
SECTION IV

The Economics of Freedom (1840-1855)

Lesson 14 Black Entrepreneurs

Grade Level: Elementary & Middle School

Objectives:

Students will

- Understand how Brooklyn businessmen overcame oppression through entrepreneurship and self-reliance.
- Assume the role of reporters and interview one of Brooklyn's black entrepreneurs of the 1840s.

Time: One 50-minute class period

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: A Shoemaker, a Barber, and an Inventor

Background:

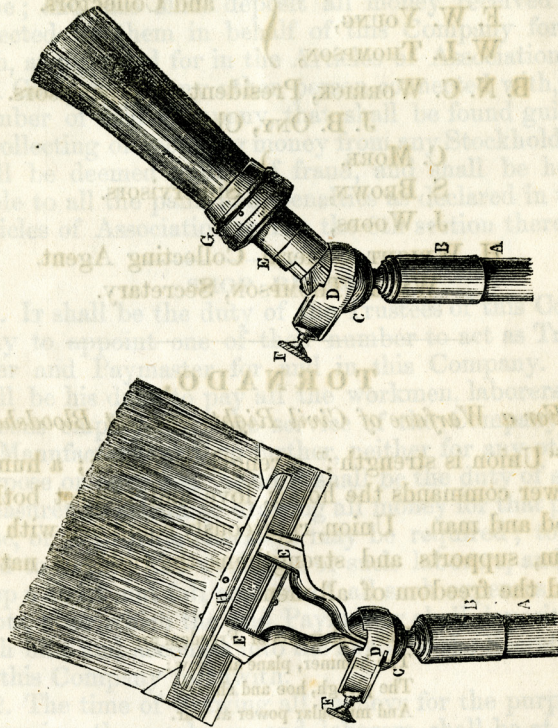
African-American workers faced widespread racism in Brooklyn and numerous other northern cities during the 19th century. Many were forced to work as domestic servants, porters, and laborers since opportunities were often limited. In 1831, just four years after slavery was abolished in New York State, Weeksville land investor Henry C. Thompson, educator and Brooklyn AME pastor George Hogarth, and James Pennington questioned Brooklyn's economic inequality. "How many of us," they asked, "have been educated in college, and advanced in different branches of business?" and yet worked in the "drudgery of the streets." During the decades prior to the Civil War, economic opportunity did not improve dramatically for Brooklyn's African-American community.

Isaac H. Hunter, a shoemaker, Lewis H. Nelson, a barber, and Freeman Murrow, an inventor, however, represent three examples of the ways in which Brooklynites overcame their oppression through business acumen and self-reliance.

FREEMAN MURROW'S
 PATENTED AND PREMIUM
DOUBLE ADJUSTABLE BRUSH,

With Handles adapted to Whitewashing, Painting, Varnishing,
 Dusting, Washing Walls, Cornices, Windows, &c.

Patented the 27th of April, 1852.



This Invention remedies the defects of Brushes in common use which have fixed and immovable handles, and consists in so connecting the Handle and the Brush, by means of adjustable joints, that the Brush can be adjusted to any desired position and angle with its Handle.

A PREMIUM MEDAL

was awarded to this Invention by the American Institute, 1853, and a Premium from the Crystal Palace, 1854.

☞ Communications must be addressed to "The Brooklyn Brush Manufacturing Company," Brooklyn, or to the Inventor, FREEMAN MURROW, Williamsburgh, (post-paid.)

New-York, January 1, 1855.

"To provide other means of support for our wives and daughters than perpetual servitude as scrubbers and washing servants to others, and to alleviate ourselves from our former and present low condition—as we are disenfranchised by this Government,—that we may enjoy our rights as free Citizens of the United States, and that by means of our productive labor. . .whereby we may cultivate, strengthen and employ our inventive genius, as authors and producers, equally with other men."

—Brooklyn Brush Manufacturing Company
 Articles of Incorporation, 1978.191; Brooklyn
 Historical Society.

Diagram of Freeman Murrow's patented double adjustable paint brush. Brooklyn Brush Manufacturing Company articles of incorporation. 1978.191. Brooklyn Historical Society.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Write the term “entrepreneur” on the board and ask students to share what they think the term means.

2. After students have defined an entrepreneur as someone who owns his or her business, elicit examples of entrepreneurs in which students are familiar (i.e. Jay-Z, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, Mark Zuckerberg). Ask them to create a list of characteristics that makes these people successful entrepreneurs. Record student responses on the board.

3. Ask students to imagine that they are black entrepreneurs in Brooklyn during the 1840s. Have them list the challenges involved in started a business during this period in history.

4. Explain that it was a challenge for Brooklyn’s black entrepreneurs to open and operate their own businesses, especially in a labor market that limited many African Americans to only working in service jobs . However, in the face of prejudice and lack of economic opportunity, several entrepreneurs overcame oppression through intelligence and self-reliance.

5. Place students in small groups and distribute **Worksheet 1: A Shoemaker, a Barber, and an Inventor**. Explain that this document tells the stories of three black entrepreneurs who demanded respect through their work. Students should discuss the following questions:

- What difficulties and risks did black entrepreneurs in Brooklyn face?
- How might owning a successful business help move African Americans towards freedom?

6. Have students assume the role of reporters and interview a black Brooklyn entrepreneur, inquiring about how his or her business pursuits strengthen the black community’s self-sufficiency.

Linking Past and Present

- Have students watch PBS Newshour Report, “One Family’s Effort to Buy Black for a Year” (available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/business/jan-june12/makingsense_06-19.html). Discuss some of the challenges that African-American entrepreneurs face today. Why are African-American-owned businesses still a rarity in many neighborhoods, including minority communities? How do students feel about the “Empowerment Experiment?”