

## **CREATING ORIGINAL HISTORICAL FICTION USING HENRY "BOX" BROWN'S NARRATIVE AND RUNAWAY SLAVE ADS**

A SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON PLAN

GRADES 3-5

### **Overview**

One of the most famous slave narratives is that of Henry "Box" Brown who escaped from slavery by having himself shipped in a crate from Richmond, VA to Philadelphia, PA. He popularized his escape by creating a one-man show about his experiences that he performed in theaters. Escaping slavery by running away was one of the most overt forms of slave resistance, although the experience was rarely as dramatic or successful as Brown's daring adventure. In this lesson, students are provided examples of actual runaway slave ads that owners published in newspapers to retrieve their "property." These are primary sources that provide a rare window into the circumstances surrounding the escape of slaves and into the thoughts and feelings of slave masters. Because owners wanted to have their slaves captured and returned, they were candid and detailed in their physical descriptions of their slaves' bodies, facial features, and clothing in the ads they placed. Using the excerpt from the narrative of Henry "Box" Brown, a selection of runaway slave ads, and a sample of historical fiction diary entries written by a fourth grade student, students develop their own fictional, yet historically accurate, diary entries, or "mini-narratives" written from the perspective of a runaway slave.

### **Learning Objectives**

Upon completion of this lesson plan, students should be able to:

- Discuss the life and escape of Henry "Box" Brown.
- Explain what runaway slave advertisements are.
- Explain why the information describing how the enslaved person looked, provided in runaway slave advertisements, was often honest and accurate.
- Explain why the descriptions of the enslaved person's personality, character, and behavior are often more reflective of the attitudes and beliefs of the slave owner who wrote the ad than the actual runaway slave.
- Create a fictitious, but historically accurate, first-hand account of a runaway slave experience.

### **Guiding Question**

What can we learn about slavery from the daring escape of Henry "Box" Brown? What can we learn about slavery from both the prevalence and general content of runaway slave ads?

### **Suggested Time**

2 class periods

## Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Review Teacher Tool 1, which is a brief biography of Henry "Box" Brown.
2. Review Teacher Tool 2, which presents an excerpt from the narrative of Henry "Box" Brown. Reading part of Brown's narrative will aid you in your discussion. Determine the best way to present the story of Henry "Box" Brown to your students: providing them with an overview based on your own reading, reading part of the narrative aloud, or having them read parts of the narrative aloud or individually.
3. View the short video, *One Noble Journey: A Box Marked Freedom*, featuring an actor portraying "Box" Brown describing his journey to freedom.
4. Review Teacher Tool 3, which contains a list of websites featuring runaway slave ads. Select at least five runaway slave ads to print and photocopy for distribution to your students.
5. Be prepared to lead a discussion about the various experiences of runaway slaves. The goal for this step is to help your students generate plausible events that could likely occur to a slave during the experience of running away for use in their historical fiction writing assignment. If you feel that you need some extra background information to assist you with this discussion, you might consult any overview of slave resistance or runaway slaves that appears in your students' textbook for details about the types of things that happened to a runaway slave along the way. For information on the Underground Railroad, you can visit the Pathways to Freedom website at: <http://pathways.thinkport.org/about/>. You might also wish to review the runaway slave narratives William Henry Singleton and Harriet Jacobs, two other freedom crafters featured on our site. For other examples of North American slave narratives, you can also review the material on the Documenting the American South website at: <http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/neh>.
6. Review Student Handout 1, which is a sample of a historical fiction diary writing assignment completed by a fourth grade student.
7. Review Student Handout 2, which presents a writing assignment based on "Box" Brown's narrative, the short video, your selected runaway slave ads, and the sample assignment provided in Student Handout 1.

## Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. Begin this lesson by informing students that they will learn about slavery by: exploring runaway slave ads; getting an overview of the life and narrative of Henry "Box" Brown; watching a short video about Brown; and reading a sample of an historical fiction writing assignment completed by an elementary student.
2. Show the short video, *One Noble Journey: A Box Marked Freedom* to introduce your students to Henry "Box" Brown.
3. Based on the information in Teacher Tools 1 and 2, provide your students with an overview of the life and narrative of Henry "Box" Brown. If you choose to have students read some portion of the narrative themselves, distribute Teacher Tool 2.
4. Lead a discussion about the various experiences of runaway slaves. You might ask students to consider such questions as: Based on the material you have read or films you have seen, what are some of the things that runaway slaves experienced along their route of escape? What are some of the places they hid? Who assisted runaway slaves? Who did they try to avoid? How might they disguise that they were runaway slaves?

How might they make it all the way to the North? What was the Underground Railroad? What were some of the experiences slaves had along the Underground Railroad?

5. Provide students with a brief introduction to runaway slave ads. Explain that runaway slave ads were written from the perspective of the slave owner who supported slavery and viewed the runaway slave as his or her property. Because the master wanted to get his or her property back as soon as possible, the physical descriptions of runaways in ads are usually very specific and offer accurate pictures of the slave's clothing and physical features. However, the language used to describe non-physical characteristics of the enslaved person should not be taken as an accurate description of the enslaved person. Descriptions in ads of the personality, character, and behavior of the enslaved frequently reveal the racist attitudes of the slave owners who wrote the ads. For example, advertisements often used demeaning, racist terms such as "boy" for a man and "wench" for a woman. Terms like "deceitful," "slow-witted," and "clumsy" are also commonplace in ads. These words reveal owner attitudes more than they accurately describe the enslaved person's character, personality, or manner. Explain to students that enslaved people ran away throughout the era of slavery. Evidence of this is provided by the plethora of runaway slave ads placed in newspapers in the colonial and antebellum period.
6. Distribute copies of the runaway slave ads that you preselected from the online sources provided in Teacher Tool 3 (or others that you found on your own). Review the runaway slave ads with your students. Read several of them aloud or have students take turns reading them aloud. Ask questions that stimulate students to put themselves in the shoes of the runaway slave: Why do you think the slave took such a great risk to run away? How would you feel if you were the slave in the ad? If you were a slave, do you think you would try to run away? Why or why not?
7. Distribute Student Handout 1 and ask students to read the sample of a student-created historical fiction presented from the first-person perspective of a runaway slave.
8. Distribute Student Handout 2, which presents the historical fiction diary writing assignment. Ask students to use the runaway slave advertisements, what they learned about Henry "Box" Brown from your overview and the short video, and the sample assignment in Student Handout 1 as stimuli. Students should write 2-3 pages of historical fiction diary entries and try to identify with one or more of the individuals featured in the runaway slave ads and imagine what they experienced while running away. The runaway slave ads provide the names of the runaways, their physical description, and often some details about the circumstances surrounding their flight. Students should use these realistic details as a "jumping off point" for a story that is told through first-person diary entries. The runaway stories must be plausible and historically accurate, but also descriptive. They must reflect realities and facts about the antebellum period and the relationships between masters and slaves.

## **Extending the Lesson**

You may also wish to read the excerpts from two or three other runaway slave narratives (like those of George Moses Horton, Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckly, and William Henry Singleton) included on this website. If doing a unit or longer session on slavery, these would be excellent to provide as background material to draw from for the historical fiction diary writing assignment.

*Teachers may use and reproduce the material on the Crafting Freedom website for instructional purposes.*