
SECTION III

Land, Politics, and Anti-Slavery Protest Citizenship (1834-1846)

Lesson 10

Democratizing the Vote: Black Landowners and Voters

Grade Level: High School

Objectives:

Students will

- Understand the connection between full citizenship and voting rights.
- Analyze the implications of voting property requirements after 1821.

Time: One 50-minute class period

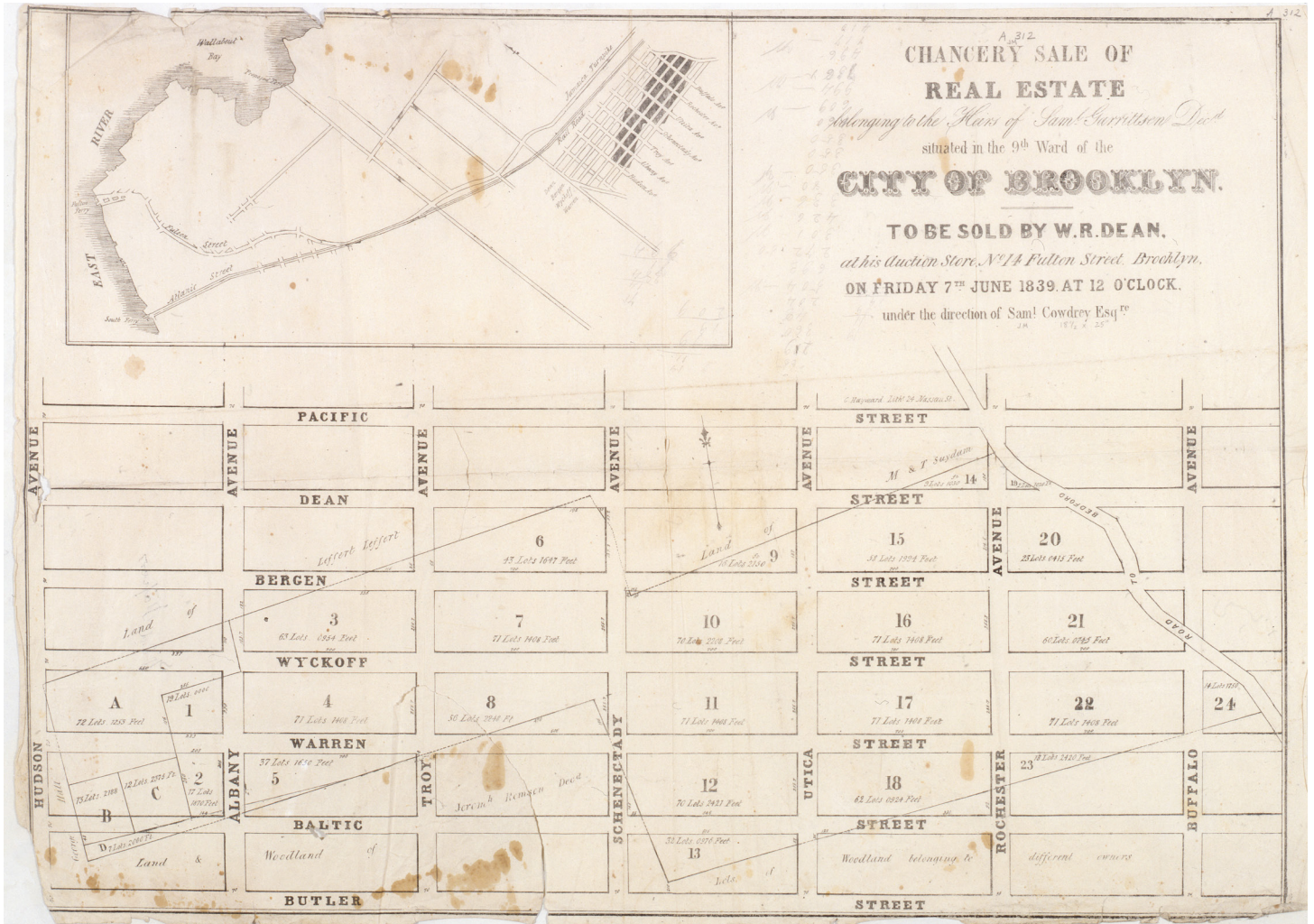
Materials:

- Worksheet 1: New York State Voter Requirements - 1777 & 1821
- Worksheet 2: Voices from the 1821 New York Constitutional Convention

Background:

As black and white abolitionists built a national campaign, black Brooklynites sustained the city's anti-slavery movement by continuing to build their communities. In 1821, the New York State Constitution eliminated all property qualifications for white voters, while introducing a \$250 property requirement for black voters. Black Brooklynites who did meet the property requirement demanded to be recognized as equal citizens on par with their white neighbors.

Black Brooklynites took advantage of the growing city of Brooklyn which underwent rapid urbanization in the late 1830s. During this time, several changes occurred: frequent street openings; increase in the number of banks, public buildings, schools, and churches; introduction of omnibuses; proposal for a City Hall; and discussion of a cemetery near Gowanus Bay (later Greenwood Cemetery). However, following the Panic of 1837, property prices fell to an all time low. New arrivals such as brothers William and Willis Hodges born free in Norfolk, Virginia, bought their own home in the late 1830s in the small emerging town of Williamsburg. (It was not until 1855 that Williamsburg was annexed to Brooklyn.) Like many other black residents in Brooklyn, the Hodges bought property in order to create spaces of safety and independence and fight racism and oppression. Central to their struggle was the right to vote so they could be seen as full citizens with equal rights.



Real Estate Auction Map showing a portion of Weeksville.

Chancery Sale of Real Estate Belonging to the Heirs of Samuel Garritsen, decd., situated in the 9th Ward of the city of Brooklyn. George Hayward. 1839. B P-[1839].F1. Brooklyn Historical Society.

“The minds of blacks are not competent to vote. They are too much degraded to estimate the value, or exercise with fidelity and discretion that important right. It would be unsafe in their hands.”

—Samuel Young, *Reports of the Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of 1821, Assembled for the Purpose of Amending the Constitution of the State of New York*

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Distribute **Worksheet 1: New York State Voter Requirements - 1777 & 1821**. Ask students to read the excerpts from the 1777 and 1821 New York State Constitution. Have students discuss the following questions with a partner:

- How have the voter requirements changed from the Constitution of 1777 to the Constitution of 1821 for white men?
- How have the voter requirements changed from the Constitution of 1777 to the Constitution of 1821 for black men?

2. Explain that the Constitution of 1821 eliminated the \$100 property requirement for white voters, while introducing a \$250 property requirement for black voters.

3. Tell students that before the passing of the 1821 Constitution, New York State had approximately 6,000 black voters. If \$250 in 1821 is the equivalent of about \$5,000 in 2012 dollars, ask students to estimate how many African Americans would have been able to vote after the passage of the 1821 Constitution. Share with students by 1828, out of 29,701 African Americans in New York State, there were only 298 eligible black voters.

4. Explain to students during the New York Constitutional Convention in 1821, the Committee on the Elective Franchise proposed eliminating property requirements and extending suffrage to every white male citizen of the state, for the first time explicitly disenfranchising all black

men. This proposal was one of the Convention's most controversial. The delegates, New York's leading politicians, elected to represent their counties at the Convention and engaged in a fierce debate over the rights of suffrage and equality for African Americans.

5. Place students in small groups and distribute **Worksheet 2: Voices from the 1821 New York Constitutional Convention**. Students should cut apart the arguments for and against limiting the vote to white men. After they read each argument, have students decide if the speaker is for or against disenfranchising black men.

6. Once students have read all of the arguments, ask them to summarize the reasons that were given in the arguments. Ask students to speculate:

- Why do you think the white majority was against the enfranchisement of blacks?

Linking Past and Present

- Have students read the report, "Jim Crow in New York" (available at http://brennan.3cdn.net/50080b21f7f0197339_z7m6i20ud.pdf) to learn how criminal disenfranchisement laws were part of the effort to maintain white control over access to the polls. Students can write letters to members of the New York Legislature to restore voting rights to people on parole.