

Relevant Unit Objectives

Module 3: Building New York

This lesson addresses the following Essential Questions:

- How did free African Americans contribute to the building of New York?
- How did the unique social and economic fabric of New York contribute to the building of African American social and economic institutions?

Objectives of the Lesson

Aim

How did African-American entrepreneurs contribute to the antebellum economy of New York City?

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

- Assess the contributions of entrepreneurs such as Thomas Downing to the economy and social life of antebellum New York
- Identify the characteristics of a successful entrepreneur
- Contrast the image of a wealthy, successful free African American to the commonly-held image of antebellum African Americans as poor and enslaved

Introduction

Show students the picture of Thomas Downing from the MAAP website (without the caption). Ask them to describe what they see in the picture:

- How is he dressed?
- What general conclusions might you draw about his background from his appearance - i.e., does he appear to have been well-educated? Successful? How can you tell?
- What do you imagine he might have done for a living?
- What do you imagine was his standing in society?
- Why do you draw these conclusions?

Instructional Procedures

Step One

The teacher provides basic background about Thomas Downing drawn from John H. Hewitt, "Mr. Downing and His Oyster House: The Life and Good Works of an African-American Entrepreneur - 19th Century New York, New York Restaurateur, Thomas Downing," *American Visions*, June-July, 1994, available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1546/is_n3_v9/ai_15495012/pg_1

In addition to explaining who Downing was, when he lived, and what he did for a living, the teacher explains that:

"When Downing became a New York oysterman, he entered a business conducted primarily by other free black men. It has been noted that in 1810, only nine years before his arrival in the city, of the 27 oystermen listed in the city directory, at least 16 were free African Americans. Right from the start, Downing thus found himself up against established and successful competitors." (Hewitt, p. 2)

- Why do you think so many free African American men worked as oystermen?
- Why do you think they were competing for?

Step Two

The teacher further cites an article in *The New York Evening Post*, on September 26, 1855:

"To those who do not know Mr. Downing (every one knows him here), it may be proper to say that he is one of the most respectable and aged colored men in this city. His private character is without reproach; he has made a large fortune as the keeper of a refectory, which is frequented daily by throngs of the principal bankers and merchants of Wall and Broad streets and their vicinity ... and during his long and uninterrupted success had never forgotten the humility and modesty which is one of the most noticeable characteristics ... and it would be difficult to detect the slightest change wrought in the character or deportment of the old man since he became what has been for many years, a man of fortune, except in the magnitude of his donations for the relief of his oppressed race."

- What particular characteristics helped Downing become successful?
- Why is it important that the New York Post describes Downing as colored?
- Who came to Downing's restaurant (refectory)?
- How does Downing's story differ from our commonly held conceptions of what African American lives were like in this time period?

Materials

John H. Hewitt, "Mr. Downing and His Oyster House: The Life and Good Works of an African-American Entrepreneur - 19th Century New York, New York Restaurateur, Thomas Downing," *American Visions*, June-July, 1994, available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1546/is_n3_v9/ai_15495012/pg_1