

FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER: LOVER OF LITERACY

TEACHER TOOL 2: SLAVE MOTIVATION TO READ AND WRITE

Slave Motivation to Read and Write

Enslaved people had many reasons to desire literacy. A literate slave could forge passes or free papers. A forged weekend pass could enable a slave to visit a family member or a neighbor. Forged free papers could aid a slave in escape. In fact, enslaved people forged free papers so frequently that free people of color with bona fide legal documents were often suspected of forgery.

Literate slaves could write about the inhumanity of slavery in letters, slave narratives, or literary works like poems and novels. Nineteenth-century African American political activist David Walker wrote, “for coloured people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation” with knowledge that “their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world.”¹ In 1830, North Carolina passed a law that forbade teaching slaves to read and write, stating that literacy has a “tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds and to produce insurrection and rebellion to the manifest injury of the citizens of this state.”² Throughout the antebellum period slave literacy was viewed as a symbol of resistance.

Slaves were an important part of the economy, including the underground economy that flourished in the South throughout the era of slavery. In this economy, slaves bought and sold goods and services “under the table.” Entrepreneurial slaves benefited from reading and writing and from having math skills. Slaves with math skills were especially useful because they could manage the bookkeeping, do calculations, and help their owners manage their money. It is revealing that the 1830 North Carolina law that forbade teaching slaves to read and write made an exception for “the use of figures.”³

Slaves knew that literacy was the key to political knowledge and power. Newspapers contained information about issues like emancipation and events like the Civil War. Literate slaves read newspapers to be informed about events that affected their lives. Frederick Douglass spoke for thousands in bondage when he wrote: “Nothing seemed to make her [his mistress] more angry than to see me with a newspaper.”⁴ Douglass continued, “She seemed to think that here lay the danger.”⁵

How Slaves Acquired Reading and Writing Skills

Many slaves taught themselves to read in ingenious ways. Some learned from white children who were less informed about the laws that forbade teaching slaves to read and write. They

¹ David Walker and Peter P. Hinks. *David Walker's Appeal: To the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Edited by Peter P. Hinks. (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000), 34.

² Heather Williams. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

eavesdropped on conversations and lessons. They took newspapers and other printed materials and studied the letters and words. Literate slaves passed their skills on to others: literate parents taught their children when away from the watchful eye of the master or overseer; some slaves held underground “schools” in secret hiding places—often deep in the woods—late at night or very early in the morning before or after the work day. After Emancipation, many of these black teachers became founders and leaders of schools for former slaves. “I have seen the Negroes up in the country going away under large oaks, and in secret places, sitting in the woods with spelling books,” former slave Charity Bowery of North Carolina told an interviewer decades after Emancipation.⁶ Wherever there was a strong will to read, African Americans became very creative in finding a way.

Some slave owners, such as the Edenton white woman who claimed Harriet Jacobs as her property, taught their slaves to read. This practice decreased, however, after the Nat Turner insurrection of 1831, when teaching slaves to read and write was outlawed in much of the South. Occasionally, an owner might teach slaves to read despite the laws and customs if doing so was in his or her business interests. It could, for example, be much easier and efficient to give a list to a slave for items to pick up in town and tasks to do than to rely on the slave’s memory.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

REFERENCES

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