



Freedom Seeking Across North Carolina

Overview

For enslaved people throughout the history of North Carolina and America, freedom was not something that was simple or gained overnight. And while we often think of slavery in only a binary (that people were either enslaved or they were free) below the surface of the brutal and inhumane period of slavery, there was more complexity as well as community. From the enslaved people who sought and/or defined freedom for themselves, to those free and enslaved who assisted freedom seekers in escaping, to the rich and complex communities that were formed between enslaved and free people, a wholly accurate understanding of this period must include attention to the various ways Black people strove to experience varied concepts of freedom through their individual and collective agency, resistance, and resilience. In this lesson, students will gain an overview of the various ways freedom was sought across North Carolina by focusing on the [National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom \(NTF\)](#) sites located across North Carolina, as well as the NC African American Heritage Commission's [Freedom Roads Trail](#). In a rotating stations activity, students will specifically explore:

- River Runaways
- The Great Dismal Swamp
- Edenton & Colonial Park
- The Cape Fear Region
- Freedom and Resistance Through Culture, Intellect & Identity

In addition to this overview lesson, other lesson plans are available to delve further into specific areas of North Carolina's freedom history. They include:

- [Coastal Freedom Seekers: Hotel D'Afrique, Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony & James City](#)
- [Halifax County, the Roanoke River and Freedom Seeking](#)
- [Resistance, Resilience & Strength: The Life of Harriet Ann Jacobs](#)
- [Abolitionism, Quakers & the Underground Railroad in North Carolina](#)
- [Against All Odds: The African American Founding of Princeville, North Carolina](#)

Grades

8 - 11

Materials

- Recording & lyrics for "Oh Freedom," available [here](#)
- Freedom Seeking Across NC Map, available [here](#)
 - Teachers implementing this activity as well as some of the additional coordinating lesson plans mentioned above should consider having students mark additional points from those lessons on their map as each lesson is implemented (i.e., Hotel D'Afrique, Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, James City, Princeville, the Piedmont's Quakers sites, etc.)
 - A complete map of North Carolina's freedom sites is available [here](#).

This material is based upon work assisted by a grant from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), funded by the Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of ASALH or the Department of the Interior.

- Freedom Seeking Across NC, response handout [here](#)
- Station Packets (available by clicking the links below)
 - Stations should be set up prior to class arriving. The document packets below can be photocopied (and optionally, laminated) and left at each station, or teachers can upload these into their preferred technological platform so that students can access the materials at “digital” stations. Teachers may also alter the station, either varying the content within these topics to better match student reading levels, or adding additional station topics that directly address your curricular goals. It is highly recommended teachers include a local history station, in which students explore these topics as they directly intersect with your town and/or county. One place to start such research is [UNC-G’s Collection of NC Slave Runaway Ads](#), which can be filtered by county.
 - [River Runaways](#)
 - [The Great Dismal Swamp](#)*
 - [Edenton & Colonial Park](#)
 - [The Cape Fear Region](#)*
 - [Freedom and Resistance Through Culture, Intellect & Identity](#)*

**These stations starred will also need at least one device connected to the internet, since a video or audio recording is part of the materials to be reviewed.*

Additional Resources

- [National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom \(NTF\)](#): The mission of NTF is to honor, preserve and promote the history of resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, which continues to inspire people worldwide. Through its mission, the NTF helps to advance the idea that all human beings embrace the right to self-determination and freedom from oppression.
- NC African American Heritage Commission’s [Freedom Roads Trail](#): Freedom Roads is a statewide trail system that recognizes the places (from rivers to towns) that were crucial to the efforts of freedom seeking throughout the state, as well as the freedom seekers and their allies, whose stories testify to the indomitable spirit found in thousands who strove to be free and aided them in success.
 - *Freedom Roads sites include designations in the National Park Service’s [Network to Freedom Underground Railroad](#) program, as well as other sites and routes recognized by historians and/or archaeologists as significant to African American freedom seeking in North Carolina.*
- [River Runaways](#)
- [“We Are Five Africans Seeking Freedom,” a Civil War Story from Beaufort](#)
- [The Shores of Freedom: The Maritime Underground Railroad in North Carolina, 1800-1861](#)
- [The Waterman’s Song](#), a book by David Cecelski
- [Freedom Fighter: Remembering the 1st North Carolina Colored Volunteers](#)
- [Black Spirituals as Poetry & Resistance](#)

Duration

- 90+ minutes
- Time will vary depending on student reading level, amount of discussion, as well as whether teachers alter station materials.

Preparation

- Student must understand expectations for respectfully discussing “[hard history](#)” such as enslavement. While this history brings up difficult topics such as racism and racial violence, such history represents a part of our shared state and national history that students must understand in order to comprehend its impact on the present. To ensure students are able to respectfully and empathetically discuss such topics,

This material is based upon work assisted by a grant from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), funded by the Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of ASALH or the Department of the Interior.

teachers must ensure a foundation of civil discourse, respect and empathy in the classroom. For techniques on building such a classroom community, see Carolina K-12's classroom management activities in the Database of K-12 Resources under the "[Activities](#)" section and specifically [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](#).

- Prior to class, teachers should arrange the room to allow for "station" explorations, or arrange for and set up the desired technology if implementing "digital stations," as described in the procedure.
 - This will involve grouping small seating areas together in various sections of the classroom, hanging information on the wall in particular areas, or utilizing other varied ways to allow students space to travel around the classroom and collect the necessary information. Be creative! (Teachers may also want to reserve a larger space, such as a media center, if available.)
 - Teachers will want to determine the number of stations they will be utilizing and be prepared to divide students into that number of groups. The activity as written includes five stations. Large classes, or teachers desiring smaller groups, can also have more than one station for each topic.
 - Teachers may also want to have extra stations (i.e., with thematically related art to review) where groups finished and waiting on a content station can busy themselves. This could include art such as [The Dutchman](#), [Forward](#), [The People Could Fly](#), etc.

Procedure

Warm Up: What Is Freedom?

1. As a warm-up, ask students to do a free write on the question of "What is freedom? What does it mean to be free?" (A creative option is to hang bulletin board paper along the wall of the classroom, and allow students to graffiti write for this activity.) As students write, play the spiritual "Oh Freedom!" (One version is available [here](#), though teachers should only use the audio and not the video.) After the song ends, have students "pair and share" with a neighbor for one minute. Finally, conduct a large-group discussion, layering in additional discussion questions while adding any new thoughts/emerging themes to the graffiti wall:
 - How does your identity inform your ideas about freedom? (Encourage students to consider features such as race, gender, economic status, etc.)
 - How might the time in which you live inform your ideas about freedom? (This should open up a conversation about historical periods such as slavery.)
 - Based on what we've said thus far, how is freedom much more complex than just physical freedom (i.e., not being jailed or enslaved)?
 - Consider the song you listened to as your brainstormed, which was a spiritual called "Oh Freedom." From whose perspective was the song written/sang and how do you think they define freedom? (As students discuss, project the lyrics to the song to layer into the conversation as well; lyrics are available at the [same link](#) as the recording.)
 - As we discussed earlier regarding ourselves, would freedom for those enslaved only have been about physical freedom or would it have also been more complex? What were the various ways enslaved people may have sought or carved out freedom for themselves? (Encourage students to consider this question in terms of physically, mentally, spiritually, culturally, etc.)

Exploring NC Freedom Seeking in Rotating Stations

2. Explain to students that in today's lesson, they will be exploring the complex and myriad of ways enslaved and free people both sought, experienced, and maintained freedom given their individual circumstance. It is important that students understand that for enslaved people throughout the history of North Carolina

This material is based upon work assisted by a grant from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), funded by the Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of ASALH or the Department of the Interior.

and America, freedom was not something that was simple or gained overnight. And while we often think of slavery in only a binary (that people were either enslaved or they were free) below the surface of the brutal and inhumane institution of slavery, there was more complexity. From the enslaved people who sought and/or defined freedom for themselves, to those free and enslaved who assisted freedom seekers in escaping, to the rich and complex communities that were formed between enslaved and free people, a wholly accurate understanding of this period must include attention to the various ways Black people strove to experience varied concepts of freedom through both their individual and collective agency, resistance and resilience. Provide each student with the [Freedom Seeking Across NC map and response sheets](#).

3. Let students know that in this “rotating stations” activity, they will be exploring the various ways freedom was sought across North Carolina by focusing on North Carolina’s sites that are part of the [National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom \(NTF\)](#). Project the website for NTF and explain to students that the mission of NTF is to honor, preserve and promote the history of resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, which continues to inspire people worldwide. Through its mission, the NTF helps to advance the idea that all human beings embrace the right to self-determination and freedom from oppression.
4. Let students know that in addition to learning about many the NTF sites across North Carolina (as of Dec. 2020 there are 18 NTF-designated sites), they will also be exploring other sites identified by the NC African American Heritage Commission’s [Freedom Roads Trail](#). Explain to students that Freedom Roads is a statewide trail system that recognizes the places (from rivers to towns) that were crucial to the efforts of freedom seeking throughout the state, as well as the freedom seekers and their allies, whose stories testify to the indomitable spirit found in thousands who strove to be free and aided them in success.
 - Point out to students that Freedom Roads Sites *include* designations in the National Park Service’s [Network to Freedom](#) Underground Railroad program, as well as *other sites and routes* recognized by historians and/or archaeologists as significant to African American freedom seeking in North Carolina.
5. As they rotate through the various stations focusing on NTF and Freedom Roads sites, tell students that they will be exploring:
 - Pathways and access points utilized for seeking freedom across North Carolina (rivers, ports, towns, etc.)
 - Examples of individual freedom seekers whose stories testify to the indomitable spirit found in thousands who strove to be free, as well as the allies who supported and assisted the efforts of freedom seekers throughout the state and beyond.
 - The concept of freedom, with attention paid to the myriad of ways enslaved people exhibited agency and resistance, both overtly and subtlety
6. Divide students into five groups (or the number of groups corresponding to the number of stations you are utilizing. Large classes, or teachers desiring smaller groups, can also have more than one classroom site for each topic.) Explain to students that they will be traveling around the classroom to visit each station, where they will work with their group members to read, explore and discuss the information presented. Students should answer the corresponding [worksheet questions](#) and also label the various points and pathways to freedom they learn about on the [map](#) provided to them.
7. Teachers should determine if students need to visit stations in any particular order, as well as how much time to provide for exploration at each station. At each station, students can work together (for instance,

after reading any overview, they might divvy up the remaining materials, then teach back to their group members about what they learned.) Depending on the time provided and reading level of students, this activity may stretch across more than one day of class time. Remind students of classroom expectations for productive group work and safe movement around the classroom then allow students to get started. Teachers should rotate around the room to answer questions and provide feedback as students work.

Class Discussion and Reflections: NC Freedom Seeking

8. Once students have completed their station rotation, their [map](#), and their [handout](#), bring the class together for a larger discussion on what they learned about freedom seeking. (As a reminder, depending on timing of the stations activity, this might occur on a second day of instruction.) Go through the handout's questions and review student thoughts, and utilize additional questions to further reflect:
- Look back at our graffiti wall about freedom that we did when we first starting talking about this concept. What would you now add or change based on everything that you have learned? (Teachers may even want to allow students time to return to the wall and add to it.)
 - What do these measures of freedom have in common? (i.e., all forms of freedom are achieved without permission of the enslaver; all might offer some degree of relief; many can provide a common sense of community; all are a declaration/demand of humanity; all have varying degrees of risk associated; all would involve a level of difficulty and courage; even if successful, all enslaved people likely experienced various forms of post-traumatic stress; etc.)
 - What is different about these three types of freedom?
 - For example, all are different in the degree of danger in exercising each type of freedom; the ratio of risk vs. reward; the obstacles an enslaved person must face to achieve each; etc.
 - Of everything that you learned, what did you find most interesting, or what surprised you the most? What did you learn that you can't believe you didn't know before? (And why do you think you've never learned about this before?)
 - We've learned about a different view of slavery – a “maritime underground” and even a “hidden culture” existing on plantations, rather than the classic image of the plantation with enslaved people obediently working in fields. Why do you think we aren't normally taught the full picture in this way?
 - Remember that the mission of the [National Park Service Underground Railroad Network to Freedom](#) is to honor, preserve and promote the history of resistance to enslavement through escape and flight, which continues to inspire people worldwide. Through its mission, the NTF helps to advance the idea that all human beings embrace the right to self-determination and freedom from oppression. Of all the places, bodies of water, people, stories, etc. that are NTF sites that you have learned about, which do you think is most meaningful, memorable or important and why?
 - Looking over your map on which you plotted the various points of freedom seeking that you learned about, what conclusions can you make?
 - As you discuss, project the African American Heritage Commission's [Freedom Roads map](#), so that students can ensure they have correctly plotted the various points. Note any points on the map that students did not read about in this activity as well.
 - Remind students that Freedom Roads Sites *include* designations in the National Park Service's [Network to Freedom](#) Underground Railroad program, as well as *other sites and routes* recognized by historians and/or archaeologists as significant to African American freedom seeking in North Carolina.

Acknowledging the Risks of Freedom Seeking

9. Point out to students that while we celebrate the resistance, resilience, and demands of freedom made by enslaved people, it's important we also keep an eye to reality and acknowledge the risks that any attempt towards freedom entailed. What were the risks and dangers enslaved people were constantly facing?

Allow students to weigh in and further share:

- The punishments freedom seekers faced upon their return if captured varied from verbal abuse to beatings, sale to another master, and even mutilation or death. Often while gone, loved ones left behind could be targeted. (For instance, when Harriet Jacobs was in hiding, her children were jailed in hopes this would draw her out.)
- "Finding safe passage on a ship to free territory proved a difficult, risk-laden endeavor that often required months or years. A single wrong step, misplaced trust, or rash inquiry could doom a runaway slave. Success depended as much on patience and prudence as daring and courage." (David Cecelski) This was true for freedom seekers and their allies.
- Even once passage was secured, any sailor or ship's captain could betray the runaways to earn the bounty. Stowaways could be discovered by any port inspector, and ships were sometimes fumigated by burning pitch or brimstone between decks to drive pests – and people – out.
- As incredible and uplifting as the story of North Carolina's maritime Underground Railroad is, it is important to understand that of the thousands of enslaved people who fled each year, most never made it to freedom. Many returned tired, hungry and understandably, unable to survive as fugitives based on some of the conditions we've explored. Others were carried back in chains after their capture by lawmen or professional slave catchers.
- For those who successfully escaped, and even those who went on to lead successful lives, many worried about those left behind, and most would deal with the trauma of their past experiences for the rest of their lives (this remained even after slavery was legally ended, and many argue has passed down through generations and is still with us today.)
- Even after slavery was legally ended, the struggle was no where near over. Many historians argue the struggle continues today. As Patsy Mitchner, a formerly enslaved person said, "Slavery was a bad thing, and freedom, of the kind we got, with nothing to live on, was bad. Two snakes full of poison. One lying with his head pointing north, the other with his head pointing south. Their names was slavery and freedom." (Patsy Mitchner, age 84, Raleigh, NC)

10. In culmination, project the following quote from Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, from the preface of the [Teaching the Hard History of American Slavery report](#) by Teaching Tolerance:

- "The intractable nature of racial inequality is a part of the tragedy that is American slavery. But the saga of slavery is not exclusively a story of despair; **hard history is not hopeless history**. Finding the promise and possibility within this history requires us to consider the lives of the enslaved on their own terms. Trapped in an unimaginable hell, enslaved people forged unbreakable bonds with one another. Indeed, no one knew better the meaning and importance of family and community than the enslaved. They fought back too, in the field and in the house, pushing back against enslavers in ways that ranged from feigned ignorance to flight and armed rebellion. There is no greater hope to be found in American history than in African Americans' resistance to slavery." Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries

11. Either as a closing class discussion, or in a written reflection, ask students:

- What message is Dr. Jeffries conveying?
- How does North Carolina's history of freedom seekers and the Underground Railroad support Dr. Jeffries's argument?

This material is based upon work assisted by a grant from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), funded by the Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of ASALH or the Department of the Interior.

- Why is a more comprehensive look at our past, even when it involves difficult topics such as slavery, critical to a true understanding of our past and present?