

A SLAVE BOY WHO RAN AWAY: WILLIAM HENRY SINGLETON'S RESISTANCE TO SLAVERY

A LANGUAGE ARTS LESSON PLAN

GRADES 3-5

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn that enslaved people resisted their captivity constantly. Because they were living under the domination of their masters, slaves knew that direct, outright, *overt* resistance—like talking back to or hitting their master or running away—could result in being whipped, sold away from their families and friends, or even killed. Therefore, most enslaved people resisted their captivity in ways that were *covert* or concealed, masked, and hidden. However, the regular appearance of runaway slave advertisements in newspapers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is evidence that despite the dire consequences of being caught, many enslaved people took the risk of overt resistance through running away. William Henry Singleton was born into slavery in 1843 in New Bern, North Carolina and ran away from slavery several times. Once when he was only six or seven years old, he ran all the way from Atlanta to the North Carolina plantation where his mother lived. This escape and long journey will be a major focus of the lesson and students will be asked to write about his experiences using the “voice” of the young William Henry. Through exploring Singleton’s narrative, with a focus on segments about his childhood, students will learn that even very young boys and girls did not passively accept slavery. Students will expand their understanding of slave resistance while identifying with young William Henry and imagining how he might have recounted his lived experiences in a diary entry.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Discuss the various ways that bondsmen and women resisted slavery.
- Note that even enslaved children had ways of resisting.
- Provide details about the early life of William Henry Singleton.
- List and discuss the various ways that Singleton effectively resisted slavery.
- Describe Singleton’s experience as a young boy running away from Georgia to North Carolina.
- Write about the experiences of another person using the language and incorporating the feelings that the person might have had.

Guiding Questions

What do William Henry Singleton's life experiences teach us about resistance to slavery? Why is it important to understand that there is more than one way to resist injustice? Is covert resistance more sustainable than overt? How does Singleton empower himself? What does it mean to help someone? How does one choose allies?

Suggested Time

1-2 class periods

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. To learn about William Henry Singleton, read a brief biography in Teacher Tool 1.
2. Review the short video, *Boy Runaway*, which features an actor playing the role of William Henry Singleton as an old man describing his experience running away when he was a young boy.
3. Review the Digital History summary of Slave Resistance and Revolts at http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=79. Review Teacher Tool 2, which provides an overview of slave resistance, exemplifying both overt and covert ways that slaves resisted.
4. In this lesson, you will show your students two or three examples of real runaway slave advertisements. Many of these primary sources have been digitized and are available via the Internet. Identify two or three ads that you think will be of particular interest to your students. You might, for example, choose ads from your home state or ads about children who ran away from slavery. You can conduct your own search or review the following websites which feature actual runaway slave advertisements:

- <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?id=4418>
- <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?id=4419>
- http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/browse/browse_main.php

You may also choose to review the following site, which provides tips on how to teach using runaway slave advertisements:

<http://www.ohiohistory.org/historyworksohio/classroom/activity.cfm?id=109>

Decide if you wish to present the runaway slave ads to your students via projection or via printed photocopy and plan accordingly.

5. Consider how to address the topic of resistance as it relates to students' relationships and interactions with authority figures in their own lives. As a teacher, you will find some methods of resistance very familiar because students often use similar techniques in the classroom, like pretending to be sick, feigning ignorance of their assignments, or even more overt forms like not doing assigned work and challenging the teacher's authority. Since most students will naturally be familiar with resistant behavior, encourage them to think about *when* resistance is appropriate. It is important to convey that just because resistance to slavery is behavior we admire, it is not always appropriate to resist. It is self-destructive to resist people in authority, like parents, teachers, and coaches, if they are trying to help you improve your chances of success in life. People who are abusing their power or who are doing unjust or evil acts, on the other hand, should be resisted in overt ways, such as telling a trusted person about the abuse.
6. Review Student Handout 1, which contains an excerpt from Singleton's narrative with emphasis added to the passages in which he recounts his experience running away from Georgia to North Carolina as a young boy.
7. Review Teacher Tool 3, which contains the full text of Singleton's narrative with the different ways Singleton resisted noted next to specific passages. The focus of this lesson plan is Singleton running away as a young boy, but you will note that he describes several ways that he resisted (running away, hiding, pretending to be ignorant, and assisting and serving in the Union Army) in his narrative.

8. In this lesson, students will explore the long journey that Singleton made from Atlanta, Georgia to Wilmington, North Carolina and then on to New Bern, North Carolina when he was only six or seven years of age. You can show them the distance between these places on a United States map in your classroom or have them find the distance themselves using MapQuest. If you decide to have students use MapQuest, they will need to type "New Bern" as two words instead of "Newbern" as in Singleton's narrative. The distance he traveled was a little over 500 miles.
9. Students often ask: Why didn't slaves just refuse to take it? Why didn't they rebel? To help students understand the answer to this, you might ask them if for every person on their side, there were 10 people on the other team, would it be a fair fight? Could your team be successful if you were so outnumbered? Explain that overt rebellion was not practical because those in authority were far more numerous, better armed, and better organized than insurgent groups of slaves. Slave insurrections were quickly put down and the rebels (and often other innocent people) were severely punished or killed in retaliation. Covert strategies of resistance were more sustainable and successful because they could be implemented without the instigator (or even the act of resistance itself) being detected, often for long periods of time.
10. Review Student Handout 2, which presents a Diary Writing Assignment.

Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. Begin this lesson by asking questions that engage students in thinking about how enslaved people viewed their captivity. Ask students if they think enslaved people accepted their lack of freedom and the legality of their being considered the property of others? Ask them how they think slaves resisted or opposed their enslavement? Note: Some students may state the myth that slaves acquiesced to their enslavement, an incorrect notion that this lesson aims to dispel. Also, students will likely focus on overt forms of resistance, such as violence against white owners, group rebellions/insurrections, or running away.
2. Using the information provided in the Slave Resistance and Revolt overview on the Digital History website and the information in Teacher Tool 2, provide students with an overview of the ways that slaves resisted. Open with an example of overt resistance, such as slave rebellion, a concept with which students will most likely be familiar.
3. Show the short video *Boy Runaway*. After the short video, provide a high-level overview of William Henry Singleton's life using the information in Teacher Tool 1 and Singleton's own narrative in Teacher Tool 3.
4. Distribute Student Handout 1 and either read the bold segment aloud to your students while they follow along or ask them to take turns reading it aloud. In the bold segment, Singleton recounts his long journey running away from Georgia to North Carolina when he was only six or seven years of age. Note: Before students begin to follow along as you read Singleton's narrative aloud, be sure to explain why they might see typographical errors, misspellings, and the use of United Kingdom English spellings for certain words within the narrative. Inform them that spellings and capitalizations of some words have changed over the last century. Point out that Singleton's publisher, a small-town newspaper in New York, may not have had the resources to proofread his narrative as carefully as a more established book publisher. Students should not assume that differences between spellings in Singleton's narrative and today are reflective of Singleton's intelligence.
5. Lead a brief discussion about Singleton's escape and long journey. Here, you might

mention that as a boy, Singleton also resisted slavery by hiding and pretending to be ignorant. When he grew up, he also assisted and served in the Union Army.

6. After reading the excerpt from Singleton's narrative, show students the distance (over 500 miles) on your classroom map or have them look it up on MapQuest. Think of local points of interest, like your school to the closest movie theater or shopping mall, and tell them how many miles are between those two places. Ask them to imagine walking all that way. What would that be like? Ask them to imagine doing so before there were good roads and when they were trying to hide to avoid being caught and returned to slavery. What would that feel like? Have them imagine making that journey without money or other resources and all alone as a young child. Ask them what kinds of feelings would they have? Now, ask them to multiply that distance by how ever many times it would take to get to the more than 500 miles that Singleton traveled. Ask them to imagine traveling that whole distance at so young an age and with so little assistance.
7. Explain to students that Singleton was one of many people who ran away from slavery. Either project or distribute printed copies of the runaway slave ads that you preselected. Discuss the runaway slave ads to help students "get into character" and to empathize with the feelings of a fugitive boy on the run and fearing capture by those seeking a reward. Distribute the Student Handout 2, which outlines their Diary Writing Assignment.

Assessment (Optional)

The Diary Writing Assignment created during the lesson would be appropriate to assess students' understanding of a fugitive slave's life. A rubric is provided to assess the assignment.

Extending the Lesson

Read or have students read other parts of William Henry Singleton's narrative that describe his childhood resistance experiences. Have students write diary entries about these other experiences from Singleton's perspective and in his voice. You can note the various ways that Singleton resisted slavery (running away, hiding, pretending to be ignorant, and assisting and serving in the Union Army) in Teacher Tool 3, which provides the full text of his narrative with notes on the right to identify the type of resistance next to the bold passages on the left.

Present some examples of injustice to your students, including the institution of slavery. Discuss the ways that the injustice might be resisted and why it is important to understand that there is more than one way to resist injustice. Be sure to discuss how students might identify something as unjust. Lead a discussion about what circumstances call for resistance. Ask them to consider several things when thinking about appropriate ways to resist. Students should consider: why they want to resist; whether resisting is worth the possible consequences; what is the goal of resisting; what are some of the options for how to resist; and, which way they would choose (and why).

After familiarizing students with a broad array of runaway slave advertisements and exposing them to the experiences of fugitive slaves (including such Freedom Crafters as William Henry Singleton, Harriet Jacobs, and Henry "Box" Brown), ask students to create a fictional short story in which they depict an enslaved child who runs away from his or her owner. Encourage them to select various sources of input and experiences for this fiction writing assignment from the

different sources they have—including the runaway slave ads, slave narratives, and short biographies—to incorporate into their short stories.

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