

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Document Based Activity

Part 5: New Times New Troubles

MISSION 2: "Flight to Freedom"

Caution! Colored People of Boston

In the course of your study of the 19th century, your students have probably learned about the debates in Congress over the extension of slavery into new states and territories, the Compromise of 1850 and perhaps the more local attempts in free states to prevent the extension of slavery by passing "personal liberty laws." Those laws varied from place to place, but they attempted to protect free black people as well as runaways from being kidnapped, to give blacks accused of being runaways legal rights, and to keep slaveholders who were traveling from bringing enslaved people into free states.

Local legal battles and the problems of fugitive slaves and kidnapping, especially along the Border States, intensified with the Compromise of 1850. That mega-deal, made to appease the North and the South, included provisions admitting California as a free state, allowed slavery to continue in Washington, DC, and beefed up Article 4 Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, which required that escaped slaves "shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due." That last provision came with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, which levied a \$1,000 fine on any federal or local official who did not arrest an alleged runaway slave. People aiding runaways faced a half year in jail and a \$1,000 fine. Accused runaways were not entitled to a trial.

This handbill is one of the most famous images in American history. It was written and circulated by Unitarian clergyman Theodore Parker, the head of the Boston Vigilance Committee, an abolitionist group that agitated in a variety of ways in an attempt to disturb the operation of the slavery system and to undermine support of it by both legal and illegal means.

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A Note to the Educator

As with the other "Flight to Freedom" Document Based Activities, you might wish to share the handbill and the following questions with your students, and then give them some time to read and answer them, independently or in small groups, before you begin full-class discussion.

Questions about the handbill:

- When was the handbill written? What might it have to do with the Compromise of 1850? *(It was written in 1851, months after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, a provision of the Compromise of 1850. That law made it even less safe to be a fugitive slave anywhere in the United States by making it illegal to give aid to runaways. It required federal and local officials to take alleged fugitives into custody and to participate in their return to the slaveholders from whom they had escaped.)*
- Can you tell whether the text of the poster is a warning to the "colored people of Boston" or a threat? *(It is a warning.)*
- What words tell you that? Make a list of the words and phrases that prove your point-of-view *(Black people are "cautioned" and "advised"; they are being told that watchmen and police officers are now empowered to kidnap them; they are told to avoid them--"shun them in every possible manner"--and be watchful--"Keep a Sharp Look Out").*
- Who might have posted such a handbill? *(Abolitionists or some other people who opposed slavery.)*

Other questions for discussion:

- If you had been a freedman or a fugitive from slavery living in Boston who never had been enslaved, how might you have responded to the Fugitive Slave Law? *(It might have made you feel less safe and more vulnerable to slave catchers and even to local police or other officials.)*
- If you were a white person who may have helped a runaway before, and you became aware that you yourself would be punished for helping a fugitive, what might you do? *(Depending on the strength of your convictions, you might continue to help fugitives or you might decide not to help anymore.)*
- Personal liberty laws, at least to an extent, reflected the sentiments of the people who lived in a particular state, while the Fugitive Slave Act made it a criminal offense to give aid to fugitive slaves in any state. Is giving aid to a runaway a matter that should have been left to states to decide? Why or why not? *(Whether a state was "free" or "slave" was*

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something that had been determined either by the people who lived in a state or by the terms of a compromise that was supposed to ensure a balance between slave and free states. Using similar reasoning, one could either argue that it should have been left to the states, as slavery originally was, or that it was a matter that had to be decided for the whole country, as the Compromise of 1850 did. Understandably but interestingly, slaveholders who believed that it should be up to states to decide on slavery did not feel that way about whether or not to have the right to extradite their runaways from free states.)

Legality Versus Morality

While a more detailed examination of the arguments for and against slavery will be taken up in Part 4 of "Flight to Freedom," it may make sense to introduce here the concept of *legality versus morality*. In essence, people who supported the new law were saying that regardless of one's sympathies, one must abide by the law of the land. Those opposed to slavery and who were willing to defy the new law were saying that there is a higher, moral law, which takes precedence over statutory law.

Students have most likely encountered this idea in their own lives or in current events, and so looking at the handbill and talking about it with your students presents a wonderful opportunity for them to discuss the important understandings and the complexities these questions may help them articulate. The discussion could serve as an introduction to the document or as a follow-up, and questions related to this topic will appear as writing prompts for this section. Here they are with some suggested responses:

- DOES LEGAL MEAN RIGHT? If something is legal, is it always right or ethical? Can you think of things that are legal, but that aren't right? (Some students may feel the consumption of alcohol or tobacco are not right because they are unhealthy or pose a threat to others. Others may suggest that it is wrong to waste tremendous amounts of potentially recyclable materials, or to pollute the air with cars that are inefficient, but that those things are legal. Your students may be ready to discuss more complex and controversial issues, such as abortion, as well. Entertain any and all suggestions you feel are appropriate for your group to discuss.)
- DOES ILLEGAL MEAN WRONG? If something is illegal, is it always wrong? Can you think of things that are illegal, but that may be morally right? (Students may feel that people should have the legal right to end their lives if they are terminally ill. Others may

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feel that medical use of marijuana should be legal. Again, use your best judgment about your class to determine what is appropriate for discussion.)

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