Lesson Title: Slavery and American Families – Harriet Jacobs

By: Kathryn I. MacKay, Teacher Consultant, Wasatch Range Writing Project

Burning Question: Can students come to a richer understanding of American families by reading the story of Harriet Jacobs?

Objectives:
- Students will explain the impact slavery had on African American families as a way to consider the dynamics in their own family.
- Students will explore one of the paradoxes in the life of a slave: that in fleeing their bondage, they often left behind the only people they loved to go to a place where they knew no one and could trust no one.

Context: Students reading at a 5-7th grade level.


Time span: 2-3 class periods (40 minutes) to discuss the book and to discuss the topic of families.

Procedures:
1. The teacher should prepare the students to read the book by discussing issues for slave families. Family relations were often used by slaveholders to enforce obedience and submission. The owner of Harriet Jacobs used the threat of selling her children as a means of controlling her behavior. In her book, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Jacobs described one mother, who had just witnessed seven of her children being sold at a slave-market: "She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, 'Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?' I had no words wherewith to comfort her."
   A study of slave records held by the Freedman’s Bureau showed that of 2,888 slave marriages in Mississippi (1,225), Tennessee (1,123) and Louisiana (540), over 32 per cent of marriages were dissolved as a result of slaves being sold away from the family home.
2. Students will write individually in response to discussion questions. Students will then use their written statements in a guided discussion in small groups of 2-3 and then to participate in larger class discussion. The teacher will write on whiteboard key phrases from students.
3. After reading the book I Was Born a Slave, students will answer the discussion questions using specifics from the book and repeat step 2.
Extensions:

- Distribute to each student one of the want ads for lost relatives published after the Civil War in *The Colored Tennessean*. Have students write a short story about the circumstances related in the advertisements.

Resources:

- Discussion questions
  1. How did the family create a world for slaves outside of the world of work?
  2. How did slave families create communities?
  3. What did the slave master not know about slave families and communities?
- From the National Humanities Center are resources for studying the Enslaved Family: [http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text1/text1read.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text1/text1read.htm).

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The *Colored Tennessean* (later changed to *The Tennessean*), was published from January 1865 through early 1867 in Nashville, Tennessee. During that period, it was the only newspaper in the state of Tennessee owned and published by blacks for blacks. In their searches, sometimes across state lines, for lost parents, siblings, spouses, and children, many family members used the press as a means for locating their loved ones. All four extant issues of the newspaper carried the little 2" x 2" square boxes, filled with small type, imploring readers for any information which would lead to the reunion of families. The following are abstracts of genealogical information taken from the ads in all existing issues of the newspaper.
August 12, 1865

SAMUEL DOVE of Utica, NY - Looking for ARENO, his mother, his sisters MARIA, NEZIAH and PEGGY and his brother, EDMOND DOVE. Their former owner was GEORGE DOVE of Rockingham County, Shenandoah Valley, Virginia. His mother and sisters were sold in Richmond, Virginia and he and his brother were taken to Nashville.

HENRY HILL of Nashville, TN - Looking for my wife, LUCY BLAIR, of Jonesboro (Washington County) Tennessee. Five years ago she was last living with WILLIAM BLAIR. I was raised by JOHN BLAIR.

LEVY DONE of Nashville, TN - Looking for KISSY DONE of Corinthe, Mississippi, my mother. Last saw her in 1862. Also looking for JOSEPH DONE, my brother.

MARTHA McDERMIT of Nashville, TN - Looking for ELIAS LOWERY McDERMIT, my brother, who used to belong to THOMAS LYON of Knoxville, Tennessee. ELIAS was sold to a MR. SHERMAN about 1855. He worked on a steamboat between Memphis and New Orleans.

HANNAH BARNETT of Nashville, TN - Looking for MARTHA JAMES, my daughter, last heard from in Montgomery, Alabama, but supposedly gone to Mobile, Alabama. She formerly belonged to DR. BARNETT of Princeton, Kentucky and was sold to JOHN JAMES of Nashville-, Tennessee about 9 years ago.

ROBERT WILLIAMS of Unionville, Bedford County, TN - Looking for DANIEL, my son, 15 or 16 years old, formerly belonged to CLINTON WILLIAMS of Marshall County, Tennessee and later to HARVEY McRORY. Last heard of, he was in Memphis.

ELIZA MOORE of Augusta, GA - Looking for SARAH MOORE, my daughter, age 22. Last owned by a man named Seymour Taylor, who lived about 5 miles from Clinton, Louisiana. Also WILLIAM MOONY, who belonged to JOSEPH ROWLEY.

JUDY MERRILL of Nashville, TN - Looking for WILSON, my son, servant to General Van Dom. When last heard from, he was living in Cincinnati, Ohio with LIEUT. WAID LONG.

SAMUEL WILLIAMS of Nashville, TN - Looking for SYLVIA WILLIAMS, my mother, formerly belonged to JAMES MAXWELL of Augusta, Georgia. Before him, she was owned by DR. DeGARR. I formerly belonged to JAMES MAXWELL. My father is HENRY WILLIAMS, now in Liberia.

MATILDA CLAIBORNE of Chicago, IL - Looking for HENRY AND ELIZABETH NORMANT, and their children, NELSON, LEMON, GRANVILLE, VIRGINIA AND PARTHENIA, who formerly belonged to JAMES NORMANT. No relationship to Matilda was given.
LUCINDA NORRIS of New Market, AL - Looking for MARIA RAGSDALE, my mother.

AUGUSTUS AND LUTITIA BRYANT of Augusta, GA - Looking for our children, JOSEPHINE (20), CELIA (14), CAROLINE (13), ELLEN (10), AND AUGUSTA (8). They were in Charlotte or Rock Hill, North Carolina. We were formerly owned by JOHN L. AND VIRGINIA MOON of Augusta, Georgia.

March 24 and March 31, 1866

DAVID LOFFLIN, 5 miles from Franklin, TN - Looking for ALEX LOFFLIN, who used to belong to JOHN LOFFLIN, and was last heard of in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

ELIZA ANN RATLIFF of Williamson County, TN - Looking for GEORGE (18), WILLIAM AND BEARTY LEWIS (13), my sons, born in Culpepper County, Virginia.

MRS. NOTTINGHAM took them to Eastern Shore, Virginia in 1858. In 1860, they were taken to Petersburgh, Virginia. In 1855, I came to Tennessee with MRS. HEMPS.

SIDNEY ELLIOTT (NO RESIDENCE GIVEN) - Looking for SIDNEY AND HARRISON CANNON, my sons, who belonged to CLEM CANNON, who formerly lived in Shelbyville, Bedford County, Tennessee and were sold to GOODBAR, the trader. They were last seen in Montgomery, Alabama. The oldest is about 26. I was owned by a MR. ELLIOTT. Their mother's name is ELIZA CANNON.

SUSAN HOWARD of Chattanooga, TN - Looking for WILLIAM HOWARD, my son, who formerly lived in Kingston, Georgia. Last heard from in Chattanooga. He is age 19 years old with a yellow complexion.

ALVY ELLIS of Augusta, GA - Looking for JUDY, my mother, who was free and lived with MR. SPEARS on Sulphur Creek about 9 years ago. I once belonged to CHRISTOPHER ELLIS on Sulphur Creek.

DAVID HADLEY of Gallatin, TN - Looking for MELISSA FLOWERS who left Clarksville, Tennessee in July and went to Nashville. Her uncle, SANDERS FLOWERS, in Indiana is looking for her. No relationship to Hadley is given.

MARTHA KELLER of Nashville, TN - Looking for BYRD KELLER, my father. He was last heard from in Bowling Green, Kentucky. She wishes him to come and get her.

RICHARD GRAY of Macon, MS - Looking for MOSES LUMLY, raised near Oxford, North Carolina by DR. JOHN HICKS and sold to WILLIAM LUMLY of Rome, Georgia where he was living when Sherman's army reached there in the spring of 1864.
RICHARD GRAY of Macon, MS - Also looking for POLLY NOEL, who lived in Vicksburg, Mississippi up to the time the law was passed prohibiting blacks from living there. She moved to Nashville and no one has seen her since.

SAMUEL JONES of Wartrace, TN - Looking for DOCK AND GEORGE, my 2 sons who formerly belonged to NATHANIEL POTTER, who lived in Gibson County near Trenton, Tennessee.

REQUESTER'S NAME NOT GIVEN, ONLY A BOX NUMBER - Looking for DAVID AND LUCY MORGAN, my parents, who lived 10 miles from Memphis, Tennessee. Last heard from by me 4 years ago. Also of my sisters, HANNAH DAVIS, CATHARINE MORGAN, SAVANNAH MORGAN, and my brother, CHARLES LEVI MORGAN. All of whom were formerly owned by WILLIAM MORGAN.

July 18, 1866

JOHN MELTON of Huntsville, AL - Looking for DICK RICHARDSON, my father, who formerly belonged to MASON ANDERSON of Pontotoc County, Mississippi, my brother EDWARD and my sisters, LUCY AND POLLY, who all belonged to the same man. My uncle, JOHN ANDERSON and his wife, FANNY ANDERSON.

REQUESTOR'S NAME NOT GIVEN, ONLY A BOX NUMBER - Looking for MICHAEL KINNARD, my son, 12 years of age, who was hired to a man named GRIFFIN at a pinewood factory in Hickman County, Tennessee.

SUSAN HUDDLESTON of Murfreesboro, TN - Looking for JETSON, my son who was sold 16 years ago by a MR. DOLHITE of Oxford, Mississippi to a MR. THOMAS FORD of the same place. I have not heard from him since.

ARMISTEAD BOGLE of London, TN - Looking for EDMONIA BOGLE, who formerly belonged to JOHN SCRUGGS in McMinn County, Tennessee and who was taken to Texas some years ago.
Lesson Title: Forming Identity

By: Mary Thomas and Natalie Wilson, Teacher Consultants, Wasatch Range Writing Project

Burning Question: What are the challenges of forming identity and what role does literacy play in the formation of identity?

Objective/Introduction: Students will explore what they know about their own identity and compare their findings to what African American slaves, particularly Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, knew about theirs.

Context: This lesson helps junior high school students understand the challenges slaves faced in forming their own identity. Many students also face challenges. The narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs demonstrate how identity can be formed and thrive despite challenges and difficulties.

Materials:
- Bulleted biographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs
- Foreign Language Reading
- Writing supplies for students
- Whiteboard or chalkboard for group discussions

Time Span: One 45-minute class period with extension possibilities.

Procedures:
1. Students will describe in list form, using 10 words or less, what they think they know about a person through observation. Discuss the limits of what you can know about a person just by looking at them.
2. Students will then write one or two paragraphs that describe who they are. Some questions for students to answer in this paragraph would be: Where were you born and what story is told about your birth? Who are your parents and what do they do for a living? What are your favorite things to do in your free time? What are your favorite foods? What are your likes and dislikes?
3. Discuss how slaves were often limited in forming their identities as human beings. Often they did not know their birthdays or who their parents were. Many were sold multiple times. It was against the law to teach a slave to read and write. Discuss what slaves might have used to form their identities – work, cultural expressions such as songs and stories, preserved African traditions such as names and ceremonies.
4. Have students attempt to read a foreign language reading. Discuss what role literacy plays in forming your identity. Literacy allows us to make choices and understand the society we live in. Have students list all of their daily experiences that would not be possible for them if they were not literate. (Examples: Driving, email, texting, shopping ads, job application.) Have students write a reflection on how they felt after trying to read a text in Japanese script and then being told an English translation.
Extensions:

- Students could write a “Who Am I” paper exploring more in-depth about themselves, how they view their own identity through family ties and relationships. (Possible question for paper are attached.) Students could also compare their own family history with that of Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs.
- Students could form small groups and each receive one of the following quotes from Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs, write a reflection on them, discuss in small groups, and then share with the class as a whole. (Possible quotes are attached.)
- *The Underground Railroad, An Interactive History Adventure* by Allison Lessieur would be a fun activity to have the students read and then choose different characters to follow through a slave escape situation.
- Using the Biography on Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, compare and contrast their early lives and their experience forming identity.
- Have students create a “family tree” spanning one to three generations. They should pick several relatives to interview in order to increase their awareness of their family history. Students should present their research to the class as a whole, or in small groups. The final reflection paper should focus on their reactions to what they have discovered about their families and the role of families in developing identities. What role did literacy play in their efforts? How did their knowledge compare to what Douglass and Jacobs knew about their families?
- In our modern consumer culture, our identities are often expressed by what we purchase. Have the students bring ads for various products to class. They should present the ads in small groups, answering a few basic questions: 1. What is being sold? 2. What is the method used to sell the item (appeals to emotion, logic, shared values, etc.)? 3. Would you buy this product? Why or why not? Next, have students examine the ad/runaway notice place by Dr. Norcom for the capture of Harriet Jacobs. 1. What is the ad requesting? 2. What method is used to encourage people to return Jacobs to Norcom? 3. How is Jacobs described? Is she described as a human being or a “product/possession”? 4. Do you think white northerners would react favorably to this ad? Why or why not? Give specific examples from the ads to support your ideas.

Rationale: Students will hopefully understand all that goes in to forming our identities and how other people attempt to create identities for us.

Resources:

- From *Voices Education Project*, are resources about African American resistance strategies and formation of identity, [http://www.voiceseducation.org/content/african-american-resistance](http://www.voiceseducation.org/content/african-american-resistance).
• *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass Curriculum Unit*, The Center for Learning, ISBN:978-1-56077-818-9

**Quotes to use for reflection activity as an extension**

1. “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skillful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 125)

2. “According to the Norcoms’ way of thinking, Harriet was a pampered slave. She still had her grandmother, brother, and other relatives, including aunts and uncles, who helped to look after her. Unlike a plantation hand, she lived in the Norcoms’ house, sleeping in a room with her great-aunt Betty, and her duties often included playing with the young Norcom children. And she had never been whipped. But Harriet’s view of her situation was entirely different. She would rather have been a starving pauper than a slave.” (*I Was Born a Slave The Story of Harriet Jacobs*, 24)

3. “My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he early detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, “You both called me, and I didn’t know which I ought to go to first.” “You are my child,” replied our father, ‘and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water.’(*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 129)

4. “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood…The opinion was also whispered that my
master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me.” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 17)

5. “The ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case. I found no severe trial in my departure. My home was charmless; it was not home to me; on parting from it I could not feel that I was leaving any thing which I could have enjoyed by staying. My mother was dead, my grandmother lived far off, so that I seldom saw her. I had two sisters and one brother, that lived in the same house with me; but the early separation from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories. I looked for home elsewhere…” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 39).

6. “Though conscious of the difficulties of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read.” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 44).

7. “My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 74-75).

**Questions to consider for “Who Am I?” paper**

1. What is the story of your name? Why did your parent(s) choose that particular name?
   Does the name suit you? Why or why not?
2. Do you have any siblings? Describe your place in the family.
3. What is the story of your birth?
4. List 5 things you know about your parent(s).
5. List several of your likes and dislikes. What would surprise someone to learn about you?
6. What do you know about your grandparents? What have you learned from them?
7. What are your favorite children’s books? Who read them to you?
8. List 3 of your talents, favorite books, activities.
9. What do you like most about yourself?
10. Name one person (or animal or thing) that is important to your identity. Explain.
11. Draw a picture of yourself 10 years from now. How will you have changed?
    Describe your plans for the future.
12. Douglass valued literacy and promoting the welfare of former slaves. What are your values? Why is the value important to you?
Bulleted Biographies for Douglass and Jacobs

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)
- Douglass was the son of a slave woman and an unknown white man (possibly his master).
- He did not know his birth date. This information was frequently denied slaves.
- He only saw his mother, Harriet Bailey, four to five times in his life. She had to walk 24 miles round trip to see him. Douglass only saw her at night, when her work was done.
- Douglass experienced the hardships of slavery from an early age, including witnessing brutal beatings of slaves.
- At the age of eight, Douglass was sent to live with a ship carpenter named Auld. Mrs. Auld began to teach Douglass to read, until she was forbidden to continue. Mr. Auld told her it was illegal to teach a slave to read. His words made Douglass more determined to learn.
- After spending seven years in Baltimore, Douglass was given to a cruel “slavebreaker” named Covey. Douglass was savagely beaten and given little to eat. Eventually, he fought back and regained his “long-crushed” spirit.
- Douglass escaped on September 3, 1838, fleeing to New York City.
- He continued to educate himself, and became involved in the abolitionist movement.
- Douglass became an effective orator, and gave speeches for anti-slavery societies. He also published his autobiography and a weekly paper called North Star.
- Douglass devoted his time to improving the lives of African-Americans. He was also an advocate of rights for women.

Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897)
- Jacobs was the daughter of Delilah Horniblow and Elijah Knox. Unlike Douglass, she lived with her parents in her earliest years. Her grandmother was an influential person in Jacobs’ life. At the age of six, after the death of her mother, Jacobs learned for the first time that she was a slave.
- Jacobs’ first mistress (also her mother’s) taught her to read and sew. After the death of her mistress, Jacobs became the property of the Mistress’s niece (age 3). For all practical purposes, she belonged to Dr. Norcom, the father of her mistress, and a cruel, willful individual.
- For many years, Jacobs resisted the sexual advances of Dr. Norcom. He prevented her from marrying the man of her choice (a free African-American) and continued to pursue her after she became involved with another man, a white attorney, named Sawyer. She gave birth to a son (1829) and daughter (1833).
- Jacobs ran away from the plantation where she had been sent. Norcom offered $300.00 for her capture. Jacobs went into hiding in her grandmother’s house, in a small crawlspace. She lived there for six years. In 1837, she persuaded Sawyer to purchase her brother and children.
- Jacobs escaped slavery in 1842 and was reunited with her daughter, Louisa, in New York.
- Jacobs’ biography was published in 1861.
• She published a series of articles explaining the suffering of her fellow slaves, still in captivity. Jacobs and her daughter opened a free school for black children in Alexandria, Virginia.

• Text written in Japanese and English

これを読むことができるおよび正午によるオフィスへの応答は学校を今朝早く去ることは許されるどの学生でも。
彼らはまた週の残りのためのあらゆる宿題から免除されている。

Any students who can read this and reply to the office by Noon will be allowed to leave school early today. They also will be exempt from any homework for the rest of the week.

• Runaway notice for Harriet Jacobs
Lesson Title: Making Decisions – The Underground Railroad

By: Mary Thomas, Teacher Consultant, Wasatch Range Writing Project

Burning question: Can students analyze decisions using historical examples?

Context: This lesson is designed for middle school. Information about slavery in America should be given prior to this lesson.

Objectives: After completing this lesson, students will be able to
- Identify steps in the decision-making process.
- Identify and analyze the decisions of the characters in The Underground Railroad.
- Apply their learning to their own decision-making.

Materials:
- Copies of The Underground Railroad
- Decisions, Decisions handout
- Decision Analysis handouts
- Pens, pencils, and paper

Procedures: This lesson will require at least 2 class periods.

Day 1

1. Help the class brainstorm different types of decisions. What are examples of easy decisions? What are examples of difficult decisions? What were particular difficulties that slaves faced when they made decisions?
2. Explain to the students that they will be working in pairs to examine decisions in greater detail. Discuss the importance of thoughtful decisions in their lives. Give each student a copy of the handout entitled Decisions, Decisions. The students should complete the handout and discuss it with their partners. Then each pair should pick one example to share with the class.

Day 2

1. Explain to the students that they will be studying decisions made in the past. Discuss the particular difficulties that slaves faced in their decision making. How did slaves deal with these obstacles?
2. Distribute copies of The Underground Railroad and the Decision Analysis handout to each pair. Discuss the vocabulary on the handout. Pick one decision from the book to do as a class, demonstrating thoughtful responses. Following the teacher-led class example, each pair should complete the handout for 1-3 decisions (depending on the available time).
3. Discuss the choices made by the students. Did they consider alternative options? Discuss the impact of their decisions on the other characters in the story. Discuss the role of chance and fate. What factors were beyond their control?
4. Have the class develop a list of steps for effective decision-making.
5. Individual assignment (homework): Students choose one of the following projects:
   - Write several letters from your character to another character in the story explaining the choices you have made.
   - Create an anti-slavery pamphlet based on the experiences of the characters in *The Underground Railroad*.
   - Research the lives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and create a poster illustrating several key decisions that they made.
   - Design a map illustrating the journey your character made. Include the obstacles and dangers he or she faced along the way.

**Rationale:** This lesson encourages students to consider their decisions carefully. It also emphasizes a close reading of the text and fosters a greater appreciation of the difficulties slaves confronted in their daily lives.

**Extensions:** Students may research the role of the family in the lives of slaves. What were the unique pressures put on slave families? Are there any connections to families of immigrants today? (Students might consider the fear and reality of separation of family members.) What role did family considerations play in the decisions made by Harriet Jacobs?

**Resources:**
- From *National Geographic Online* is “The Underground Railroad” which is also set up as a series of decisions: [http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/)
- From *Scholastic* is “The Underground Railroad” which includes lesson plans and materials related to the books they publish on the subject for younger readers.
- Handouts:
  - *Decision Analysis*
    1. Pick one of the scenarios in the book listed on p.11
    2. What is your character’s background and situation?
    3. What is the first decision you must make?
    4. What are the listed options?
    5. Can you think of any alternative choices that are not listed?
    6. What factors should be considered before you make your choice?
    7. What are the potential positive consequences of each choice? What are the potential negative consequences?
    8. What is your decision? Why?
    9. What is your reaction to the outcome of your decision?
  - *Decisions, Decisions*
    1. What are three decisions that you have made in the past week?
    2. Pick one decision to analyze in greater detail. What factors did you consider?
    3. Was it a good choice? Why or why not?
    4. What were the consequences (results) of the decision?
Lesson Title: Harriett Jacobs – Literacy Through Letters

By: Kathryn L. MacKay, Teacher Consultant, Wasatch Range Writing Project

Burning Questions: Can students improve their writing by writing letters? Can students understand the plight of slaves by reading a novel based on the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs?

Objectives:

- Students will use letter writing to improve their own writing.
- Students will consider letter writing as a way to tell a story. They will gain experience in reading an epistolary novel – a novel written as a series of documents, usually letters.
- Students will gain an understanding of slavery in America.

Context: Students reading at 6-8th grade level. Students may be studying American literature or American history.

Materials:

- Template for a “friendly letter.”

Time Span: One week to read the novel in sections; 30 minute class sessions to “de-brief” each section.

Procedures:

1. Students will write for about 5 minutes a statement expressing their reaction to the text.
2. Students will use their written statements in a guided discussion of the novel in small groups of 2-3 and then to participate in larger class discussion. Teacher will write on whiteboard key phrases from students.
3. For the first sections of the novel, students might be asked to predict what will happen to Harriet. For the last section, students might be asked to speculate about what they might do if they were Harriet.
4. Students will write a “friendly letter” in which they explain their experiences with reading and discussing Letters from a Slave Girl.

Extensions:

1. Harriet Jacobs wanted to tell her story, but knew she lacked the skills to write the story herself. She had learned to read while young and enslaved, but, at the time of her escape to the North in 1842, she was not a proficient writer. She worked at it, though, in part by writing letters that were published by the New York Tribune, and with the help of her friend, Amy Post. Her writing skills improved, and by 1858, she had finished the manuscript of her book, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Lyons has written the novel based on Incidents in a way that shows Harriet becoming a more skilled writer. Students
could have a discussion about experiences which have helped them become stronger writers.

2. Harriett Jacobs corresponded with a number of women involved in the anti-slavery movement. Students, individually or in small groups, could research some of the women with whom she corresponded and report their findings orally in class. For example, a short biography of Amy Kirby Post is available at: \( \text{http://www.winningthetvote.org/FAPost.html} \).

Note: In studying slavery and slave narratives, students may encounter images, language, descriptions, and opinions that they find offensive or unsettling. Teachers should be mindful of student backgrounds and be sensitive to these issues.

Resources:

- The author, Mary Lyon has a web page of activities for younger children based on the book: \( \text{http://www.lyonsdenbooks.com/html/jacobs.htm} \).
- PBS site in support of their film series \textit{Slavery in America} has a lesson plan using \textit{Letters from a Slave Girl}: \( \text{http://slaveryinamerica.org/amliterature/amlit_lp_va_tobeasslave.htm} \).
- Additional letters and documents related to Jacobs are available from: \( \text{http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/docs.htm} \).
- From the \textit{Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society} is information about “African American Children and Youth”: \( \text{http://www.faqs.org/childhood/A-Ar/African-American-Children-and-Youth.html} \).
- Format for a “friendly letter”
  
  - The \textbf{heading} includes the sender's address and the date. The sender's address needs to be located at the top of the page in the center or at the top right-hand corner. The date needs to be located under the sender's address on the left-hand side of the page above the greeting.
  - The \textbf{greeting} needs to be located under the heading on the left-hand side of the page. The \textit{greeting} would include such words as Dear _______________.
  - The \textbf{body of the letter} includes the message. It is written in paragraph form.
  - The \textbf{closing} of the letter would include such words as Sincerely, or Your friend.
  - The \textbf{signature} is your signed name under the closing.