

Lesson 14, Worksheet 1

A Shoemaker, a Barber, and an Inventor

Isaac H. Hunter, the Shoemaker

Isaac H. Hunter was formerly enslaved in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he saved money from his nightly work as a shoemaker. Hunter emancipated himself through self-purchase for \$1200 (about \$33,000 in 2012 dollars). He saved another \$432 in order to emancipate his wife and children. However, when North Carolina mandated that free people of color had to leave the state or risk being placed back into slavery, Hunter was forced to leave his family behind. He relied on anti-slavery networks in Philadelphia, New York, and Washington DC, to raise \$1,757.60 (\$48,500 in 2012 dollars) in order to free his family.

When he arrived in Brooklyn with his family, Hunter set up shop as a shoemaker at the busy commercial corner of Fulton and Orange Streets. By 1847, he had acquired property, giving him the right to vote. Eight years after arriving in Brooklyn, Hunter left the shoe making profession and was listed in the 1850 Federal Census as a physician.

Lewis H. Nelson, the Barber

Lewis H. Nelson was born in Pennsylvania around 1810. By 1837, he moved to New York where he ran a grocery and tea store at 53 Anthony Street, selling goods made by free labor. Around 1841, Nelson moved to Brooklyn and operated a “Hair Dressing Saloon” at 45 Fourth Street in Williamsburg. He lived at his place of work and was listed in both the 1850 and 1860 Census as a barber. Nelson’s full-page advertisement in the *Williamsburg City Directory* (1852) revealed that his business catered to men, women, and children; he worked both at the salon and within his clients’ homes.

However, Nelson was more than a barber. He held a long career as a reformer and activist. He served as an officer in the Garrison Literary and Benevolent Association, a mutual aid society in Manhattan. In 1841, he helped open the African School in Williamsburg, the first educational initiative by African Americans in Williamsburg. He also organized against voter discrimination with other activists from Williamsburg.

Freeman Murrow, the Inventor

On July 29, 1853, a notice appeared in the *Frederick Douglass Paper*: Freeman Murrow, who lived at 90 Meserole Street in Brooklyn, had invented an adjustable paint brush. Murrow had secured a patent, but because of racial prejudice, he was unable to present his invention to the American Institute Fair and had to have it presented by a white man. The adjustable brush won a silver medal at the Fair in October 1853.

After getting his patent, Murrow formed the Brooklyn Brush Manufacturing Company. The company declared that it stood for “welfare of Civil Rights and not bloodshed” and intended to liberate their wives, sisters, and daughters from taking low-paying jobs as washerwomen and domestic servants.

On June 28, 1855, at the Convention of Radical Political Abolitionists, Lewis Tappan, a prominent abolitionist and Brooklyn Heights resident, spoke highly of the brush company, saying that “their project was a very worthy one” and that the purpose of the business was to “gain an honest livelihood for themselves and to elevate their race.”