

Enslaved Business Owners: Lunsford Lane, Enslaved Tobacconist and Elizabeth Keckly, Enslaved Dressmaker

Introduction

Lunsford Lane was an enslaved tobacconist who lived in antebellum Raleigh, North Carolina. Elizabeth Keckly* was an enslaved dressmaker who attained her freedom and grew to prominence as the fashion designer of first lady, Mary Todd Lincoln. Students may be surprised to learn there were slaves who operated businesses usually on the condition that they regularly pay a rent to their owner. In *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane Formerly of Raleigh, NC...Published By Himself*, the tobacconist explains how while still a slave, he came to manufacture and distribute a uniquely flavored tobacco product and pipes for smoking it. Elizabeth Keckly, in her slave narrative, explains how she started a dressmaking business in St. Louis in order to support her master's household of seventeen people, because her master's earnings were insufficient. Lane and Keckly's experiences are different in the specifics, yet they share several over-arching themes and a common story line: both figures were talented and motivated individuals who were allowed to start their own businesses as slaves due to their masters' urgent need of funds. Through their earnings and/or business contacts they managed to purchase their own freedom and that of family member/s. They both exhibited exceptional "self-agency," the ability to plan and think independently and work toward the accomplishment of their own goals.

* Often the surname is spelled: "Keckley." However Elizabeth Keckly herself spelled her surname without the second "e" so we honor her own spelling of her name.

Guiding Questions

- 1) What do enslaved business owners tell us about the human will to succeed in the face of enormous obstacles?
- 2) How common do you think self-agency was among the enslaved?

Learning Objectives

- 1) Compare and contrast the enslaved business experiences of Keckly and Lane and especially the circumstances that led each to their enslaved business endeavors.
- 2) Describe the incidents that enabled each figure to purchase their own freedom.
- 3) Explain in your own words and describe examples of Keckly's and Lane's self-agency.

College and Career Readiness Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Background

African Americans have always been deeply involved in the American economy since the early colonial period. While the term "enslaved business owner" may seem like a contradiction in terms, some slaves were allowed to have their own businesses on the condition they paid their masters a regular rent for this privilege. Enslaved businesses came about because some slave owners found it to be more lucrative, or simply more convenient to allow an industrious slave to find their own customers, draw up their own contracts, and collect their own fees for their services or products. Letting a slave "self-hire" and start a business often occurred when the owner had an urgent need for money. The major motivation for the enslaved person to start a business was the desire to accumulate money to buy one's own and one's family's freedom. Enslaved business men and women usually lived in towns or urban areas where there was a large enough customer base to support small enslaved businesses such as laundries, produce stalls, artisanal shops or other such enterprises.

In addition to having to pay their owners a regular fee, the enslaved business person could move around "freely", draw up contracts and "wheel and deal" as they pleased. Yet, they could never feel totally at ease, because it was technically illegal for slaves to be allowed to self-hire and start their own business. In an instant, all of their savings could be demanded by their masters, their business could be terminated, or they could be sold away.

Enslaved business people needed to be highly skilled in how they presented themselves "in public" to their owners and to their clients. Lane and Keckly were individuals who possessed great "self-agency" meaning that although enslaved, they felt empowered to make their own decisions and to take action to improve their circumstances. Yet Lane and Keckly knew their self-agency could be threatening to the master class so they masked it. One way of masking self-agency was pretending to *not* have any. Lane did this by dressing shabbily to appear impoverished even though he was accumulating considerable savings. Another way of masking one's self-agency was by demonstrating to the master class one's subservience and "inability" to act independently without the full consent of the master. Whenever Keckly describes interactions with her master or mistress, she was always very deferential to their authority even though her owners were dependent on her income to keep their household afloat! Reinforcing the master class's illusion that it had total control and dominance over their slave "property" was a common technique the enslaved used to mask individuality and self-agency.

Preparation and Resources

- 1) Review the "Brief Biography of Elizabeth Keckly."
- 2) Review the "Brief Biography of Lunsford Lane."
- 3) View the short video, "Enslaved Entrepreneurship" featuring historian, Dr. Juliet E.K. Walker, a leading scholar of black business history.
- 4) Review "Excerpt from the Slave Narrative of Elizabeth Keckly."
- 5) Review "Excerpt from the Slave Narrative of Lunsford Lane."
- 6) Review "Comparing the Enslaved Businesses of Lane and Keckly" and "Comparing the Enslaved Businesses of Lane and Keckly, Teacher Version." These documents ask students to compare and contrast the enslaved businesses of Lane and Keckly. The teacher version presents answers.
- 7) Review "Comparing the Self-Agency of Lane and Keckly" and "Comparing the Self-

Agency of Lane and Keckly, Teacher Version.” These documents ask students to compare and contrast the self-agency of Lane and Keckly.

Activities

Activity 1. Comparing and Contrasting Lane and Keckly: How they became enslaved business people, and how they purchased their freedom.

- 1) Ask students: "Who comes to mind when you hear 'African-American business person'?" Students may mention famous black business figures today such as corporate executives or sports moguls. Some may name celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, a powerful woman in the entertainment and publishing business. You may also wish to Google "black business people" and use the information found to introduce African American business people in your state or region.
- 2) Refer to the "Background" in this lesson plan; explain that African Americans have a long history of economic and business involvement in America. Explain that there were even enslaved people who operated small businesses. Since it was illegal for blacks to have their own businesses there is not very much information available about enslaved business owners, but through "slave narratives" we have some case histories. The two presented in this lesson are: Lunsford Lane and Elizabeth Keckly.
- 3) Show the short video, "Enslaved Entrepreneurship."
- 4) Provide a brief overview of Lunsford Lane and Elizabeth Keckly using the information in the "Brief Biography of Elizabeth Keckly" and "Brief Biography of Lunsford Lane."
- 5) Distribute "Excerpt from the Slave Narrative of Lunsford Lane" and "Excerpt from the Slave Narrative of Elizabeth Keckly."
- 6) Divide the class into groups of 6-8 students and distribute "Comparing the Enslaved Businesses of Lane and Keckly."
- 7) Ask each of the small groups read to subdivide into two smaller groups. One of the subgroups reads the excerpt from the Lane narrative; the other reads the excerpt from the Keckly narrative.
- 8) When the subgroups finish reading their assigned excerpt they should respond to the questions in "Comparing the Enslaved Businesses of Lane and Keckly."
- 9) Once each subgroup has completed the questions for one individual, they should return to their small group and discuss the similarities and differences between how Lane and Keckly had become business people while still enslaved and how they managed to acquire their freedom.
- 10) Once each small group has completed their discussion, all groups return to the large group. Discuss the comparison using "Comparing the Enslaved Businesses of Lane and Keckly, Teacher Version."

Activity 2. Comparing the Self-Agency of Lane and Keckly

- 1) Explain to students that *self-agency* refers to the ability of a person to make his or her own decisions and to take control of his/her own life. Both Lane and Keckly, although enslaved and technically the property of their masters, had self agency: they could set goals and successfully work toward achieving them; they could make decisions and follow-through on their decisions with actions; and they could persevere and work hard

in the face of despair and enormous obstacles. It was their "self-agency" that ultimately enabled both Keckly and Lane to gain their freedom and that of their family.

- 2) Divide the class into small groups of 6-8 students.
- 3) Distribute "Comparing the Self-Agency of Lane and Keckly."
- 4) Tell students that they will be using the excerpts from the slave narratives again.
- 5) Ask each of the small groups to subdivide into two smaller groups. One of the subgroups reads the excerpt from the Lane narrative, the other reads the excerpt from the Keckly narrative.
- 6) When the subgroups finish reading their assigned excerpt they should respond to the questions on the worksheet for either Lane or Keckly.
- 7) Once each subgroup has completed the questions, they should return to their small group and discuss the similarities and differences between how Lane and Keckly demonstrated self-agency and how they masked their self-agency.
- 8) Once each small group has completed the discussion, all groups return to the large group. Discuss the comparison using "Comparing the Self-Agency of Lane and Keckly, Teacher Version."
- 9) As an assessment, ask students to write a two-page essay comparing and contrasting how Lane and Keckly demonstrated self-agency and how they masked or hid their self-agency from their masters.

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