

GEORGE MOSES HORTON: CRAFTING VIRTUAL FREEDOM THROUGH POETRY

TEACHER TOOL 3: ENSLAVED ENTREPRENEURSHIP

“Enslaved entrepreneurship” might seem like a contradiction in terms but there were slaves who were gifted at creating and running profitable businesses. It is impossible to know how many entrepreneurial slaves there were, but the many diverse examples that have been identified suggest that slave entrepreneurs existed from the earliest days of slavery in America. African Americans—enslaved and free—in the antebellum period were involved in all aspects of the American economy. The fact that there were more laws to restrict black economic activity than to restrict black resistance activities points to the prolific nature of black involvement in the free enterprise system. Many plantation slaves sold crops that were grown on the small plots they were given for their sustenance. However, black involvement in the economy was not only related to agriculture. Many slaves were brought to the Americas from regions in West and Central Africa, where they had complex market economies with deeply rooted trade networks. In addition to elements of this commercial culture, enslaved Africans also brought centuries-old craft traditions in areas such as woodworking, masonry, pottery, metalworking, and sewing. In America, they found a young economy in need of the skills they possessed, but also a society in which their full economic participation was severely restricted by laws and conventions.

Despite social and political constraints, black people—both enslaved and free—sought opportunities to engage in the rapidly expanding free marketplace and to advance themselves materially. Laws discouraged large-scale land ownership by non-whites, and access to credit and capital—the tools of capitalism—were not available to most aspiring black entrepreneurs. Thus, African Americans found the craft trades and personal service sectors to be the most accessible and fruitful as they relied upon skills, personal relationships, business savvy, and minimal capital outlay.

One of the ways that slave owners benefited from the varied skills of their bondsmen was through the legal practice of hiring out their slaves to perform services. Hiring out required owners to find opportunities for the slaves to work, negotiate and write up contracts for labor, and make sure the work was properly executed. All of this required significant time commitments from slave owners. Slave owners often found it more profitable and efficient to allow slaves with talents that were in demand in the marketplace to find their own work. In such cases, owners demanded a percentage of the profits in the form of “freedom dues.” Laws against slaves self-hiring and running their own entrepreneurial ventures, which existed in all southern states, were widely ignored. Self-hiring often provided benefits for owners, slaves, and consumers. Slave owners often made more money by allowing entrepreneurial slaves to work independently. Consumers of the slaves’ products and services generally paid lower than average prices as many enslaved entrepreneurs were motivated to work long hours at reduced wages by the goal of purchasing their freedom and/or that of loved ones.

Enslaved entrepreneurs established a broad variety of successful enterprises. Several examples of enslaved entrepreneurs are presented on the *Crafting Freedom* website. These include: Elizabeth Keckly, who developed a high-end fashion business; Sally Thomas, who had a laundry business and specialized in cleaning fine fabrics; and George Moses Horton, who sold and published his poetry. Sally Thomas lived her entire life in “virtual freedom.” While Thomas was never permitted to purchase her freedom, she was able to purchase that of her sons. George Moses Horton published several volumes of poetry, sold love poems (a precursor to the modern

greeting and Valentine card business) and lived as a free man by the end of his life. Although the majority of enslaved people were not entrepreneurs, the very fact that some slaves did operate their own businesses, is a testament to the human perseverance and ingenuity in the face of extreme hardship.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Franklin, John Hope and Loren Schweninger. *In Search of the Promised Land: A Slave Family in the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Horton, George Moses. *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton: The Colored Bard of North Carolina: To Which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*. Chapel Hill: Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina.

Walker, Juliet E. K. *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*. New York: MacMillan Library Reference, 1998.

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