
SECTION I

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

Lesson 6

Self-Reliance in Brooklyn's Free Black Communities

Grade Level: Middle School

Objectives:

Students will

- Explore the definition of community.
- Understand the importance of mutual assistance and community building in Brooklyn's early free black communities.
- Create flyers to promote the services offered by key organizations within Brooklyn's early free black communities.

Time: Two 50-minute class periods

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: Population of Kings County, 1791-1820
- Worksheet 2: Assistance in Brooklyn's Free Black Communities

Background:

During gradual emancipation (1799-1827), Brooklyn transformed from Dutch farmland to a bustling town centered around the ferry landing and located at the northwestern tip of Kings County. In 1815, residents created the village of Brooklyn located within the town of the same name. The free black diasporic community lived in the neighborhoods which are known today as DUMBO and Vinegar Hill. Their neighbors included Irish immigrants, transplants from New England, descendants of the English, and original Dutch settlers.

Brooklyn's free black community seized their own freedom by creating institutions that would be independent, safe, and free from racism in order to combat the legacy of slavery. Two brothers, Peter and Benjamin Croger, in particular, were at the center of this community-building. They created a mutual aid society intended to assist orphans and widows called the Brooklyn African Woolman Benevolent Society (1810), a school for African-American students (1815), and Brooklyn's first African Methodist Episcopal Church (1818). The foundation allowed them to live their lives with determination, dignity, and respect in a society that did not imagine African Americans as equal citizens.

CONSTITUTION

OF THE

BROOKLYN AFRICAN WOOLMAN

BENEVOLENT

SOCIETY,

ADOPTED

March 16, 1810.



This band is thus united,
Each other to relieve ;
If they shall be distressed,
From it they shall receive.

The widow and the orphan,
As we suppose they need ;
From it shall have their portion,
And thus we are agreed.

Constitution of the Brooklyn African Woolman Benevolent Society, New-York Historical Society Collections. Y1820.BrookAfrican.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Distribute **Worksheet 1: Population of Kings County, 1791-1820**. Ask students to examine the graph and work with a partner to discuss how the population of Kings County changed from 1791-1820.

2. Students should note that in addition to the entire population increasing, the free black population was growing as the number of enslaved persons decreased. Remind students that with the passage of the Gradual Emancipation Act in 1799 (see Lesson 2), enslaved people in the state of New York began the process of becoming legally emancipated. Many of the formerly enslaved settled in free black communities.

3. Write the word “community” on the board. Allow students to define community in their own words by writing or drawing a definition. Create a word web as students share their definitions. Ask the following questions:

- What purposes does a community serve?
- What can a community provide its members?
- What can a member provide for the community?

4. Working with a partner, have students discuss the following questions:

- What might life have been like for the free black community?
- In what ways might people have had to depend on one another?
- What needs do you think free blacks had during the early 1800s?
- How might those needs have been met?

5. Explain to students that enslaved people faced discrimination, political inequality, and lack of economic opportunity; once African Americans were freed, black churches, schools, mutual aid societies, and other institutions arose to meet their needs. These organizations assisted African Americans in the following ways: provided voluntary services, financial resources, and education; assisted fugitives; and built the foundation for anti-slavery activism in Brooklyn.

6. Distribute **Worksheet 2: Assistance in Brooklyn’s Free Black Communities**. Ask students to examine the images and read about the three institutions. Discuss how these institutions provided assistance to free blacks in Brooklyn.

7. Using **Worksheet 2: Assistance in Brooklyn’s Free Black Communities**, have students choose one institution and design a flyer announcing the services provided to the community. Flyers should communicate why these services are vital to the free black community.

Linking Past and Present

- Discuss how self-reliance and community-building can counter discrimination and oppression today. What advice would free blacks from the early 1800s have for all of us today about community-building and resistance?