



Teaching Unit: Footsteps to Freedom at the Camp Nelson National Monument

#3 Slavery and the Family

UNIT: Footsteps to Freedom at the Camp Nelson National Monument

TARGET LEVEL: High School (ages 14-18)/Higher Education (ages 18-22)

MATERIALS: computer, internet connection, pen and paper.

SKILLS PROMOTED: critical thinking, close reading and interpretation, primary source and visual analysis.

Students learn about the impact of slavery on Black family life and how the actions of enslaved men and women at Camp Nelson forced white authorities to recognise their marriage and secure freedom and greater autonomy.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Students will learn how the institution of slavery and the actions of enslavers impacted the formation of Black families.
2. Using Camp Nelson as a case study, students will learn how the on-the-ground actions of Black women influenced governmental policy towards the families of Black soldiers and brought about their freedom.

RESOURCES:

Exhibit: Refugee Tents

William Goodell, 'The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice', (1853)

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/texts/hard-history/the-american-slave-code-in-theory-and-practice>

Affidavit of Joseph Miller <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/Nov64.pdf>

Congressional Resolution freeing families <https://www.freedmen.umd.edu/soldfam.htm>

LESSON STEPS:

1. As a class, read the extract on marriage contracts and families from the abolitionist William Goodell's 'The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice' (1853). Have students analyse the text and answer the following questions:
 - a. What evidence does Goodell assemble to illustrate the idea that enslaved people cannot constitute families?
 - b. How does the author convey the brutality of slavery and inhumane treatment of enslaved people in this text?
 - c. How might this text support the author's abolitionist goals?
2. Have students recall session #1 (Refugee Tents) and the deadly Expulsion that took place at Camp Nelson in 1864. Introduce them to Joseph Miller and his family by reading excerpts from his affidavit. Ask students to note down and reflect on:
 - a. How the text makes them feel and why
 - b. Who they think the audience for the text is
 - c. Why they think it was made

- d. What does it tell us about family relations under slavery and how does this compare with the accounts recorded by Goodell?
3. In the final part of the lesson, ask students to read the Congressional Resolution freeing the soldiers of Black families (March 3, 1865), and answer the following questions:
 - a. What do you think were the motivations behind this resolution?
 - b. How does this resolution undercut the 'Slave Code' outlined by Goodell?
4. [Alternative Activity: Split students into 3 groups and assign each group one of the documents above. Have students study their assigned text, summarise, and report back to the class on its content and facilitate discussion on how each text compares and interrelates.]

ASSESSMENT

1. Many of formerly enslaved people interviewed as part of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in the 1930s discuss family life and their childhood experiences under slavery. Visit the 'Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-8' online collection (available via Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>) and select two or three interviews to read. Take note of how they talk about their family and relatives. Use these documents and what you know about Camp Nelson to write an essay on the impact of slavery on family ties and traditions.

Alternatively, have students visit the 'Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery' database: <https://informationwanted.org/> and select several of the advertisements to study. In the years following the war, many formerly enslaved people wrote to their local newspapers seeking information about their family and loved ones. These letters, known as 'Last Seen/Information Wanted' advertisements, contain names, locations, details of separations, and desires to reunite. This resource can be used to inform the same essay activity outlined above.

RESOURCES:

Affidavit of Joseph Miller, November 26, 1864.

Camp Nelson Ky November 26, 1864

Personally appeared before me E. B. W. Restieaux Capt. and Asst. Quartermaster Joseph Miller a man of color who being duly sworn upon oath says

I was a slave of George Miller of Lincoln County Ky. I have always resided in Kentucky and am now a Soldier in the service of the United States. I belong to Company I 124 U.S. C[olored]. Inft now Stationed at Camp Nelson Ky. When I came to Camp for the purpose of enlisting about the middle of October 1864 my wife and children came with me because my master said that if I enlisted he would not maintain them and I knew they would be abused by him when I left. I had then four children ages respectively ten nine seven and four years. On my presenting myself as a recruit I was told by the Lieut. in command to take my family into a tent within the limits of the Camp. My wife and family occupied this tent by the express permission of the aforementioned Officer and never received any notice to leave until Tuesday November 22nd when a mounted guard gave my wife notice that she and her children must leave Camp before early morning. This was about six O'clock at night. My little boy about seven years of age had been very sick and was slowly recovering. My wife had no place to go and so remained until morning. About eight O'clock Wednesday morning November 23rd a mounted guard came to my tent and ordered my wife and children out of Camp. The morning was bitter cold. It was freezing hard. I was certain that it would kill my sick child to take him out in the cold. I told the man in charge of the guard that it would be the death of my boy. I told him that my wife and children had no place to go and I told him that I was a soldier of the United States. He told me that it did not make any difference. He had orders to take all out of Camp. He told my wife and family that if they did not get up into the wagon which he had he would shoot the last one of them. On being thus threatened my wife and children went into the wagon. My wife carried her sick child in her arms. When they left the tent the wind was blowing hard and cold and having had to leave much of our clothing when we left our master, my wife with her little one was poorly clad. I followed them as far as the lines. I had no knowledge where they were taking them. At night I went in search of my family. I found them at Nicholasville about six miles from Camp. They were in an old meeting house belonging to the colored people. The building was very cold having only one fire. My wife and children could not get near the fire, because of the number of colored people huddled together by the soldiers. I found my wife and children shivering with cold and famished with hunger. They had not received a morsel of food during the whole day. My boy was dead. He died directly after getting down from the wagon. I know he was killed by exposure to the inclement weather. I had to return to camp that night so I left my family in the meeting house and walked back. I had walked there. I travelled in all twelve miles. Next morning I walked to Nicholasville. I dug a grave myself and buried my own child. I left my family in the Meeting house—where they still remain. And further this deponent saith not

his
(Signed) Joseph Miller
mark

Congressional Resolution freeing the Soldiers of Black Families

A Resolution to encourage Enlistments and to promote the Efficiency of the military Forces of the United States.

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That, for the purpose of encouraging enlistments and promoting the efficiency of the military and naval forces of the United States, it is hereby enacted that the wife and children, if any he have, of any person that has been, or may be, mustered into the military or naval service of the United States, shall, from and after the passage of this act, be forever free, any law, usage, or custom whatsoever to the contrary notwithstanding; and in determining who is or was the wife and who are the children of the enlisted person herein mentioned, evidence that he and the woman claimed to be his wife have cohabited together, or associated as husband and wife, and so continued to cohabit or associate at the time of the enlistment, or evidence that a form or ceremony of marriage, whether such marriage was or was not authorized or recognized by law, has been entered into or celebrated by them, and that the parties thereto thereafter lived together, or associated or cohabited as husband and wife, and so continued to live, cohabit, or associate at the time of the enlistment, shall be deemed sufficient proof of marriage for the purposes of this act, and the children born of any such marriage shall be deemed and taken to be the children embraced within the provisions of this act, whether such marriage shall or shall not have been dissolved at the time of such enlistment.

APPROVED, March 3, 1865.

William Goodell, 'The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice', (1853)

Chapter VIII.

SLAVES CANNOT CONSTITUTE FAMILIES.

Being Property, "Goods" and "Chattels Personal," to all intents, constructions and purposes whatsoever, they have no claim on each other—no security from Separation—no Marital Rights—no Parental Rights—no Family Government—no Family Education—no Family Protection.

THE family relation originates in the institution of marriage, and exists not without it. We have already proved that slaves cannot have families or be members of families, by proving that they cannot be married. To this latter point, in its connection with the former, we cite the words of Judge Jay:

"A necessary consequence of slavery is the absence of the marriage relation. No slave can commit bigamy, because the law knows no more of the marriage of slaves than of the marriage of brutes. A slave may, indeed, be formally married, but so far as legal rights and obligations are concerned, it is an idle ceremony." "Of course, these laws do not recognize the parental relation, as belonging to slaves. A slave has no more legal authority over his child than a cow has over her calf." (Jay's Inquiry, p. 132.)

The fact that the slave, as a chattel personal, may be bought, sold, transported from one place to another, mortgaged, attached, leased, inherited, and "distributed" in the settlement of estates, shows plainly that slaves cannot constitute families.

"In the slaveholding States, except in Louisiana, no law exists to prevent the violent separation of parents from their children, or even from each other." (Stroud's Sketch, p. 50.)

"Slaves may be sold and transferred from one to another without any statutory restriction or limitation, as to the separation of parents and children, &c., except in the State of Louisiana." (Wheeler's Law of Slavery, p. 41.)

This has been the condition of American slaves in every period of our history, since their first introduction among us. John Woolman, the philanthropist, a minister of the Society of Friends, residing in New-Jersey, bears the following testimony concerning the slaveholders of his times, (A.D. 1757):

"They often part men from their wives by selling them far asunder, which is common when estates are sold by executors at vendue." (Journal of the Life of John Woolman, London edition, p. 74.)

At a later period than this, according to a well-authenticated tradition in the neighborhood, a Congregational minister at Hampton, Conn., (Rev. Mr. Moseley), separated by sale a husband and wife who were both of them members of his own church, and who had been, by his own officiating act as a minister, united in marriage. Yet no legal or ecclesiastical proceedings grew out of the transaction. Some thought it a hard case, but the sufferers were only negroes and slaves.

It is the common understanding at the South, that slaves do not constitute families. It is the common understanding of the county at large. The American Bible Society, many years ago, proposed to supply each family in the United States with a Bible. After a long effort, it was announced by the Society that the great work was completed. It was afterwards ascertained that no part of the supply went to the then two and a half millions of slaves. The Society made no apology for its mistake, nor acknowledged that it had committed any. Public sentiment in general (with exception of abolitionists) attributed to them no error. The nation knew nothing about families of slaves!

The practice corresponds with the theory. The statement that follows is from Sarah M. Grimke, daughter of the late Judge Grimke, of Charleston, S. C.:

"A slave who had been separated from his wife, because it best suited the convenience of his owner, ran away. He was taken up on the plantation where his wife, to whom he was tenderly attached, then lived. His only object in running away was to return to her; no other fault was attributed to him. For this offense he was confined in the stocks six weeks, in a miserable hovel, not weather-tight. He received fifty lashes weekly during that time, was allowed food barely sufficient to sustain him, and when released from confinement, was not permitted to return to his wife. His master, although himself a husband and a father, was unmoved by the touching appeals of the slave, who entreated that he might only remain with his wife, promised to discharge his duties faithfully; his master continued inexorable, and he was torn from his wife and family. The owner of this slave was a professing Christian, in full membership with the church, and this circumstance occurred while he was in his chamber, during his last illness." (Weld's Slavery as it is, p. 23.)

William Goodell, 'The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice', (1853) Cont.

The following is from Mrs. Angelina Grimke Weld, sister of the preceding witness:

“Chambermaids and seamstresses often sleep in their mistresses’ apartments, but with no bedding at all. I know of an instance of a woman who has been married eleven years, and yet has never been allowed to sleep out of her mistress’s chamber. This is a great hardship to slaves. When we consider that house slaves are rarely allowed social intercourse during the day, as their work generally separates them, the barbarity of such an arrangement is obvious. It is peculiarly a hardship in the above case, as the husband of the woman does not ‘belong’ to her ‘owner,’ and because he is subject to dreadful attacks of illness, and he can have but little attention from his wife in the day. And yet her mistress, who is an old lady, gives her the highest character as a faithful servant, and told a friend of mine that she was entirely dependent on her for all her comforts; she dressed and undressed her, gave her all her food, and was so necessary to her that she could not do without her. I may add that this couple are tenderly attached to each other.”

“I know an instance in which the husband was a slave, and the wife was free. During the illness of the former, the latter was allowed to come and nurse him; she was obliged to leave the work by which she made a living, and come to stay with her husband, and thus lose weeks of her time, or he would have suffered for want of proper attention; and yet this ‘owner’ made her no compensation for her services. He had long been a faithful and a favorite slave, and his owner was a woman very benevolent to the poor whites.” “She, no doubt, only thought how kind she was to allow her to come and stay so long in her yard.” (Ib., p. 56.)

“Persons who own plantations and yet live in the cities often take their children from them as soon as they are weaned, and send them into the country; because they do not want the time of the mother taken up with attendance upon her own children, it being too valuable to the mistress. As a favor she is sometimes permitted to go to see them once a year. So, on the other hand, if the field slaves happen to have children of an age suitable to the convenience of the master, they are taken from their parents and brought to the city. Parents are almost never consulted as to the disposition to be made of their children, and they have as little control over them as have domestic animals over the disposal of their young. Every natural and social feeling and affection are violated with indifference. Slaves are treated as though they did not possess them.” (Ib., pp. 56-7.)