

Lesson Title: Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) Lesson 1
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American History
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Teaching Traditional American History Program

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<http://www.chillihistoryproject.com/>

Lesson Overview: Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey born as a slave in Talbot County, Maryland in 1818. Escaped from slavery in 1838. He became a prominent figure in history through his writings, eloquent orator for the abolition cause, statesman and reformer.

Essential Question:

Was teaching a slave to read dangerous?

Objective:

After completing this lesson the student will be able to:

- Evaluate the consequences of teaching a slave to read.

Assessment:

Document Analysis Worksheet Simplified – last page

Materials:

Listed in the references. You will need to have Internet access to review the Teacher Input information.

Class Time:

One class period

Teacher Input:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass

All information is found on this website for teacher input.

Activities:

Put students in workable groups. Pass out excerpts that are attached to this lesson to each student. Pass out the Document Analysis sheet.

Have the students read the excerpts and discuss among themselves. Each group will need to share their thoughts with the class. They need to turn in their Document Analysis sheet.

Question for review:

What helped to make Douglass such an overwhelming abolitionist?

- *He was an ex-slave.*
- *He spoke out against slavery.*
- *He wrote a book about his life as a slave in Maryland.*
- *He was a great orator and was able to grab people's attention.*
- *He helped the freed African Americans with their civil rights.*

Closure:

If all the slaves would have been able to read and write, do you think they would have revolted against the slaveholders? Explain your answer.

Extension:

Classroom debates to extend the lesson. Write a speech as an abolitionist on why the slaves should be freed. An in depth study of Douglass and his life.

References:

- Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass by Frederick Douglass Page 20, Copyright 1995 (First published Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave by The Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 76 pages, www.doverpublications.com cost \$1.00 a piece.
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass

Graphics:

Excerpts are included.

Excerpt from the book
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

By: Frederick Douglass (1845)

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“Very soon after I went to live with Mr. And Mrs. (Hugh) Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, “If you give a (slave) an inch, he will take an ell. A (slave) should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best (slave) in the world.” “Now,” said he, “if you teach that (slave) (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.” These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence and entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought: and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.”

Excerpt from the book
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
By: Frederick Douglass (1845)
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“The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! That very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity.”

Document Analysis Worksheet

Type of Document

- Excerpt from a book

Date of Document _____

Author of Document _____

Position of Author _____

Why do you think this excerpt was included in Douglass' book?

Why did Douglass feel as a slave that being able to read was a "curse rather than a blessing"?

In your opinion, was it right or wrong for the slaveholders to not let their slaves be able to read? Support your answer with your knowledge of the subject.
