Relevant Unit Objectives

Module 1: African American Community and Culture
This lesson addresses the following Essential Questions:

- How did the existence of slavery shape African American communal life and cultural expression?
- How is community defined?
- How was the African American community defined?

Objectives of the Lesson

Aim

How did the establishment of free schools for African Americans in 18th- and 19th-century New York help transform the lives and identities of its students?

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Evaluate the significance of education and literacy to the larger African American community in New York City
- Situate the development of schools for African American students within the larger development of public education in New York City
- Assess how the education received at the African Free School helped create a class of important African American leaders
- Evaluate the importance of education and literacy to democratic participation
- Identify some of the literary contributions of James Weldon Johnson and Frances E.W. Harper

Introduction

Distribute Handout 1, the poem "Learning to Read" by Frances E. W. Harper, an abolitionist and poet born in Maryland in 1825. The poem describes the experience of a freedwoman who was taught to read during Reconstruction. Ask students to consider the following in terms of the poem:

1. Why did southern slaveholders try to prevent slaves from learning to read?

2. What were some of the strategies slaves used to try to learn to read?

3. Why was it so important to the slaves and freedmen to learn to read? What did literacy represent to them?

4. How old was the narrator of the poem when she learned to read?

5. Examine the last two lines of the poem. How did learning to read make the narrator feel?

6. Can a person be truly free if s/he is illiterate? Discuss.

Instructional Procedures

Step One:

Divide students into small groups and distribute copies of Handout #2, the excerpt from James Weldon Johnson's Black Manhattan. Ask each group to discuss the following questions (please note that students may need to use other references or websites to answer some of the questions).

1. What was the "Manumission Society"? Who comprised this group, and why might they have wanted to start schools for African American students?

2. In what year was the first African Free School opened, and where was it located?

3. Who was Cornelius Davis? Why might he have wanted to teach at this school rather than at a school for white students?

4. According to Johnson, which came first in New York City – free schools for white children, or African American children? Discuss some possible reasons for this "curious historical fact," as Johnson puts it.

5. How many students could be schooled at the African Free School No. 2?

6. How many African Free Schools were in existence by 1834? Estimate how many students they might have enrolled all together

7. Who were the teachers at these schools? Why would it matter if they were white or African American?

8. What subjects did boys learned at the African Free School.

9. What subjects did girls learn? Why might these have differed from those learned by the boys?

10. What was Charles G. Andrews' opinion about what the students were learning at the African Free School?

11. According to the article in the Commercial Advertiser, how did what was happening at the African Free School compare to what was happening at schools for white children at the time?

12. Are you surprised by this description? Why or why not? What in particular stood out in the minds of those who observed the school for the Commercial Advertiser?

13. Johnson concludes that "the fact that these schools were genuinely free was very important." Why?

14. Is free education important in a democracy? Can people be true participants in a democratic society if they are not educated? Why or why not?

Step Two:

The instructor will poll each group on its answers to the questions, with particular emphasis on the final two questions, centering on the role of education and literacy in a democratic society.

Step Three:

Johnson notes in the last paragraph of his description that it was mainly due to the African Free Schools "that there was produced in New York City and State a body of intelligent and well-trained coloured men and women ready to assume leadership during the great crisis in the history of their race."

The New York Historical Society has an extensive online exhibit called "Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection." This website includes profiles of seven important leaders educated at the African Free School: Ira Aldridge, Charles C. Andrews, Samuel E. Cornish, Alexander Crummell, Henry Highland Garnet, James McCune Smith, and John Teasman. They are available at https://www.nyhistory.org/web/afs/bios/ira-aldridge.html.

Assign each of the groups one of the individuals on this website. Ask each group to report briefly on the contributions of this particular individual, and to hypothesize how the education received at the African Free School may have contributed to his later success.

Materials:

- African Free School Bios from the New York Historical Society https://www.nyhistory.org/web/afs/bios/ira-aldridge.html
- James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (1930)
- Frances E. W. Harper, "Learning to Read"

Handout 1

"Learning to Read"
Frances E. W. Harper (1825-1911)

Very soon the Yankee teachers
Came down and set up school;
But, oh! how the Rebs did hate it,-
It was agin' their rule.

Our masters always tried to hide
Book learning from our eyes;
Knowledge didn't agree with slavery-
'Twould make us all too wise.

But some of us would try to steal
A little from the book,
And put the words together,
And learn by hook or crook.

I remember Uncle Caldwell,
Who took pot-liquor fat
And greased the pages of his book,
And hid it in his hat.

And had his master ever seen
The leaves up on his head,
He'd have thought them greasy papers,
But nothing to be read.

And there was Mr. Turner's Ben,
Who heard the children spell,
And picked the words right up by heart,
And learned to read 'em well.

Well, the Northern folks kept sending
The Yankee teachers down;
And they stood right up and helped us,
Though Rebs did sneer and frown.

And, I longed to read my Bible,
For precious words it said;
But when I begun to learn it,
Folks just shook their heads,

And said there is no use trying,
Oh! Chloe, you're too late;
But as I was rising sixty,
I had no time to wait.

So I got a pair of glasses,
And straight to work I went,
And never stopped till I could read
The hymns and Testament.

Then I got a little cabin-
A place to call my own-
And I felt as independent
As the queen upon her throne.

Handout 2

Excerpt from Black Manhattan
James Weldon Johnson, 1930

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) was a leading African American writer, civil rights activist, and poet of the Harlem Renaissance Among his many accomplishments were writing the lyrics to "Lift Every Voice and Sing," long considered the "Black National Anthem," and an autobiographical novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. *In 1930, Johnson wrote Black Manhattan, which examined African American cultural contributions to the growth of New York City. The excerpt below is from that volume.*

Secular education for the Negroes of New York began with the establishment of the African Free School, which was founded by the Manumission Society and opened on November 1, 1787. Here again, however, it must be noted that work by the Quakers preceded the work of the Manumission Society. When the Quakers set their slaves free, they made provisions for the education of the black youth. Nor did these provisions for the slaves they had set free fully satisfy their consciences; the Quakers of Purchase settled their emancipated slaves on lands in the town of Harrison, in Westchester County, and there was begun a Negro community of which a vestigium still remains in the northern part of White Plains. Systematic schooling among the Negroes of New York began, however, with the establishment of the African Free School by the Manumission Society in 1787. The school was opened in a single room, and the first classes were taught by Cornelius Davis, who gave up a school for white children to take charge of this school for black children.

The first building for the school was erected on Cliff Street in 1796. In 1797, 1798, and 1800 the Corporation of the city made small grants to the school, and in 1801 the State Legislature appropriated $1,565.78. It is a curious historical fact that the establishment of the African Free School gave the black children of New York a free school some years before there was any such institution for white children. In truth, this school was the precursor of the New York public school system. The Cliff Street building was burnt down in 1814, but the Corporation of the city again came to the aid of the society and made a grant of a lot on William Street near Duane, where a "commodious brick building" was erected, and opened in 1815. African Free School No. 2, with accommodations for five hundred pupils, was built on Mulberry Street near Grand in 1820. By 1834 there were seven of these African Free Schools, and several coloured men and women had been installed among the teachers.

The schools were well conducted and the instruction was quite thorough. The boys were taught "reading, writing, arithmetic, English grammar, composition, geography, astronomy, use of the globe, and map and linear drawing." The girls, in addition to reading, writing, arithmetic, the elements of English grammar, and geography, were taught plain sewing and knitting. Charles G. Andrews, for many years one of the principals, published a *History of the African Free School*. The little volume tells of a public examination of the pupils that was held on May 7, 1824, upon which a report was made to the Common Council of the City of New York by a committee appointed from that body. In its report the committee said:

The undersigned having attended an examination of the children of the African Free Schools on the 7th instant, pursuant to the invitation of the trustees of that Institution to the Common Council, beg leave to state, that the exercises consisted of exhibitions in Spelling, Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Grammar, Geography, and Elocution, and of the Needlework in addition to these, on the part of the females. The answers of both boys and girls to questions in the important and useful branches of simple and compound arithmetic, of Grammar, and of general and local Geography, especially that of our own country, were prompt and satisfactory. The performances in writing were neat, and in many instances, highly ornamental. The behavior of the children was orderly and creditable to them and their teachers.

Mr. Andrews also quotes from the comments made in the *Commercial Advertiser* in its issue of May 12, 1824:

> We had the pleasure on Friday of attending the annual examination of the scholars of the New York African Free School, and we are free to confess that we never derived more satisfaction, or felt a deeper interest, in any school exhibition in our life. The male and female schools . . . were united on this occasion, and the whole number present was about six hundred . . . The whole scene was highly interesting and gratifying. We never beheld a white school of the same age (of and under the age of fifteen) in which, without exception, there was more order, and neatness of dress, and cleanliness of person. And the exercises were performed with a degree of promptness and accuracy which was surprising. There were two or three Southern gentlemen present, and we should have been pleased had there been many more . . . . We were particularly struck with the appearance of the female school. . . . There was a neatness of dress and person, and a propriety of manner, and an ease of carriage, which reflected great credit upon themselves and their teacher.

It would be difficult to over-estimate the value of the African free schools to the Negroes of New York. And it is easy to see that it was due mainly to them that there was produced in New York City and State a body of intelligent and well-trained coloured men and women ready to assume leadership during the great crisis in the history of their race. The fact that these schools were genuinely free was very important.