

Slave Resistance

Overview

“Slaves brought to America during colonial years were *active*, not passive, beings who in the face of terrible circumstances struggled to maintain their dignity, their African heritage, and even their lives, from the violent and brutalizing aspects of slavery obtained in North Carolina as elsewhere.” In this lesson, students will work to see beyond the stereotypical image of slaves as docile archetypes and examine the various ways slaves, as rational men and women, resisted their unjust circumstances to the best of their ability.

Grade

8

Materials

- Warm-Up Images, attached
- Resistance to Slavery, handout attached
- Perspective Descriptions for CHOICES activity, attached
 - NOTE: These perspectives are currently written from the year 1774 and thus one option discussed is joining the British army; teachers who choose to implement this activity within a unit on the Civil War however can change this language to the Union army (though a discussion of when black troops were allowed to serve will need to be included.)
- Optional teacher reference: *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, by Jeffrey Crow, Paul Escott, & Flora Hatley. (All quotations from this lesson are taken from this book.)

Essential Questions:

- What is resistance?
- What were the various ways that those enslaved resisted their enslavement?
- What were the risks and benefits associated with various types of resistance?
- Why is it important to examine colonial slaves as active rather than passive beings?

Duration

60 minutes

Teacher Preparation

It is important to understand and convey the purpose of the Family Negotiation.

Procedure

Introduction to Types of Slave Resistance

1. As a warm-up, project the attached “Warm-Up Images” and ask students to write down initial impressions. Facilitate thinking by asking:
 - What do you see here? What details do you notice first about this image?
 - What do you think might be happening in this image?
 - When might this scene be occurring?
 - What evidence leads you to these conclusions?
 - What questions do you have about this image?
 - If you were to give this image a title, what would it be?

2. Once students have had several minutes of written brainstorm time, allow them to share their thoughts out loud. As students discuss, ensure they have an understanding of the actual event pictured, which is a marriage ceremony among slaves. Explain to students that there was no official marriage process for those enslaved prior to the Civil War. Thus, to symbolize their commitment to one another in front of the slave community, it is believed slaves would perform the pictured ritual of “jumping over the broom.” The origination of this custom is debated among historians, but is largely believed to have roots in West Africa.
3. Next, write the word “RESISTANCE” on the board and ask students to comment on what this word means to them. List student thoughts under the word. As a class, come to a consensus on a definition, such as:
 - **Resistance:** the act of resisting, opposing, or withstanding; a survival mechanism
4. Ask the class to infer how the image they just viewed relates to the word resistance. Lead students to the understanding that while slave masters constantly attempted to strip slaves of their humanity, slaves managed to maintain their identities as human beings by holding on to their culture and building a sense of community, often through shared rituals or ceremonies such as “jumping over the broom.” While this type of resistance might not be as obvious as a slave rebellion, it was none the less just as important.

Explain to students that when studying slavery, we often make the mistake of assuming slaves were passive beings who simply accepted all that was dealt to them, from harsh punishment to cruel restrictions. This view is incorrect. In truth, those enslaved were truly resilient in the ways they carved out areas of freedom in their lives, even in the midst of such danger and oppression. Tell students that this lesson is about exploring all the ways slaves resisted the wretched conditions handed to them.

5. Next, tell students that they will be working in groups to brainstorm all of the ways slaves may have resisted their circumstances, their masters/overseers, and slave-owning society as a whole. Students will take approximately 5 minutes to consider all of the ways slaves may have gotten back at their oppressors or worked to maintain a sense of the very identity and humanity slave owners tried to strip from them. To encourage creative thinking, tell students to ponder some of the ways they themselves react when they want to “get even” with someone, or ways they may retaliate without being so obvious that they put themselves at risk (perhaps even with the adults who have power over them.) Once brainstorming instructions are clear, number students off into groups of 5, tell them where in the room to meet, and instruct them to quietly move to their group’s location. Give each group a piece of chart paper and a marker and instruct them to elect a spokesperson who at the end of the brainstorming session will report their answers to the remainder of the class.

Discussion & Notes: Forms of Resistance to Slavery

6. Once groups have had ample time to work, have each spokesperson share with the whole class. Compile a master list at the front of the room as groups report back. Facilitate discussion around what students share, asking clarifying questions that will spawn additional ideas where possible. Below are various forms of resistance to highlight and discuss with students as they reflect on the class list. Hand out the attached note sheet for students to fill in as you discuss:

Forms of Resistance – Teacher Notes:

- **Culture:** Slaves strove to hold on to their original cultures and integrate their own customs into the new communities they formed in the colonies. In the 1770s approximately one-third of the slaves in North Carolina were of African origin. This was evident in their language, religion, work patterns, and names they chose for their children. By maintaining these cultural traits, slaves were holding on to a piece of their identity. They refused to let their masters strip them of their identities. Specific examples include:
 - “John Koonering”: “North Carolina slaves of the 19th Century engaged in a colorful Christmas time celebration know as Jonkonnu, or ‘John Koonering.’ The custom is believed to have originated in

the Caribbean island of Jamaica and to have spread to North Carolina sometime prior to 1824...A slave leader, dressed in a costume of rags, animal skins, horns, and bells and accompanied by other slaves playing musical instruments or 'gumba boxes,' performed songs and dances..."

- Belief in conjurers or obeah men: "Conjurers or obeah men held great influence within the slave community. Skilled in the use of roots and herbs for medicinal purposes, obeah men could also make various poisons or manufacture antidotes. In the slave quarters, obeah men healed the sick, comforted the sad, interpreted the unknown, and avenged the wronged." Beyond holding on to such traditions as a form of resistance, the herbal medicines themselves could also be used as a more obvious form of rebellion, particularly when crafted to be poisonous. For example, "In 1780 the Johnston County court tried the slave Jenny for poisoning her master, Needham Bryan." Another slave conjurer, Will, was brought before a Dobbs County court in 1769. Will was accused of making "some Liquid thing to drink" by which he was then said to be able to control people.
- **Behavior:** Slaves also used their behavior as a means of resistance. "Malingering, insolence, carelessness, and dilatory behavior all artfully disguised patterns of slave discontent. Through such methods slaves could define the limits of their work, the hours they labored, and when and how they conducted their assigned duties."
 - "The task system, in the low country almost certainly grew out of tensions between masters' expectations and slaves' unwillingness to perform merciless labor. Under the task system, slaves could quit work after completing so many assignments, for example, hoeing a specific number of rows. Thereafter slaves were free to tend their own gardens and livestock, fish, hunt, rest, or take care of their own families and homes."
 - "Perhaps the most prevalent form of resistance to slavery was theft...Slaves stole to keep alive and supplement the inadequate provisions supplied by masters."
- **Community:** Though slave owners constantly attempted to dehumanize slaves, they made every effort to build a community among themselves when possible. This was particularly true on plantations where multiple slaves worked. "Blacks had few ways to defend the integrity of familial institutions, improve living conditions, or resist the cruelties of an arbitrary master. Yet, blacks were not passive beings who stoically accepted punishment and benevolence with equanimity. Instead, they sought to carve out larger areas of freedom in their lives, undermine slaveholders' discipline, and develop a community life within the slave quarters."
- **Revolt:** While acts of aggression and revolts were rare due to the consequences slaves faced if caught, they still did occasionally occur.
 - Stono Rebellion, SC: On September 9, 1739, twenty African American Carolinians led by a literate slave named Jemmy, met near the Stono River, twenty miles southwest of Charleston with the plan to rebel for their freedom. Marching with a banner that read "Liberty," they chanted the same word in unison. They seized weapons and ammunition from a store at the Stono River Bridge and killed two storekeepers. Their plan was to head for Spanish Florida, a well known destination for escaped slaves. As they marched, their numbers rose to 80. They managed to burn 7 plantations and kill 20 whites before the militia caught up and suppressed the rebellion. The captured slaves were decapitated and their heads displayed on spikes. Two more uprisings flared over the next two years in both Georgia and South Carolina, perhaps inspired--colonial officials believed--by the Stono Rebellion. As a result, a 10-year moratorium on slave importation through Charleston was enacted, as well as a harsher slave code, which banned earning money and education for slaves. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stono_Rebellion)
 - Other examples of slaves acting aggressively resulted in similar gruesome punishments. "The Halifax County court in 1785 found the slave Peter guilty of murdering John Miller and Sarah Gold. He was hanged, his head cut off and placed on a pole, and his body burned. A Granville County slave charged with murder" was burned at the stake in 1773. Five of Henry Ormond's

slaves conspired to kill him in 1770. The slaves were tried, two were executed, and one was burned at the stake.”

- **Religion:** Religion has always been a complicated area when discussing slavery. Throughout the history of slavery, it was first debated in the white community whether slaves should be baptized and allowed to practice Christianity at all. Later, Christianity was used by slave owners as an attempt to control slaves as well as justify the institution of slavery itself. Regardless, many slaves used religion as a form of resistance by either holding on to remnants of their own religious traditions, or taking it upon themselves to accept and practice Christianity as they so pleased.
 - “In 1709 James Adams, an Anglican cleric, complained that planters would not permit the baptism of their slaves because of the ‘false notion that a Christian slave is by law free.’ Another Anglican minister in 1719 declared that Negroes in North Carolina were ‘sensible and civic and...inclined to Christianity and...would be converted, baptized, and saved, if their masters were not so wicked as they are, and did not oppose their conversion, baptism, and salvation, so much as they do.’ In 1730, the crown finally instructed royal governor George Burrington ‘to find out the best means to facilitate & encourage the conversion of Negroes and Indians to the Christian religion.’”
 - “The Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s occasioned the first burst of religious enthusiasm that brought many slaves to Christianity. Evangelists such as George Whitefield exhorted blacks as well as whites to accept Christ....[This] disconcerted many whites who feared that conversion of slaves would lead to insurrection.”
 - “Baptists and Methodists...conducted services in a democratic atmosphere. Members called each other brothers and sisters, emphasized fellowship, and shunned the rank and deference of the Anglican church. In its fledgling years the Methodists even espoused abolitionism. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, denounced slavery as an evil institution, and Methodist preachers were instructed to approach Negroes and whites on a basis of religious equality. Between 1782 and 1790 the number of Methodists in North Carolina grew to more than 8,000 whites and nearly 1,800 blacks. In 1785 Tar Heel Methodists even considered forcing slaveholders to manumit their slaves as a condition of membership.”
- **Education:** Slaves took great measures to educate themselves, learning to read and write even when it became illegal. Missionaries (particularly Quakers & Presbyterians) made great efforts to provide religious instruction for blacks as well as teach them to read and write.
- **Purchase freedom:** Free labor provided possibilities for emancipation for some enslaved people. The most industrious and the most skilled of the enslaved could take greater advantage of these opportunities by earning the money to buy themselves from their owners. One such example was Venture Smith, born into slavery in the 1720s. After spending his early life enslaved on Long Island and eastern Connecticut, he was able to purchase his freedom by his labors at the age of 31. Those labors, along with his entrepreneurial activities such as fishing, working on a whaler, and agricultural activities, made possible the purchase of his son, daughter, and wife’s liberty.
- **Running away:** While escaping slavery was incredibly risky, many blacks determined their best chance for freedom to be running away. In fact, during the 18th century North Carolina had a reputation as a haven for slave fugitives.
 - “Fugitive slaves from Virginia & North Carolina turned the Great Dismal Swamp into a sanctuary. The swamp was an ideal hideout. According to a 1780s traveler, runaways were ‘perfectly safe, and with the greatest facility elude the most diligent search of their pursuers.’ Blacks had lived there ‘for twelve, twenty, or thirty years and upwards, subsisting themselves...upon corn, hogs, and fowls...’ The runaways cultivated small plots of land that

were not subject to flooding but ‘perfectly impenetrable to any of the inhabitants of the country around...’

- “Runaway slaves, more than most species of black discontent, alarmed white Carolinians because runaways imperiled whites’ security and portended the possibility of revolt. As early as the 1690s blacks fled south to St. Augustine, Florida.”

CHOICES Activity

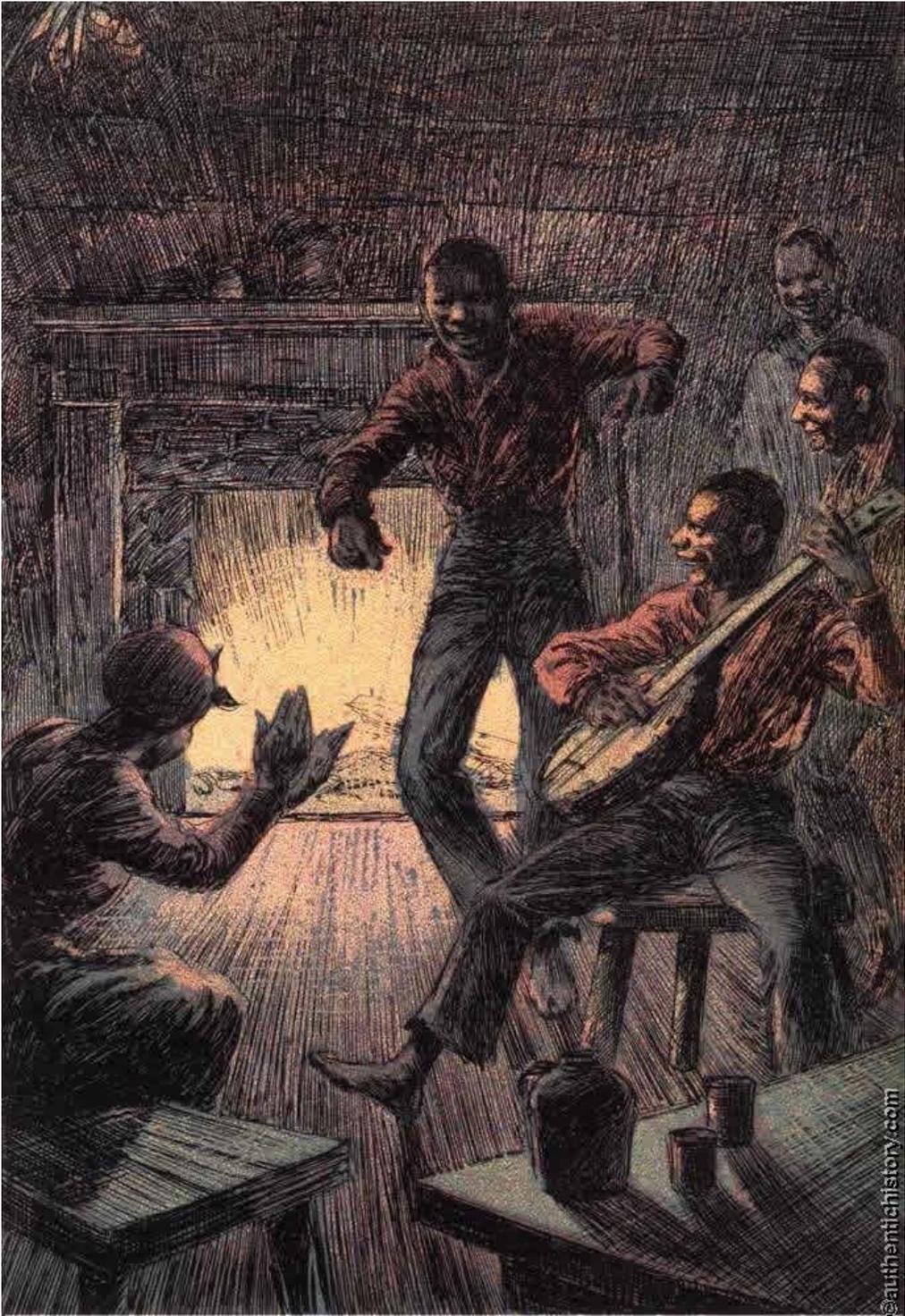
7. After discussing the various ways slaves resisted their unjust circumstances, tell students they are going to further explore the individual choices enslaved people made in terms of their survival, as well as what led them to make the particular choices they made. Tell students that again in their groups of 5, they are going to review five perspectives and potential choices weighed by a family of enslaved people living in North Carolina in the year 1774. The goal of the activity is for students to explore the various feelings, individual experiences, and possible choices of resistance that enslaved people were faced with, and to gain an understanding of the complicated nature of survival and resistance. Give students the following specific instructions:
 - In your groups of 5, each of you will receive a piece of paper describing a member of a family from the year 1774 who is enslaved. Each perspective has differing opinions regarding what to do about their status as a slave.
 - Read your individual’s perspective, jot down notes about their personality, life situation, and ultimate goals regarding family and freedom, and answer the questions provided.
 - After about 8 minutes, your group will each take turn to talk about the enslaved person assigned to you and what their idea is for survival.
 - After everyone has shared, discuss which perspective you think makes most sense, is most realistic, and why.

➤ **Teacher Note:** These perspectives are set in 1774 and thus one option discussed is joining the British army; teachers who choose to implement this activity within a unit on the Civil War however can change this language to the Union army (though a discussion of when black troops were allowed to serve will need to be included.)
8. As a whole class, come back together and discuss:
 - What were the various resistance options members of the family considered?
 - What were the pros and cons to each?
 - What is difficult about deciding to act on resistance ideas or not?
 - Regardless of the role you played, who in the family do you feel had the most logical idea regarding resistance? Why?
 - What do you imagine would have been most difficult about being enslaved?
 - Why is it important to recognize all of the ways (from as small of a choice as working slow to as great a choice as revolt) that slaves practiced resistance?
9. As a reflection to the lesson or as a homework assignment, have students interpret the quote located at the bottom of their “Resistance to Slavery” handout.

Warm Up Images







Name: _____

Resistance to Slavery

Resistance:

Category of Resistance	Description, examples, notes, etc.

“...Afro-Americans were **active, not passive**, beings who in the face of...[terrible circumstances]...struggled to maintain their dignity, their African heritage, and even their lives, from the violent and brutalizing aspects of slavery obtained in North Carolina as elsewhere. They were...**rational** men and women who from necessity had to weigh the impact of each and every action they made. The slightest misstep in racial etiquette and expected behavior could bring whipping or mutilation.” ~Jeffrey Crow, writer & historian

Summarize your interpretation of the above quote as it pertains to our discussion of slave resistance:

Elizabeth, a Mother – “To stay safest, we must stay put.”

Elizabeth was born into slavery in South Carolina in 1745. When her owner decided to start cultivating rice in North Carolina during 1755, he sent her to work on his new plantation in the Cape Fear region. She was only 10 and tragically had to leave her family behind. The year is now 1775 and while life as a slave has been hard, she has managed to start her own family amidst all the hard work required by her master. She married and had three wonderful children. However, 2 years ago her husband was brutally beaten by the plantation owner – it happened in front of two of her children. He received so many lashes to his back that he developed an infection and died three days later. Since then, all three of her children have been getting more and more restless with life on the plantation. But, as bad as life as a slave may be, she feels at least blessed that she has not been separated from her children, since so many of her friends have had their children sold way to other plantations. She does worry constantly, however...if the master is capable of whipping her late husband that hard, she can only imagine what he would do if she or her children tried to escape. Instead of risking an escape, she feels there are other ways to maintain a little bit of power – the master might control what she does physically, but as she always tells her children, he doesn't control their minds or spirits. One of her children has recently terrified her with talk of planning a slave revolt. Just last year, a Granville County slave who was charged with murder was burned at the stake. Other slaves who have attempted to revolt or harm their masters have suffered similar consequences. Her priority is to keep everyone as safe as possible and most importantly, alive. She feels the best way to do this is to stay put.

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1. What has Elizabeth's life been like as an enslaved person? (Your answer should be guided by the details above, but you can also make inferences based on what you know about slavery in general.) How might her experiences be similar or different than other enslaved people?
 2. How does Elizabeth feel regarding her and her family's current situation? What does she feel her family needs to do regarding their enslavement? Why do you think she feels this way?
 3. Write out three arguments that Elizabeth could try to use to help convince the rest of the family to stay put:

William – “Our best chance at a free life is to run away and never look back.”

William is 18 years old and has been a slave in North Carolina his whole life. He has been growing more and more tired of the abuse he and fellow slaves receive from their owner. Whether it's insults, beatings, or lack of food and clothing provided – William is sick of being treated less than human. Two years ago, he had to stand by and watch as the plantation owner beat his father to death. When William yelled for it to stop, the plantation owner smashed the base of his rifle into William's face, causing him to lose consciousness.

William feels it is time for he and his family to run away and escape this cruel situation. He's heard of a community of runaway slaves living in the Great Dismal Swamp. It sounds like the ideal hideout, with communities of Blacks who are cultivating small plots of land and farming for themselves rather than a master. William knows however that his mother, Elizabeth, is afraid to leave. But he's seen firsthand – and felt firsthand – the cruelty the master is capable of. William passionately believes that if he, his mother and siblings don't leave, eventually the master will do the same to each of them as he did to their father. He tries to convince his mother, siblings, and Uncle that anything other than running away is a death sentence. Besides, living in chains is no way to live. One of his siblings keeps trying to convince the family that he'll be able to buy everyone's freedom soon enough, thus you should sit tight for awhile longer. William feels this is ridiculous – it's taken him years to earn enough money to even purchase himself. By the time he earns enough to purchase the whole family, some of you may be dead or sold off to another plantation. Whose to even say the plantation owner would agree to let any of you purchase freedom anyway...

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1. What has William's life been like as an enslaved person? (Your answer should be guided by the details above, but you can also make inferences based on what you know about slavery in general.) How might his experiences be similar or different than other enslaved people?
 2. How does William feel regarding his and his family's current situation? What does he feel his family needs to do regarding their enslavement? Why do you think he feels this way?
 3. Write out three arguments that William could try to use to help convince the rest of the family to stay put:

Tandey – “More important than freedom is justice through REVOLT.”

Tandey is 16 and has been a slave in North Carolina his entire life. Each day of his life it feels like he grows angrier and angrier, and it's almost to the point that he feels he might explode. He is a human being, and day after day he and the people he loves are forced to do back-breaking work cultivating rice while the white people watch. He was pegged as being disobedient when he was only a child, and even had his ears cropped when he was 13. When they took that piece from his ear, he vowed that one day he would get revenge. He tries to get back at the master in small ways – stealing from him here and there, working a little bit slower to keep him from earning that much profit...Then, two years ago, Tandey watched silently as his father was beaten to death, simply because the amount of rice he'd cultivated that day was a pound short. When Tandey's brother tried to yell for the master to stop, the master struck him in the face with his gun. Tandey had to roll him over to keep him from choking on his own blood. Tandey has never forgiven himself for not doing something to help them both. Recently, Tandey decided to do everything in his power to convince his family members and the other 30 slaves on the plantation to revolt against the master. Even if he dies in the process, slamming him to the ground one time would be worth his entire life. While his Aunt keeps talking of waiting on a war to start between the colonies and England, he isn't interested in any more waiting. There might not even be a war, so Tandey is ready to take matters into his own hands. If his family won't stand up for themselves, Tandey is going to stand up for them.

1. What has Tandey's life been like as an enslaved person? (Your answer should be guided by the details above, but you can also make inferences based on what you know about slavery in general.) How might his experiences be similar or different than other enslaved people?

2. How does Tandey feel regarding his and his family's current situation? What does he feel his family needs to do regarding their enslavement? Why do you think he feels this way?

3. Write out three arguments that Tandey could try to use to help convince the rest of the family to stay put:

Jackson – “Freedom comes at a cost I will be able to afford soon enough.”

Jackson is 21 and has been a slave in North Carolina his entire life. As the oldest child in his family, his father taught him math from the time he was 10, wanting him to be as educated as possible. Because he is pretty good with numbers, his master sends him to go to the market in Wilmington to sell goods for him. When Jackson is in the city, he is always dazzled by the free Blacks he meets. Jackson has vowed that he and his loved ones would one day enjoy this type of freedom – he decided the best chance for this would be for him to purchase his own freedom and then purchase each of his family members’ freedom. For the past 5 years, Jackson has been skimming money off the top of what he sells for his master. His family also cultivates a small garden behind his slave quarters and he even sells some of that produce for additional income. Two years ago, his 2 siblings watched as his father was beaten to death. Since then, he started trying to squirrel away money more aggressively. He’s almost earned enough money to purchase his own freedom; once he is free, he can more aggressively work to earn the money for purchasing each of his family members. While he feels sure he can convince his mother of this plan, he worries about his siblings. They have grown more and more angry and rebellious in the past two years and he is afraid they may do something irrational that will risk all their lives.



1. What has Jackson’s life been like as an enslaved person? (Your answer should be guided by the details above, but you can also make inferences based on what you know about slavery in general.) How might his experiences be similar or different than other enslaved people?
2. How does Jackson feel regarding his and his family’s current situation? What does he feel his family needs to do regarding their enslavement? Why do you think he feels this way?
3. Write out three arguments that Jackson could try to use to help convince the rest of the family to stay put:

Aunt Ruth – “There is a war upon us, and we must take up a side.”

Ruth is 32 years old and has been enslaved her entire life. She was sold away from her family 5 years ago to work on the rice plantation where she currently lives. The only good thing about the situation is that she discovered her older sister was also enslaved on the same plantation, so she has formed a tight bond with her and her children over the past years. She has watched her nephews grow into fine young men and she understands the frustration and restlessness that the children are feeling over their status as slaves. Being older than them, she has felt that same frustration for more years and she too wants her freedom. She feels the best way to attain this freedom is to keep monitoring the situation between the colonies and England. This entire year (1774) the colonies have grown more angry regarding England’s control of them and she’s heard the master and his friends discussing the possibility of a pending war. She feel’s that if a war breaks out, this will be the ideal time for her, your sister, and her children to escape with the British. Perhaps they could join the British Army – you all could all fight against the very masters who enslaved you, serve as cooks, do laundry – anything to get away from the plantation. This is the most sensible way to ensure success in leaving the plantation. The British will have an established army, whereas any other course of action relies on loose plans where much could go wrong.

1. What has Ruth’s life been like as an enslaved person? (Your answer should be guided by the details above, but you can also make inferences based on what you know about slavery in general.) How might her experiences be similar or different than other enslaved people?

2. How does Ruth feel regarding her and her family’s current situation? What does she feel her family needs to do regarding their enslavement? Why do you think she feels this way?

3. Write out three arguments that Ruth could try to use to help convince the rest of the family to stay put: