

**MAN IN THE MIDDLE: THOMAS DAY AND THE FREE BLACK EXPERIENCE**

STUDENT HANDOUT 2: CRAFTING FREEDOM, HOW THEY DID IT

During the antebellum era, blacks, both enslaved and free, actively sought to enhance the freedom they had and used what freedom they had (and the opportunities it afforded them) to help family members or others of their race secure or enhance their freedom. "Crafting Freedom" is a term that has been coined to describe their freedom-fostering activities. The following table lists ways in which each group crafted freedom for themselves and others:

<b>Slaves</b>	<b>Free Blacks</b>
<p>Slaves sought to buy themselves out of slavery. For example, skilled slaves were often "hired out" by their masters to work for others; they would be allowed to keep a portion of their earnings and by saving up their money, they often tried to pay their own purchase price and thus free themselves. Slaves often used the centuries-old craft traditions (wood-working, masonry, pottery) as means of earning money to buy self and others.</p> <p>Many slaves crafted freedom by resisting slavery in various ways: they rejected the domination of their owners, took property from their owners, slowed down work, performed tasks sloppily, took unscheduled breaks, and destroyed crops and tools. Open defiance—even outright individual acts of violence—was not uncommon.</p> <p>Some individuals were willing to risk their lives to get to a place where they could live as free human beings. Although most runaway slaves were not successful, eighteenth and nineteenth-century newspapers are full of runaway slave advertisements, which are evidence of how common it was for slaves to try to achieve freedom by running away.</p> <p>The most overt form of resistance, was outright violent rebellion against the institution of slavery. This was rare because the powers of the state would be called out and quickly and decisively put down most slave revolts. Yet, many slave rebellions were planned and</p>	<p>Free blacks who attained some wealth often used it to buy family or friends out of slavery.</p> <p>Free blacks who attained social status and had influential contacts sometimes used their position to help others attain greater freedoms or opportunities. For example, Elizabeth Keckly, dress designer to Mary Todd Lincoln, used her White House connections to raise charitable funds to help black soldiers who fought in the Civil War.</p> <p>Free blacks crafted freedom through resistance that took the forms of both open and secret political activity. The most open form was publically criticizing the institution of slavery and working against its demise. Southern free blacks had to work much more secretly to oppose the institution of slavery as knowledge of their actions could result in imprisonment or even death.</p> <p>Free blacks sometimes aided runaway slaves and secretly supported slave insurrections. Denmark Vesey was a free black accused of masterminding a massive slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina. He and his co-conspirators were hanged.</p> <p>Living in a society that denied their full humanity and individuality, free blacks constantly sought outlets for free and creative expression. They excelled in this domain. Free black artists and artisans often elevated their work—even their craft work—to the highest levels of art. Through their unique, creative</p>

<p>some executed. Nat Turner’s rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831 was the most well-known revolt. Turner’s band of insurgents killed nearly 60 whites and in retaliation, vengeful whites killed scores of blacks.</p> <p>Living in a society that denied their full humanity and individuality, enslaved blacks constantly sought outlets for free and creative expression. They excelled in this domain. Enslaved African Americans created wholly original musical compositions and styles that became the basis of jazz and the blues, unique American art forms. Through creative expression, they could feel “free” and maintain their own unique culture.</p> <p>Enslaved blacks crafted freedom through spoken and written words that often reinforced the democratic ideals upon which America was based.</p>	<p>expression, they could feel “free” and valuable in a society that deemed them second-class citizens.</p> <p>Free blacks crafted freedom through spoken and written words that often reinforced the democratic ideals upon which America was based.</p>
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