

The Value of Literacy to the Enslaved

Enslaved people had many reasons to desire to read and to write. A literate slave could forge passes or free papers and these could aid a slave to escape. In fact, enslaved people forged free papers so frequently that free blacks with bona fide legal documents were often suspected of forging them.

African American political activist David Walker wrote: “for coloured people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation” with knowledge that “their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world.”¹ Literate African Americans wrote about the inhumanity of slavery in letters, slave narratives, or literature like poems and novels. In 1830, North Carolina passed a law that forbade teaching slaves to read and write, stating that literacy has a “tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds and to produce insurrection and rebellion to the manifest injury of the citizens of this state.”²

Slaves who often bought and sold goods and services “under the table” were an important part of the economy. Entrepreneurial slaves benefited from reading and writing and from having math skills. Slaves with math skills could manage bookkeeping, do calculations, and help their owners manage their money. It is telling that the 1830 North Carolina law that forbade teaching slaves to read and write made an exception for “the use of figures.”³

Many slaves taught themselves to read. Some learned from white children who were less informed about the laws against teaching slaves to read and write. Some slaves eavesdropped on white children's lessons. Slaves also took newspapers and other printed materials and studied the letters and words. Frederick Douglass spoke for thousands in bondage when he wrote: “Nothing seemed to make her [his mistress] more angry than to see me with a newspaper.”⁴ Douglass added, “She seemed to think that here lay the danger.”⁵

Literate slaves passed their skills on to others and enslaved parents often taught their children when far removed from the master or overseer; some slaves held underground “schools” in secret hiding places—often deep in the woods—late at night or very early in the morning before or after the work day. “I have seen the Negroes up in the country going away under large oaks, and in secret places, sitting in the woods with spelling books,” former slave Charity Bowery of North Carolina told an interviewer decades after Emancipation.⁶ In sum, African Americans were very creative in finding a way to learn to read and write because they knew that literacy was key to knowledge, freedom and personal power.

1. David Walker and Peter P. Hinks. *David Walker's Appeal: To the Coloured Citizens of the World*, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000), 34.

2. Heather Williams. *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 15.

3. *Ibid.*, 15.

4. *Ibid.*, 25.

5. *Ibid.*, 25.

6. *Ibid.*, 7.