
SECTION VI

“The Half Has Never Been Told:” Brooklyn’s Civil War (1861-1865)

Lesson 20

Black Brooklynites in the Union Army

Grade Level: Middle & High School

Objectives:

Students will

- Understand how Brooklyn’s abolitionists used their experiences as community builders and political activists to rebuild the nation.
- Write and perform a monologue from the perspective of a historical character from Reconstruction.

Time: One 50-minute class period

Materials:

- Worksheet 1: Help is Here

Background:

On April 14, 1865, as the Civil War drew to a close, organizers invited prominent abolitionist and pastor of Plymouth Church, Henry Ward Beecher, to speak at the flag-raising ceremony at Fort Sumter. Known for his charisma and oratorical skills, Beecher said, “Terrible in battle, may [the flag] be beneficent in peace [and] as long as the sun endures, or the stars, may it weave over a nation neither enslaved nor enslaving.” Later that evening, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. He did not witness the ratification of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in the United States (passed on January 31, 1865) but he was firmly established as the “Great Emancipator.” Lincoln’s views on slavery and emancipation, however, changed during his lifetime, and abolitionists in Brooklyn and beyond were responsible for shaping many of his later views. Brooklyn’s anti-slavery activists and abolitionists had long recognized that their work did not simply end with state emancipation in 1827. Rather, they consistently pushed a program of reform that reimagined freedom in the United States that was available to all citizens regardless of race.

Still, the work of Brooklyn’s anti-slavery activists and abolitionists continued. From 1865 to 1877, Reconstruction formed one of the most turbulent and controversial chapters in U.S. history. Brooklynites committed themselves to rebuilding the nation, and themes of education and assistance dominated their work as it had during the gradual emancipation decades (1799-1827).

COLORED DOMESTICS AND EMPLOYES,
FROM THE SOUTH,
CAN BE OBTAINED AT THE
NEW YORK AND BROOKLYN
FREEDMEN'S EMPLOYMENT BUREAU,
No. 16 COURT STREET, CORNER OF JORALEMON,
(Room 20,) BROOKLYN, N. Y.

It is important that applicants for these freed men and women should describe, as nearly as possible, the ages and qualifications of the persons desired. It must, however, be distinctly understood that the Society does not undertake to furnish a very large number of first-class, well-instructed servants. A few only have been accustomed to perform household work, and fewer still have any knowledge of our Northern modes of domestic life. But it is believed they are as teachable and intelligent as any other class occupying similar social positions; and by proper training and instruction, many of them will become most valuable domestics.

Very few men can be obtained. Women, from eighteen to thirty years of age, can be had in large numbers. Boys and girls, from ten to fifteen years old, can also be had by hundreds, and will be placed in such families as are willing to engage to board and clothe them, and to secure to them the advantages of a common school education, similar to those usually given to other orphan and dependent children in the Free States.

Parties wishing to avail themselves of this Agency, will be required to advance *Five Dollars* for each servant applied for, in order to defray expenses of transportation, temporary board, etc. This can subsequently be deducted from the wages of the servant, which, of course, will vary according to his or her capacity and the service rendered.

For the money thus advanced, a certificate will be given, signed by the Corresponding Secretary; and an order sent by him to an Agent at the South will procure a servant in the course of two or three weeks. Delays, however, are liable to occur; and if such should be the case, to an unreasonable length of time, and to the detriment of the holder of the certificate, the money will be refunded, if desired.

The Society does not engage to pay travelling expenses from Brooklyn.

Letters should be directed to

Rev. O. S. ST. JOHN, Cor. Sec'y,
No. 16 COURT STREET, BBOOKLYN. N. Y.

Solicitation by the New York and Brooklyn Freedmen's Employment Bureau. 1864. Collection of Brooklyn, N.Y., Civil War relief associations records, ephemera and other material. ARC.245: Box 5, Folder 7. Brooklyn Historical Society.

LESSON PROCEDURES

1. Place students in small groups and ask them to brainstorm the answers to the following questions:

- What problems did the Civil War solve for African Americans?
- What problems did the Civil War fail to solve for African Americans?

2. Create a column for each question on the board and record the groups' responses

3. Explain that although the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments promised the hope that African Americans would gain full and equal rights, there were still many challenges to address. On March 3, 1865, Congress created the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Land Act, also known as the Freedmen's Bureau. It began as a result of mounting pressure to provide for African Americans who had escaped enslavement and headed for Union lines during the Civil War. The New York and Brooklyn Freedmen's Bureau opened at 16 Court Street at the corner of Joralemon.

4. Tell students that during the Reconstruction period, Brooklynites committed themselves to rebuilding the nation. They used their experiences as community builders and political activists to offer assistance where it was needed. Some provided assistance in Brooklyn, while others went to the South to help the newly freed men, women, and children.

5. Distribute **Worksheet 1: Help is Here**. Place students in small groups and have them analyze the documents. Discuss the following questions:

- What do these documents reveal about life in Brooklyn after the Civil War?
- Identify the kinds of support and assistance that were available in Brooklyn after the Civil War.

6. Explain to students that Brooklynites donated money, clothes, food, and other goods, opened schools and orphanages, and provided jobs to freed people and white Union refugees.

7. Assign a Reconstruction era character to each student. Possibilities can include the following:

- A newly freed African American from the South
- A former African-American soldier who fought in the Union army
- An African-American woman from Brooklyn who went to the South to teach in a freedmen school
- A white woman who sits on the Committee of Ladies who held a benefit for freedmen and black soldiers
- A white man/woman who works at the Freedmen's Bureau in Brooklyn

8. Have students write a monologue in which the character expresses his or her point of view on life after the Civil War. The monologue should reveal the character's situation in life and his or her needs, wants, and motivations. Students should share their monologues with the class. Ask the students to refer back to the responses to the first activity and have them incorporate into their monologues how their characters will work to address the problems that the Civil War failed to solve.

Linking Past and Present

Have students reflect on the following questions:

- What principles of freedom was the United States founded upon?
- Has the United States been successful in maintaining these freedoms?
- What freedoms are still not guaranteed for all people?
- What can you do to help move the country toward the promise of freedom and equality for all?