

Elizabeth Keckly: From Slavery to Celebrity

Overview

In this lesson, students learn about the life of Elizabeth Keckly, an enslaved woman (who spent part of her life in Hillsborough, NC), who because of her skills and fortitude, became a successful business woman and Mary Lincoln’s dressmaker and friend. Students will explore, evaluate and make inferences from primary source documents in order to understand how an enslaved woman crafts her own path to success and celebrity.

Grade

8

Essential Questions

- What was Elizabeth Keckly’s life like as an enslaved person?
- What skills did Keckly possess to resist enslavement and become a successful business woman?

Materials

- NEH Video “My Dear Mother”: <https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/harriet-jacobs-and-elizabeth-keckly-material-and-emotional-realities-childhood-slavery>
 - Teachers may also provide the attached text of the letter as well.
- Picture of Mary Todd Lincoln’s Velvet Dress (by Elizabeth Keckly), attached
- Excerpts from Keckly’s autobiography, attached:
 - Buying Her Freedom
 - Becoming a Successful Businesswoman and Celebrity Dressmaker in Washington, DC
- Pictures of Mary Todd Lincoln, attached
- Picture of Elizabeth Keckly, attached
- Historical marker, template

Duration

45 to 60 minutes

Preparation

Students should have a basic overview of Elizabeth Keckly’s life, such as <http://www.burwellschool.org/elizabeth-keckly>.

Procedure

“My Dear Mother”

1. Begin class with a review of Elizabeth Keckly’s early life, or a brief overview. (Teachers can utilize information from the sections labeled “Girlhood” and “Slavery in Hillsborough” at <http://www.burwellschool.org/elizabeth-keckly>.) Let students know they are going to begin to get a better sense of Keckly by watching a short video depicting Keckly writing a letter to her mother from the Burwell School in Hillsborough, NC. The 4-minute video is available [here](#). Teachers may also want to provide the attached transcript of the letter to students, instructing them as they watch/listen to underline any words/phrases in the letter that strike them, and to write down any observations or questions they have in the margins. Afterwards, discuss:
 - What parts of this letter most struck you and why?
 - How would you describe the tone of Elizabeth’s letter? What emotions and hardships can you identify that she is experiencing and what particular sections of the letter make you think this?

- Overall, what does this letter tell us about Keckly's life in particular as an enslaved person, as well as perhaps slavery in general?

From Slavery to Freedom

2. Next, project the attached image (without including its title or providing any information about it) of Mary Lincoln's Velvet Dress.
 - Also available online, here: http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1359703

Ask students to simply make observations regarding what they see and what they infer by posing questions such as:

- What do you see?
 - How would you describe this dress?
 - When do you think it was made and/or worn and why? By whom may it have been worn and what makes you think this?
 - Assume that this dress was made in 1861. How would it have been made in contrast to how clothes are made today, and what skills would the person who created it have needed?
3. Let students know that the dress was made in 1861 for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, who wore it during the Washington winter social season in 1861–62 and it was made by Elizabeth Keckly! Allow students a moment to imagine how Keckly went from being enslaved to creating dresses for the First Lady of the United States. Explain to students that in 1847, Keckly, who had been loaned to one of the Burwell daughters named Anne Burwell Garland, moved with the Garland family to St. Louis. St. Louis was in the slave state of Missouri but lay just across the Mississippi River from the free state of Illinois. Hugh Garland was a lawyer but found it difficult to support his large household, so he wanted to hire out Elizabeth's mother to make money. Elizabeth convinced him to hire herself out as a seamstress instead. In doing so, she gained the reputation as prompt, reliable, and skilled, and soon reached the level of *modiste*, a designer of the most intricate and well fit gowns. Ultimately, this was Elizabeth's opportunity to craft her own freedom. Provide students with the attached "Buying Her Freedom" which is an excerpt from Keckly's own autobiography (yet another accomplishment that she made) and instruct students to read either individually or in partners. Discuss:
 - Based on what you read and have learned thus far, how would you describe Keckly? What skills does she have?
 - What does it say about Keckly that despite the terrible life circumstances she faced as an enslaved woman that she was able to purchase her own freedom?

Celebrity Dressmaker to Political Elites

4. Next, ask students to share what their understanding of a celebrity is. Further, engage them in a short discussion of what an entrepreneur is and how his or her success is usually measured. Tell them that despite the great adversity Keckly faced, both of these words could be used to describe her in her later life. Pass out the second attached excerpt from Keckly's autobiography, "Becoming a Successful Businesswoman & Celebrity Dressmaker." After reading, discuss:
 - What do you imagine it took on Keckly's part to amazingly go from slavery to the White House?
 - What do both excerpts you read and what you've learned tell us about Keckly's strategies for establishing a successful business?
3. Next present the students with a picture (such as those attached) of Mary Lincoln. Discuss:
 - What challenges would a dressmaker have in an attempt to flatter Lincoln? (Students should notice that Lincoln was quite a stout/portly/heavy woman in 1864.)
 - Thinking back to the velvet dress Keckly designed (teachers may want to show the dress again), how did she meet this challenge? What design choices did she make to flatter the First Lady? In what ways was this a good business strategy?

- If students have trouble with this question. Ask them, for instance, what it would have looked like if Keckly had gathered the heavy velvet around Lincoln’s waist. The gores trimmed in white satin lay flat against the waist and made Lincoln look as thin as possible.
4. Present the students with the attached photograph of Keckly, taken in the 1880s or 1890s and discuss.
 - What does the picture tell us about Keckly particularly as it relates to how she presents herself [appearance, posture, clothes, gaze]
 - How would such a presentation help to establish her reputation as a celebrity dressmaker?
 - How does this further highlight her skills and intelligence as a businesswoman?
 5. Let students know that “Mrs. Keckly’s relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln evolved into more than that of a dressmaker and her client. She served as Mrs. Lincoln’s confidante and in the First Lady’s own words, her “best friend.” In this position, she interacted with the First Family on a personal basis, traveled with the First Lady, and was an intimate witness to many of the events of the Civil War and Lincoln Presidency.

During these years, Mrs. Keckly founded the First Black Contraband Relief Association to assist newly freed slaves and served as its president. In 1861, her son George died fighting for the Union during the Civil War.

In 1868, in an attempt to tell her story and rehabilitate the declining reputation of Mrs. Lincoln, Elizabeth Keckly wrote a memoir entitled *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Despite Mrs. Keckly’s best intentions, the publication of her memoir marked the end of her friendship with Mrs. Lincoln who felt her confidence had been betrayed.

Elizabeth Hobbes Keckly later taught in the Department of Sewing and Domestic Science Arts at Willberforce University in Ohio. She died in Washington, D.C., in 1907, at the age of 88.

Today, *Behind the Scenes* is recognized as a rare and outstanding example of a slave memoir written by a woman.” Source: <http://www.burwellschool.org/elizabeth-keckly>

Culminating Activity: Design a Historical Marker Honoring Keckly

6. As a culminating activity, tell students that they are charged with re-designing Hillsborough’s historical marker commemorating Elizabeth Keckly. Provide students with the attached traditional design template for a historical marker, but allow student to be creative and come up with their own design if desired. Explain that their final design should include interesting (such as facts and quotations), an appropriate visual (such as a symbol or image), as well as a suggested location. Students can sketch or draw their ideas or mock up a design using a computer program.

Elizabeth Keckly (known as "Lizzie") was born into slavery in 1818 near Petersburg, Virginia in the household of Col. Armistead Burwell. She learned to sew from her mother, an expert seamstress also enslaved in the Burwell family. In 1831, Col. Burwell "gave" Lizzie to his eldest son, Robert Burwell, upon his marriage to Margaret Anna Robertson. In 1835, the seventeen-year-old was taken to Hillsborough, NC with the Burwell family as their only enslaved servant, where she spent the next six years. After a total of thirty years as a Burwell slave, Keckly purchased her and her only son's freedom. Later, when Keckly moved to Washington, D. C., she became an exclusive dress designer whose most famous client was First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Keckly's enduring fame results from her close relationship with Mrs. Lincoln, documented in her memoir, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868). The following is a letter Elizabeth wrote to her mother from Hillsborough, NC.

"HILLSBORO', April 10, 1838.

"MY DEAR MOTHER:—I have been intending to write to you for a long time, but numerous things have prevented, and for that reason you must excuse me.

"I thought very hard of you for not writing to me, but hope that you will answer this letter as soon as you receive it, and tell me how you like Marsfield, and if you have seen any of old acquaintances, or if you yet know any of the brick-house people who I think so much of. I want to hear of the family at home very much, indeed. I really believe you and all the family have forgotten me, if not I certainly should have heard from some of you since you left Boyton, if it was only a line; nevertheless I love you all very dearly, and shall, although I may never see you again, nor do I ever expect to. Miss Anna is going to Petersburg next winter, but she says that she does not intend to take me; what reason she has for leaving me I cannot tell. I have often wished that I lived where I knew I never could see you, for then I would not have my hopes raised, and to be disappointed in this manner; however, it is said that a bad beginning makes a good ending, but I hardly expect to see that happy day at this place. Give my love to all the family, both white and black. I was very

much obliged to you for the presents you sent me last summer, though it is quite late in the day to be thanking for them. Tell Aunt Bella that I was very much obliged to her for her present; I have been so particular with it that I have only worn it once.

"There have been six weddings since October; the most respectable one was about a fortnight ago; I was asked to be the first attendant, but, as usual with all my expectations, I was disappointed, for on the wedding-day I felt more like being locked up in a three-cornered box than attending a wedding. About a week before Christmas I was a bridesmaid for Ann Nash; when the night came I was in quite a trouble; I did not know whether my frock was clean or dirty; I only had a week's notice, and the body and sleeves to make, and only one hour every night to work on it, so you can see with these troubles to overcome my chance was rather slim. I must now close, although I could fill ten pages with my griefs and misfortunes; no tongue could express them as I feel; don't forget me though; and answer my letters soon. I will write you again, and would write more now, but Miss Anna says it is time I had finished. Tell Miss Elizabeth that I wish she would make haste and get married, for mistress says that I belong to her when she gets married.

"I wish you would send me a pretty frock this summer, if you will send it to Mrs. Robertson's Miss Bet will send it to me.

"Farewell, darling mother.

"Your affectionate daughter,

"ELIZABETH HOBBS."

Mary Lincoln's Velvet Dress, made by Elizabeth Keckly



Source: http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1359703

Buying Her Freedom

Excerpts from Elizabeth Keckly's Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), pp. 19-23 [Edition: Hillsborough: Eno Publishers, 2016]

[In 1847, Keckly, who had been loaned to one of the Burwell daughters named Anne Burwell Garland, moved with the Garland family to St. Louis. St. Louis was in the slave state of Missouri but lay just across the Mississippi River from the free state of Illinois. Hugh Garland was a lawyer but found it difficult to support his large household, so he decided to hire out Keckly's mother to raise some money for her labor.]

“The idea was shocking to me. Every gray hair in her old head was dear to me, and I could not bear the thought of her going to work for strangers. . . . I would rather work my fingers to the bone, bend over my sewing till the film of blindness gathered in my eyes; nay, even beg from street to street. I told Mr. Garland so, and he gave me permission to see what I could do. I was fortunate in obtaining work, and in a short time I had acquired something of a reputation as a seamstress and dress-maker. The best ladies in St. Louis were y patrons, and when my reputation was once established I never lacked for orders. With my needle I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons for two years and five months. . . .

One day when I insisted on knowing whether he [Hugh Garland] would permit me to purchase myself, and what price I must pay for myself, he turned to me in a petulant manner, thrust his hand into his pocket, drew forth a bright silver quarter of a dollar, and proffering it to me said:

“Lizzie, I have told you often not to trouble me with such a question. If you really wish to leave me, take this: it will pay the passage of yourself and boy [her son George] on the ferry-boat, and when you are on the other side of the river you will be free. . . .”

I looked at him in astonishment, and earnestly replied: “No, master, I do not wish to be free in such a manner. If such had been my wish, I should never have troubled you about obtaining your consent to my purchasing myself. I can cross the river any day, as you well know, and have frequently done so, but will never leave you in such a manner. By the laws of the land I am your slave – you are my master, and I will only be free by such means as the laws of the country provide.” He expected this answer, and I knew that he would be pleased. Some time afterwards he told me that he had reconsidered the question; that I had served his family faithfully; that I deserved my freedom, and that he would take \$1200 for myself and the boy. . . .

I went to work in earnest to purchase my freedom, but the years passed, and I was still a slave. . . .

Mrs. Le Bourgois [one of her patrons offered a solution to her problem] “Lizzie, . . . I have been thinking over the matter, . . . You have many friends in St. Louis, and I am going to raise the twelve hundred dollars required among them. I have two hundred dollars put away for a present; am indebted to you one hundred dollars; mother owner you fifty dollars, and will add another fifty to it; and as I do not want the present, I will made the money a present to you. . . .

Mrs. Le Bourgois, God bless her dear good heart, was more than successful. The twelve hundred dollars were raised, and at last my son and myself were free. Free, free! What a glorious ring to the word. Free! . . .” [Keckly's deed of emancipation was certified by the Clerk of the Circuit Court in St. Louis on November 15, 1855.]

Becoming a Successful Businesswoman and Celebrity Dressmaker in Washington, DC

Excerpts from Elizabeth Keckly's Behind the Scenes, pp. 33, 35-36, 38

[It took almost five years for Keckly to pay off her debt to her patrons. In 1860 she moved to Washington, D. C., where she hoped to establish herself as the capital city's foremost modiste, [a mantua-maker or dress maker who both designed and constructed fashionable clothing]

“Ever since arriving in Washington I had a great desire to work for the ladies of the White House, and to accomplish this end I was ready to make almost any sacrifice consistent with propriety. . . .

Tuesday morning [following Lincoln's inauguration], at eight o'clock, I crossed the threshold of the White House for the first time. I was shown into a waiting-room, and informed that Mrs. Lincoln was a breakfast. In the waiting-room I found no less than three mantua-makers waiting for an interview with the wife of the new President. It seems that Mrs. Lincoln had told several of her lady friends that she had urgent need for a dress-maker, and that each of these friends had sent her mantua-maker to the White House. Hope fell at once. With so many rivals for the position sought after, I regarded my chances for success as extremely doubtful. I was the last one summoned to Mrs. Lincoln's presence. All the others had a hearing, and were dismissed. I went up-stairs timidly, and entering the room with nervous step, discovered the wife of the President standing by a window, looking out, and engaged in lively conversation with a lady, Mrs. Grimly, as I afterward learned. Mrs. L. came forward, and greeted me warmly.

“You have come at last. Mrs. Keckley, who have you worked for in the city?”

Among others, Mrs. Senator [Jefferson] Davis [Varina Davis, soon to be first lady of the Confederacy] has been one of my best patrons,” was my reply.

“Mrs. Davis! So you have worked for her, have you? Of course you gave satisfaction; so far, so good. Can you do my work?”

“Yes, Mrs. Lincoln. Will you have much work for me to do?”

“That, Mrs. Keckley, will depend altogether upon your prices. I trust that your terms are reasonable. I cannot afford to be extravagant. We are just from the West, and are poor. If you do not charge too much, I shall be able to give you all my work.”

“I do not think there will be any difficulty about charges, Mrs. Lincoln; my terms are reasonable.”

“Well, if you will work cheap, you shall have plenty to do. I can't afford to pay big prices, so I frankly tell you so in the beginning.”

The terms were satisfactorily arranged, and I measured Mrs. Lincoln, took the dress with me, a bright rose-colored moire-antique, and returned the next day to fit it on her. . . .

The levee [to which Lincoln wore the dress] was a brilliant one, and the only one of the season. I became the regular modiste of Mrs. Lincoln. I made fifteen or sixteen dresses for her during the spring and early part of the summer, when she left Washington, . . . In the mean time I was employed by Mrs. Senator [Stephen] Douglas, one of the loveliest ladies that I ever met, Mrs. Secretary [of the Navy, Gideon] Wells [Welles], Mrs. Secretary [of War Edwin] Stanton, and others.”

Portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln



Source: <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/portrait-of-mary-todd-lincoln-high-res-stock-photography/AB30525>

Image of Elizabeth Keckly



THE JEFFERSON FINE ART GALLERY 523 BROAD ST. RICHMOND, VA.

