



REIMAGINING
New England Histories
Historical Injustice, Sovereignty and Freedom

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Black Anti-Slavery Activists in 1850s Worcester, Massachusetts

Background and Context for Educator:

The abolitionist movement in the United States was a social and political campaign aimed at ending the institution of slavery. Emerging in the late 18th century, the movement gained momentum in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Abolitionists, such as [Frederick Douglass](#), [Harriet Tubman](#), [Abby Kelley Foster](#), [Angelina and Sarah Grimké](#), [Charles Lennox Remond](#), [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#), [Sojourner Truth](#), [David Walker](#), [Theodore Weld](#), and [William Lloyd Garrison](#), passionately advocated for the emancipation of enslaved individuals and the establishment of equal rights for all. They utilized various methods, including public speeches, literature, the [Underground Railroad](#), and even violence to support their cause. The movement played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and ultimately contributed to the adoption of the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, a crucial step toward the abolition of slavery in the United States.

Lesson Context for Students:

In the nineteenth century, people fought against injustice in different ways. Some devoted their lives to fighting for the abolition, or immediate end, of slavery. They fought not just with weapons during the Civil War, but with words, writing and publishing pamphlets and newspapers, sharing the stories of enslaved people, and delivering speeches to persuade their fellow Americans to end slavery, a system that sat at the foundation of America's economic and social order. This week, you're going to learn more about abolitionists and activists in Worcester, Massachusetts, and you're going to think about how you would persuade others to care about an issue that is important to you. At the end of the week, you will all have a chance to share your message and try to persuade your classmates.

Big idea: Despite their struggles and limitations, the African American community in Worcester, Massachusetts of 1860 demonstrated resilience, determination, and a commitment to improving their circumstances. They sought to end slavery, overcome discrimination, promote education, and advocate for equality in an era marked by significant racial injustice. There are connections between their efforts and those who continue their work today in movements like Black Lives Matter.

Essential Question:

How have people fought against injustice in their or their community's lives? How are their strategies different from, or similar to, strategies used by people fighting injustice today?



Vocabulary:

- Fugitive Slave Act
- Underground Railroad
- Abolitionists
- Frederick Douglass
- William Lloyd Garrison
- Worcester County Anti-Slavery Society

Lesson 1:

Objective: Students will be able to describe the work of Black anti-slavery activists in Massachusetts and its connection to national issues during the antebellum period.

Overview

Introductory question: what do people do today if they feel like something is unjust or unethical? [Discuss]

Introduction: “In the nineteenth century, people fought against injustice in different ways. Some devoted their lives to fighting for the abolition, or immediate end, of slavery. They fought not just with weapons during the Civil War, but with words, writing and publishing pamphlets and newspapers, sharing the stories of enslaved people, and delivering speeches to persuade their fellow Americans to end slavery, a system that sat at the foundation of America’s economic and social order. This week, you’re going to learn more about abolitionists and activists in Worcester, Massachusetts, and you’re going to think about how you would persuade others to care about an issue that is important to you. At the end of the week, you will all have a chance to share your message and try to persuade your classmates.”

Provide background: depending on what you’ve previously covered on the antebellum period in US history, it may be helpful to watch one or more of the following clips and discuss them with your students.

- “The Underground Railroad,” Crash Course Black American History, <https://youtu.be/Byh-HityBIM>
 - This is a longer video that discusses the Underground Railroad, narratives of enslaved people (William Still), the Fugitive Slave Act, and the complexity of highlighting the stories of those who escaped from slavery, or self-emancipated. It provides useful context for the history that follows, and some great jumping-off points for conversation, if you have time.
- “What to the Slave Is the 4th of July?": James Earl Jones Reads Frederick Douglass's Historic Speech,” Democracy Now!, <https://youtu.be/iZDcB1NhMfo>
 - This is a recording of Frederick Douglass’s speech reflecting on the cruel irony of celebrating liberty in a nation where slavery was still practiced.



- “The Fugitive Slave Law,” Becoming Frederick Douglass, PBS. <https://youtu.be/oW3TkkRv8nI>
 - This is a brief overview of the Fugitive Slave Law, showing the tension between North and South over what to do about people who escaped from slavery by moving north. It incorporates discussions of the use of violence to resist “slave-catchers,” something also addressed in the readings below.

Read the text and discuss

Discussion questions:

- What were some ways that community leaders resisted slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act?
- The clips from earlier and the text you read have talked about times when people used violence to fight for their rights and against slavery. Is their violence justified? *When, if ever*, is violence justifiable in the fight for rights or equality? What other strategies can also be employed in these struggles?

Pick an issue

Say: “Starting in class tomorrow, you will be researching a contemporary issue related to education, discrimination, or equality that you care about. Take some time right now to brainstorm potential topics, then see if you can narrow it down to one or two that you can start researching tomorrow.”

Close: “Today you learned about important civil rights and abolitionist leaders in the nineteenth century. However, their strategies informed the movements for equality and against discrimination and racism that followed, whether that was the movement for women’s suffrage, school integration, or equal opportunities. Tomorrow, and for the rest of this week, you’ll have a chance to think about how you’ll apply the lessons of leaders like Lucy Schuyler and Frederick Douglass to an issue you care deeply about—what will your message be? How will you share it with the world in a way that will persuade them to join your fight? You’ll figure that out this week, and share that message on Friday.”

Lesson 2:

Objective: Students will independently research a current issue related to education, discrimination, or equality.

Introduction: “Think about a person you read about yesterday. Whose footsteps are you following in as you create your own persuasive work? What strategies of resistance would you want people to use as they stand with you?”

Students will be independently researching a contemporary issue that they care about, in order to write a persuasive essay on it and create something (a poster, pamphlet, TikTok, song, etc.) to share their message.



Things to review before students begin researching:

- Acceptable sources for research
- Note-taking (make sure to write down source information before taking notes)
- Quoting and paraphrasing
- Class independent work norms

In closing, you might ask students to share something interesting they learned from their research, and ground them again in the goals of the activity.

Lesson 3:

Objective: Students will use their research to outline and draft a persuasive essay.

Introduction: Students will use class time to turn their notes into a draft of their persuasive essay on their chosen issue.

Things to review before students begin drafting:

- Standard outlines for a 5-paragraph persuasive essay
- Quoting, paraphrasing, and citing
- Class independent work norms

Lesson 4:

Objective: Students will revise their essay and create a way to share their message.

Lesson 5:

Objective: Students will share their messages with their class.

Massachusetts State Standards: Grades 5-6

Topic 5. Slavery, the legacy of the Civil War, and the struggle for civil rights for all [5.T5]

Supporting Question: What ideas and events of the 19th century led to the expansion of civil rights in the 20th and 21st centuries?

Topic 5 (Gr. 5-6) Trace the state-by-state abolition of slavery in the Northern states in the 18th and 19th centuries and the expansion of slavery into western states; explain the effects of the 1808 law that banned the importation of slaves into the United States and explain how a robust slave trade nonetheless continued within the United States until the mid-19th century

How the abolition and spread of slavery impacted Black communities in New England

Topic 4. Social, political, and religious change [USI.T4]

Supporting Question: How did religious and ethical beliefs shape American reform movements?

Topic 5. The Civil War and Reconstruction: causes and consequences [USI.T5]



Supporting Question: How did sectional differences over slavery in the North, South, Midwest, and West contribute to the Civil War?

Works referenced (for further reading):

<https://www.worcestermag.com/story/news/2008/02/28/the-slave-catcher39s-riot/10910854007/>

Thompson, Dr. L.S. *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson*. SicPress, Methuen, MA, 2012. With Afterword by Godsey, Joyce. Originally published in 1866 by the Sentinel Press in Lawrence, MA.

Bell, Edward L. *Persistence of Memories of Slavery and Emancipation in Historical Andover*. Shawsheen Press, Boston, MA. 2021.

McCarthy, B. Eugene and Doughton, Thomas L. *From Bondage to Belonging: The Worcester Slave Narratives*. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA. 2007.

<https://id.loc.gov/authorities/names/nr98033871.html>

Han, Sora. "Slavery as Contract: Betty's Case and the Question of Freedom." *Law and Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (FALL 2015), pp. 395-416 (22 pages)

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26770761>

"Great Excitement Among the Boston Colored Population." *The Tennessean*. Nashville, TN. 17 November 1857, page 3.

Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped (For Kids): Racism, Antiracism, and You*.



Black Anti-Slavery Activists in 1850 Worcester

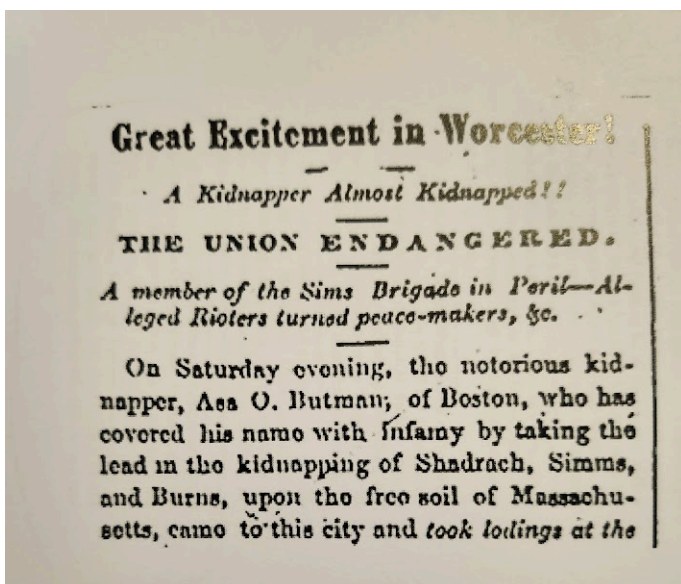
By Cheryll Toney Holley (Hassanamisco Nipmuc)

Slavery was a deeply divisive issue in the United States in 1850, with tensions between the North and South continuing to escalate in the years leading up to the Civil War. The country was divided over the issue of slavery, with the southern states depending heavily on it for their agricultural-based economy, while the northern states increasingly viewed it as a moral wrong.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed by Congress, which required citizens to assist in the capture and return of runaway slaves and made it illegal to assist or harbor escaped slaves. This law was deeply controversial and led to tensions between the North and South, as many in the North refused to comply with the law and actively helped runaway slaves escape to freedom.

The **Underground Railroad**, a network of secret routes on land and at sea as well as safe houses, operated in the North, provided a means for self-emancipated people to escape to freedom. **Abolitionists** in Massachusetts such as **Frederick Douglass** and **William Lloyd Garrison** spoke out against slavery and advocated for its immediate end. The anti-slavery movement in Massachusetts played a significant role in the national movement to end slavery in the United States. Massachusetts was one of the first states to abolish slavery, with a judicial decision enacted in 1783, and its citizens, Black and White, were at the forefront of the abolitionist movement throughout the nineteenth century.

The anti-slavery movement in Worcester, Massachusetts was a crucial part of the broader state and national effort to end slavery, and the city's role in the movement helped to shape the course of American history. The black community in Worcester in 1850 was small but a growing, active, and visible part of the city, with its own churches, schools, and social organizations. This community was at the forefront of the anti-slavery movement.



Worcester was a center of anti-slavery activity in the mid-nineteenth century, and the city was home to several influential abolitionist leaders and organizations including **Abby Kelley Foster**, a Quaker abolitionist who moved to the city in the 1840s. Foster was an eloquent speaker and tireless organizer, and she played a key role in the founding of the **Worcester County Anti-Slavery Society** in 1841. The organization quickly became one of the most active and multi-racial anti-slavery groups in the state, and it held regular meetings and events to rally support for the cause.



Worcester's Black community also played a key role in the anti-slavery movement, hosting speeches and events for prominent abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison and supporting political candidates who were opposed to slavery. Known as a safe haven, self-emancipated persons were welcomed into the homes of Black citizens of Worcester. Jobs, shelter, and protection were made available. Soon, the newly free persons themselves became protectors and leaders of the community including **Gilbert Walker** and **Isaac Mason** who separately escaped slavery in Maryland.

One example of Worcester's Black community's dedication to freedom was the Asa Butman incident. **US Marshall Asa Butman** was a notorious slave catcher who operated out of Boston, Massachusetts. Butman was known for his brutal tactics and his success in capturing and returning enslaved persons to their enslavers in the South. On October 28, 1854, Butman made the mistake of entering the city of Worcester. Earlier in the day, a local newspaper, *The Worcester Daily Spy*, printed and distributed handbills throughout the city warning of Butman's arrival. While Black citizens safeguarded themselves and any new residents, a committee of White citizens visited Butman at his hotel to learn what his business in Worcester was. Butman assured his visitors that he was only in town to question witnesses about an incident in Boston.

Unfortunately for Butman, no one believed his story. Some of the local abolitionists tried to escort Butman out of town for his safety. They did not get far – a crowd numbering at least 1000 people trailed Butman to the rail station. More than once Butman was struck by a rock and knocked down. Butman missed his train and to keep him from further attack, he was driven to nearby Grafton by coach to catch the Boston train there.

Six men were arrested in the attack on Butman including Nipmuc **Alexander Hemenway**, Abby Foster's husband, and a Black man named Solomon Dutton. All were freed the next day on bail except for Foster who refused bail. In exchange for his escort out of Worcester, Butman promised to never return. And never did he return.

Black women in Worcester also participated in anti-slavery efforts. **Martha Brown** and **Susan Van Rensselaer** were among local women who hosted speakers, led protests, and chaired meetings. Susan's daughter, **Lucy Schuyler**, an Indian doctress and wife of Peter Schuyler, a minister and faith healer, became an active part of the Underground Railroad and a tireless defender of those persons trying to self-emancipate.

Lucy and Peter moved from Worcester to Lawrence in 1855 where they continued to support anti-slavery efforts. Peter died only a year after moving to Lawrence and of the couple's seven children, only two survived after the death of their father. To support herself and her children, Lucy continued to work as an Indian Doctress from her home in Lawrence. She did not neglect her anti-slavery activities though. In 1857, an enslaved woman named **Betty Booth** traveled from Tennessee to Lawrence with her enslavers, the Sweets. Lucy became aware of Betty's situation and obtained a writ of habeas corpus to win Betty's freedom. The



case backfired when Betty chose of her own free will to continue her arrangement with the Sweets. Betty told the judge presiding over the case that her husband and family were still in Tennessee and that she had no desire to be parted from them. The judge allowed Betty to decide for herself and also issued instructions for Lucy to not interfere with Betty's decision.

Lucy continued her work with the Underground Railroad. In 1859, she met George Brown, a self-emancipated man from St Louis, MS. Brown changed his name to John Thompson to avoid slave catchers. Lucy and John married in 1860 and continued to live and work in Lawrence. Lucy's last remaining child, Arthur, joined the Massachusetts 54th MA 54th regiment by falsifying his age. He did return home only to die a year later of tuberculosis.

Lucy also wrote at least two slave narratives for persons she encountered – Mattie J. Jackson and Mrs. H.N. Tuthill. Mattie was the stepdaughter of Lucy's husband John. Slave narratives are autobiographical accounts of the experiences of enslaved individuals from throughout the United States. Many of these narratives were written by enslaved individuals themselves or transcribed through interviews with formerly enslaved persons. Lucy narrated and published these stories as fundraisers for the women, in Mattie's case, to pay for her education. She continued to champion other women and work as a healer until her death. She died in 1881, the last of her line.

<https://www.worcestermag.com/story/news/2008/02/28/the-slave-catcher39s-riot/10910854007/>

Thompson, Dr. L.S. *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson*. SicPress, Methuen, MA, 2012. With Afterword by Godsey, Joyce. Originally published in 1866 by the Sentinel Press in Lawrence, MA.

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"Great Excitement Among the Boston Colored Population." *The Tennessean*. Nashville, TN. 17 November 1857, page 3.



Additional Resources:

POPULATION—THE FREEDOM-SHRIKERS SOLD.—The Boston papers of last Monday week contain exciting and elaborate accounts of the attempt to rescue a “down-trodden African” from the jaws of human slavery, which came off in that metropolis on that day. The object of the philanthropic sympathies on this occasion was a colored servant traveling with Mr. Louis Sweet, son-in-law of Major Raworth of this city. The strong-minded women and weak-minded men of the town, ascertaining that Betty was in town, besieged her with entreaties to throw herself at once upon her constitutional rights, and into their outstretched arms, and be forever free. Betty, the account says, was of “an uncertain mind,” and did not encourage her sympathetic friends in their attempt to induce her to give a theoretical demonstration of “the might that slumbers in a freewoman’s arm.” Determined not to be thwarted, however, a widow woman named Lucy S. Scuyler obtained a writ of *habeas corpus*, stating in her petition, on oath that Betty was unlawfully restrained of her liberty. The fact became public—the excitement became intense, and when the critical hour for examination arrived, dark clouds of ebony skins swarmed the Court room, interspersed with strong minded women and their masculine relatives. The usual preliminaries were gone through with, when a proposition to allow the object of the Bostonian solicitation to decide for herself whether she would leave her master and fly into the arms of her new formed friends, or remain in *statu quo*, was mutually agreed to. The Judge descended from his bench, and took Betty to his private room, where he enlightened her benighted mind upon the beauties of freedom—appealed to her to set her countrymen an example—pictured to her the delights of Northern society, and told her of the high respect white folks had for darkies there. “A very pretty young lady,” the account says, was allowed to add her persuasions to those of the judge, as was also Mr. Grimes, who besought Betty never to return to the vile place from whence she came. But Betty was incorrigible—she refused their proffered boon, and decided to remain in the service of Mr. and Mrs. Sweet. She was therefore allowed to depart.

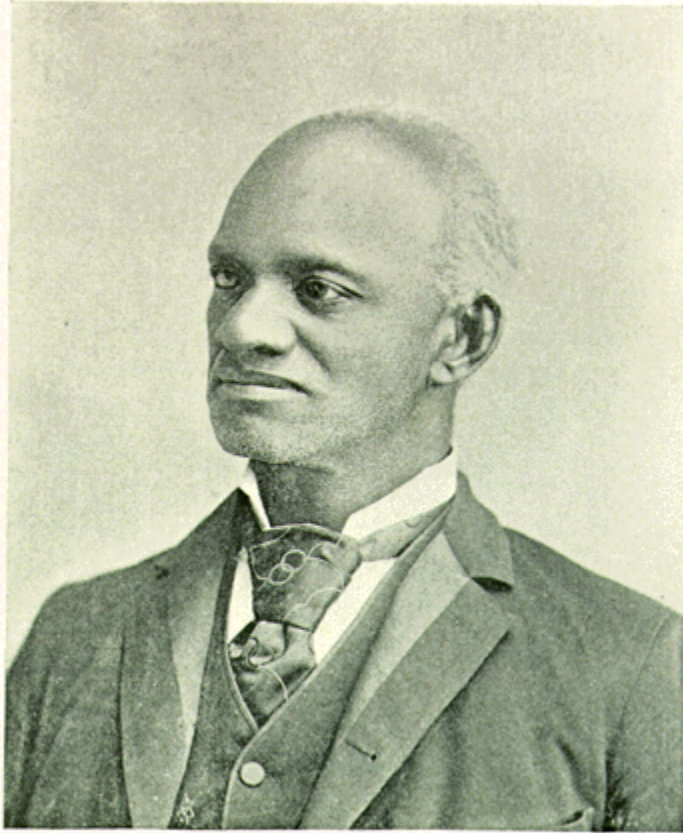
Our Boston friends were beautifully sold—delightfully *sweetened*—in this operation. Betty Booth has, and is, and always has been as free as that charming young widow, that “very pretty young lady,” and her Rev. Mr. Grimes. She is a resident of this city, and has a husband here, who, by the way, talks of bringing an action against Rev. Mr. Grimes for interfering in his domestic relations. The respect he has for “old Grimes,” that good old man, may possibly prevent him from doing so.



<https://gigi.mwa.org/imagearchive/filename/610047>

American Antiquarian society - Digital Archive





Isaac Mason.

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/mason/mason.html>

Life of Isaac Mason As a Slave