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## SECTION III

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

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#### Lesson 12

#### Literacy and Liberation: Brooklyn's African School System

**Grade Level:** Elementary & Middle School

**Objectives:**

Students will

- Understand the importance of education and literacy to the African-American community in Brooklyn.
- Write a diary entry of a day in the life of a student attending an African school.

**Time:** One 50-minute class period

**Materials:**

- Worksheet 1: School Exhibition

**Background:**

A number of anti-slavery activists and abolitionists were educators at Brooklyn's African schools. Education was seen as a tool for fighting racism and inequality.

In 1827, Henry C. Thompson, Sylvanus Smith, and George Hogarth—all members of Brooklyn's free black community—oversaw the founding of the town's first African school. Like the African school opened at Peter Croger's home in 1815, the town's public African school was conceived through a community-led, grassroots effort. In 1845, when the Brooklyn Board of Education absorbed the African school, it was renamed Colored School #1. A school in Weeksville, renamed Colored School #2, was led by long term resident Junius Morel. Finally, in Williamsburg, brothers Willis and William Hodges opened an African school around 1841, after the village school refused admission to 40 children of color aged between five and sixteen.

For Brooklynite James Pennington, a fugitive from Maryland, the benefits of an education changed his life forever. In 1829, soon after his arrival in Brooklyn, he joined a Sabbath school in Newtown, Long Island. Because he had been enslaved in Maryland, Pennington had been deprived of the right to literacy. His access to education inspired him to become an anti-slavery activist in order to seek social justice.



African School Williamsburg, PS #191, Williamsburgh, March 1929. Eugene L. Armbruster. 1929.  
Eugene L. Armbruster photographs and scrapbooks. V1991.106.125. Brooklyn Historical Society.

**“There is one sin that slavery committed against me, which I never can forgive. It robbed me of my education...”**

—James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith, Or, Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York : Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States*. London: Charles Gilpin, 1850.

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# LESSON PROCEDURES

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1. Read to students the following quotation from James Pennington, a formerly enslaved person:

*There is one sin that slavery committed against me, which I can never forgive. It robbed me of my education.*

2. Ask students the following questions:

- Why did slaveholders try to prevent enslaved people from obtaining an education?
- Why was it so important to enslaved people and freedmen to get an education?
- What do you think education represented to enslaved people and freedman?

3. Help students understand that slaveholders feared that educating enslaved people would prove a threat to the slave system, which relied on enslaved peoples' dependence on their masters. As a result, slaveholders in the South instituted laws forbidding enslaved people to learn to read or write and made it a crime for others to teach them. Despite these challenges, enslaved people and free blacks demonstrated their determination and ability to learn.

4. Explain to students that because education was seen as a tool for fighting racism and inequality, many activists and abolitionists were educators at Brooklyn's African schools. Because these educators were committed to showing black and white communities the need for black-led schools, they held public exhibitions, or examination days, as proof of the students' accomplishments. Tell students that examination days were often covered in local newspapers.

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5. Distribute **Worksheet 1: School Exhibition** and explain that it is a letter to the editor to the *Colored American* newspaper and written by a spectator at a free school examination day in Brooklyn. Have students read the letter with a partner and discuss the following questions:

- What are two main points of the letter?
- What is the author's intent in writing this letter?
- Who is the audience for this text?
- Is the author's argument sound? Use evidence support your answer.
- Why do you think the letter is not signed?
- What two conclusions about the Primary Select School of Brooklyn can you draw from reading the letter?
- What questions does this letter raise in your mind?

6. Have students imagine that they attended the Primary Select School of Brooklyn. Ask each student to write a journal or diary entry about the school exhibition day. Why is education important to them? What does having access to an education mean to a young black student during that time? What are they proud of? What are their hopes for the future? Visit the New-York Historical Society's African Free School Collection (<https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool>) to access a wide selection of drawings, essays, and other work by African Free School students in New York City.

## Linking Past and Present

- Have students research and make multimedia poster presentations about other important issues at the intersection of race and education today, such the achievement gap, busing, charter schools, standardized testing, and graduation rates.