

Study Guide *for the*
2009 Baskes Lecturer in History:
David Blight

Chicago Humanities Festival
Education Programs | 2009 Curriculum Collection
Page 1 / 7



Chicago Humanities Festival
500 North Dearborn Street, suite 825
Chicago, IL, 60654
phone 313.661.1028
fax 312.661.1018
www.chicagohumanities.org
education@chfestival.org



DAVID W. BLIGHT is a professor of history and the director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University. He is the author or editor of ten books, including *A Slave No More* and the award-winning *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Blight is a member of the Society of American Historians, the board of trustees of the New York Historical Society, and the African American Programs at Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the board of advisors to the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission.

GETTING TO THE CORE:

An excerpt by David Blight

Today, on Lincoln's birthday, I will be in Cohasset - 98 percent white and mostly affluent - to honor the life of one of its own who was neither. John Washington was a former slave who settled in Cohasset long after the Civil War and is buried in Woodside Cemetery. We might never have known who John Washington was were it not for the discovery of a narrative he wrote about his struggles to free himself from slavery, which came to light in 2003.

In this season of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial, we would do well to remember the ways African-American slaves felt their own connections to the author of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln described that document as "the central act of my administration, and the greatest event of the 19th century." John Washington could not have agreed more, and he played his own small part in bringing it about.

On April 18, 1862, in Fredericksburg, Va., Washington, an urban, literate 24-year-old slave, escaped across the Rappahannock River to the safety of Union lines. In a scene that suddenly threw the meaning of the Civil War into bold relief, an officer asked Washington about Confederate forces and conditions in strategic Fredericksburg. Washington had "stuffed his pockets with rebel newspapers" and distributed them to his interrogators. They were puzzled at Washington's intelligence and his fervor; one asked him if he wanted to be free. Washington answered loudly, "by all means!" In his narrative, the intrepid Washington remembered the moment: "Dumb with joy, I thanked God and laughed!"

After the Civil War ended, Washington became a refugee, among the first wave of freedmen (ultimately 40,000) who eventually formed the District of Columbia's modern black community. He first worked in contraband camps and hospitals. By 1864, he managed to get his wife, Annie, and their newborn son, as well as other family members to the District with him; they appear in a city directory living at 311 Eighteenth St., the site today of Constitution Hall, a mere two blocks southwest of the White House. Washington and President Lincoln had become neighbors.



So far as we know, the president and the former slave never met, although one can wonder how many times Washington may have seen the tall one in the stove pipe hat as he and his family walked to the Shiloh Baptist Church, located only four blocks north of the executive mansion, and of which Washington was a founder.

The president and the former slave had in common a love of books and language, a craving to be known through the power and music of words. Washington gained his literacy as a boy from the good luck of having a literate mother, as well as some tutoring from a white minister. He had no formal schooling (Lincoln had only a few months). Washington not only wrote his approximately 100-page narrative, but also numerous love letters to his sweetheart, and later wife, Annie Gordon. He also kept an extraordinary diary of their courtship. And he wrote a rare, unforgettable eulogy about the death of his infant son, "The Death of Our Little Johnnie," in spring 1865. He and Lincoln, knowingly or not, shared this timeless terror of the death of children.

Washington wrote with creative grammar and spelling. But when it came to remembering his night of freedom, he reached for an eloquence Lincoln would have admired: "A most memorable night that was for me the soldiers assured me that I was now a free man. . . Before morning I had begun to feel like I had truly escaped from the hand of the slaves master and with the help of God, I never would be a slave no more. . . I began to feel that life had a new joy awaiting me. . . This Was The First Night of my freedom. It was good Friday indeed the Best Friday I had ever seen."

We cannot know if Washington was in the audience on March 4, 1865, when the president, who would be killed on Good Friday, delivered his Second Inaugural Address, although the crowd was nearly half African-American. We can be sure, though, that the religious and biblically sophisticated former slave would have wept in agreement as he read the 14 uses of God and the four Biblical quotes among the 701 words.

Rapt by the transcendent language, he would have solemnly nodded as Lincoln hoped that the "mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away." And he may have gasped with anguished joy to hear that the war must continue "until all the wealth piled by two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword . . ."

In unusual and hidden ways, John Washington and Abraham Lincoln, neighbors after all, taught one another, and us, the meaning of the Civil War.

From an editorial written by David Blight and published on February 12, 2009 in the *Boston Globe*. http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/02/12/lincoln_and_the_former_slave/



REFLECTION:

“Memorys of the Past,” by John M. Washington from David Blight’s

A Slave No More, Mariner Books, 2009.

We left Staunton one afternoon, after a sad and affecting parting with mother and sisters and Brother: My hart heart was full and my voice choked with emotions and mother and children wept, as only those do, who do not know that they may ever meet again on Earth. Indeed either one might be sold on the Auction Block next day...

The years of 1853-54. was passed in the usual routine of slave life. with its many sorrows and fears and fiting hopes of Escape to Freedom. So far as I was concerned I was kept unusually close, never permitted to pass the limits of the lot; after sundown without a permission and limited time to return, which must be punctually obeyed if I had any desire to go out again in a reasonable time.

On Sundays the same of “Rules” mentioned in Chapter 5. was strictly Enforced, which if disobeyed, at any one time would be sufficient cause to keep me in many Sundays thereafter Imagine a boy about 16 or 17

years of age in good health with many rockinq fun loving companions playing in full sight of the house. on bright Sunday morning in the months of May or June, with a beautiful surrounding country spread out for miles around visible to the naked Eye: With the sweet scent of clover locust Blossums, Hunnysuckle, Apple, Cherry, and various Fruit Trees almost Ripened, and all nature clothed with beauty, that can not be describe.—And that boy only permitted to see all this from an open window.

Not permitted to go out and see and smell the work of Him, who created all things. Imagine such a case. I say and you will have a very faint glimmer of my case at that time.

REFLECTION:

An Excerpt from “The Emancipation Proclamation” by Abraham Lincoln

January 1, 1863

“That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

“That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people thereof, respectively, shall then be in rebellion against the United States; and the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall on that day be, in good faith, represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong countervailing tes-



timony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State, and the people thereof, are not then in rebellion against the United States.”

Now, therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days, from the day first above mentioned, order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively, are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth)], and which excepted parts, are for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/transcript.html

LESSON PLAN: *A Slave No More*

Lesson plan by Greg Lundberg, Maine East High School, Park Ridge, IL.

In his book, *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Narratives of Emancipation*, David Blight explores the life history of John Washington, a former slave who escaped to the North during the Civil War, ultimately settling in Washington, D.C. He contrasts the



life of Washington, who seems to have lived happily but in relative obscurity, with that of Abraham Lincoln—the men were, after all, contemporaries, who shared an interest in equal rights, a knack for communication, and many similar family-related experiences.

Like Lincoln, Washington had little formal schooling but a great deal of guidance early in life. And he turned out to be, like Lincoln, a prolific writer. As Blight writes in *The Boston Globe*, “The president and the former slave had in common a love of books and language, a craving to be known through the power and music of words. Washington gained his literacy as a boy from the good luck of having a literate mother, as well as some tutoring from a white minister. He had no formal schooling (Lincoln had only a few months). Washington not only wrote his approximately 100-page narrative, but also numerous love letters to his sweetheart, and later wife, Annie Gordon.

He also kept an extraordinary diary of their courtship. And he wrote a rare, unforgettable eulogy about the death of his infant son, “The Death of Our Little Johnnie,” in spring 1865. He and Lincoln, knowingly or not, shared this timeless terror of the death of children.”

In this lesson, we’ll create an imagined correspondence between these two thoughtful men, a correspondence that begins with differences and ends in similarities.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What are the main points/key ideas of Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation,” and what in the document itself suggests this?
- What hope did the document offer to those African Americans suffering under America’s system of slavery? How might people in different socioeconomic situations have understood and reacted to this document?
- How might John Washington and Abraham Lincoln, men distanced by race, class, and origin, have overcome their differences through writing?

GOALS:

- To imagine, even empathize with, the experiences of a former slave who crossed to freedom;
- To explore similarities between John Washington and Abraham Lincoln, men who on the surface appear to be quite different but who are, according to David Blight, similar in many important respects;
- To write a series of imagined letters discussing the very salient issues in the “Emancipation Proclamation”

MATERIALS:

- Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation”;
- Examples of Abraham Lincoln and John Washington’s personal letters, including their letters to their wives and thoughts about their departed children

TIMEFRAME: One to two week.

PROCESS & PROCEDURE:

Part I (Analysis)

1. As a first step, students should read David Blight’s *Boston Globe* article. Discuss Blight’s major



ideas as a class. What can we already say about similarities, and differences, between John Washington and Abraham Lincoln?

2. Students should then read the “Emancipation Proclamation” and identify its key ideas; make a list as a class. (This may take lots of in-class preparation, too, depending on the level of your class—placing the work in context, not to mention dealing with difficult vocabulary and unusual syntax, will probably require some direct teaching.)
3. Students should read a selection of Lincoln’s personal letters, making note of both his style and his main concerns (both as a politician and as a father);
4. Students should read a selection of Washington’s personal letters, making note of the same kinds of things;
5. As a class, share the ideas students have come up with;
6. Students should invent a series of letters between Lincoln and Washington that interweave commentary on the “Emancipation Proclamation” and personal concerns. The main goal here is to move between ideological (e.g., freedom) and personal (e.g., fatherhood) interests, guiding the reader to see more similarities than differences between the two men. (It would be great, too, if students made the attempt to write in a 19th century style!)

ASSESSMENT: The assessment will be the letter exchange series.

ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, enjoy, and support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. The CHF’s mission of providing broad access to the humanities – at a low ticket price – depends in part on the generosity of its most committed and enthusiastic supporters.

www.chicagohumanities.org