

GEORGE MOSES HORTON'S ANTI-SLAVERY ACTIVISM

STUDENT HANDOUT 3

(UNDERScore "ACTIONS" HORTON TOOK TO RESIST AND FIGHT SLAVERY)

George Moses Horton (b. circa 1798–1889) is best known as a literary poet, the majority of whose verse was published while he was enslaved. Several of his best-known poems, such as "The Slave's Complaint" (1829) and "Division of an Estate" (1845), eloquently express his thoughts and feelings about slavery and freedom.¹ Horton's poetry provides rare insights into what chattel slavery was like from the perspective of a gifted literary artist who was enslaved at the time he was expressing his feelings about his bondage. He published poems in prominent anti-slavery periodicals such as the *Freedom's Journal* and *The Emancipator* in hopes they would convert readers into antislavery activists or strengthen the convictions of those already opposed to slavery.

While working on his enslaver's farm, Horton gained permission to visit Chapel Hill, NC on weekends, where he penned and sold love poems customized for the sweethearts of his major clientele—young male students at the University of North Carolina. He tried to purchase his freedom many times with money he earned from his customized verse business, but his enslaver refused to allow him to self-purchase. He would set the price so high that it was beyond Horton's ability to pay.

Patrons of Horton in Raleigh, NC published two volumes of his poetry in 1829 and 1845. Despite the national attention these publications gave Horton, his enslaver still refused to allow him to buy his freedom. He finally gained his freedom when the Union army liberated Chapel Hill in April 1865. Horton—along with other enslaved men and women—escaped with them.²

Horton exemplifies how an African American poet could be an antislavery activist by instilling anti-slavery feelings, respect for Black talent, and empathy for Black aspiration in his readership.

¹ Nina Bayam, et al. eds. *Norton Anthology of American Literature: Beginning to 1865*, ninth edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2017).

² Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 434–35; Joan R. Sherman, ed., *The Black Bard of North Carolina: George Moses Horton and His Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).