

Lunsford Lane and Enslaved Entrepreneurship

Introduction

Lunsford Lane was an enslaved entrepreneur who lived in Raleigh, North Carolina in the decades before the Civil War. Lane created several money-making enterprises while enslaved. In one especially successful business, Lane, with the help of his father, originated, branded, packaged, and distributed a flavored smoking tobacco product throughout North Carolina. Harvard Business School defines entrepreneurship as "the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources controlled." This lesson aims to teach students how Lane exemplifies "entrepreneurship," as well as to point out the additional demands he faced as a businessman who legally was the property of someone else. Enslaved entrepreneurs used their earnings not only to sustain and grow their businesses, but also to purchase their own and their family members' freedom. They also had to pay their masters a "rent" on a regular basis. Despite these challenges, many slaves capitalized on the opportunity to "hire their own time" and some became independent entrepreneurs. Lane is one of the best-known entrepreneurial slaves because he described his experiences in his slave narrative, providing a rare lens into this little-known chapter of slavery.

Guiding Questions

- 1) What do enslaved entrepreneurs tell us about the human will to succeed in the face of major obstacles?
- 2) Why do some people develop a sense of self-agency even through they are in very restrictive circumstances, yet some people do not?

Learning Outcomes

- 1) When given examples of activities of Lunsford Lane, explain how they exemplify features of entrepreneurship as defined in this lesson.
- 2) Closely read a short segment of Lunsford Lane's narrative and translate the segment into easy-to-understand everyday, contemporary English.
- 3) Define terms and expressions used in this lesson such as: *entrepreneurship*, *virtual freedom*, *self-agency*, *enslaved entrepreneur*, *"making a way where there is no way"*; *hiring out*; *hiring one's own time*; and *self-hiring*.

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.W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Background

The economic activities of Africans in the new world were a continuation of their heritage in west and Central Africa where they were engaged for centuries in complex market economies and trade networks. Although their economic participation was restricted in America, they nonetheless sought opportunities to materially advance themselves. Some even started business

while they were enslaved and Lunsford Lane is an excellent case history of "the enslaved entrepreneur."

Colonial laws discouraged large-scale land ownership by non-Europeans, and access to credit and capital—the tools of capitalism—was impossible for most. Entrepreneurial slaves relied instead on their individual skill, personal relationships, business savvy, and minimal capital outlay. Artisans had the majority of colonial and antebellum black businesses such as carpentry, cabinetmaking, seamstress work, basket-making, coopering, and pottery. Slaves were also frequently self-employed in areas like barbering, supplying and preparing food, and doing laundry; some built profitable businesses by supplying these services, sometimes hiring others to work for them.

The enslaved business person often got his or her start by being "hired out." In hiring out, the master drew up the contract, placed the slave in the job, and collected the salary for the hired slave's labor, sometimes allowing the person to keep a portion of his or her earnings. Some slaves managed to convince their masters to allow them to "self-hire." In self-hiring, the enslaved person found their own customers, drew up their own contracts, collected their own fees and paid the master regular "rent." Getting a regular rent with little to no effort was motivational to many owners. The motivation to self-hire for the slave was the chance to accumulate enough money to purchase oneself and one's family members. Yet it was at the discretion of the master to allow the slave to self-purchase and sometimes, even when enough money had been saved to cover the purchase price, the master would refuse.

"Self-hiring" became a common practice in many Southern cities as this statement from a group of disgruntled white businessmen in Charleston, South Carolina in 1858 attests:

slaves are permitted to go at large, exercising all the privileges of free persons, making contracts, doing work and in every way being and conducting themselves as if they were not slaves...whether the slave so working out on his own account is mechanic or handicraftsman, a stevedore, a laborer, a Porter, a drayman or anything else.

Despite resentment toward self-hiring and laws against it, the practice persisted throughout the slavery era. This is because it was generally an economic win-win for all: the master no longer had to find work for his slave(s), but simply collected a regular payment; the enslaved person negotiated directly with the customer and was generally able to keep more of his/her earnings thereby enabling him/her to accumulate money faster with which to try to purchase his own and family members' freedom. Also, in self-hiring, the customer generally got a price break because slaves would often work for less than their white counterparts.

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

- 1) Review "Brief Biography of Lunsford Lane."
- 2) Review "Key Features of Enslaved Entrepreneurship."
- 3) Review "Excerpts from Lunsford Lane's Slave Narrative."
- 4) Review "Discussion Guide to Review the Excerpts."
- 5) Review "Activity 1 Assessment" and "Activity 1 Assessment Answer Sheet."
- 6) Review "Boyhood of Lunsford Lane, Excerpted from His Narrative."
- 7) Review "Activity 2 Assessment." The assessment for this activity is self-evident.

Activity 1. Analyzing Lunsford Lane's Entrepreneurship

- 1) Provide an overview of the life of Lunsford Lane using the “Brief Biography of Lunsford Lane.”
- 2) Distribute and discuss “Key Features of Enslaved Entrepreneurship.”
- 3) Break the class into four groups and assign each group an excerpt from Lunsford Lane’s narrative.
- 4) Ask each group to use close reading techniques and also to use the "Key Features of Enslaved Entrepreneurship" handout to analyze their excerpt by explaining how it relates to one or more features of entrepreneurship. Have each group appoint a leader to summarize the group's analysis of the excerpt and present a report to the whole group.
- 5) Use the “Discussion Guide to Review the Excerpts” when discussing as a class.
- 6) Distribute “Activity 1 Assessment” and ask students to complete it.
- 7) Use “Activity 1 Assessment Answer Sheet” to grade the assignment.

Activity 2. Creating a Children's History Story about Lunsford Lane's Childhood

- 1) Distribute “Boyhood of Lunsford Lane, Excerpted from His Narrative.”
- 2) Ask students write a one-two page paper about Lane's boyhood years in contemporary language at a level young children (4th grade) can understand.
- 3) Distribute “Activity 2 Assessment.” Ask students to complete the assessment.

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