

## Relevant Unit Objectives

### Module 3: Building New York

This lesson addresses the following Essential Question:

- What role did African-American owned businesses and communities play in the expansion of New York City?

## 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:

- What is his general appearance?
- How is he dressed?
- What general conclusions might they draw about his background from his appearance – i.e., does he appear to have been well-educated? Successful? What other possibilities come to mind?
- What general conclusions might they draw about his personality from his appearance – i.e., does he appear to have been reliable? Responsible? What other adjectives might come to mind?
- What do they imagine he might have done for a living?
- What do they imagine was his standing in society?
- Why do they draw these conclusions?

**Instructional Procedures****Step One:**

Now reveal the caption from the picture. (Note: It may be a little difficult to read. The caption says: "Thomas Downing, one of the pioneers of New York City. He at one time owned the property at No. 3 Broad Street, now occupied by the Morgan-Dresler Building, a structure valued at \$3 million. Born in 1791, he knew intimately every New Yorker of prominence up to the days of the Civil War. It was he who saved James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald from going under by advancing a loan of \$10,000 to Mr. Bennett.")

Ask students to briefly discuss the following (these questions will be addressed again in the concluding discussion):

1. Are they surprised by this description? Why or why not?
2. How does the existence of a wealthy, successful African-American in antebellum New York contrast with our general image of African Americans in this time period?
3. What circumstances might have allowed for an African American in this time and place to have achieved such success?
4. What personality traits might have allowed for an African American in this time and place to have achieved such success?
5. What conclusions can we draw about New York society and economics in this period from the existence of such a person?

**Step Two:**

Distribute copies of the article, 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](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1546/is_n3_v9/ai_15495012/pg_1)

In this activity, students must imagine that Thomas Downing has been invited to give a speech to the class detailing his life story and the reasons behind his success. Members of the class will act out the part of Downing and deliver the speech. In order to do this, the class will be divided into six small groups. Each group will be responsible for collecting information about one aspect of Downing's life and career from the article above: his family background; the business skills and practices that helped him succeed; who his customers and clientele were; how financially successful he was; his social circle and general standing in society; and the various political causes, such as abolitionism, he became involved with. Depending on the skill level of the students, the instructor may wish to give each group a general topic or a list of specific questions, as provided in the Handout. One person in each group will serve as recorder and take notes. Each group will then work together to write a section of the speech about that aspect of Downing's life. Each section should be approximately 1-2 paragraphs in length. Students are encouraged to keep in mind that they are writing a script for a speech to be delivered by a well-known person in the mid-1800s, a time when oratory was taken quite seriously. It is also important that they remember not to simply copy from the article, but to phrase the speech in a way Downing was likely to have done. One person from each group will deliver that group's section of the speech.

**Step Three: Concluding Discussion**

After the entire speech has been given by the representatives of all six groups, the instructor will lead a summative discussion based on the following questions:

1. What is an entrepreneur? What characteristics lead a person to become a successful entrepreneur?
2. Can a person become an entrepreneur in any context? Is it more difficult in certain contexts? Why or why not?
3. What particular characteristics helped Downing become successful?
4. What social and economic role did Downing play in antebellum New York?
5. Why did Downing become involved in political causes? Why would such a successful person take considerable risks to hide runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad?
6. If you had been in Downing's position, would you have taken these risks? Why or why not?
7. What insights into the society and economy of antebellum New York can we learn from Downing's experience? (Remember, for example, that on the one hand the society allowed Downing to become successful, but on the other only white people could patronize his restaurant. Remember, too, that the catering business was one of very few in which African Americans could actively participate.)
8. 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](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1546/is_n3_v9/ai_15495012/pg_1)

**Handout: Group Assignments – Writing a Speech for Thomas Downing****Group 1 – Personal Background & Family**

- Where was Downing from?
- What was his family background?
- What was his family's legal status?
- Who were his childhood friends?
- How did Downing get to New York?
- Who did he marry and who were his children?

**Group 2 – Business Skills & Practices**

- How did Downing get into the oyster business?
- Why did he choose this particular business?
- What were some of the particular things Downing did to make his business more competitive and successful?
- What other things besides running the restaurant did Downing do to expand his business enterprises?

**Group 3 – Clientele**

- What specific categories (i.e., occupations) of people did Downing's Oyster House serve?
- What race(s) did Downing's serve, and why?
- What social class(es) of people did Downing's cater to?
- Who were some of the specific well-known people who ate at Downing's?
- What kinds of political activities took place at Downing's?

**Group 4 – Financial Success**

- How big a business were oysters in New York in 1842?
- How did the New York Evening Post describe his finances in 1855?
- What sort of stocks did Downing invest in, and how well did he do with these investments?
- How much was Downing paid to provide oysters for the 1848 Boz Ball?
- What sort of things did Downing like to spend his money on?

**Group 5 – Social Circle and Standing in Society**

- How was Downing generally regarded by New York society?
- How did the New York Evening Post describe Downing's general standing in society in 1855?
- Why did people leave messages at Downing's?
- What sort of social circle did Downing move in?
- What was his relationship with Frederick Douglass?
- Who were some of the other well-known people of his time Downing was friendly with?
- How did the Weekly Anglo-African describe him in 1859?

**Group 6 – Political Causes**

- How was Downing regarded in the African-American community and why?
- What was Downing's involvement in the abolitionist movement?
- What efforts did Downing make to improve education for African American children?
- How did Downing become involved in the campaign to secure the vote for African Americans?