



Chicago Historical Society



MEET HANNAH THE WEAVER

Grade level: Late elementary through middle school

Estimated time: Five class periods

Specific Topic: Hannah Harris, a slave anticipating freedom

Subtopic: Freedom

Teacher background information

Hannah Harris was a weaver on Leo, one of Robert Carter’s plantations in Loudoun County in the northern neck of Virginia.

In 1792, anticipating her freedom the following year, Hannah wrote a note to Carter, asking to purchase her loom. Hannah’s note reveals insights into her character and abilities. It states:

“Dear master Hannah begs [begs] one favour that is to buy her loom that she know [now] workes with and you will oblige her migh[tily] from your Homble [bumble] Servant Hannah the weaver”

Robert Carter signed the note on the back and wrote:

“5th Apr, 1792. Leo. Negro Hannah will be free Jany, 1793. She wants to buy her loom.”

This brief document has inspired researchers and raised questions about the past and will surely inspire those seeking to know more about her in the future. Did she actually write the note? And if so, how did she learn to write? If not, who wrote it on her behalf? Where and how did she learn to weave? What were Hannah’s responsibilities on the plantation? How did slaves survive under a system that took away their precious freedom? What were Hannah’s plans for life after



slavery? Where would she go? How would she live? By studying artifacts and history, it is possible to reconstruct a context for Hannah and begin to address some of the questions that surround her. (For a more in-depth discussion of Hannah’s life and her note, see the handout included in this lesson, “Hannah the Weaver: Student Background Information.”)

Educator note: To fully comprehend this lesson, students will need to have some background in Colonial history, including plantation life and slavery. Before beginning this lesson, it is important to recognize that slavery and emancipation are powerful topics, which may provoke a variety of passionate responses from your students.



Key concepts

1. Students can study slavery, emancipation, and freedom through the experiences of individuals, like Hannah.
2. Students can build a historical context through the analysis of primary and secondary sources.
3. Students will learn that many slaves and free African Americans were skilled in trades, such as weaving, and used their ingenuity and talent to enhance their circumstances both while enslaved and in freedom.

Key questions

Who was Hannah Harris? Who was Robert Carter? What can we infer about Hannah and Carter from Hannah's note and Carter's response? Why was Hannah requesting to purchase her loom? How important are primary and secondary sources? What kind of information can they give us?

Goals of this lesson

To bring history to life by studying individuals from the past and provide students with the opportunity to learn about slavery, emancipation, and freedom through analysis of primary and secondary sources, creative writing, and drama.

Objectives

1. Students will learn about slavery and freedom and extrapolate a historical context for Hannah Harris and Robert Carter by analyzing primary and secondary sources.
2. Students will begin to understand the power of written communication.
3. Students will build historical empathy by completing a creative writing assignment from the point of view of either Hannah Harris or Robert Carter.
4. Students will reinforce their presentation and listening skills by delivering oral reports.
5. Students will work cooperatively to develop and deliver historical dramas inspired by their creative writing assignments.

Materials

Master copies of all artifact reproductions and student handouts are provided.

1. "Vocabulary List" worksheet (one per student)
2. Dictionaries (optional, if necessary)
3. "Note from Hannah Harris to Robert Carter" artifact reproduction (one per student or group)
4. Magnifying glasses (optional)
5. "A Note from the Past" worksheet (one per student or small group)
6. "Hannah the Weaver: Student Background Information" handout (one per student or small group)
7. Basic art supplies: paper, pencils, and crayons or markers

Procedures

Day 1

Ask students to imagine that there is something they really want that is in another person's power to grant or give to them. How can they get it? Identify different types of requests (verbal and written) and explain that verbal requests are often more casual, while written requests are considered more formal. Discuss the power of written requests. The requestor can take the time to make a persuasive case (rewriting if necessary), while the person receiving the request can reread it as necessary and take his or her time to consider the request.

Ask students to identify the thing they want. They may choose anything—an object, a situation, or an event—as long as it is of great importance to them. Instruct students to record the following pieces of information on a piece of notebook paper: what they want, who can give it to them, the reason why they want/need it, and the reason their request should be granted. Allow students time to brainstorm and complete the information.

Instruct the students to write out their requests as letters on a separate sheet of paper. Students should refer to their earlier brainstorming to compose their note. The notes should be brief and concise.

Break students into small groups and ask each student to share their request with his/her group

members. On notebook paper, all students (or you can assign one student to act as the note taker) should record their group’s wish list. The wish list should contain three columns—Item, Note Sent To, and Reason for Request—and reflect all group members’ requests.

Ask each group to read their complete wish list aloud to the class. Discuss the range and types of requests.

Day 2

Distribute the “Vocabulary List” worksheet. Instruct students to match the words in List A with their definitions in List B. If necessary, students can use a dictionary to confirm their choices. Afterward, on a separate sheet of paper or the backside of the worksheet, ask students to write the definition of each term in their own words. Students can work individually or in small groups to complete this assignment. When finished, review the words and definitions as a class.

Vocabulary List Answer Key

1 = D; 2 = E; 3 = H; 4 = I; 5 = K; 6 = L; 7 = A;
8 = F; 9 = B; 10 = G; 11 = C; 12 = J

Distribute a copy of the “Note from Hannah Harris to Robert Carter” to each student or small group. Inform students that this is a reproduction of the real note with the original spelling and punctuation, which in some cases is incorrect or different from modern language. If necessary, ask a student volunteer to read the letter aloud to the class. Have students use magnifying glasses (if available) to make out the detail. Distribute a copy of the “A Note from the Past” worksheet to each student or small group. Allow students enough time to analyze the letter and answer the questions on the worksheet.

Hold a class discussion about Hannah’s letter, using the worksheet questions to guide the conversation. Also refer back to students’ notes and wish lists from Day 1. Compare and contrast the students’ requests to Hannah’s.

Day 3

Distribute copies of the “Hannah the Weaver: Student Background Information” handout to each student or small group. Allow students enough time to read the background information and study the tape loom. Begin a class discussion by having students study

the image of the loom and speculate about its use. Prompt students with these questions:

- Why do you think this loom was popularly called a “lap” loom?
- Imagine threading the loom. How long would it take? Would it be a difficult task? What skills would you need? What adjectives can you use to describe threading the loom?
- This type of loom produced narrow pieces of woven cloth that could be sewn together to create a variety of things. What finished item would you create?
- Imagine operating this loom. What would you most enjoy about the work? What would you least enjoy?

Challenge students to create their own terms for the different parts of the loom. They should create a diagram by labeling the photograph of the loom with the words or terms they have invented. On the back of the page, ask students to write brief directions for using the loom. The directions should include words from their diagram.

Continue the discussion to review the information from Day 2 and summarize the main points of the “Student Background Information.”

Instruct students to use all of their knowledge about Hannah to complete a creative writing assignment (if you run out of class time, ask students to complete the writing assignment as homework). Give students several options (you may think of others):

1. As Hannah, write a letter to her already freed siblings—her brother Anthony and her sister Keziah—explaining her note to Robert Carter and her future plans.
2. As Hannah, a free person after her manumission in January 1793, write a diary entry describing her typical day, including her work as a weaver.
3. As Robert Carter, write an entry in his daily plantation calendar about receiving Hannah’s note, include his reaction to the note and decision regarding her request.

Day 4

Distribute art supplies and have students create illustrations to accompany their writing. Allow time for each student to share his/her writing and illustrations with the class.

Day 5

Break students into small groups and ask each group to choose one writing assignment to dramatize. Students may need to enhance the original writing by adding characters, dialog, and narration. Emphasize that the purpose of this exercise is not to produce a finished, polished play. Rather, it is a quick ad-lib of one scene and meant to illustrate a story about Hannah. Students must work together quickly, as improvisational groups do, to outline and perform a scene. Allow students time for quick writing and rehearsal. Have each group perform for the class.

Suggestions for student assessment

Students’ written work—“Student Request Note,” “Vocabulary List,” or “A Note from the Past”—may be assessed for accuracy and creativity. Student participation in small group or class activities may also be used for assessment.

Extention activity

Students can create simple weaving projects using paper, yarn, raffia, or any other suitable material. First define the two types of thread in weaving: warp (a set of vertical threads) and weft (thread that is woven over and under the warp, alternating with each row). You can make a simple loom by cutting notches in both ends of a piece of cardboard or a Styrofoam food tray. Then string the loom with warp threads. If desired, you can use a ruler or another piece of cardboard as a shed stick. Insert the shed stick through the warp threads at the bottom of the loom by weaving it over and under. Then turn the stick on its side to raise every other warp thread. This will make it easier to push or pull weft threads through the warp threads. Now you are ready to begin adding your weft threads. Weave the weft threads in and out of the warp threads and use the shed stick to push rows tightly together. Add rows of weft until your piece of weaving reaches your desired size.

Additional resources

Bennett, Lerone, Jr. *Before the Mayflower: a History of Black America*. Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1962; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984.

Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. 1855; reprint, New York: Washington Square Press, 2003.

Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. 8th edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. “Introduction.” *The Classic Slave Narratives*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: New American Library, Mentor Books, 1987.

Keckley, Elizabeth. *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. New York: G. W. Carlton, 1868. Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 1988.

Potts, Jody. *Adventure Tales of America: An Illustrated History of the United States: 1492–1877*. Vol. 2. Dallas: Signal Media Corporation, 2000.

Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives. Boston, Massachusetts: Bulfinch Press, 2002.

Washington, Booker T. *Up From Slavery*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1901. Reprint, New York: New American Library, Signet classic, 2000.

Web resource

Adventure Tales of America Website
www.adventuretales.com

This lesson fulfills the following Illinois Learning Standards:

English Language Arts

- State Goal 1: Read with understanding and fluency.
- State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.
- State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.
- State Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

Social Science

- State Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.
- State Goal 18: Understand social systems with an emphasis on the United States.

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VOCABULARY LIST

Name _____ Date _____

Match the words in List A with their definitions in List B. Use a dictionary to confirm your choices.

List A

List B

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. slavery ____ | A. To make cloth by interlacing strands of yarn or thread, usually on a loom |
| 2. emancipate . . ____ | B. To earnestly ask for |
| 3. plantation . . . ____ | C. To derive as a conclusion from facts or premises, to imply, guess or surmise |
| 4. manumission ____ | D. Forced labor using people, who are considered property |
| 5. document . . . ____ | E. To free from bondage |
| 6. loom ____ | F. To twist fiber into yarn or thread, sometimes using a small hand-driven or foot-driven machine |
| 7. weave. ____ | G. To do a kindness for, to oblige |
| 8. spinning ____ | H. A large agricultural estate, usually run with forced, resident labor |
| 9. beg. ____ | I. Formal release from slavery |
| 10. favor ____ | J. A truth or an actual occurrence |
| 11. infer. ____ | K. A written record that provides information and serves as evidence and proof |
| 12. fact. ____ | L. A frame or machine used to interlace two or more sets of threads or yarns to form a cloth |

NOTE FROM HANNAH HARRIS TO ROBERT CARTER

Dear master Hannah begs one favour
 that is to buy her loom that she
 knowes workes with and you will
 oblige her mightly from your
 Humble Servant Hannah the weaver

To Hon^{ble} Robert Carter
 Westmorland County Virg
 Quarter
 April 5 1792

TRANSCRIPTION OF HANNAH'S LETTER

“Dear master Hannah begs [begs] one favour that is to buy her loom that she know [now] workes with and you will oblige her mightly from your Humble [humble] Servant Hannah the weaver”

A NOTE FROM THE PAST

Name _____ Date _____

Read the note from Hannah Harris to Robert Carter and answer the following questions.

1. We know Robert Carter received this letter from Hannah Harris, because it is one document in a larger collection of papers and records from his plantation. Why does she begin her note “Dear master”?

2. What object is Hannah asking for from Robert Carter?

3. Does Hannah want the object as a gift or will she pay for it?

4. What kind of work does Hannah do using the object she is requesting in the letter?

5. Robert Carter wrote on the back of this letter the date he received it (April 5, 1792) and noted that Hannah would be freed in January 1793. Why do you think Hannah made this written request of Robert Carter?

6. Imagine you have gone back in time to meet Hannah Harris in person just after she has delivered her note. List three questions you would ask her that you can’t learn from the note. What do you want to know about her life, her work, or her future plans?

a. Question 1: _____

b. Question 2: _____

c. Question 3: _____

7. Study the note again. List three facts you have learned and three inferences you have made from reading it.

a. Fact 1: _____

b. Fact 2: _____

c. Fact 3: _____

d. Inference 1: _____

e. Inference 2: _____

f. Inference 3: _____

HANNAH THE WEAVER: STUDENT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name _____ Date _____

Hannah Harris was enslaved as a weaver on Leo, one of Robert Carter’s plantations in northern Virginia. Hannah was the daughter of George and Rachel Harris and had eight brothers and sisters. We do not know if she ever married or if she had children.

Robert Carter was a wealthy Virginian who owned eighteen plantations and 485 slaves. On large plantations, like Leo, skilled slave women had the job of spinning and weaving cloth to make clothing and sacks for packing produce. Leo records show that the plantation contained a sixteen-by-sixteen-foot weaving house. Several looms and six spinning wheels could fit in the weaving house, and it is probably where Hannah worked. Inventory records also show that Hannah could be “hired out,” or sent to work for other people, who would pay Carter for her services.

In 1791, Carter wrote, “I have for some time past been convinced that to retain them [slaves] in Slavery is contrary to the principles of Religion & Justice & therefore it is my duty to manumit (to free) them.” In 1782, Virginia had passed laws permitting slave owners to free slaves at their choosing, and on August 1, 1791, Robert Carter filed a deed indicating his intent to free his slaves in groups over a twenty-one-year period.

In 1792, looking forward to her freedom, Hannah wrote a note to Robert Carter asking to buy her loom. The note was found in a small collection of the business papers of Robert Carter in the Chicago Historical Society. It states:

“Dear master Hannah begs [begs] one favour that is to buy her loom that she know [now] workes with and you will oblige her migh[tily] from your Homble [humble] Servant Hannah the weaver”

Robert Carter signed the note on the back and wrote:

“5th Apr, 1792. Leo. Negro Hannah will be free Jany, 1793. She wants to buy her loom.”

In 1793, Hannah Harris, age 37, was legally freed. Her sisters and brothers were also freed between 1792 and 1800. At the time that Hannah requested her loom, her brother, Anthony, and her sister, Keziah, were already free.

Mysteries surround Hannah and her note. Did she write it? And if so, how did she learn to write? If not, who wrote it for her? In the South, it was unusual for a slave to be allowed to learn how to read and write. The handwriting and spelling suggest that the person who wrote it was not used to writing.

Did Hannah get her loom? Carter’s note on the back of Hannah’s letter gives no hint of his decision. It is likely, however, that Carter granted her request because he rented plots of land to other freed slaves, who made their living as farmers.

What happened to Hannah? No one knows for sure, but her note suggests that she was planning for life as a free person and intending to make her living as a weaver. Perhaps this strong woman with a skilled trade joined her brothers and sisters to make a new life in freedom.



Tape loom, c. 1790

Although it is unclear what type of loom Hannah sought to purchase, this loom dates from the time of her note.

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