedom. Perhaps no greater effort was made in support of freedpeople than that of the Freedmen’s Bureau. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois called the Freedmen’s Bureau “one of the most singular and interesting of the attempts made by a great nation to grapple with vast problems of race and social condition.”⁵ Created by Congress in March 1865, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands represented the first significant post-war attempt by the federal government to define freedom for Black Americans. Involved in the daily local affairs of communities across the South, the bureau represented a significant expansion of the reach of the federal government. The Freedmen’s Bureau’s most immediate job was to provide government aid to penniless freedpeople and destitute refugees from the war. The bureau also oversaw land abandoned and confiscated during the war, the status of which would prove to be a particularly contentious issue. In addition, the bureau’s mission included helping Black Americans transition from slavery to freedom by educating them about their new rights and responsibilities.

⁴ Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 227.

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “[Of the Dawn of Freedom](#)” (Chapter 2), in *The Souls of Black Folk* (public domain).

One of those responsibilities, according to the bureau, was to resume working in the Southern fields as quickly as possible, but now as wage laborers instead of slaves. The resumption of labor, according to assistant bureau commissioner Rufus Saxton, would disprove their former masters' arguments that African Americans were lazy and worked only when under threat of the lash.⁶ By quickly returning to the fields, the freedpeople would also help the post-war national economy get back on its feet. To that end, the bureau agents played an essential role by helping to negotiate labor contracts between former slaves and planters and resolving disputes by acting as a court of law in areas where the local courts did not recognize Black citizens. The Freedmen's Bureau also played an important role in reconstructing the post-war South through its work in education. The schools that the bureau created to educate the freedpeople, augmenting schools created by Northern missionaries and the freedpeople themselves, constituted the first public school systems the region had ever seen and established a legacy of public education enjoyed by all children in the South.⁷

Beyond the freedom to be "their own masters" in matters of work, family, and church, African Americans expressed even more robust political, economic, and social aspirations for their lives as free people. In this lesson, students will explore four documents in which Black Americans define what they believe they need in order to be both free and equal members of American society. To Garrison Frazier, a minister and leader of the Savannah, Georgia, community of freedpeople, the bases of freedom and equality for Black Americans were economic rights, including land of their own, and the ability to live apart from the prejudice of white Americans.

In addition to land, the formerly enslaved believed that a key aspect of their new freedom was their entitlement to fair wages in exchange for their labor. Students will explore an 1866 petition circulated by Black women laundry workers in Jackson, Mississippi, in which the workers join forces to set a uniform pay rate for their labor. Another important aspect of freedom was securing voting rights and civil equality for freedpeople. In a speech entitled "What the Black Man Wants," Frederick Douglass demanded that government action secure these rights for freedpeople, asserting that Black Americans should be placed on the footing where they could exist on their own without further outside assistance.

⁶ United States Congress Joint Committee on Reconstruction, *Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction*, at the First Session, Thirty-ninth Congress, vol. 3 (US Government Printing Office, 1866).

⁷ John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 36–39.

To Jourdon Anderson, a former slave writing in response to his former master's request that he return to work on the plantation, to be free and equal meant safety for his family, education for his children, and compensation for the labor his family performed as slaves. Yet, as students will see when they examine his letter in the next lesson, Anderson's sarcastic tone indicated that he also believed that freedom provided him the dignity to be able to address his former master as his equal in social status.⁸ Finally, a convention of freedmen in Charleston, South Carolina, demanded education for their children, arguing that "an educated and intelligent people can neither be held in, nor reduced to slavery."⁹

By exploring these four documents, students will begin their reflection on key issues at the core of the debates and struggles of the Reconstruction era—voting rights, land distribution, and education, but also dignity, safety, and the nature of equality.

Notes to the Teacher

1. Note about the Word "Negro"

The speech by Frederick Douglass **What the Black Man Wants** uses the term "Negro." You may wish to point out to students that in earlier times, this was an acceptable term for referring to African Americans. While not offensive in the past, today the term "Negro" is outdated and inappropriate, unless one is reading aloud directly from a historical document.

2. Assigning Reading: Heterogeneous or Leveled Groupings of Students

To learn about the many ways newly emancipated African Americans defined freedom, groups of students will read one of four primary sources. The sources vary in length and reading level, so you might consider in advance how you will group students for this activity. One option is to create heterogeneous groupings of readers so that the stronger readers can assist struggling ones with pacing, vocabulary, and comprehension. Alternatively, you might group students by level and work more closely with struggling readers to target specific literacy skills while allowing the more confident readers to tackle the content independently.

⁸ Allen G. Breed and Hillel Italie, "Origins of Famous Note Revealed," *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 15, 2012.

⁹ Proceedings of the Colored People's Convention of the State of South Carolina, Held in Zion Church, Charleston, November 1865 (Charleston: South Carolina Leader Office, 1865).

3. Teaching Strategies

The following teaching strategies are referenced in this lesson's activities. You may wish to familiarize yourself with them before teaching this lesson.

- [Identity Charts](#)
- [Jigsaw](#)

Materials

- **Reading:** Excerpts from the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment
- **Video:** [Defining Freedom](#)
- **Reading:** Petition from the Colored Washerwomen
- **Reading:** What the Black Man Wants
- **Reading:** Savannah Freedpeople Express Their Aspirations for Freedom
- **Reading:** South Carolina Freedpeople Demand Education

Activities

Day One

1. Reflect and Discuss the Meaning of Freedom

In the video [Defining Freedom](#) that students watch later in class, historian Tim McCarthy points out that throughout history all people have desired to be free. The concept of freedom is at the heart of the conflicts and debates in the United States after the end of the Civil War and ending of slavery. Before watching the video, ask students to pause and reflect on what freedom means to them.

Ask students to write a short reflection in response to the following questions:

1. What does it mean to be free? What can free people do that people who are not free cannot?
2. What does freedom look like in your life? What gets in the way of your freedom?

Have students share ideas from their reflections using the [Think, Pair, Share](#) teaching strategy.

2. Read and Analyze the Emancipation Proclamation and Thirteenth Amendment

As a class, read **Excerpts from the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment**. The reading includes excerpts from the Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, and the Thirteenth Amendment, approved by Congress in January 1865 (and ratified by the states the following December). As the class reads the excerpts below, ask them to answer the following questions:

1. What words and phrases does each use to address the status of those who were enslaved in the United States before 1863?
2. Does either document define or suggest what it means for the formerly enslaved to be free?
3. Whose responsibility is it to fully answer that question?

3. Watch a Video about the Meaning of Freedom for Newly Freedpeople

Show the video [Defining Freedom](#). At the time stamps listed below, pause the video and ask students to discuss each of the following questions with a partner using the Think, Pair, Share teaching strategy.

1. Who helped bring about Emancipation? What did they do to bring it about? (4:47)
2. What were freedpeople able to do immediately after Emancipation? (6:28)
3. What aspirations did freedpeople express for the rights they should enjoy? (10:29)
4. What obstacles remained in the way of achieving their aspirations? (14:46)

Debrief by discussing the questions as a class.

Day Two

1. Review the Concept of Freedom

Have students review their notes and class materials from the previous day. In pairs, have students use the [identity chart](#) format to name the characteristics of *freedom* based on what they learned in the previous lesson. Tell them that they will be adding to their charts later in the lesson, after they've investigated primary sources from freedpeople during this period.

2. Read Freedpeople's Aspirations of Freedom

Use the [jigsaw](#) strategy to read the four handouts representing African American voices on the meaning of freedom:

- **Petition from the Colored Washerwomen**
- **What the Black Man Wants** (excerpt of speech by Frederick Douglass)
- **Savannah Freedpeople Express Their Aspirations for Freedom** (the testimony of Garrison Frazier)
- **South Carolina Freedpeople Demand Education** (a resolution from an 1865 convention of freedmen) (Handout 2.5)

Students will work in "expert" groups to read one of these four documents and determine the attributes of freedom discussed by the primary source's author. Each group should focus its discussion on the following questions:

1. According to the author, what can free people do that people who aren't free cannot?
2. What do people need in order to sustain and protect their freedom?
3. What does the document suggest about the meaning of freedom? Do you agree or disagree with that perspective? Why?

Students will next reshuffle into "teaching" groups, in which they will share the findings of their "expert" group with their new group members. In their "teaching" groups, students can use evidence from all four documents to discuss the questions above.

3. Revisit the Characteristics of Freedom

Close the lesson by debriefing the jigsaw activity as a whole group.

- What new ideas about freedom came up for students in the primary sources?
- What questions did this activity raise for them that they hope will be answered as they learn more about the Reconstruction era?

In the remaining class time, or for homework, have students revisit the identity charts for freedom they created with a partner earlier in class and add any new ideas they have encountered since they originally created the chart.