
SECTION V

The Crisis Decade (1850-1859)

Lesson 15

The James Hamlet Case

Grade Level: Middle & High School

Objectives:

Students will

- Understand the consequences of the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act.
- Use the flashback/flash-forward drama technique to explore the background, motivations, and consequences of the case of James Hamlet.

Time: Two 50-minute class periods

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: Two Fugitive Slave Acts
- Worksheet 2: The Case of James Hamlet

Background:

In Brooklyn and beyond, abolitionists worked together to demand an end to slavery. They spoke in public spaces, organized themselves into networks, and printed a variety of materials intended to persuade the public about the traumas of slavery. Their greatest challenge, however, came when Congress passed the Compromise of 1850 which included the Fugitive Slave Law.

The first Fugitive Slave Law in 1793 required individual states to return fugitives to slaveholders; the law's success depended on the state's willingness to allocate resources towards enforcing the law. However, the law of 1850 explicitly created special federal commissioners to cross state lines and kidnap any African American accused of being a fugitive. The accused were given no trial and their testimony was not permitted. Moreover, anyone found assisting a fugitive could face a heavy fine or imprisonment. After the law was passed, slavecatchers arrived in free states in order to arrest fugitives—even those who had lived freely for months, years, or decades. They also kidnapped many free African Americans illegally.

James Hamlet (also known as James Hamilton Williams) was a Williamsburg, Brooklyn, resident. He was also the first kidnapping victim under the provisions of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Hamlet was accused of being a fugitive from Baltimore, Maryland, having run away from his enslaver Mary Brown. On September 26, 1850, slavecatchers approached Hamlet under the false pretense of being wanted as a witness in a criminal case and arrested him on Water Street in Manhattan. Although Hamlet stated to authorities that he was born free, his testimony was not permitted under the new law. He was immediately taken to Baltimore. Outraged abolitionists in Manhattan and Brooklyn immediately organized a rescue fund. Among the speakers and organizers was Junius C. Morel, a longtime Weeksville resident and educator.

Several thousand people gathered at Broadway and City Park in New York to celebrate Hamlet's rescue and return. A final celebration took place at Brooklyn's AME Church. Despite the successful rescue, the threat of kidnapping had a deep psychological impact on African-American communities in various northern cities.



K Stands for *Kidnapper*. Whoso receives
What others have stolen, is leagu'd with the thieves.
But setting aside what this proverb reveals,
The Slaveholder *breeds* what the Kidnapper *steals!*
Distinction there is, and a difference too—
But *which*, if you chose, would be chosen by *you?*
To buy, or to sell, involves profit or waste—
To breed, or to steal, is a question of taste;
And whoso does either, a business may claim
That perfects in meanness the sin and the shame!

"K Stands for Kidnapper," Abel C. Thomas. Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Distribute **Worksheet 1: Two Fugitive Slave Acts**. Read each of the fugitive slave laws with students. Ask them the following questions:

- What is the difference between the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850?
- How do you think fugitives from slavery living in the North felt when the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed? How do you think ordinary citizens in the North felt? Southern slave owners? Enslaved people in the South?
- Why do you think the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 prohibited enslaved people the right to a trial?

2. Explain that as the United States expanded westward, the question of whether slavery should exist in the new territories fueled growing divisions in the nation. Make sure that students understand that the first Fugitive Slave Law in 1793 laid out a vague plan for returning fugitives to slavery and relied on states to enforce it. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law created special federal commissioners who could cross state lines to assist in the capture of fugitives. The accused were not given a trial and their testimony was not permitted. After the law was passed, slave hunters arrived in free states in order to arrest fugitives who had lived freely for months, years, and even decades. The law was an outrage to anti-slavery activists and abolitionists in Brooklyn and beyond.

3. Tell students that Williamsburg, Brooklyn, resident James Hamlet was the first kidnapping victim under the provisions of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. He was accused of arriving as a fugitive to New York, having run away from his enslaver Mary Brown in Baltimore.

4. Distribute **Worksheet 2: The Case of James Hamlet**. Explain that after James Hamlet was arrested, Brooklyn resident William Harned, who was a publishing agent for the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, issued a pamphlet entitled *The Fugitive Slave Bill, Its History and Unconstitutionality: With an Account of the Seizure and Enslavement of James Hamlet, and his Subsequent Restoration to Liberty*. Ask students to read the excerpt from the pamphlet to learn more about the case of James Hamlet.

5. Discuss the following questions:

- What argument is being made by the author of the pamphlet? Is this argument convincing?
- Who is the audience for this text?
- What patterns exist with respect to language and/or tone?
- According to the Fugitive Slave Act, what would compel the New York State Commissioner Alexander Gardiner to turn over James Hamlet to Thomas J. Clare?
- Why would some New Yorkers support the freeing of James Hamlet and view his capture as an outrage?
- If you were James Hamlet's neighbor during this time and were aware of the arrest warrant against him, what actions would you be required to take? What would you do?

6. Define the terms flashback and flash-forward. Have students come up with examples of flashbacks and flash-forwards from books they have read or movies they have seen. Place students in small groups. Have them write and act out a scene in which they flashback five years before James Hamlet's arrest and a scene in which they flash-forward five years after James Hamlet's arrest. Students should include characters that were mentioned in **Worksheet 2** in each of their scenes.

Linking Past and Present

- Have students research recent or historical examples of citizens engaging in civil disobedience, and then have them discuss what they would be willing to do for a cause that is important to them.