

Exploring the Rhetoric of Slave Bills of Sale before and after Gradual Manumission

an in-archives exercise by William Burgos, Sara Campbell, and Deborah Mutnick

featured on [TeachArchives.org](http://www.teacharchives.org) at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/gradual-manumission/>

Students conduct a close analysis of slave bills of sale and indentures to better understand the legal and social history of manumission in the north.

Introduction

This exercise asks students to do close analysis of slave bills of sale and indentures in the context of the [1799 New York State Gradual Manumission Act](#). The law granted freedom to enslaved people born after July 4, 1799; however, they were mandated to remain in servitude until the age of 25 for females and 28 for males. Slave owners across New York state were critical of this law, perhaps none more than in agricultural Kings and Queens Counties. In 1790, 30% of Kings County residents were of African descent and the overwhelming majority of them were enslaved.

Students examine one bill of sale from before passage of the law, and an indenture from after 1799 (but before 1827 when slavery was abolished in the state). The language of these documents is brief and transactional whereas post-1799 indentures often recognize slavery as more temporary or conditional.

By asking students to transcribe the documents, this exercise forces them to read more slowly and carefully than they usually do. More importantly, it instills in students a sense of engagement and purpose that they do not often show in a first-year composition course.

The exercise allows students to see how the 1799 Act made a difference in the lives of the individuals named in the archival documents. The realization that the paper in their hands signified the sale of a human being produces a deeper appreciation for the experiences of enslaved people. They also understand that the documents they examine are probably the sole remaining record of the lives of these individuals.

Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Accurately transcribe 18th- and early 19th-century manuscripts
- Identify the individuals named in the documents and their roles, and analyze the power dynamics involved in their relationships
- Articulate the relationship between archival documents and key legislation, including the New York State 1799 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.

Context

Students read the introduction and chapter 1 of Marcus Rediker's *The Slave Ship: A Human History* to learn about the transatlantic slave trade.

Before visiting the archives, students read the text of the 1799 Act as homework and discuss it in class.

We also provide students with a timeline which outlines key dates and events in the history of slavery in New York. They can refer to this before, during, and after the visit to the archives.

Teachers might also consider pairing this exercise with slave narratives such as Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass; federal legislation like the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments; or the writings of enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau.

Visit

Number of Visits: 1

Duration of Visit: 1 hour

Agenda

| | |
|------------|---------------------------------------|
| 15 minutes | Standard introduction |
| 5 minutes | Short review |
| 15 minutes | Small group work |
| 25 minutes | Wrap up |

After introductions, archives staff lead students in a review and analysis of the [1799 Act](#).

Students work in groups of 3 or 4 to study a pair of documents (one pre-1799, and one post) pre-selected by the professor. Students are guided through the exercise by a [handout](#).

They begin by examining the physical attributes of the documents. They read the documents aloud and transcribe them (educators should encourage students to take turns so that everyone has a chance to read the handwriting). After the transcriptions are complete, students discuss and analyze the documents based on the pointed questions in the [handout](#).

Wrap Up

The class reconvenes and each group informally shares their initial analyses based on the notes they took on their [handout](#).

To ensure that all students understand the change in legal language about slavery, faculty then lead the whole class in an examination of a pair of pre- and post-1799 documents on a large screen (this can be done by either using a [document camera](#) or by including photographs of documents in a PowerPoint).

End Products

In-Class Presentations

In the subsequent class period, groups will have 30 minutes to prepare a more formal 10 minute in-class presentation based on their work in the archives.

Blog Posts

After visiting the archives, students post on the class blog. See prompts [here](#).

Response Paper

Students are assigned a response paper. See prompt and rubric [here](#).

Archival Material Used

Group 1

Bill of sale for Jin, 1777; Hubbard family papers, 1974.044, box 1, folder 11; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Bill of sale for Jin, 1782; Stoothoff family collection, ARC.150, box 1, folder 17; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

Indenture for Grace, 1816; Lefferts family papers, ARC.145, box 3, folder "Misc. Business, Slave Bills, 1787-1852"; Brooklyn Historical Society. [click for image](#)

**This group has three documents because we identified two pre-1799 bills of sale for the same person, a woman named Jin.*

Group 2

Slave indentures for Anna, 1751; Lefferts family papers, ARC.145, box 3, folder 9; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Slave indenture for Mercy, 1814; Lefferts family papers, ARC.145, box 3, folder 9; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Group 3

Slave indenture for Pegg, 1797; Teunis G. Bergen collection of Van Brunt family genealogy papers, 1978.157, series 3, folder 11; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Slave indenture for Susan, 1819; Teunis G. Bergen collection of Van Brunt family genealogy papers, 1978.157, series 3, folder 11; Brooklyn Historical Society.

Further Reading

“An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.” In *Jim Crow New York, A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship 1777-1877*, eds. David N. Gellman and David Quigley, 52-55. New York: New York University Press, 2003.

The New York State Archives has a zoomable version of the original document [online](#).

Katz, Robin M. and Julie Golia. “Finding Hidden Personal Stories in Legal and Financial Records.” In *Teaching with Primary Sources: Hands On Instructional Exercises.*, eds. Anne Bahde, Heather Smeadberg, Mattie Taormina. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited *Forthcoming*.

This exercise was based on an activity developed for the 2011 SAFA Summer Institute at Brooklyn Historical Society, and published in this book.

Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2007.

Staples, Brent. “To Be a Slave in Brooklyn.” *New York Times*, 24 June 2001.

Our students read a short article which discusses how scholars use archeological evidence to learn about the experiences of enslaved people in Brooklyn.

This Exercise Was Used In

English 16C: Pathways to Freedom An accelerated English composition class for first-year students who need help completing the requirement. We each teach a section in a learning community along with a world history course.

Adaptability

This can be adapted for use at the secondary school level and across several disciplines, including literature, history, and social studies.

Course Materials (included)

1799 Act

In-Archives Handout

Blog Prompts

Response Paper

Cite This Exercise

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An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery

New York State, 1799



Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/gradual-manumission>

March 29, 1799, State of New-York, Passed at the Twenty-Second Meeting of the Legislature Begun the Second Day of January, 1799 (Albany, 1799).

Be it enacted ... That any child born of a slave within this state after the fourth day of July next shall be deemed and adjudged to be born free: Provided nevertheless. That such child shall be the servant of the legal proprietor of his or her mother until such servant, if a male, shall arrive at the age of twenty-eight years, and if a female, at the age of twenty-five years.

And be it further enacted ... That such proprietor, his, her or their heirs or assigns, shall be entitled to the service of such child until he or she shall arrive to the age aforesaid, in the same manner as if such child had been bound to service by the overseers of the poor.

And be it further enacted ... That the person entitled to such service may, nevertheless, within one year after the birth of such child, elect to abandon his or her right to such service, by a notification of the same from under his or her hand, and lodged with the clerk of the town or city where the owner of the mother of any such child may reside; in which case every child abandoned as aforesaid shall be considered as paupers of the respective town or city where the proprietor or owner of the mother of such child may reside at the time of its birth; and liable to be bound out by the overseers of the poor on the same terms and conditions that the children of paupers were subject to before the passing of this act.

Source: Gellman and Quigley, eds. *Jim Crow New York, A Documentary History of Race and Citizenship, 1777-1877*. New York: New York University Press, 2003, 52-55.

The New York State Archives has shared a zoomable version of the original document online at <http://iarchives.nysed.gov/dmsBlue/viewImageData.jps?id=177879>

3. Read the later document out loud, and discuss the following:

- Each document is either a slave bill of sale or slave indenture (see glossary). What kinds of transactions do they chronicle?
- List the names of approximately 5 people mentioned in earlier document and determine their role in the transaction.

What is their relationship to each other?
What is required of each person in the transaction?

- Do the same for the later document.

What is their relationship to each other?
What is required of each person in the transaction?

4. Read the copy of the 1799 New York State Gradual Manumission Act. Plot the following on the below timeline:

- a) when the first indenture was written
- b) when the second indenture was written
- c) when the law was enacted
- d) when the people in the indentures will be freed?

1700

1800

1900



For further discussion

Propose a question that will serve as a prompt for class discussion when we meet next.

Blog Prompts

by William Burgos, Sara Campbell, and Deborah Mutnick



Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/gradual-manumission>

Undergraduates seldom get to do research in an archives. Discuss what you learned about archival research in general and, more specifically, what you learned from the slave bills of sale. In what ways did the visit affect your understanding of the course theme, slavery in Brooklyn and the Mid-Atlantic colonies?

You have already blogged about Marcus Rediker's idea that scholars have neglected to show the slave trade as a "human history." Did your examination of the slave bills of sale and indentures—actual artifacts from the period of slavery—give you a sense of that human history? If so, how so. If not, why? Please feel free to upload images of the documents to your blog post, and remember to cite them correctly.

Response Paper

by William Burgos, Sara Campbell, and Deborah Mutnick



Part of an in-archives exercise at <http://www.teacharchives.org/exercises/gradual-manumission>

Response Paper: A Rhetorical Analysis of Pre- and Post-1799 Slave Bills

According to Lloyd F. Bitzer, “rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to a situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem” (5). Using Bitzer’s idea of rhetoric as situational, analyze the slave bill(s) of sale and runaway slave ads you examined at Brooklyn Historical Society in light of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the 1799 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. You may refer to Gellman’s “The Problem of Abolition” to explain the historical context for the 1799 Act.

Here are some questions to consider:

What situations give rise to the slave bills of sale? To what situations do the Declaration of Independence and the 1799 Act respond? What is the purpose of each of the documents, including the slave bills? Who are their authors? Audiences? How do the two political documents define freedom? How do the slave bills of sale complicate these definitions?

Be sure to cite all secondary and primary sources using MLA style documentation (see LIU Handbook and/or Purdue OWL).

A typed, 3-5-page draft is due Wednesday, Oct. 9. The revision is due Mon., Oct. 28.

Format: Double-space, one-inch margins, 12 pitch font. Be sure to title your essay, number the pages, and cite all secondary and primary sources using MLA style (see Hacker).

Rubric

| CRITERIA | ADVANCED | PROFICIENT | EMERGING | ATTEMPTED | NON-ASSESSABLE |
|--------------------------------------|----------|------------|----------|-----------|----------------|
| Rhetorical Analysis | | | | | |
| Focus (purpose, thesis) | | | | | |
| Content (development/evidence) | | | | | |
| Use of primary and secondary sources | | | | | |
| Audience (tone, point of view) | | | | | |
| Style: Sentence Structure/Mechanics | | | | | |
| MLA Documentation | | | | | |