

GEORGE MOSES HORTON: SLAVERY FROM A POET'S PERSPECTIVE

TEACHER TOOL 4

This Teacher Tool contains information to support the PDF slide show. Use these notes as a lecture reference.

Slide 1: *George Moses Horton, the Bard of North Carolina*

Lecture Notes

Tell students that throughout the introduction to George Moses Horton, you want them to think about how individuals can recognize their natural talents, overcome obstacles, and create opportunities and to use their talents to earn a living.

Slide 2: *George Moses Horton: An Overview*

Lecture Notes

For over six decades, George Moses Horton lived in slavery yet obtained virtual freedom through the sale of his poetry in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He earned enough money through the sale of his poetry that he escaped the drudgery of supervised manual labor. Horton was the first slave to publish anti-slavery poetry, to publish a book of poetry, to create a book of poetry before he could write, and to earn a living as a poet. He crafted far more independence than the laws of North Carolina intended for any slave to obtain. Horton's poetic efforts and intellect earned him benefactors from the college faculty and president at UNC Chapel Hill, the North Carolina Governor's office, newspaper editors in North Carolina and the northern United States, and finally a Union officer. Horton accomplished all of this in an era when it was illegal for slaves to learn to read and write, white society believed that African Americans were inferior, and laws throughout the entire United States limited the rights of blacks.

On the Slide

The image on the slide is the hand of a black man cuffed in a chain and using a plume to write.

Slide 3: *Facing Obstacles*

Lecture Notes

Horton's owner had a dairy farm in North Carolina and the enslaved George Moses tended the cows. As a slave, George Moses had very little free time and few resources. He wished to learn to read and write and made great sacrifices to teach himself. He gave up meals, worked during infrequent breaks, used tattered spellers, endured taunting from his peers, and, having no candle or lamp, he inhaled smoke while working by the light of a fire. His sacrifices demonstrate his commitment to becoming literate despite great challenges.

On the Slide

The slide presents the following three quotes from Horton's *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, The Colored Bard of North-Carolina. To Which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*:

- "being nothing but a poor cow-boy, I had but little or no thought of ever being able to read or spell one word or sentence in any book whatever." (iv)

- "At length I took resolution to learn the alphabet at all events; and lighting by chance at times with some opportunities of being in the presence of school children, I learnt the letters by heart; and fortunately afterwards got hold of some old parts of spelling books abounding with these elements" (iv)
- "A number strove to dissuade me from my plan, and had the presumption to tell me that I was a vain fool to attempt learning to read with as little chance as I had." (vi)

Slide 4: Using a Speller

Lecture Notes

A tattered old speller is one of the resources that George Moses Horton used to teach himself to read. Spelling books, or spellers, served as textbooks for children learning to read in the early nineteenth century.

On the Slide

The image on this slide is of two pages of a nineteenth-century copy of *The American Spelling Book* by Noah Webster. The right page describes the differences between a good boy and a bad boy, emphasizing the moral component of education during this period. The following is a reproduction of what appears on the right page of the speller in its entirety:

Table XLII. The description of a good boy. A good boy is dutiful to his father and mother, obedient to his master, and loving to all his play fellows. He is diligent in learning his book, and takes pleasure in improving himself in every thing that is worthy of praise. He rises early in the morning, makes himself clean and decent, and says his prayers. If he has done a fault, he confesses it, and is sorry for it; and scorns to tell a lie, though he might by that means conceal it. He loves to hear good advice, is thankful to those that give it him, and always follows it. He never swears, nor calls names, nor uses any ill words to his companions. He is never peevish and fretful, but always good humored. He scorns to steal [*sic*] or pilfer any thing from his play fellows; and would rather suffer wrong than do wrong to any of them. He is always ready to answer when he is asked a question, to do what he is bid, and to mind what is said to him. He is not a wrangler, nor quarrelsome, and keeps himself out of all kinds of mischief, which other boys run into. By this means he becomes, as he grows up, a man of sense and virtue; he is beloved and respected by all that know him; he lives in the world with credit and reputation, and when he dies is lamented by all his acquaintance.

Table XLIII. *The description of a bad boy.* A bad boy is undutiful to his father and mother, disobedient and stubborn to his master, and illnatured to all his play fellows. He hates his book, and takes no pleasure in improving himself in any thing. He is sleepy and slothful in the morning, too lazy to clean himself, and too wicked to say his prayers. He is always in mischief, and when he has done a fault, will tell twenty lies in hopes to clear himself, which is only making bad worse. He hates that any body should give him god advice, and when they are out of sight will laugh at them. He swears and wrangles, and quarrels with his companions, and is always in some dispute or other. He will steal whatsoever comes in his way; and if he is not caught, thinks it no crime, not considering that God sees whatsoever he does. He is frequently out of humour, and sullen and obstinate, so that he will neither do what he is bid, nor answer a question that is asked him. In short, he neglects every thing that he should learn, and minds nothing but play or mischief; by which means he becomes, as he grows up, a confirmed blockhead, incapable of any thing but wickedness or folly, despised by all men of sense and virtue, and generally dies a beggar.

Slide 5: Developing Poetry Skills While Tending Cows

Lecture Notes

Horton quickly realized that he had an affinity for poetry. He started to compose and memorize poems based on the Bible and the Wesley hymnal before he could write. Since Horton was a slave, he had to memorize the poems that he composed while plowing and tending dairy cattle.

On the Slide

The slide presents an image of dairy cows and the following quote from Horton's *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, The Colored Bard of North-Carolina. To Which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself*:

"At length I began to wonder whether it was possible that I ever could be so fortunate as to compose in that manner. I fell to work in my head, and composed several undigested pieces, which I retained in my mind, for I knew nothing about writing with a pen" (viii)

Slide 6: The Colored Bard of North Carolina

Lecture Notes

Horton walked eight miles each way from James Horton's farm to Chapel Hill to sell his own and his owner's produce in the farmer's market near UNC Chapel Hill. While in Chapel Hill, Horton got to know students and faculty members from the University. UNC students often asked the slaves who were selling produce at the farmer's market to deliver orations. George Moses Horton was not skilled at oration and one day delivered a poem instead, noting that it was his own. The students did not immediately believe him and asked that he compose an acrostic poem using the letters of a name to demonstrate proof of his ability. He composed the poem, memorizing it as he went. After having a student write it down, he delivered the acrostic poem to the surprised students.

Students began commissioning poetical works by Horton, who was then about 20 years old. They asked him to write acrostic poems using the letters of their sweethearts' names. Horton sold his acrostic love poems for 25 cents a piece or 50 cents for especially romantic poems. He memorized these poems and dictated them to a student who would write them down for him. In addition to paying him for his work, students began giving Horton dictionaries and works by such authors as Milton, Homer, Virgil, Byron, and Shakespeare, which allowed him to continue his literary development.

By the 1830s, George Moses Horton's owner allowed him to hire out his time. This enabled Horton to live in Chapel Hill and sell poems and give part of the money to his owner instead of working on the dairy farm. He paid his owner \$90 a year, which is the equivalent of over \$20,000 by today's measure, through the sale of his poems. Horton was still enslaved at this time, but through his skill, hard work, and commitment, he was able to create more personal freedom in his life.

On the Slide

This slide shows a still image of an actor portraying George Moses Horton from the short video, "George Moses Horton, Poet Entrepreneur."

Slide 7: A Published Poet

Lecture Notes

George Moses Horton holds a unique place in history. He was the first slave poet of the South; the first southern black man to have his poetry published; the country's first black professional man of letters who earned his living from writing; and his was the first clear black outcry against slavery in poetic form. Horton accomplished all of these firsts at a time when slaves were prohibited by law to be taught to read or write. Horton published three volumes of poetry: *The Hope of Liberty* (1829), *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina, To Which is Prefixed The Life of the Author, Written by Himself* (1845), and *Naked Genius* (1865). *The Hope of Liberty* covers the themes of flight, the savior, love, death, rural beauty and seasons, and liberty versus slavery. *The Poetical Works of George Moses Horton*, features the same themes again with the addition of college life, historical events, itches, heaven, debtors, and dogs, but not slavery. Horton wrote *Naked Genius* while traveling as a free man with the Union Army.

On the Slide

This slide presents the cover of Horton's 1829 collection of poems titled, *The Hope of Liberty*.

Slide 8: Gaining Supporters and a Prestigious Invitation

Lecture Notes

George Moses Horton was able to impress not only UNC Chapel Hill students, but also gained the support of the college faculty and its president with his eloquence on a variety of subjects. It is remarkable that even as laws forbade enslaved people from hiring themselves out, Horton lived independently in Chapel Hill, providing services for students there. Horton won the favor of a UNC faculty member and his literary wife, Caroline Lee Hentz. Caroline Hentz helped Horton with his poetry, made efforts to get his work published, assisted him in learning to write, and, together with other of his supporters, worked to get him freed. Even the Governor of North Carolina was involved in the efforts to purchase George Moses Horton's freedom (although, at the time, Horton's owner was unwilling to sell him). Horton also befriended a Union Army captain, who went on to work with Horton on another poetry project.

In 1859, George Moses Horton was asked to deliver an address to the freshmen class of UNC Chapel Hill. He gave a 29-page speech, titled "An Address. The Stream of Liberty and Science..." in Gerrard Hall on campus. This invitation to speak before an incoming freshmen class at a prestigious university was remarkable considering that Horton was technically still enslaved. It is illustrative of his ability to make connections and to operate successfully in more than one arena.

On the Slide

The slide presents an image of the outside of Gerrard Hall during the nineteenth century.

Slide 9: The Legacy of a Slave Poet/Entrepreneur

Lecture Notes

After the Civil War, Horton moved to Philadelphia. He made a modest living writing for churches and serving in the homes of former acquaintances from North Carolina. He moved to Philadelphia in 1866 and may have migrated to Liberia. Little of his life is known from then until

his death around the mid-1880s. Horton's accomplishments are especially noteworthy because he was a slave with few resources beyond his own will. He overcame great obstacles in learning to read and write and in developing his skills as a poet. Horton persisted in making acquaintances (including even white slave owners) that he believed would assist him in gaining his freedom throughout his adult life. He exploited his owner's desire for wealth by paying him a high percentage of his poetry sales to gain a large degree of control over his life. Horton contained his frustrations about being a slave even as attempt after attempt failed to secure his independence. He did not allow his anguish regarding slavery to interfere with his artistic expression and ability to demonstrate the genius of African Americans. The conduct of his life makes him a powerful example of how stereotypes can be defeated and what any American can accomplish. Today, UNC Chapel Hill has named a dormitory for him in recognition of the contributions he made to campus life in the antebellum period.

On the Slide

The slide presents an image of Horton Hall, dedicated on the UNC Chapel Hill campus in 2002.

Slides 10 and 11: "Slavery"

Lecture Notes

This poem is from George Moses Horton's 1865 collection of poems titled, *Naked Genius*.

On the Slide

This slide presents the poem "Slavery." Read the poem aloud to your class and use Teacher Tool 5 to assist with the poetry analysis.