Literacy as Freedom

As we look upon this young black man reading a Bible, one question that comes to mind is whether or not the subject is an enslaved person. If he is a free man in the North, it would be legal for him to read at this time in 1863. But what if he is not free? Or what if he is a free black man residing in a slave state? The issue of literacy among blacks during the Civil War was a complicated one. Before the 1830s there were few restrictions on teaching slaves to read and write. After the slave revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831, all slave states except Maryland, Kentucky, and Tennessee passed laws against teaching slaves to read and write. For example, in 1831 and 1832 statues were passed in Virginia prohibiting meetings to teach free blacks to read or write and instituting a fine of $10 – $100 for teaching enslaved blacks.

The **Alabama Slave Code of 1833** included the following law "[S31] Any person who shall attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read or write, shall upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum of not less than two hundred fifty dollars, nor more than five hundred dollars." At this time, *Harpers Weekly* published an article that stated "the alphabet is an abolitionist. If you would keep a people enslaved refuse to teach them to read." There was fear that slaves who were literate could forge travel passes and escape. These passes, signed by the slave owner, were required for enslaved people traveling from one place to another and usually included the date on which the slave was supposed to return. There was also fear that writing could be a means of communication that would make it easier to plan insurrections and mass escapes.

Sunday Morning, ca. 1877, Thomas Waterman Wood, oil on paperboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Slave narratives from many sources tell us how many enslaved people became educated. Some learned to read from other literate slaves, while at other times a master or mistress was willing to teach a slave in defiance of the laws. Former slave and abolitionist leader **Frederick Douglass** was taught the alphabet in secret at age twelve by his master's wife, Sophia Auld. As he grew older Douglass took charge of his own education, obtaining and reading newspapers and books in secret. He was often quoted asserting that "knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom." Douglass was one of the few literate slaves who regularly taught others how to read. Younger slaves frequently listened outside school houses where their masters' children were learning. Enslaved people who were

caught reading or writing were severely punished, as were their teachers. In every instance these slaves and those who taught them undertook a profound risk, which for many was surmounted by the individual's passion, commitment and imagination.

The following are two telling examples of slave narratives that discuss how slaves became literate. This first account is from James Fisher of Nashville, Tennessee, who relayed his story in 1843:

> *I . . . thought it wise to learn to write, in case opportunity should offer to write myself a pass. I copied every scrap of writing I could find, and thus learned to write a tolerable hand before I knew what the words were that I was copying. At last, I found an old man who, for the sake of money to buy whisky, agreed to reach me the writing alphabet, and set up copying. I spent a good deal of time trying to improve myself; secretly, of course. One day, my mistress happened to come into my room, when my materials were about; and she told her father (old Capt. Davis) that I was learning to write. He replied, that if I belonged to him, he would cut my right hand off.*

Artist Eastman Johnson was active in the abolitionist movement in the 1860s, so it is plausible that he read slave narratives that demonstrated the importance of literacy and, specifically, the reading of the Bible to slaves and former slaves. One possible source Johnson might have come across was the narrative of former slave James Curry, published in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* on January 10, 1840. Curry recalls his quest to learn to read:

> *My master's oldest son was six months older than I. He went to a day school, and as I had a great desire to learn to read, I prevailed upon him to teach me. My mother procured me a spelling-book. (Before Nat Turner's insurrection, a slave in our neighborhood might buy a spelling or hymn-book, but now he cannot). I got so I could read a little, when my master found it out, and forbad his son to teach me any more. As I had got the start, however, I kept on reading and studying, and from that time till I came away, I always had a book somewhere about me, and if I got an opportunity, I would be reading in it. Indeed, I have a book now, which I brought all the way from North Carolina. I borrowed a hymn-book, and learned the hymns by heart. My uncle had a Bible, which he lent me, and I studied the Scriptures. When my master's family were all gone away on the Sabbath, I used to go into the house and get down the great Bible, and lie down in the piazza, and read, taking care, however, to put it back before they returned. There I learned that it was contrary to the revealed will of God, that one man should hold another as a slave. I had always heard it talked among slaves, that we ought not to be held as slaves; that our forefathers and mothers were stolen from Africa,*

> *where they were free men and free women. But in the Bible I learned that 'God hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth.'*

Slave Education and the Union Army

In the effort to forge a new identity after their emancipation, former slaves realized that the key to empowerment was literacy. Slaves who tended to young white children, helping to dress them and carry their books to school, watched as they grew into successful adults and witnessed firsthand the benefits of an education. The lack of reading and writing capabilities was frustrating for many as it hampered the ability to do such simple things as record a marriage or the birth of a child. With emancipation came the chance for freed blacks to acquire the education they had been denied. Eastman Johnson's painting of a freed black man reading the Bible personifies that chance that all newly freed African Americans had to take in order to build a new life. The quest for literacy was especially important to adult blacks as once they learned how to read, they could then teach their children, producing a new generation of educated freed African Americans.

Following the Emancipation Proclamation, Northern whites helped newly freed blacks to construct schools and served as teachers. In Arkansas, a visiting teacher tasked with teaching black soldiers to read and write, recalled that the soldiers "seem to feel the importance of learning and study very hard, helping themselves along very much." Others observed that since their emancipation, "one of the most gratifying facts developed by the recent change in their condition is, that they very generally desire instruction, and many seize every opportunity in intervals of labor to obtain it." Their determination to obtain literacy was so great that for many it ranked as high as necessities like food and shelter.

Many black soldiers also became part of a movement to educate former slaves. They advocated for the building of schools and the opportunity for others to learn. The soldiers knew that they would need to construct new lives, and education was the key to achieving that goal. Black soldier John Sweeney attested:

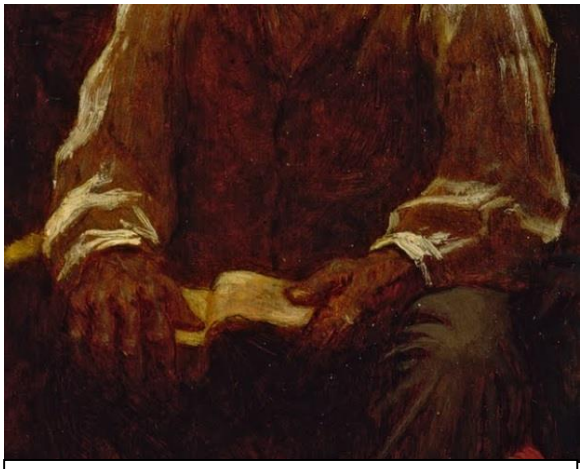
> *We have never Had an institutiong [sic] of that sort and we Stand deeply inneed [sic] of instruction the majority of us having been slaves. We Wish to have some benefit of education To make of ourselves capable of buisness [sic] In the future. . . . We wish to become a People capable of self support as we are Capable of being soldiers. . . . But Sir What we want is a general system of education In our regiment for our moral and literary elevation." Literate black soldiers also helped to instruct illiterate soldiers to read and write when teachers were not available.*

For African Americans, freedom was not something that was gained overnight; for many freedom came with the Emancipation Proclamation, for others it came when they escaped in the middle of the night and crossed into Union territory, yet for some it occurred when they donned the blue uniform of the Union Army. The army gave freedmen a purpose. Not only were they fighting for their personal right to exist, but also for the country they were indebted to. That they fought and died for the United States only solidified their claims that African Americans deserved equal rights and citizenship. Frederick Douglass argued that "Liberty won by white men would lose half its lustre." Douglass believed that black military service and black American citizenship were inextricably linked; "Once let the black man in . . . an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship."

Life as a black Union soldier was not at all what many had envisioned; in fact, former slaves had some of the worst jobs in the army. They were often relegated to menial jobs, such as digging ditches or clearing away dead bodies and paid much less than their white counterparts. Though they were less likely to be killed in action, black soldiers were much more likely to succumb to diseases and bacterial infections at camp because of the tasks assigned to them. Writing to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, a black soldier objected to the inequality stating, "We have come out like men and we Expected to be Treated as men but we have bin [*sic*] Treated more Like Dogs then [*sic*] men." Additionally, if they were captured they were not seen as prisoners of war in the eyes of the Confederacy, but as property. Due to this Southern policy, the Union had no recourse for a prisoner exchange. Black soldiers were sent back to the states from which they came to either be thrown back into slavery or executed. Despite these risks, a total of 186,000 blacks served in the Union army during the Civil War which accounted for one tenth of the army's total forces. Tellingly, half of those soldiers originated from a proslavery Southern state.

Literacy and Faith

For African Americans religion and the Christian church was, and continues to be, a unifying and enduring force within the black community. Faith and freedom were strongly intertwined. Blacks considered emancipation the beginning of their exodus out of bondage, and the Christian church became a primary focus in the lives of African Americans. During Reconstruction, the expansion and prosperity of black churches stood as a symbol of black progress to naysayers who believed the emancipated slaves could not and would not be able to organize and become productive citizens. Church congregations also provided a support system against poverty and outside discrimination and gave hope to the masses that conditions would improve for the formally-enslaved population. Church-affiliated societies and youth groups



The Lord Is My Shepherd (detail), 1863, Eastman Johnson, oil on wood, Smithsonian American Art Museum

were created in order to support, instill, and enforce family values and religious ideals. Churches often provided blacks their first taste of civic independence. As self-governing institutions, their administration was tended to by their black parishioners, providing the opportunity for blacks to hold positions of leadership. Perhaps most importantly, churches served as educational institutions by encouraging literacy through the reading of the Bible.

The title of this artwork, *The Lord is My Shepherd*, references a phrase taken directly from the Bible in the **Book of Psalms**. Psalm 23 draws an analogy between a shepherd and his flock of sheep to God and his children, mankind. Eastman Johnson cleverly converts the phrase for use in a contemporary context, suggesting that God, or more likely the Union, will lead the enslaved population out of bondage. This is the likeliest meaning of the picture, but it receives the least attention.

Another theory proposes that perhaps the man is not reading from Psalms, which occurs in the middle of the Bible. Instead, he may be reading a passage from the front of the Bible where one finds the **Book of Exodus** with its powerful message, “let my people go.” Union soldier A.B. Randall reported in 1865 that "The Colord [*sic*] People here, generally consider, this war not only; their exodus, from bondage; but the road, to Responsibility; Competency; and honorable Citizenship." That Randall chooses to use the word *exodus* tells us that the parallel between the plight of the enslaved black population and that of the Jews in Egypt was a common, well-known reference. Indeed, parallels can be drawn between Biblical figures and contemporary figures; Pharaoh and Southern plantation overseers, Moses and abolitionist leaders like **Sojourner Truth**, Frederick Douglass, and **Harriet Tubman**.

Relation to the Artwork

Following the cleaning and conservation of *The Lord is My Shepherd*, it was revealed that the blanket the man sits on is blue in color, which makes it possible that the blanket is a United States Army-issued blanket. A resulting theory proposes that this man could be “contraband,” a slave who escaped to the North and became allied with the Union army. These slaves were often taught to read by Union soldiers and they in turn taught other slaves to read. The man could also be representative of one of the first members of the United States Colored Troops,

an all-black regiment of the Union army formed in 1863, which is the same year this artwork was painted. Regardless of the man's status, to quote American Art museum curator Eleanor Jones Harvey, "the idea of determination, of initiative . . . the idea of taking your future into your own hands becomes a central part of Eastman Johnson's narrative of the American Civil War."

Glossary

Alabama Slave Code of 1833: slave codes (like the 1833 Alabama code) were sets of laws that restricted aspects of slaves' lives to various degrees depending on the state. These codes controlled slave travel, marriage, education, and employment. They also set rights for slave owners.

Book of Exodus: the second book of the Old Testament of the Bible, Exodus describes the plight of the Israelites and their subsequent flight out of Egypt, led by Moses. This story drew comparisons to the plight of African American slaves in the nineteenth century.

Book of Psalms: a compilation of songs, poems, lyrics, and prayers in the Bible. The subject matter centers on episodes of Israel's history.

Frederick Douglass: (1818-1895) a former slave himself, Douglass was an African American social reformer, abolitionist, writer, and statesman.

Harriet Tubman: (1822-1913) a former slave, she was an African American abolitionist and social reformer. Best known for her association with the Underground Railroad, through which she helped nearly seventy friends and family escape slavery.

Sojourner Truth: (1797-1883) a former slave, she was an African American abolitionist and women's rights advocate. She is best known for her speech, "Ain't I a Woman?," which she delivered at a women's convention in 1851. During the Civil War she recruited black soldiers for the Union Army and collected supplies for the troops.