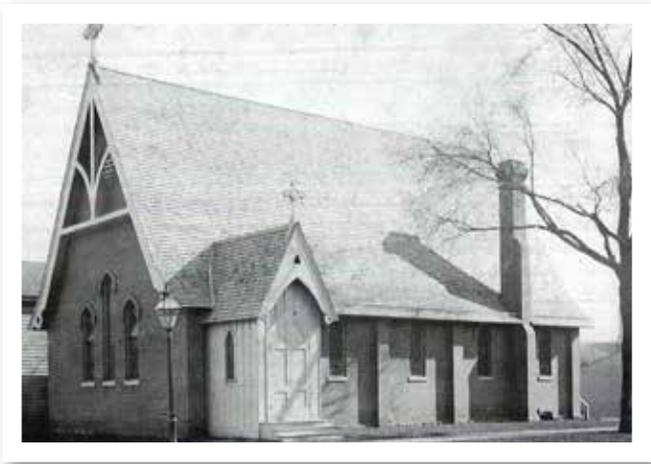


Where
the past
is present

DETROIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

TEACHER RESOURCE LESSON PLAN

THE THORNTON BLACKBURN AFFAIR



St. Matthew's Episcopal Church

Courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library

INTRODUCTION

This lesson was originally published in *Telling Detroit's Story: Historic Past, Proud People, Shining Future* curriculum unit developed by the Detroit 300 Commission in 2001.

Students in grades six through eight will gain an understanding of the Fugitive Slave Laws and the resulting "Black Codes" in Michigan Territory prior to the Civil War. They will explore the Thornton Blackburn Affair and the issues of civil rights.

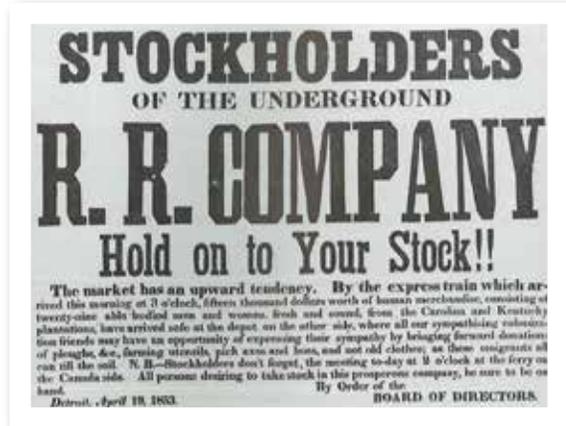
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Understand provisions of Fugitive Slave Laws.
- Understand the conditions of servitude in the South in the early 1830s.
- Understand that more can be accomplished by having supporters.
- Develop empathy and concern for others by researching a historical event.

BACKGROUND ESSAY

Most enslaved people lived without freedom in the South. Some of them worked in the cotton and rice fields before dawn and often continued long after the sun went down. A few had dreams of escaping to the North and freedom. The Blackburn family made the decision to do so and were confronted with many hardships and dangerous situations, threatening their lives. Nevertheless, they were determined to live in freedom, and were willing to sacrifice their lives for what they believed to be just, fair, and humane. They were aided by sympathetic friends who also demonstrated fortitude and believed in justice and fairness.



1853 Detroit Underground Railroad Broadside

Courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library

For more information about the
Detroit Historical Society,
or to schedule a field trip to the
Detroit Historical Museum or
Dossin Great Lakes Museum,
visit detroithistorical.org

LESSON PLAN: THE THORNTON BLACKBURN AFFAIR

MATERIALS USED

- Reading: “The Thornton Blackburn Affair”
- Reading: “Fugitive Slave Law Provisions”

LESSON SEQUENCE

Opening the Activity:

1. Have students read about the life of enslaved people on the plantation in the South during the early 1800s in the social studies textbook and other sources.
2. Class discussion:
 - What kind of work were enslaved men expected to do?
 - What kind of work were enslaved women and children expected to do?
 - How were they paid?
 - Who took care of their children?
 - Where and how did they live?
 - Do you think they dreamed of freedom? Why?
3. Discuss the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law:
 - How did the provisions engender fears among the enslaved?
 - How does this law deny African Americans the fundamental American democratic values, such as life, liberty, justice, and equality?
 - Discuss how a few of the Northerners felt about this law.

Developing the Activity

1. Ask students to read “The Thornton Blackburn Affair.” Distribute copies of this article to each student.
2. Class Discussion:
 - Why did the Blackburns come to Detroit?
 - What happened when they got here?
 - What were the “Black Codes?”
 - How did they finally escape to Canada and freedom?
 - Who was determined that they remain enslaved? Why?
 - Who helped them flee to freedom? Why?
3. Have students list all of the people who were involved in the “Blackburn Affair,” such as Mrs.

and Mr. Blackburn, the sheriff and others. Have students describe each of the persons and what they did during the “Affair” and why.

4. After describing the roles, Lead a discussion about each person’s point of view.
 - Did they show fear?
 - Did they show deep commitment to freedom?
 - Did they show how deeply the “master” felt about his “personal property”?
5. Discuss how one would feel and what one would do in a similar situation as any of the persons in the “Blackburn Affair.” Also, discuss core democratic values which are involved.

Concluding the Activity

1. Class discussion: Who were other African Americans who have displayed courage and bravery in attaining the commitment to the values of justice and freedom?
2. Have students volunteer to report on the accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Ralph Bunche, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and others.
3. Present a situation to the students and ask them to discuss how they would have reacted, what role they would have played, and why? Example: A classmate is being denied the opportunity to swim at the local public swimming pool.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Have the students study the “Black Codes” and how they limited citizenship for African Americans. Study the political, social, and economic conditions in the United States during the first half of the 1800s.

ASSESSING THE LEARNING

- Assign students to write a well-organized paper discussing at least two core democratic values which were involved in the “Blackburn Affair.”

READING: THE THORNTON BLACKBURN AFFAIR

“Black Codes” were laws enacted by states to limit African Americans from participating in the full privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. These laws generally prohibited African Americans from voting, attending schools with whites, entering and using public facilities such as hotels, theaters, and restaurants, and in some cases it forced them to post a bond with the local government to insure good behavior and to guard against indigence.

On April 13, 1827, a Michigan law was passed which required all “black people” to register at the county clerk’s office after May 1, 1827. Those who did not have their “free papers” would not be permitted to reside in the territory of Michigan. Many people merely crossed the river and entered Canada. This restrictive law of 1827 did not stop African Americans from coming to Detroit on their way to Canada. Since the law of 1827 was never strictly enforced, many stayed. Whenever their qualifications for residence were too closely checked, they merely crossed the river. One of those couples was Mr. and Mrs. Thornton Blackburn.

In 1831, Thornton Blackburn and his wife escaped enslavement in Louisville, Kentucky and fled to freedom in Detroit, Michigan. They became welcome and well-liked members of the African American community of Detroit. In 1833, the Blackburns were arrested and placed in jail for violating the Fugitive Slave Law of 1783 by their “master,” who had tracked them to Michigan. The Blackburns believed that they could live in Michigan if they paid \$500.00 for “free papers” or they could escape to Canada if there was ever a problem.

The Blackburns were set to sail on the ship *Ohio* on a Monday. On Sunday, two African American ladies, Mrs. Madison Lightfoot and Mrs. George French visited Mrs. Blackburn in the city jail. Mrs. Blackburn exchanged clothes with Mrs. French and was taken in this disguise across the Detroit River into Amherstburg, Ontario. When Sherriff Wilson discovered

the hoax, Mrs. French was threatened with permanently taking Mrs. Blackburn’s place, which entailed being taken back to Kentucky and sold into slavery to compensate for the loss of one female slave. Later that day, Mrs. French was allowed to leave the jail.

The following day, when Mr. Blackburn was to leave the jail to be returned to slavery, a group of African Americans gathered outside of the jail to protest. As the sheriff, deputy, slave owner, and Mr. Blackburn approached the prison coach, the crowd got closer and closer. Blackburn asked to speak to the group in order to ease their fears and diffuse their anger. As the group moved closer, someone gave Blackburn a pistol that he pointed at the sheriff, deputy, and slave owner. He ran into the prison coach and locked himself in. Blackburn promised to kill whoever tried to recapture him.

In the confusion that followed, Blackburn was slipped from the coach by Sleepy Polly and Daddy Walker (local citizens) and whisked away to Canada. An unknown assailant fatally wounded Sheriff Wilson.

While Blackburn escaped, a full-scale riot was in progress. Those persons involved were fined and sentenced to work on the street repair gang. Mr. Lightfoot was jailed for slipping the gun to Blackburn. Mr. and Mrs. French fled to Canada.

Many African Americans who had not been involved in the incident planned to march to protest mob brutality and various injustices. Mayor Chapin issued a proclamation that silenced the planners and demonstration. The proclamation stated that all African Americans that could not prove their freedom would be expelled. There was an exodus to Canada of African Americans.

Excerpts and information taken from Detroit Perspectives: Crossroads and Talking Points by Norman McRae

READING: FUGITIVE SLAVE LAWS PROVISIONS

INFORMATION ABOUT FUGITIVE SLAVE LAWS

February 1793: Congress enacts a Fugitive Slave Act, mandating the right of a slave owner to recover a runaway slave. This bill implements the provisions of Article IV, Section 2 of the Constitution by establishing the mechanism for the recovery of fugitive slaves.

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 placed authority over all runaway slave cases with the federal government. Federal officers could issue warrants for the arrest of runaway slaves. When the slaves were found, they were to be returned to their owners. Under the law, only an owner's word was needed to prove a black person was a slave, and any black person's claim to freedom could be challenged according to law. Federal courts could fine or imprison a person convicted of aiding a runaway slave.

The Fugitive Slave Law said, in part, "When a person held to (slavery) in any part of the United State...shall escape...the master...is hereby empowered to arrest such fugitive...and to remove the fugitive...to the state or territory from which he or she fled."