

Black Life & Resistance in Pre-Civil War Illinois

Background Essay and Document Analysis

Created by Yosra Yehia, US history and ELL Civics teacher, and the team at Evanston Township High School

Skills Addressed

The following lesson draws from multiple skills identified in the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) C3 Framework. The table below represents some of the skills highlighted in this lesson. The full framework of NCSS skills can be viewed [here](#).

D2.His.1.9-12	Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- a) *Describe the conditions that African Americans faced once they migrated to Illinois during the antebellum period.*
- b) *Under what circumstances is it appropriate for people to protest or rebel against their conditions?*
- c) *What does it mean to rebel? What different forms can rebellion take?*

SEQUENCE OF THE LESSON:

Supporting Slides linked [here](#).

1. Warm-up: Ask students to describe a time in their lives when they decided to break a rule or rebel. After students reflect independently, call on students to share out with the class. After this discussion, ask students to work together to write a class definition of rebellion, add it to slide 2.
2. Independent Reading: Students will read and annotate the background essay on page 2 of this document and respond to the reading questions on page 4. Consider sharing out student responses to the reading questions.
3. Document Analysis: Independently or w/ a partner, students will analyze 3 documents from the web exhibit responding to analysis questions below each document.
4. Exit Slip: *What form of rebellion stood out to you the most today? Do you think*

this rebellion was justified? Why or why? Cut out the slips on page 8.

Black Life in Antebellum Illinois

CREATING COMMUNITY, DEMANDING JUSTICE

This essay was adapted from from two essays in the web exhibit: "Slavery and Racist Laws" and "Migration."

Illinois was officially a free state after the Northwest Ordinance outlawed slavery in the Midwest in 1787. But the end of slavery did not mean the beginning of racial equality. The state legislature enacted "black laws" designed to deny basic rights to free African Americans. The goal of these laws was to discourage Black people from migrating into Illinois and to make their lives difficult after they arrived.

For example, the 1819 black law required Black Illinoisans to provide local officials with documentation showing that they were free, and to register with local officials if they wanted to reside legally in a community. Black people who could not prove their free status could be arrested, "deemed a runaway slave," and sold to labor without pay for up to one year. The law also criminalized the assembly of three or more "slaves or servants of color," and it promised a fine for any person who hired an African American who had not officially registered. State laws also barred (prevented) Black people from testifying in court cases involving whites and promised public education to white children only.

The Illinois black laws made clear that free African Americans were not welcome in Illinois and not entitled to the same basic rights as white residents. Despite these laws, Black people arrived and settled in Illinois. Black Illinoisans organized, established community spaces, and fought these policies for decades. The legislature finally repealed the black laws on Feb. 7, 1865.

African Americans were among the early settlers in the city. In 1837, a census (an official count) counted seventy-seven people of African descent. By 1848, a local census counted 288 Black residents. Arriving mainly from slave states including Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee, Black Chicagoans bought property and built homes, churches, and businesses in the 1840s and 1850s.

In Chicago, men worked as teamsters, sailors, day laborers, barbers and preachers. Women operated mills, ran boarding houses, and took in laundry, all while laboring in their own homes.

Some Black migrants managed to accumulate (gather) property and wealth in the fast-growing city. John and Mary Jones arrived in Chicago in 1845 with only \$3.50 and made their home in a one-room house and barbershop on Madison Street and Fifth Avenue. Within a few years, John had a busy tailoring and cleaning business at 119 Dearborn. He became a prominent activist in the Underground Railroad and the movement to repeal the Illinois black laws. By 1870, he had amassed \$30,000 in real estate and \$10,000 in personal property (this is over \$800,000 today).

In addition to starting businesses, Black men in Chicago organized fraternal organizations, starting with the Knights of Tabor in 1855. They also founded branches of the Order of the Good Samaritan and the Order of Odd Fellows. In 1858, Rev. John B. Dawson organized and served as president of the Colored People's Saving Institution of Chicago, which met at Quinn Chapel A.M.E. Church.

Black women were organizing too. By 1852, a group had formed the Chicago Mutual Protection Society, which raised funds to aid fugitives from slavery. The organization's president, Ailey Maria Richardson Bradford contributed \$10.00 on behalf of the society to help Black families in Christiana, Pennsylvania, where dozens of abolitionists (a person who wants to stop, abolish, slavery) were imprisoned after an effort to rescue fugitives from the hands of slave catchers. Following John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry that year, African American women held a festival at Mechanics' Institute Hall to raise funds for the families of the "heroes" killed on the scene and those subsequently executed.

Black Chicagoans lived with insecurity, not knowing whether—and when—members of the white community might turn against them. Yet many leading activists had close working relationships with progressive (people who believe in changing the society around them) white Chicagoans. The community was relatively safe compared with Black communities in other parts of the state. Black Chicagoans knew this, which is why they led the charge against the black laws in 1853.

In 1853, when delegates (elected representatives) gathered for the first statewide convention of African Americans, Chicago was already a center for Black life and

activism. The delegates discussed many issues, but their main concern was figuring out how to persuade the state legislature to repeal the black laws.

Written by Hope McCaffrey. Edited by Kate Masur.

READING QUESTIONS

Is this essay a primary or secondary source? How do you know?

What were the primary goals of Illinois black laws?

Describe an example of resistance that stuck out to you from the reading.

What is a question that you have after doing this assignment?

OPTIONAL

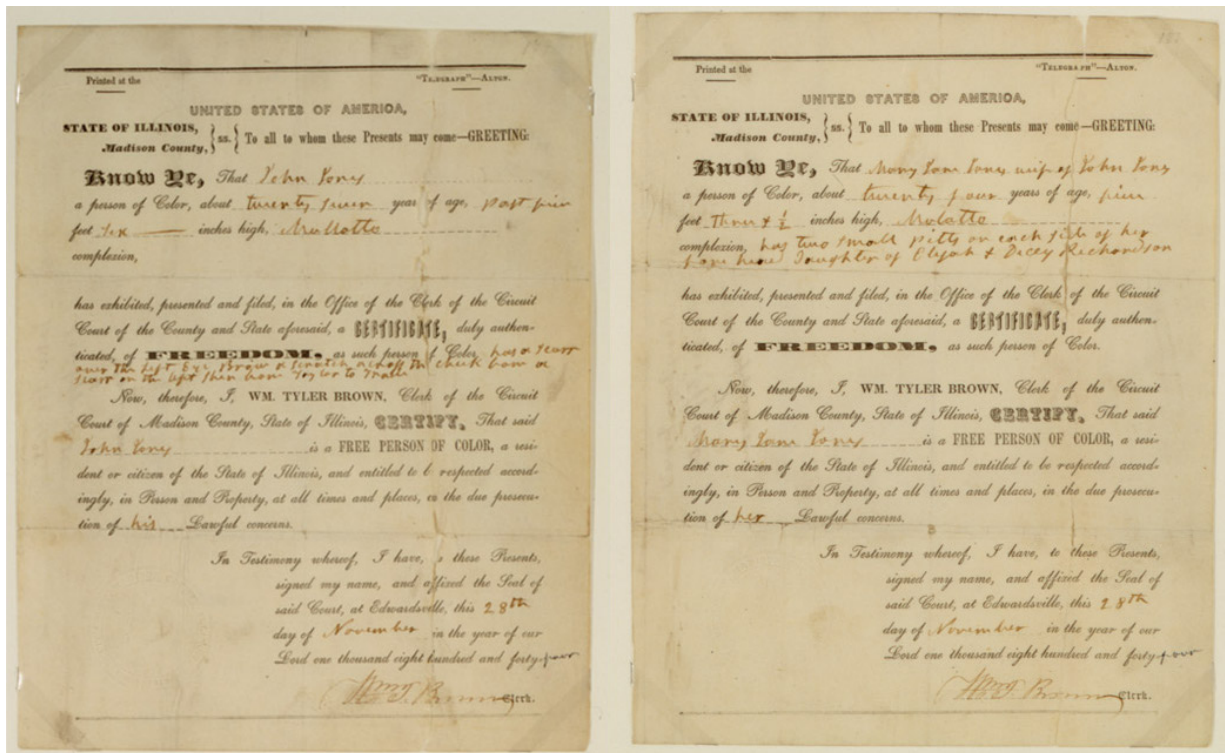
Do some quick research. Why should we trust this resource?

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

DOCUMENT A:

Freedom Certificates of Mary and John Jones, 1844

Explore these documents on chicagohistory.org to zoom in and read the text easily



- What are 2-3 pieces of information you can learn from this document?
 - John Jones is referred to as a "person of color" on this document
- Why was it necessary for this couple to have freedom papers in Illinois in 1844?
- What questions do you have after reading this document?

4. Is this a primary or secondary source? How do you know?

DOCUMENT B:

A handbill advertisement for a fundraiser benefiting “the Colored Baptist Church” in Alton, Illinois, in the 1850s. Women were essential to the success of fundraising efforts like this one.



1. What are 2-3 pieces of information you can learn from this document?
2. To what extent do you think holding an event like this is rebellious?
3. What questions do you have after reading this document?
4. Is this a primary or secondary source? How do you know?

DOCUMENT C:

Excerpt of "Petitioning for Justice in Public Education," [Black Organizing in Pre-Civil War Ill.](#)

If you are not allowed to vote, how would you exercise your political voice and get public policies changed? In Illinois, only white men were allowed to vote.

Black communities found other ways of making their voices heard in state politics. Sending petitions to the state legislature in Springfield could be effective. According to tradition, everyone — regardless of race, sex, or status — had a right to petition. Legislators were obliged at least to accept those petitions, and petitions could result in committee reports that led to real change.

Between 1853 and 1855, African Americans sent at least three school-related petitions to the Illinois legislature.

- In January 1853, Presley L. Donegan and his allies in Springfield requested that Black citizens be exempt from the school tax. Why should they pay into a public fund from which their children could not benefit? They could save their tax money and apply it to their private schools for Black children.
- That same month, the Wood River Association requested that the state refund the money that African Americans had paid to the school fund. The state legislature seems to have ignored these petitions.
- Two years later, Black and white residents of Madison County asked the legislature to appropriate school funds specifically for Black education.

The petitions represent three different ways to organize and fund schools for Black children. They also reflect the importance of education to Black Illinoisans.

1. What are 2-3 pieces of information you can learn from this document?
2. Do you think it was a good idea for Black residents of Illinois to petition the state government for access to schools? Why or why not?
3. What questions do you have after reading this document?

4. Is this a primary or secondary source? How do you know?

EXIT SLIP

What form of rebellion stood out to you the most today?

Do you think this rebellion was justified?

Describe 1 specific example (evidence) from the reading or documents to support your response.

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