
SECTION I

First Wave of Anti-Slavery Activism (1783-1834)

Lesson 2

Gradual vs. Immediate Emancipation

Grade Level: High School

Objectives:

Students will

- Review a timeline detailing the struggle for emancipation in the North between 1773-1827.
- Form and defend a position regarding gradual versus immediate emancipation.

Time: Two 50-minute class periods

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: Gradual Emancipation Timeline
- Worksheet 2: Early 1800s identities

Background:

The earliest settlers of Brooklyn, New York, planted the seeds of a fatal contradiction: slavery in a land of freedom. The dual existence was the paradox of the American Revolution. Even as slavery's numbers strengthened in Kings County, African Americans and white Quakers in other parts of the early republic used the rhetoric of liberty to initiate political change and birthed an anti-slavery movement.

As a result, a number of northern states passed emancipation laws. These laws fell into two categories: gradual and immediate. Most states relied on a gradual approach to emancipation.

Pennsylvania (1780), Rhode Island (1784), and Connecticut (1784) all passed gradual emancipation laws. These laws protected the interests of slaveholders rather than enslaved people and freed the children of enslaved people only after they had worked from their childhood to adulthood. Once enslaved people were “free”, gradual emancipation laws made no provision for political or legal equality for black people.

The constitutions of Vermont (1777) and Massachusetts (1783) forbade slavery and freed the enslaved people within their states immediately; however, it did not address political or legal equality for its black residents.

Finally, New York State was the second to last northern state to pass a gradual emancipation law (New Jersey was the last). In 1799, New York's gradual emancipation act stated that children born to enslaved mothers after July 4, 1799, would serve as indentured servants until the age of 25 if female, and 28 if male. Slavery had no end date for enslaved people born prior to July 4, 1799.

In 1817, a further law stipulated that enslaved men and women born prior to July 4, 1799, would be free on July 4, 1827. In other words, gradual emancipation occurred over a 28-year period in New York State, and therefore Kings County. Freedom did not come easily.

This Indenture made the sixteenth day of June
in the year of our Lord One thousand eight hundred
and twenty five, Witnesseth that John Ditmars of the
town of Flatlands in the County of Kings and State of
New York Hath placed and bound and by these presents
Doth place and bind a Negro Girl Servant named
Sine born on the sixteenth day of November in the
year of our Lord One thousand eight hundred and
seventeen, to Jacob Duryee of the town of Flatbush in
the said County of Kings and with him as a servant
to dwell, continue and serve from the day of the date of
these presents until the said Negro Girl Servant shall
be declared free pursuant to the Statute concerning
Slaves and Servants and in such case made and
provided; during all which term the said Servant her
said Master faithfully shall serve in all lawful business
according to her power, wit and ability; honestly, orderly
and obediently in all things demean and behave
herself towards her said Master and all his during
the said term. — And the said Jacob Duryee doth
for himself his Executors and Administrators covenant
and grant to and with the said John Ditmars his
Heirs, Executors, Administrators and Assigns by these
presents that he the said Jacob Duryee the said Negro
Girl Servant in the capacity and duties of a servant
shall and will teach and instruct or cause to be taught
and instructed in the best way and manner that he
can; And shall and will during all the term aforesaid
provide find and allow unto the said Negro Girl Servant
competent and sufficient meat, drink and apparel;
lodging, washing and all other things necessary and

This indenture for Sine, a young African-American girl, reveals that although she is not legally enslaved, she will work uncompensated from the age of eight until ten for Jacob Duryee of Flatbush.

John Ditmars and Jacob Duryee slave bill of sale, 1825. 1977.583. Brooklyn Historical Society.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Explain to students that once the Revolutionary War was over, the state of New York, along with other northern states, took efforts to abolish slavery. Many northern states grappled with the question of whether or not emancipation should be gradual or immediate.
2. Ask students to speculate: What is the difference between gradual and immediate emancipation?
3. Explain that gradual emancipation was a method of ending slavery by granting freedom to those born to enslaved people after a given date. Ask students who would have favored gradual emancipation and why. Make sure that students understand that gradual emancipation laws favored the interests of slaveholders rather than enslaved people, as the laws only freed the children of enslaved people after they had worked from their childhood to adulthood.
4. Distribute **Worksheet 1: Gradual Emancipation Timeline**. Review the timeline entries with the students. Ask the following questions:
 - When did the state of New York pass a gradual emancipation law? How does this law compare to other states in the North?
 - If you were an enslaved 16-year-old in 1799, how would you feel about the gradual emancipation law? (Students should point out that slavery had no end date for enslaved people born prior to 1799.)
 - Who would have favored gradual emancipation and why? Who would have favored immediate emancipation and why? What are the pros and cons of both paths to emancipation?
5. Place students in small groups of three or four. Cut up the slips from **Worksheet 2: Early 1800s Identities** and pass these out to the student groups.

6. In order to get students thinking about the early 1800s identities regarding gradual versus immediate emancipation, do a “stand and declare” activity. Write “Agree” and “Disagree” on two pieces of paper and post them up at the opposite ends of the classroom. Explain that you will read a statement and then students will stand on the spot between the two extremes that represent their early 1800s identity stances. Once students have chosen their spot, ask three or four volunteers to explain why they chose their stance. Remind students to listen to the speaker and to voice their opinions respectfully. Once students understand how the activity works, read the following statements:

- I am in favor of gradual emancipation.
- I am in favor of immediate emancipation.

7. Have students individually or in small groups write a fictional autobiographical statement for one of the early 1800s identities from **Worksheet 2**. To get students started, display the following sentence starter on the board: *My name is _____ and I believe that black people should be _____ (gradually or immediately) emancipated because. . . _____ (another early 1800s identity) would suggest otherwise and argue that. . .*

Linking Past and Present

- Have students create a timeline portraying the dates of emancipation of slavery across the United States. Students should then research incarceration rates of African Americans for each state. Ask students the following questions in order to connect the dots between slavery, emancipation, and present-day incarceration:
 - What is the relationship between when a state abolished slavery and its incarceration rate?
 - What long-term effects might slavery have had on its descendants?