
SECTION I

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

Lesson 3

Life as an Enslaved Person

Grade Level: All Grades

Objectives:

Students will

- Speculate on the differences between slavery in the North and the South.
- Compare and contrast two first person accounts of slavery in New York.
- Create a dramatic tableaux of the different perspectives on slave life.

Time: One 50-minute class period

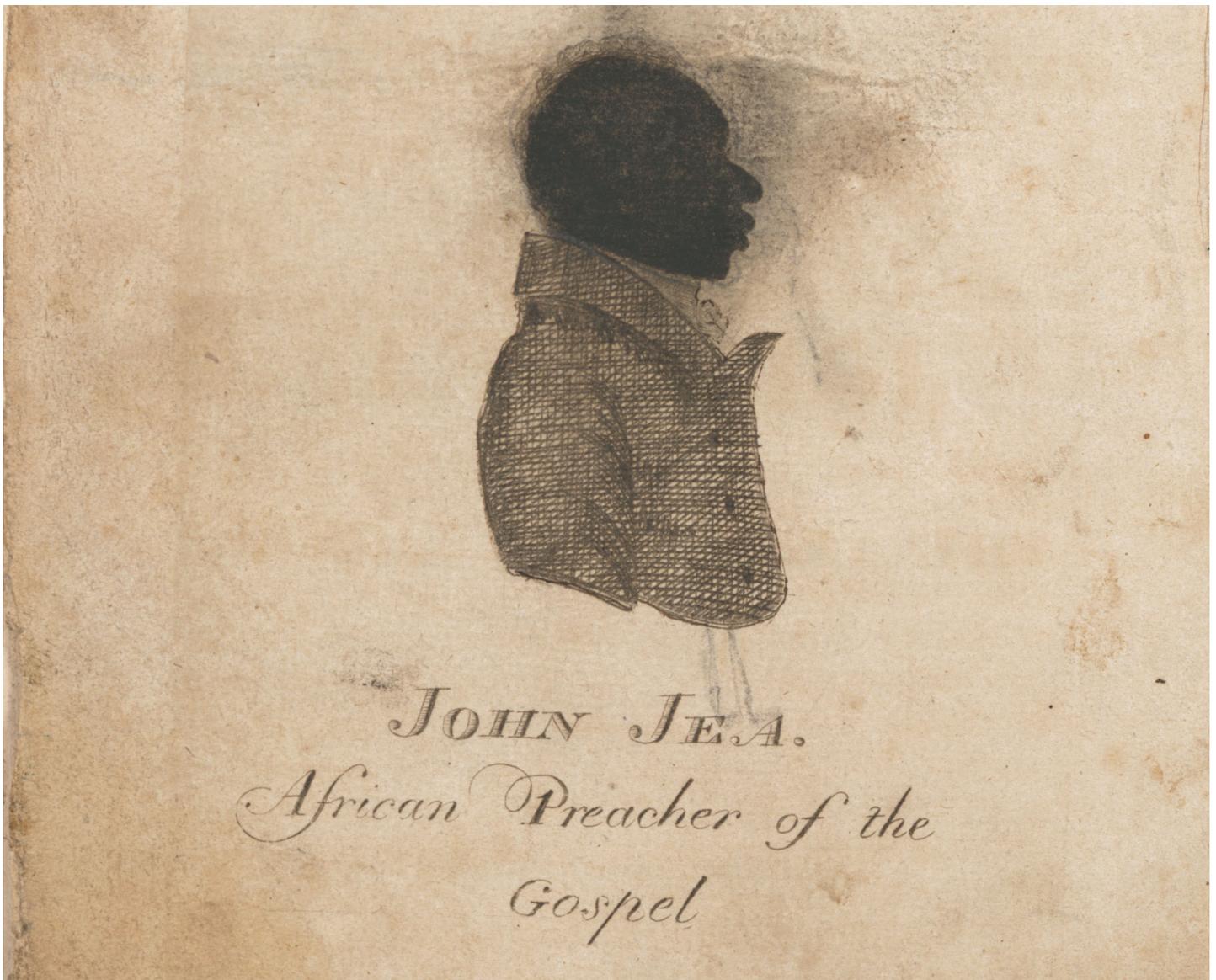
Materials:

- Audio: Amynto's First Person Account of Slavery in New York
- Audio: John Jea's First Person Account of Slavery in New York
- Worksheet 1: Primary Source Wordles
- Worksheet 2: First Person Accounts, Amynto and John Jea

Background:

As slavery died in parts of the North after the American Revolution, it thrived in Brooklyn until emancipation in 1827. In 1790, nearly one in every three Brooklynites were enslaved. Kings County's expanding agricultural economy relied on the work of unfree laborers to work on large farms and within the homes of the Dutch and English, two of the county's European colonizers.

After emancipation, as the reality of Brooklyn slavery faded, the memories of slavery—when they surfaced at all—tended to focus on how “mild” slavery in Brooklyn and the North was in comparison to its southern counterparts. Yet, first person accounts of former slaves reveal that it was no less brutal in the North than in the South—and just as pervasive. John Jea, a Nigerian, was one of the many enslaved people to work for Albert and Anetje Terhune, a Dutch family in Flatbush. Once conversion to Christianity freed Jea emotionally and legally, he established himself as a traveling preacher and described his brutal working conditions in his autobiography, *Life, History and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher* (1811). Slavery was predicated on fear, violence, denial, and psychological and physical trauma. Enslaved people worked under a system that placed severe restrictions on their civil, political, and economic rights. In the North and South alike, slavery was an institution that oppressed both the body and mind.



Frontispiece from *Life, History and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher*, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

“Our labor was extremely hard, being obliged to work in the summer from about two o’clock in the morning, till about ten or eleven o’clock at night, and in the winter from four in the morning, till ten at night. The horses usually rested about five hours in the day, while we were at work; thus did the beasts enjoy greater privileges than we did.”

—John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. As a pre-lesson activity, ask students to list the names of states where slavery existed before the Civil War. Record student answers on the board.
2. Take note of how many northern states were listed in comparison to southern states. If students listed few northern states, ask them if slavery existed in the North, and if so, ask them to describe how it compared to slavery in the South.
3. Explain that in this lesson they will listen to audio of two different first person accounts of slavery in New York. The first is an account of a writer who took up the pseudonym Amynto, and the second is from the personal narrative of John Jea, who was sold into slavery in New York with his family.
4. Give students copies of the word clouds from **Worksheet 1: Primary Source Wordles** and ask them to predict what each primary source will be about.
5. Distribute **Worksheet 2: First Person Accounts, Amynto and John Jea**. Play the audio clips “Amynto’s Account of Slavery in New York” and “John Jea’s Account of Slavery in New York” and ask students to follow along. After listening to the clips, ask students to compare and contrast the two accounts of slavery in New York by asking:
 - What is each author’s intent in creating his account?
 - Who do you think the audience is for each account?
 - How do the two accounts of slavery in New York differ?
 - Why do you think these two accounts of slavery in New York are so different?
 - About what things did John Jea and Amynto agree?
 - Which account do you think is nearest the truth?

6. Introduce the dramatic tableaux activity by telling students that they will be forming dramatic groups where they will create frozen scenes from the primary source audio clips they just watched. Explain that a dramatic tableaux is like a “freeze frame.” Tell them that if they pressed

the pause button when watching their favorite TV show or movie, they can still tell what is going in the scene from the position of the bodies and expression on the faces of the actors. Explain that, because they will not be able to use words in their dramatic tableaux, they must show what they are doing and how they are feeling with their bodies and faces.

7. Place students in groups of four or five. Tell each group that they will form a frozen scene representing either “Amynto’s Account of Slavery in New York” or “John Jea’s Account of Slavery in New York.” Allow students three to five minutes to formulate their scene. Inform them that the audience will be allowed to tap characters in the scene to hear what they have to say about what they are doing and how they are feeling. As students meet in their groups, tell them to look over their primary source’s word cloud from **Worksheet 1** to help them form a tableau that represents the words expressed in the selected piece.

8. Select a group to present and ask the rest of the class to put their heads down. Explain that they are to keep their eyes closed until you tell them they can look up. Meanwhile, allow the group to form its frozen scene.

9. Once the group is in position, tell the rest of the class to look at the frozen scene. Call on students in the audience to identify which primary source they think the scene represents. Encourage students to tap a character in the scene to hear their explanation about what they are doing and how they are feeling.

Linking Past and Present

- Have students conduct further research to find locations in Brooklyn and beyond that were made possible by the labor of enslaved people. Students can use an online map creation tool, such as www.tripline.net to create an annotated map, marking sites that were constructed by enslaved people (i.e. fortifications built in Fort Green during the War of 1812, the U.S. Capital, and U.S. railroads).