

## OVERT AND COVERT: WILLIAM HENRY SINGLETON'S RESISTANCE TO SLAVERY

A LANGUAGE ARTS LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

### Overview

In this lesson, students will learn that enslaved people resisted their captivity constantly. Because they were living under the domination of their masters, slaves knew that direct, outright, *overt* resistance—like talking back to or hitting their master or running away—could result in being whipped, sold away from their families and friends, or even killed. Therefore, most enslaved people resisted their captivity in ways that were *covert* or concealed, masked, and hidden. However, the regular appearance of runaway slave advertisements in newspapers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is evidence that despite the dire consequences of being caught, many enslaved people took the risk of overt resistance through running away. William Henry Singleton was born into slavery in 1843 in New Bern, North Carolina and ran away from slavery several times. Once when he was only six or seven years old he ran all the way from Atlanta to the North Carolina plantation where his mother lived Singleton also resisted slavery by pretending to be ignorant, hiding, and assisting and serving in the Union Army. Through reading his narrative (or selected excerpts from it), students will learn that enslaved people did not passively accept their condition and will expand their understanding of slave resistance. Students will also reflect upon the techniques people use to resist injustice today.

### Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Discuss the various ways that bondsmen and women resisted slavery.
- Distinguish covert from overt ways of resisting.
- Provide details about the early life of William Henry Singleton.
- List and discuss the various ways that Singleton effectively resisted slavery.
- Describe Singleton's experience as a young boy running away from Georgia to North Carolina.
- Explain why covert slave resistance was so much more common than overt resistance.
- Discuss various ways that people can resist injustice today.

### Guiding Questions

What do William Henry Singleton's life experiences teach us about resistance to slavery? Why is it important to understand that there is more than one way to resist injustice? Is covert resistance more sustainable than overt? How does Singleton empower himself? What does it mean to help someone? How does one choose allies?

## Suggested Time

1-2 class periods

## Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. To learn about William Henry Singleton, read a brief biography in Teacher Tool 1.
2. Review the short video, *Boy Runaway*, which features an actor playing the role of William Henry Singleton as an old man describing his experience running away when he was a child.
3. Review the Digital History summary of Slave Resistance and Revolts at [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article\\_display.cfm?HHID=79](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=79). Review Teacher Tool 2, which provides an overview of various examples of slave resistance, exemplifying both overt and covert ways that slaves resisted.
4. In this lesson, you will show your students two or three examples of real runaway slave advertisements. Many of these primary sources have been digitized and are available via the Internet. Identify two or three ads that you think will be of particular interest to your students. You might, for example, choose ads from your home state or ads about children who ran away from slavery. You can conduct your own search or review the following websites which feature actual runaway slave advertisements:
  - <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?id=4418>
  - <http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page.cfm?id=4419>
  - [http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/browse/browse\\_main.php](http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/browse/browse_main.php)You may also choose to review the following site, which provides tips on how to teach using runaway slave advertisements:  
<http://www.ohiohistory.org/historyworksohio/classroom/activity.cfm?id=109>  
Decide if you wish to present the runaway slave ads to your students via projection or via printed photocopy and plan accordingly.
5. Consider how to address the topic of resistance as it relates to students' relationships and interactions with authority figures in their own lives. As a teacher, you will find some methods of resistance very familiar because students often use similar techniques in the classroom, like pretending to be sick, feigning ignorance of their assignments, or even more overt forms like not doing assigned work and challenging the teacher's authority. Since most students will naturally be familiar with resistant behavior, encourage them to think about *when* resistance is appropriate. It is important to convey that just because resistance to slavery is behavior we admire, it is not always appropriate to resist. It is self-destructive to resist people in authority, like parents, teachers, and coaches, if they are trying to help you improve your chances of success in life. People who are abusing their power or who are doing unjust or evil acts, on the other hand, should be resisted in overt ways, such as telling a trusted person about the abuse.
6. Review Student Handout 1, which contains the full text of Singleton's narrative with emphasis added to the passages that reveal numerous examples of resistance to slavery, such as running away, hiding, pretending to be ignorant, and assisting and serving in the Union Army. Teacher Tool 3 is the same as Student Handout 1, but identifies the different ways Singleton resisted next to the appropriate passages.
7. In this lesson, students will explore the long journey that Singleton made from Atlanta, Georgia to Wilmington, North Carolina and then on to New Bern, North Carolina when

he was only six or seven years of age. You can show them the distance between these places on a United States map in your classroom or have them find the distance themselves using MapQuest. If you decide to have students use MapQuest, they will need to type "New Bern" as two words instead of "Newbern" as in Singleton's narrative. The distance he traveled was a little over 500 miles.

8. Students often ask: Why didn't slaves just refuse to take it? Why didn't they rebel? To help students understand the answer to this, you might ask them if for every person on their side, there were 10 people on the other team, would it be a fair fight? Could your team be successful if you were so outnumbered? Explain that overt rebellion was not practical because those in authority were far more numerous, better armed, and better organized than insurgent groups of slaves. Slave insurrections were quickly put down and the rebels (and often other innocent people) were severely punished or killed in retaliation. Covert strategies of resistance were more sustainable and successful because they could be implemented without the instigator (or even the act of resistance itself) being detected, often for long periods of time.
9. Identify a short list of injustices of which your students are aware. These injustices can include things they are learning about in their social studies or language arts class, current events, or even things around your community or school. Examples of injustice include genocide, torture, and discrimination based on race, religion, gender, etc.
10. Review Student Handout 2, which presents an assignment for students to complete. Part A of the assignment asks students to identify the options that William Henry Singleton had to fight the injustice that he faced as a slave. They will then highlight one or more of the ways that Singleton actually chose to resist slavery and why it was effective. Part B of the assignment is for students to use one of the injustices that you identified and to write about some of the options for resisting, what they would actually choose to do, and why.

### **Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)**

1. Begin this lesson by asking questions that engage students in thinking about how enslaved people viewed their captivity. Ask students if they think enslaved people accepted their lack of freedom and the legality of their being considered the property of others? Ask them how they think slaves resisted or opposed their enslavement? Note: Some students may state the myth that slaves acquiesced to their enslavement, an incorrect notion that this lesson plan aims to dispel. Also, students will likely focus on overt forms of resistance, such as violence against white owners, group rebellions/insurrections, or running away.
2. Using the information provided in the Slave Resistance and Revolt overview on the Digital History website and the information in Teacher Tool 2, provide students with an overview of the ways that slaves resisted. Be sure to open with overt resistance, especially slave rebellion, a concept with which students will most likely be familiar.
3. Show the short video *Boy Runaway*. After the short video, provide a high-level overview of William Henry Singleton's life using the information in Teacher Tool 1 and Singleton's own narrative in Teacher Tool 3.
4. Distribute Student Handout 1 and ask students to read Singleton's narrative (or some part of it), paying close attention to the ways that Singleton resisted slavery. Ask students to write down the specific way Singleton resisted next to each of the bold passages in his narrative. They will also need to provide a brief explanation of why Singleton's resistance was either covert or overt. Note: Before students begin to read Singleton's narrative, be sure to explain why they might find typographical errors,

misspellings, and the use of United Kingdom English spellings for certain words within the narrative. Inform them that spellings and capitalizations of some words have changed over the last century. Point out that Singleton's publisher, a small-town newspaper in New York, may not have had the resources to proofread his narrative as carefully as a more established book publisher. Students should not assume that differences between spellings in Singleton's narrative and today are reflective of Singleton's intelligence.

5. Lead a discussion about overt and covert forms of resistance exemplified by William Henry Singleton. Emphasize Singleton's escape and long journey from Georgia to North Carolina when he was only a child. Either show them the distance (over 500 miles) on your classroom map or have them look it up on MapQuest. Think of local points of interest, like your school to the closest movie theater or shopping mall, and tell them how many miles are between those two places. Ask them to imagine walking all that way. Ask them to imagine doing so before there were good roads and when they were trying to hide to avoid being caught and returned to slavery. Have them imagine making that journey without money or other resources and all alone as a young child. Now, ask them to multiply that distance by how ever many times it would take to get to the more than 500 miles that Singleton traveled. Ask them to imagine traveling that whole distance at so young an age and with so little assistance.
6. Present some of the other examples of injustice that you prepared for the lesson plan. Discuss the ways that the injustice might be resisted and why it is important to understand that there is more than one way to resist injustice. Be sure to discuss how students might identify something as unjust. Lead a discussion about what circumstances call for resistance. Ask them to consider several things when thinking about appropriate ways to resist. Students should consider: why they want to resist; whether resisting would be worth the possible consequences; what is the goal of resisting; what are some of the options for how to resist; and, which option they would choose (and why).
7. Distribute Student Handout 2 and ask students to complete it as homework or in class.
8. Ask some students to share their responses from Student Handout 2.

### **Assessment (Optional)**

The writing assignment created in class or for homework would be appropriate to assess students' understanding of resistance. A checklist is provided to assess the assignment.

### **Extending the Lesson**

William Henry Singleton's slave narrative is written from the perspective of an old man looking back on his life, highlighting the memory of running away as a six or seven-year-old boy. How might the experience of running away have been described from the perspective of a boy that age? If he could have written a diary about the experience, how might he have described the experience using the thoughts and words of a six or seven-year-old child? Have students write a diary entry from the perspective of Singleton as a young boy describing his escape (or part of it) from Atlanta to New Bern. Remind them of some of the things they considered in Step 5 of Teaching the Lesson above.

After familiarizing students with a broad array of runaway slave advertisements and exposing them to the experiences of fugitive slaves (including such Freedom Crafters as William Henry

Singleton, Harriet Jacobs, and Henry “Box” Brown), ask students to create a fictional short story in which they depict an enslaved child who runs away from his or her owner. Encourage them to select various sources of input and experiences for this fiction writing assignment from the different sources they have—including the runaway slave ads, slave narratives, and short biographies—to incorporate into their short stories.

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