

Relevant Unit Objectives

Module 1: African American Community and Culture

This lesson addresses the following Essential Questions:

- How did the existence of slavery shape African American communal life and cultural expression?
- How did acts of resistance shape African American cultural heritage and community?

Objectives of the Lesson

Aim:

How does *Freedom's Journal* reflect and/or advance the formation of an African American community in antebellum America?

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Highlight important passages of *Freedom's Journal* and connect those passages to the idea of community.
- Identify areas of concern to the African American community in the 1820s.
- Explain how the establishment of the nation's first African American newspaper served as both a response to outside forces and an act of self-determination.

Introduction

Being a part of a group or community:

Teachers will give students a diagram of a circle. The circle is titled "my groups." Students fill out the circle with all the groups they believe they are a part of. These groups may include any aspect of identity, including age, gender, ethnicity/race, religion, socio-economic class, etc.

On the back of the diagram, students choose one group they believe they are a part of and answer the following questions:

- How did you become a member of this group?
- How did the group form?
- How do you know you are part of the group?
- What do all members of this group have in common?

Instructional Procedures

Step One: Groups to Communities

The teacher will then lead students in a brief discussion about their answers to the initial activity. To facilitate this discussion, teachers might encourage students to get into pairs and share their ideas with one other student before sharing their ideas with the entire class.

Discussion questions should include the following:

- Is your group a community?
- What is the difference between a group and a community?
- In what ways can a group evolve into a community?

Step Two: Introducing *Freedom's Journal*

The teacher provides background about Freedom's Journal. This may be done as a summary of the main points listed below, as a worksheet, as a PowerPoint presentation, mini-lecture, or other appropriate strategy. Additional background information is also available on handout three.

Before 1827, African Americans didn't exist in the newspapers, unless they committed a crime. African American weddings, births, deaths, and accomplishments were not to be found in a newspaper anywhere in the United States. But the year 1827 saw big changes. New York finally abolished slavery, and two young African American men, John Brown Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish, founded *Freedom's Journal*. It was the first African American owned and operated newspaper in the country.

For most of the African American community, reading came only after freedom, since it had been forbidden under slavery. To read African American voices for the first time was powerful. On the front page of the new paper the editors wrote: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us." Inside were stories about slavery, lynchings, and social justice. The paper also covered international news of special interest to the community, such as events in Haiti and Sierra Leone. In addition, the paper featured biographies of African American men and women, schools, jobs, and housing opportunities. It also listed weddings, births, and deaths.

For two years *Freedom's Journal* served a community of 300,000 African Americans in the North. It was sent to 11 states and the District of Columbia, as well as to Haiti, Europe, and Canada. It was followed by no less than 24 other African American newspapers in the years before the Civil War.

Step Three: Reading a selection from *Freedom's Journal*

Printable PDF of *Freedom's Journal* introductory letter

<http://www.nyscss.org/resources/publications/NYandSlavery/Chapter%20D/Documents/1827A.FRE.pdf>

Freedom's Journal digital archives [Wisconsin Historical Society]

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/aanp/freedom/volume1.asp>

<http://www.nyscss.org/resources/publications/NYandSlavery/Chapter%20D/Documents/1827A.FRE.pdf>

Students will read a letter from editors John Brown Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish's letter to their readers. This letter appeared in the first issue of *Freedom's Journal* published on March, 16, 1827. Students will respond to the questions listed in Handout 1. Afterwards, they will complete the double-entry journal in Handout 2. The double-entry journal focuses on passages that demonstrate the building of an African American community. Students may also access the digital archives of the *Freedom's Journal* (see link to Wisconsin Historical Society).

Step Four: Discussion

Teachers then lead a class discussion about the passages students chose for their double-entry journals. Additional questions to include:

- What promises do the editors make to their readers regarding *Freedom's Journal* coverage?
- How does *Freedom's Journal* help to define the African American community?

Conclusion

(Optional) Students will write a letter in the style of *Freedom's Journal* that responds to the following prompt:

Imagine that you are the editor of a newspaper designed for African American teens today. Using the excerpt from *Freedom's Journal* as your model, write an opening letter to your readers. What are the issues that African American teens confront? How are they misunderstood? What do you want others to know about their situation? What topics would interest them?

Materials

Printable PDF of *Freedom's Journal* introductory letter

<http://www.nyscss.org/resources/publications/NYandSlavery/Chapter%20D/Documents/1827A.FRE.pdf>

Freedom's Journal digital archives [Wisconsin Historical Society]

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/aanp/freedom/volume1.asp>

Handout 1: *Freedom's Journal* Question Sheet

Handout 2: Double-Entry Journals

Handout 3: Additional Background information

Handout One: *Freedom's Journal* Question Sheet

1. Why was *Freedom's Journal* unique for its time?
2. What do the editors wish to accomplish through the establishment of *Freedom's Journal*?
3. What do you think the authors mean when they write, "we form a spoke in the human wheel?"
4. How will this newspaper support the civil rights of African Americans?
5. How does this newspaper help to transform African Americans from a group into a community?

Handout Two: Double Entry Journal for Analyzing *Freedom's Journal*

Use the excerpt from *Freedom's Journal* to complete the following Double Entry Journal.

- In the left hand column write down words, phrases or passages that you think connect to the idea of community.
- In the right hand column, explain how this passage connects to community.

Passage	Explanation
<u>Example</u> "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us."	<u>Explanation</u> The editors are defining the African American community and asserting their right to speak for themselves.

*Freedom's Journal: Additional Background Information***Main Points**

I. *Freedom's Journal* was the first newspaper owned and operated by African Americans. It was founded in 1827, the same year that New York State abolished slavery. Although the newspaper was published for only two years, it discussed historical developments significant to the African American community over many years. The news covered by *Freedom's Journal* varied a great deal. The editors sought to include "whatever concerns us as people" (Bacon, 2007, p. 71) with articles ranging from the major news of the day to practical matters of day-to-day living. Whereas white newspapers of the day covered criminal activity in the African American community, *Freedom's Journal* defended African Americans against attacks made by the white community. The articles found in *Freedom's Journal* also included success stories of African Americans, their fight for equality, and literature and political commentary written by African Americans.

II. Historian Jacqueline Bacon (2007) discusses factors that led to the establishment of *Freedom's Journal*, including the following:

- *Freedom's Journal* highlighted debates around the proposal by the American Colonization Society, which many whites supported, to encourage free African Americans to return to Africa. The proposal was opposed by most people of color.
- The establishment of Haiti as the world's first African American republic.
- The end of the U.S. slave trade in 1808, which had been stipulated in the US Constitution at its ratification in 1789.
- Throughout the 1800s the status of free African Americans in Northern cities worsened; they lacked employment opportunities; dealt with threats of kidnapping and violence; were denied the right to vote; and suffered various assaults on their freedom.
- In the 1820's, free African American communities developed institutions such as churches, mutual aid societies, literary societies, libraries, and reading rooms. At the same time, anti-slavery activism grew as African Americans faced new restrictions and racism, and white antislavery supporters favored compromise solutions such as gradual abolition.
- Since literacy was linked to freedom, the potential audience for an African American newspaper grew as more African Americans gained freedom.
- Mainstream newspaper coverage mocked African Americans and placed almost exclusive emphasis on crimes.
- New York hosted the largest free African American population of any northern center as well as the largest concentration of African Americans with formal education.

For more information, please visit:

http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/newbios/nwsppr/freedom/freedom.html or see:

Bacon, Jacqueline. *Freedom's Journal: the First African American Newspaper*. Plymouth, United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2007.