In Pursuit of Freedom
Teaching the Underground Railroad

FOREWORD BY James Oliver Horton
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Portsmouth, NH
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APPENDIX A: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS WORKSHEET 138

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During the last few years there has been a proliferation of books on the Underground Railroad for students of all ages. In addition, the most recently published U.S. history textbooks now devote greater coverage than ever before to the topic. These secondary sources are wonderful starting points for students as they embark on a study of the Underground Railroad. But primary source documents are the real “stuff” of history and must be integrated into their investigation of the topic.

Documents fascinate middle school students because they are real and they are personal. Teaching with documents allows middle schoolers to touch directly the lives of people in the past. Sometimes that can evoke emotional responses, enabling students to identify with the human factor in history, including the risks, courage, and contradictions of those who shaped the past.

Chapter 2 explores documents—public declarations, diaries, newspaper advertisements, letters—that relate to slavery, abolitionism, and the Underground Railroad. Some are well-known, like the Emancipation Proclamation. Others are less conspicuous sources but still played a significant role among those who embraced abolitionism. The Germantown Protest of 1688, for example, was the first antislavery petition in America and one that stirred individual Quakers to act on their antislavery convictions.

Still other documents are more personal and were not made available to historians until the twentieth century. Among these are the diary of David Evans, a Quaker farmer whose personal reflections offer a detailed description of the routes, participants, and stations on southeastern Pennsylvania’s Underground Railroad, and the letters of Thomas Garrett and William Still, stationmasters whose friendship transcended both race and religion, resulting in the passage of more than twenty-seven hundred slaves to freedom. Each one of these documents offers middle school students a different per-
spective of antebellum culture and the runaways, slaveholders, and abolitionists who shaped it.

Teachers will want to refer to the history given in Chapter 1 to provide themselves and their students with the necessary background they will need to complete the critical thinking and writing exercises in this section. For example, students interpreting a document such as the Emancipation Proclamation will want to read over the history provided in Chapter 1 under the subheading “Beginnings of the Antislavery Movement” in order to understand the kind of pressure President Abraham Lincoln was receiving from abolitionists in 1862 when he decided to emancipate the slaves. To what degree was Lincoln’s decision based on that pressure?

Similarly, students interpreting the fugitive slave advertisements in this section will want to read the history given in Chapter 1 under the subheadings “Slavery in America” and “Slave Families and Their Treatment by Owners” in order to understand why the advertisements were written as well as why the slave owner chose to describe the runaway’s physical features.

Here are some of the issues students will want to address as they examine the documents. They are also wonderful issues for a class discussion once students complete their document analyses. Can you see any similarities between the two advertisements provided in this chapter? Are the descriptions any different from those of a lost pet? What do the descriptions tell you about the way slaveholders viewed their runaways?

Distinguishing Between Primary and Secondary Sources

A primary source document is any document created by those who participated in or witnessed the events of the past. Newspapers, journals, diaries, government papers, wills, speeches, letters, drawings, engravings, and photographs are examples of primary source documents. Primary sources reflect the personal, social, political, and/or economic views of the participants, who had their own biases and motives in recording their thoughts. These records challenge students to examine their own biases, created by their own personal circumstances and the environments in which they live. Ultimately students come to realize that history is interpretation and that interpreting documents helps them analyze and evaluate contemporary sources, whether they are newspaper accounts, popular magazines, television or radio programs, or Internet sources.

Articles and books, on the other hand, are considered secondary sources written after a historical event, usually ten or more years afterward. Secondary sources are written to describe, analyze, or reconstruct an earlier event. By
their very nature, they are secondhand interpretations, subject to the distortions of the time that has elapsed. That doesn’t mean they are not useful. Because secondary sources are written years after a historical event, they can provide an extremely helpful perspective and important insight on people, places, and events of the past. In other words, sufficient distance from a historical event affords the contemporary writer a special advantage: he or she can craft his or her own interpretation based on a knowledge of the effects of a particular event or through surveying a wide array of documents about the event. For example, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger’s seminal study *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* is an indispensable source for historians, researchers and scholars interested in the Underground Railroad. The book offers readers a groundbreaking analysis of slave resistance and escape, debunking the traditional theory that slaves were generally pliant and resigned to their status as human chattel. Franklin and Schweninger show how slaves resisted and escaped, where they fled to, and how they survived away from the plantation. Their argument is supported by a wealth of documents, including planters’ records, petitions to county courts and state legislatures, and local newspapers.

**A Model for Analyzing Primary Source Documents**

Analyzing primary source documents is not only a valuable exercise for building critical thinking skills, but it also provides students with an essential research tool for writing. In analyzing documents, it is important that students are able to answer six major questions:

**What?** What kind of document is it? What is the content? The answers to these questions may seem obvious, but the way a document is described actually indicates the student’s understanding of it. Students should be able to summarize the most important issues raised by the document and do so by integrating the most relevant quotations into the body of the description.

**Who?** Who is the author of the document? Students may not always be able to identify the author by name, but they can usually identify other characteristics that may be important to understanding his or her motive for writing the document. They should consider such characteristics as gender, race, ethnicity, and political and religious affiliation.

**When?** When was the document written? Students should be able to identify not only the date on which the document was written, but also the major events that were occurring at the time. This identification is extremely important in understanding the historical context of the document. For example, a student must know that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work *Uncle*
"Tom’s Cabin" (1852) was written shortly after the passage of the federal government’s 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. Without that knowledge, her book becomes less relevant, because it was written in response to that law. Its immediate popularity among abolitionists and the controversy it caused among slaveholders prompted President Lincoln, when he later met Stowe, to remark: “So you’re the person whose book started this great [Civil] war!”

Where? Where was the document written? The location may or may not be significant. Lincoln, for example, could have written the Emancipation Proclamation anywhere in the union in 1862 and the document still would have stirred the same controversy among both Northerners and Southerners. The fact that Lincoln, as president of a divided union, wrote the document is most important because only he enjoyed the authority, under the chief executive’s war powers, to do so. Where the Emancipation Proclamation was insignificant.

On the other hand, the Germantown Protest of 1688 could have been written only in the Philadelphia area because of the inextricable relationship of the city’s early Quaker population to that document. The Germantown Protest reflects the budding abolitionist convictions that eventually prevailed among Philadelphia’s Quakers because of their religious beliefs in the equality of all human beings. Nowhere else in the colonies at that time and among no other group of people could the document have been written.

Why? Why did the author write the document? The question of motive is the most difficult one to answer. In an edited collection of documents, there is frequently an explanation of motive preceding the document. However, for original works if teachers provide students with some background information as well as some information about the author, they will have the necessary historical context to make an educated guess as to the author’s motive.

So What? This is another way of asking, Why is the document important in the broader context of American history, and in this case, what is its importance to the institutions of slavery and/or the Underground Railroad? If the document is not significant, it should probably not be used in the course. In responding to this question, students should consider the purpose of the document, what it reveals about the author’s opinion or bias, and the conclusions they can draw from it.

The documents in this section are reprinted as they were written, without editorial changes or grammatical corrections. These sources were interpreted by middle school students using the six questions identified previously. Each document is followed by one or more student interpretations and a teacher’s assessment of those interpretations. The quality of the critical thinking and
writing differs among the various student samples, but collectively the samples will give teachers a better understanding of how they can apply document analyses in their own classes, offer insight into grading those analyses, and give an idea of what to expect from students.

Analyzing Contemporary Documents

Public Declarations

Antislavery declarations described the operating principles and beliefs of the abolitionists who drafted them. Many of these documents were created at local, state, or national antislavery conventions in order to summarize the points of agreement that were reached at the gatherings. Other documents came in the form of a protest against slavery and detailed the reasons for a group’s opposition to the institution. Still others were legal documents, defining the federal government’s policies with regard to the institution of slavery. Two of the most famous antislavery documents are the Germantown Protest of 1688 and President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, which was issued on September 22, 1862, and went into effect on January 1, 1863. Taken together, the two documents mark the beginnings and end of the struggle to abolish slavery in the United States.

THE GERMANTOWN PROTEST, 1688

This is to ye monthly meeting held at Richard Worrell’s.

These are the reasons why we are against the traffick of men-body, as followeth. Is there any that would be done or handled in this manner? viz., to be sold or made a slave for all the time of his life? How fearful and faint-hearted are many at see [sic] when they see a strange vessel—being afraid it should be a Turk, and they should be taken, and sold for slaves into Turkey. Now what is this better done, as Turks do? Yea, rather it is worse for them which say they are Christians, for we hear that ye most part of such negars are brought hitherto against their will and consent and that many of them are stolen. Now tho they are black we cannot conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves, as it is to have other white ones. There is a saying that we shall do to all men like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent or colour they are. And those who steal or rob men, and those who buy or purchase them, are they not alike? Here is liberty of conscience which is right and reasonable; here ought to be likewise liberty of ye body, except evil-doers, which is another case. But to bring men hither, or to rob and sell them against their will, we stand against. In Europe there are many oppressed for conscience sake; and here are those opposed which are of a black colour. And we who know that all men must not commit adultery—some do com-
mit adultery, in others, separating wives from their husbands and giving them to others; and some sell the children of these poor creatures to other men. Ah! do consider well this thing, you who do it, if you would be done of this manner? And if it is done according to Christianity? You surpass Holland and Germany in this thing. This makes an ill report in all those countries of Europe, where they hear off, that ye Quakers do here handle men as they handle their cattle. And for that reason some have no mind or inclination to come hither. And who shall maintain this your course, or plead for it? Truly we cannot do so, except you shall inform us better hereof, viz., that Christians have liberty to practice these things. Pray, what thing in the world can be done worse towards us, than if men should rob or steal us away, and sell us for slaves to strange countries; separating husbands from their wives and children. Being now this is not done in the manner we would be done at thereof we contradict and are against this traffic of men-body. And we who profess that it is not lawful to steal, must, likewise, avoid to purchase such things as are stolen, but rather help to stop this robbing and stealing if possible. And such men ought to be delivered out of ye hands of ye robbers, and set free as well as in Europe. Then is Pennsylvania to have a good report, instead it hath now a bad one for this sake in other countries. Especially whereas ye Europeans are desirous to know in what manner ye Quakers do rule in their province—and most of them do look upon us with an envious eye. But if this is done well, what shall we say is done evil?

If once these slaves (which they say are so wicked and stubborn men) should join themselves—fight for their freedom—and handle their masters and mistresses as they did handle them before; will these masters and mistresses take the sword of hand and war against these poor slaves, like we are able to believe, some will not refuse to do; or have these negars not as much right to fight for their freedom, as you have to keep them slaves?

Now consider well this thing, if it is good or bad? And in case you find it to be good to handle these blacks at that manner, we desire and require you hereby lovingly that you may inform us herein, which at this time never was done, viz. that Christians have such a liberty to do so. To the end we shall be satisfied in this point, and satisfy likewise our good friends and acquaintances in our native country, to whose it is a terror, or fearful thing that men should be handled in Pennsylvania.

This is from our meeting at Germantown, held ye 18 of the 2 month, 1688, to be delivered to the Monthly Meeting at Richard Worrell’s.

Garret Hendricks
Derick up de Graeff
Francis Daniel Pastorius
Abraham up Den Graef
These are the reasons why we are against slavery: Is there anyone that would want be handled in this manner? To be sold or made a slave for his entire life? How fearful are sailors on the sea when they see a strange ship, being afraid that it is piloted by Turks and that they will be captured and sold as slaves in Turkey? Now is slave trading any better than what the Turks do? It is worse for those who say they are Christians when they bring Africans to America against their will. Many of these Africans are stolen. Although they are black, we do not believe that they should be slaves anymore than white people should be slaves. There is a saying that we shall do to all men, like as we will be done to ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent, or color they are. And those who steal or rob men and those who buy or purchase them, are they not all alike? Here in Pennsylvania we believe in the liberty of conscience, which is right and reasonable. Shouldn’t we also enjoy the liberty of the body, except for those who break the law? And yet there are those men who force black slaves to commit adultery by separating wives from their husbands and giving them to others, and some sell the children of those poor creatures to other men. Oh, do consider well these things and if it is done according to Christianity? We are against this traffic in men’s bodies. And we who believe that it is not lawful to steal, must also avoid purchasing those things that are stolen, but rather help to stop this robbing and stealing. Black men should be delivered out of the hands of the robbers and set free here as well as in Europe. Only then will Pennsylvania have a good report.

If once these slaves (which they say are wicked and stubborn) should join themselves together and fight for their freedom and handle their masters and mistresses as slaves; will these masters and mistresses take the sword at hand and war against these poor slaves? Or have these Negroes not as much right to fight for their freedom as you have to keep them slaves?

The Germantown Protest of 1688 was written by four German-speaking Quakers—Garret Hendricks, Derick op de Graeff, Francis Daniell Pastorius, and Abraham op den Graef—and became known to history as the first anti-slavery petition in America. The petition was submitted to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the governing body of Friends in the Middle Atlantic states, but no action was taken. Not until 1776 did the Yearly Meeting make slave-holding a cause for disownment in the Society of Friends.
STUDENT INTERPRETATION 1

1. **What kind of document is this? What is the document about?**
   This is a protest against slavery. It is a speech.

2. **Who wrote the document?**
   Age: 30 to 50  
   Sex: male  
   Occupation: Unknown  
   Married/Unmarried: married  
   Children: unknown  
   Residence: Germantown, PA  
   Able to Write: yes, but poor spelling  
   Other Information: the writers are Quakers

3. **When was the document written?** February 18, 1688

4. **Where was the document written?** In Germantown, outside of Philadelphia

5. **Why was the document written?** To end slavery with Quakers. Writers hate slavery.

6. **What is the significance of the document?** It shows how Quaker beliefs are in conflict with slavery.

This student chose to provide only the most basic responses to the questions given on the Document Analysis sheet. This is a common approach for middle school students, especially if they are just being introduced to the exercise of interpreting a primary source document. While the analysis is lacking in abstract thinking, there are some important observations. First, the student identifies the fact that the document is a “protest against slavery” and realizes that it is a public pronouncement, though he refers to it as a speech. Second, the student identifies the age range of the authors as thirty to fifty years old, though there is no direct reference to their ages in the document. The assumption here is that a document of this importance was composed by men of advanced age and experience. Similarly, the documentary references to the act of slave traders “separating wives from their husbands and giving them to others” probably led the student to believe that the authors could sympathize with the plight of the slaves because they, too, were married. Third, the student recognizes the difference between contemporary and seventeenth-century spelling of words like traffick and colour. Finally, there is the important recognition that the document was written by Quakers and that the beliefs of Friends are somehow inconsistent with the practice of slavery. All of these observations are critical to interpreting the document and, as such, are important starting points. But this student will need more guidance in understanding the significance of the protest.

Here’s a better-developed interpretation of the same document.
STUDENT INTERPRETATION 2

In 1688, when this Germantown Protest was written, slavery was up and coming in the United States. There were slaves in both the North and South. But there were some people in the North who protested against slavery. Garret Hendricks, Derrick Up de Graeff, Francis Daniell Pastorius and Abraham Up den Graef were some of these people.

“It is worse for those who say they are Christians when they bring Africans to America against their will.” Slavery needed to be stopped.

This document is a formal document protesting slavery. “Although they are black, we do not believe that they should be slaves any more than white people should be slaves.” “It is worse for those who say they are Christians when they bring Africans to America against their will.” These are reasons why this document tried to abolish slavery.

The people who wrote this document were males in their early to mid thirties, who were most likely community leaders. They lived in Germantown, PA. They were probably married and had children. They were educated and able to write.

Unfortunately, the document had no effect on slavery because it continued in the United States until 1865.

Unlike the first student interpretation, this one is written in essay form and reflects more advanced abstract thinking and writing skills. The student makes an important distinction between the South, where slavery went unchallenged, and the North, where there were those “who protested against slavery” as early as 1688. He also explains that the protest “had no effect on slavery because it continued in the United States until 1865.”

To be sure, middle schoolers tend to think in absolute terms. It is difficult for them to understand that the protest against slavery was a gradual process that was just beginning in 1688. Like other social justice movements, abolitionism began with a small group of individuals who identified the injustice and appealed to a larger body of people to address the problem. In this case, Hendricks, Pastorius, and the Up de Graefs represent that small but socially conscious group. Their appeal was addressed to members of their church, the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. While Quakers, as a body, did not adopt abolitionism as a formal policy until 1776, historians have credited the Germantown Protest with inspiring the beginnings of the abolitionist cause among Friends. Of course, the student would need to have more background information to make this kind of connection.

Interestingly, while the student does cite the group’s Christian beliefs as “reasons why this document tried to abolish slavery,” the fact that they are Quakers escapes him. One might expect that a student with strong abstract
thinking skills would recognize the several references to Quakers and Monthly Meeting in the document as an indication that these particular Christians were members of the Society of Friends. However, the inconsistency is typical for this age group.

At the same time, the interpretation reflects an advanced ability to use direct quotation as evidence to support the student's point of view. The integration of primary source quotation into a student's interpretation is a fundamental skill in the writing of history at the higher levels of education because it demonstrates the student's ability to understand the document as well as how the document supports his own argument. This skill should be introduced at the middle school level. As the student goes on to high school he will learn how to fragment the quotation and integrate only the most important parts of the quotation with his own explanation, rather than insert full-sentence quotations as this student does. Still, the fact that he attempts this skill is impressive.

A much better-known document is the Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln on September 22, 1862. This executive order freed the slaves in the states controlled by the Confederate government only and went into effect on January 1, 1863. As students read through the document, they should be asked to consider four questions: (1) Why didn't Lincoln free the slaves in the border states? (2) Why did he distinguish certain parts of the Southern states in rebellion? (3) Did Lincoln actually have the authority to free slaves in the territories controlled by the Confederacy? and (4) Why had he changed his mind in September 1862 to tie emancipation to his original war aim of preserving the union?

THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people
thereof respectively shall then be in rebellion against the United States; and
the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall on that day be in good
faith represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen
thereunto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such
State shall have participated, shall in the absence of strong countervailing
testimony be deemed conclusive evidence that such State and the people
thereof are not then in rebellion against the United States.

Now, therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by
virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and
Navy of the United States, in time of actual armed rebellion against the
authority and government of the United States, and in a fit and necessary
war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do on this first day of January,
in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in
accordance with my purpose so to do, publicly proclaimed for the full
period of 100 days from the day first above mentioned, order and designate
as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof, respectively,
are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana (except the parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines,
Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James, Ascension, Assumption,
Terre Bonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the
city of New Orleans), Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Caro-
lina, North Carolina, and Virginia (except the forty-eight counties design-
ated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkeley, Accomac,
Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Anne, and Norfolk, including
the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth) and which excepted parts are for the
present left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order
and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States and
parts of States are, and henceforward shall be, free; and that the Executive
Government of the United States, including the military and naval author-
ities thereof, shall recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain
from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense; and I recommend to them
that, in all cases where allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known that such persons of suitable
condition will be received into the armed service of the United States to
garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of
all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted
by the Constitution upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judg-
ment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God.
In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.

By the President: Abraham Lincoln

William H. Seward, Secretary of State

STUDENT INTERPRETATION

The document is called the *Emancipation Proclamation*. It was issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. But the proclamation would not be made a law until January 1, 1863.

The document says that all “persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State in rebellion against the United States will be set forever free.” This proclamation applied to slaves in the South, but excluded the 48 counties that represented West Virginia and also the Virginia counties of Berkeley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Anne and Norfolk. The proclamation does not apply to the border states because they remained loyal to the North. That sounds like a contradiction but it was important to keep those states on the North’s side in the Civil War.

The author of the document is President Abraham Lincoln. He was a member of the Republican Party and believed that slavery was wrong. He was able to pass this proclamation because of his authority as the leader of the United States Army. The fourth paragraph shows this authority saying that “I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, in time of actual armed rebellion.” He called this proclamation a “war measure.”

By writing the *Emancipation Proclamation*, Lincoln made slavery an issue in the Civil War. By 1862 he realized that ending slavery was just as important as preserving the Union. He understood his responsibility as the President to protect the well being of this country and everyone in it.

This student demonstrates a nice balance of concrete and abstract thinking. His careful reading of the document allows him to avoid the common mistake made by other middle schoolers who believe that the Emancipation Proclamation freed *all* the slaves, both in the South and in the border states. That result was actually achieved by the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865. Instead the student makes two important distinctions: (1) that the proclamation applied only to the South (even underlining the word) and (2) that there were specific areas...
of the South—some Virginia counties and the state of West Virginia—that were also exempt.

Just as insightful is the student’s remark that the failure to free slaves in the border states “sounds like a contradiction” if Lincoln actually believed that slavery was morally wrong. At the same time, the student seems to recognize that Lincoln acted in a politically expedient fashion by allowing slavery in those states in order to keep them in the Union and fighting on for the North.

But the issue of Lincoln’s motive for drafting the proclamation needed to be more fully developed, especially given this student’s appreciation for the political reasons for limiting emancipation. While the student’s insight that “Lincoln made slavery an issue in the Civil War” by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation explains the president’s belief that, by 1862, “ending slavery was just as important as preserving the Union,” he does not take into consideration the host of factors that figured into the president’s decision. To do this, a teacher may want to suggest the issue of motive to the student. Why, for example, did Lincoln decide to free the slaves in 1863 instead of from the very start of his presidential administration in 1861? Was it a decision based on political considerations? Did his religious beliefs influence the decision? Students might consider what influences shape their own decision-making processes or those of the current president. Teachers may also suggest that the student consult some outside readings or a website on Lincoln to better understand his decision.

In fact, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in part to quiet his abolitionist critics, who charged that his reluctance to declare slaves free was prolonging the Civil War, and partly in pursuit of his abolitionist convictions and original war aim to preserve the union. Hoping that an emancipation policy would not be interpreted as the act of a desperate administration to raise a servile insurrection, Lincoln waited for a Union victory before issuing the proclamation. The Battle of Antietam, fought on September 17, 1862, provided him with that victory. Still, the quality of explanation in this essay as well as the skill with which the student integrates primary source quotation with his own explanation of the document is the type of work one might expect from a high school junior.

**Fugitive Slave Advertisements**

Fugitive slave advertisements present a rare view into the slave culture of antebellum America as well as into the lives of the runaways themselves. Advertisements were designed to identify as precisely as possible information about men and women who left behind few other personal records. Often
these published notices contained information about their physical characteristics—age, height, sex, skin color, scars and bodily markings—as well as the type of clothing they wore. Some notices offer clues about the daily life of the slaves, including the type of work they performed, marriage status, frequency of escapes, and connections to family and friends. Additionally, the advertisements offer the subjective assessments of the owners, who tended to classify runaways with such terms as *cunning, impudent, bold, and complacent*, among others.

The following fugitive slave advertisement was taken from the November 29, 1809, edition of the *Chester and Delaware Federalist*:

**TAKE NOTICE.**

WAS taken up, on suspicion of being a run-away, and now confined in the gaol of Chester county, Pennsylvania, a Black Man,

who calls himself, SHADRACK MACKLIN, appears to be about 21 or 22 years of age; about 5 feet 7 or 8 inches high; full face; thick lips; and small scar under his right eye; says he was brought up with Sampson Davis, a colored man and house carpenter, near Milford, Sussex county, state of Delaware and set free by him, March 1809, but has no credentials to show this was the case.

Any person owning said black man, is desired to come forward, prove his property, pay charges and take him away before the 17th of December next, otherwise he will be discharged from prison.

THOMAS EVANS

West Chester, PA Nov. 15, 1809

**STUDENT INTERPRETATION**

*Document title:* Newspaper article from the *Chester and Delaware Federalist*, November 29, 1809.

*What kind of document is this?* The document is like a 19th century version of our lost and found notices for missing children and pets. The document tells the reader that a slave by the name of Shadrick Macklin has been found and needs to be claimed or he will be set free. The articles briefly describes Mr. Macklin then tells how he should be claimed.

*Who wrote the document?* Thomas Evans
What other characteristics can you tell about the runaway?
Age: 21 or 22 years old  
Sex: Male  
Race: Black
Height: 5 feet, 7 or 8 inches
Also has full face, thick lips and a small scar under his right eye

When was the document written? The document was written on November 15, 1809, but wasn’t printed by the newspaper until 14 days later, on November 29, 1809.

Where was the document written? West Chester, Pennsylvania

Why was the document written? The document was written to try to help a slave owner claim his slave. It was written for the general public and for readers of the Chester and Delaware Federalist. Basically, this document was written to inform all the newspaper’s readers in the states of Pennsylvania and Delaware.

What is the significance of the document? This article tells me how slaves would be claimed in the 1800s and that slavery was still supported in Pennsylvania in 1809, even though it was abolished in the state in 1780.

The student offers a detailed description of the advertisement as well as two important insights. First, she notes that the advertisement is “like a 19th century version of our lost and found notices for missing children and pets.” This is a wonderful connection to make between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, especially since the teacher can build on it to describe the legal status of a slave as the property of his white master. The implication here is that the slave, like a pet, was treated as “property” rather than as a human being. The student also notes the reference to “thick lips,” “black” complexion, and “small scar under his right eye,” which emphasizes the fugitive's bodily condition and reinforces his value as property. If the student can make this type of connection, teachers will be able to build on that knowledge by explaining that such references serve as important descriptors and also reflect the common profile of the earliest runaways as having a dark complexion. Advertisements indicate that 70 percent of the runaways during the period 1790 to 1816 were so dark-skinned that they were described as “black” and possessed strong Negroid features such as “thick lips.”

Second, the student writes that the significance of the advertisement lies in the fact that “slavery was still supported in Pennsylvania in 1809, even though it was abolished in the state in 1780.” Although I wish she had developed that thought a bit more, the acknowledgment of that fact demonstrates some important background knowledge. Teachers may want to use these fugitive slave advertisements to introduce a unit on slavery and/or abolitionism and elicit some critical questions around which to organize the unit, such as: What kinds of slaves decided to run away and why? How do fugitive slave advertisements help us understand the legal status of a slave in antebel-
lum America? and Why did a Pennsylvania newspaper run slave advertisements in 1809 when that state had abolished slavery in 1780? This particular advertisement is especially useful for answering the first question about the kinds of slaves who ran away.

Shadrack Macklin was, like most slaves who attempted escape during the early years of the Underground Railroad, a single young man in his early twenties. Advertisements from Virginia, Tennessee, Louisiana, and the Carolinas dating to the period 1790 to 1816 reveal that males in their late teens and twenties composed 81 percent of the runaways and 78 percent of them were between the ages of thirteen and twenty-nine. Single, young men ran away because they did not have the responsibilities of a family and they were more willing than females to challenge the authority of masters and overseers. Once they set out on the route to freedom, young male runaways were better able to defend themselves and resist capture. Young slave women, on the other hand, were less likely to run away because of child-rearing responsibilities. Even if they did not have their own children to care for, slave women in their teens and early twenties were expected to care for other children in the slave community and, in some cases, the master’s children as well. This did not mean that they were any less desirous of freedom than their male counterparts, but rather that they understood that carrying children in flight to the North would slow their passage and make them more vulnerable to capture. This pattern changed after the 1820s, when female slaves escaped in increasing numbers, sometimes with their children in tow, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The following advertisement from the October 6, 1857, edition of the Charlestown [South Carolina] Mercury reflects these changing circumstances:

**$500 REWARD. —RANAWAY**

about three years ago, a mulatto girl named CEELY, rather short and thickset, about 28 or 30 years of age, light complexion; has a small scar on her upper lip, near the mouth; her upper teeth bad, near gums; a fine seamstress, mantua maker and tailoress; has often been seen about the city since she went off, and is supposed to be harbored (as she has been heretofore) by some white person. Five hundred dollars will be paid for her apprehension, and fifty dollars on proof to conviction of any responsible person who may have harbored her.

WM. R. TABER.

Charlestown, SC October 6, 1857
STUDENT INTERPRETATION

The kind of document I decided to do my essay on was a newspaper article. It describes the features of a female runaway slave named Ceely. She was a seamstress about 28 or 30 years of age. She escaped from her master in 1854, three years before the article was written.

A quote that I thought was important was “Five Hundred dollars will be paid for her apprehension, and fifty dollars on proof to conviction of any responsible person who may have harbored her.” After reading this quote, you can see that most slaves were treated as trash and not as real humans.

Knowing who wrote the article is also important. In this article, William Taber was the author. He was a slave owner who might have been a leader in his community of Charlestown, South Carolina. I say this because he seems to be wealthy. Anyone offering to pay $550 for the return of a runaway slave must have been wealthy because that was a lot of money back then. My guess is that Taber wanted Ceely back because she was one of the best slaves he owned. She might have even been a house servant because slaves with lighter skin were thought to be better than those who were darker skinned and worked in the fields.

This document is important because it shows how different black slaves were treated from white people. The description of Ceely’s skin color, teeth, and short thick body is insulting. It’s like she was an animal or a piece of property.

This student demonstrates some good inductive reasoning. She notes that William Taber, the slaveholder, was most likely wealthy because he is “offering to pay $550 for the return of [his] slave.” She also states that his emphasis on describing the runaway’s physical characteristics leads the student to believe that Ceely was treated like “an animal or a piece of property.” More insightful is the student’s recognition of social status based on skin color. She points out that Taber offers such a high reward for Ceely because she “might have . . . been a house servant.” The student clarifies the point by explaining that “slaves with lighter skin were thought to be better than those who were darker skinned and worked in the fields.” This is an exceptional insight for a middle school student to make as it reflects the kind of higher-order thinking more often associated with high school. Not all students will recognize this subtlety.

Teachers might encourage students to think about the social hierarchy that was prevalent in antebellum America—among both blacks and whites—by having them consider the historic connotations of color in our society. Ask students, for example, what adjectives come to mind when they think about the color white. Many will probably mention purity, goodness, and
cleanliness. What about the color black? Some may respond with such words as darkness, dirty, evil. It was no different in antebellum society, when white people were generally treated as if they belonged to a higher social class than people of color. Even within the African American race, those slaves with lighter complexions were often favored by their masters and used as house servants. Of course, teachers must make clear to students that while these connotations are not an acceptable way to treat any human being, regardless of her skin color, it was an acceptable method of defining a person during the nineteenth century.

Ceely, the “mulatto,” or a person of mixed racial ancestry, the focus of the previous advertisement, may very well have been a house servant because of her light complexion. To be sure, mulattoes escaped in increasingly greater numbers after the 1820s, with as much as a 43 percent increase by 1860. Light-skinned slaves enjoyed certain advantages if they decided to escape. Not only were they more likely to pass for white people, but their skills could also allow them to find employment in free society more readily than fugitives of a darker hue because they often held positions as house servants, maids, cooks, and barbers on the slave plantation. Mulattoes were also twice as likely to be literate as black fugitives. They often carried freedom papers or passes forged by their own hand and could assimilate more easily into the free black population of a major Northern city.6

Antebellum Diaries and Journals

Diaries and journals offer some unique insight into the operation of, routes on, and participants in the Underground Railroad. Students and teachers can easily access these sources on the Web at the sites listed in the annotated bibliography. Quakers, in particular, were known for recording their daily activities as a way of reflecting on their spiritual lives. Farmers also kept diaries as a way of recording seasonal change and weather patterns that might have an impact on their planting or harvest. Often, their political views, family history, and social goings-on found their way into these accounts as well.

David Evans (1818–1898), a Quaker farmer and schoolteacher from Willistown, Chester County, Pennsylvania, kept such a diary. He was the son of Nathan Evans, an outspoken Quaker minister whose antislavery messages were not always appreciated by his more conservative neighbors as well as the members of Willistown Friends Meeting, where the family worshipped. While Nathan was eventually disowned from the Willistown Meeting because of his illegal involvement in the Underground Railroad, David was more secretive about his abolitionist beliefs as well as his own involvement with the
Underground Railroad. However, his two-volume journal in the collections of the Chester County Historical Society offers special insight into his clandestine activities.

Students may be introduced to the diary through the following 1836 entry, which describes an antislavery meeting at the Willistown Friends School House and establishes the important connection between abolitionist efforts in a local community and the larger statewide movement in Pennsylvania:

8 mo.–12–1836: Fifth day evening last, the first meeting on the subject of Anti-Slavery which has been held in this neighborhood took place last evening at our school house. It was well attended and a great interest manifested by the audience. William Whitehead from West Chester gave us a very pertinent and manly address. The call for a state convention and the declaration of principles published by a meeting at Adelphia Hall in Philadelphia was read. A committee was appointed to bring forward the names of delegates to attend the State convention and made report to a meeting to be held at the same place on the first 7th day of next year. The meeting terminated without disturbance and was altogether calculated to leave a favorable impression.

Note the references to the calling of a state convention and the committee “appointed to bring forward the names of delegates to attend the State convention” at this local antislavery gathering. Both of these references underscore the grassroots nature of the antislavery movement. Like the Religious Society of Friends, whose members condemned the institution of slavery on spiritual and moral grounds, the antislavery movement had a hierarchical organization. Operational principles and policies were drafted at state conventions by delegates who represented smaller, regional antislavery societies. The delegates were the most respected and active members of the local societies.

Another point to register with students is that the Quakers had a custom of referring to months and days by numbers to avoid giving homage to the pagan gods for whom some were named. This practice was consistent with the Quaker belief in a simple or plain lifestyle, which emphasized practical behavior and specifically the avoidance of any extravagance in dress, personal behavior, language, or vocabulary. Thus, Sunday was called First Day, Monday, Second Day, and so on. January was the First Month, February, the Second Month, and so on. In the previous entry, “8 mo.” refers to August, and “Fifth day” refers to Thursday.

The following excerpts are taken from the year 1842. Evans was a twenty-four-year-old schoolteacher at the time he wrote these entries. He also provides the reader with some keen insight into the operation of the
local Underground Railroad station and how he conducted business at his station:

Fifth day morning last, I started about 2 A.M. and took 4 colored persons to the Anti-Slavery office in Philadelphia. They were sent on by J. Fulton the evening before in care of Henry Lee, a colored man. Two more weary travelers from the land of bondage came last evening on their way to Canada.

Fifth day morning about 2 o'clock Lukens Pierce drove up in a farm wagon containing 27 colored persons—13 adults and 14 children. Fifth day evening I took 13 of them—5 women, 3 men and 5 children to the Anti-Slavery office in Philadelphia in E. Passmore's dearborn [covered wagon] and with his horses. Last night Davis Garrett, Jr., and John Wright, a colored young man took the rest of them down in two dearborns.

An anti-slavery meeting was held in Joseph Hickman's house fifth day p.m. Another was held in our schoolhouse in the evening. Dr. Irwin lectured. I attended the one in the afternoon. Lucretia Mott and F. Douglass, a runaway were also there, but he left early fearing that he might be arrested.

On fourth day night Henry Lee took 5 colored people to town—two women and 3 children. On Sixth day night Father took 16 more, all men. This company of men came from Harrisburg and would not have disgraced any Station so far as we may judge from their behavior while here. We had supper prepared for them in the evening so that all might sit down together. As I observed their conduct toward each other at the table, I thought that they were much above the generality of whites among us in point of breeding.

STUDENT INTERPRETATION 1

David Evans was a white Quaker man who believed in antislavery. He was also a father, husband, schoolteacher and had a variety of other jobs. He kept a diary that kept records about what went on at his underground railroad station. It also tells about how he helped many slaves escape during the night or very early in the morning hours: “Fifth day morning about 2 o’clock Lukens Pierce drove up in a farm wagon containing 27 colored persons.”

David Evans was an 80 year-old man when he died. He started writing this diary when he was about 17 years old. He was married and had children. He was the founder of the borough of Malvern. David Evans was also a minister.

He wrote this diary sometime between 1835 and 1898. During this time period there was a lot of slavery going on. There were also a lot of slaves escaping North. He wrote the diary to keep track of how many black and white people helped and to remember what went on in his meetings. He may
have also written it so that other people could read it to know what went on. The document is important because it lets people know what was happening to slaves and that there were some good people who tried to do something to end it.

Although this essay might appear to be strictly descriptive in nature, it does contain some important points about the operation of the Underground Railroad. First, the student identifies the fact that the agents Evans worked with conducted fugitives between stations at night to escape notice by the authorities. Second, she identifies the interracial nature of the secret route to freedom, noting that Evans kept the diary “to keep track of how many black and white people helped.” Blacks like Henry Lee and John Wright served as conductors. Whites like J. Fulton, E. Passmore, Lucretia Mott, and Evans himself were stationmasters. Whether or not the student fully understands the implications of these two patterns is another matter. But at least it’s a starting point for her teacher to develop as the class continues its study of the Underground Railroad.

The following student offers a more developed—and creative—analysis of the Evans diary entries:

**STUDENT INTERPRETATION 2**

David Evans closed his diary and walked to the door, someone was knocking. He answered the door and discovered “two more weary travelers from the land of bondage who were on their way to Canada.” He quickly welcomed them inside his house, making sure that no one saw his illegal actions.

The scene happened 160 years ago and was written down by David Evans in the journal he kept since he was a little boy. Evans had a negative outlook on slavery from an early age because his parents were “ardent abolitionists and station masters on the Underground Railroad.” He also thought that the runaways were smarter than the white people he knew because when he “observed their conduct toward each other at the table, I thought that they were much above the generality of whites among us in point of breeding.”

In 1842 when these diary entries were made, Evans was 24 years old. He probably wanted to keep a record of runaway slaves to know how many of them he helped and what happened to them if their families came looking for them.

The Underground Railroad was an illegal movement because of the Fugitive Slave Law. If Evans was caught or his diary was found by a slave owner or a government official, he would have been arrested and sent to jail. Today his diary is important because historians and researchers can get a good idea of how the Underground Railroad operated.
This student not only uses primary source quotes to support her argument but explains some key insights into the risks an abolitionist took when he decided to participate on the Underground Railroad. Her contention that Evans “would have been arrested and sent to jail” if “his diary was found by a slave owner or a government official” is an illustration of this point. Additionally, Evans would have incriminated all those agents he named in the diary. Another good insight is provided in the student’s remark that Evans “had a negative outlook on slavery from an early age because his parents were ‘ardent abolitionists and station masters on the Underground Railroad.’”

Among all the white agents, Quakers, in particular, sympathized with the plight of the slaves because of their religious conviction in the spiritual equality of all human beings. Accordingly, those Friends who became active on the Underground Railroad usually inculcated the same beliefs in their children. Predictably, for the Evans family, involvement in this illegal movement was a family affair.

Finally, the student offers a fascinating insight into Evans’ perception of the slaves, who were generally considered intellectually inferior. She writes that the Quaker schoolteacher “thought runaways were smarter than the white people he knew” and then supports the point with Evans’ own observation that “their conduct toward each other at the table” was “much above the generality of whites among us in point of breeding.” The reference is similar to William Still’s finding that runaways were “in general, more intelligent than most slaves” and helps to dispel the myth that runaways were intellectually inferior and passive recipients in the movement.8

**Letters**

Letters were more common among Underground Railroad agents than diaries and journals, probably because they served the more practical purpose of conveying information that was needed immediately. In addition, most letters were destroyed once they were read to avoid the possibility of incrimination.

William Still, a free black abolitionist who coordinated the Eastern Line of the Underground Railroad from the offices of the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society in Philadelphia, was perhaps the most prodigious letter writer. He also had a sense of history and preserved his correspondence, hiding it in a local cemetery until after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery in the United States.9 In 1872 Still used the correspondence to write and publish an eight-hundred-page book titled *The Underground Railroad*. Not only does the book provide a rare eyewitness account, but it is also considered by historians to be the most accurate source ever written on the secret passage to freedom. The following letter is taken from Still’s book.10
Wilmington, 12th Mo. 1st, 1860

RESPECTED FRIEND, WILLIAM STILL: —I write to let thee know that Harriet Tubman is again in these parts. She arrived last evening from one of the trips of mercy to God’s poor, bringing two men with her as far as New Castle. I agreed to pay a man last evening to pilot them on their way to Chester County. The wife of one of the men, with two or three children, was left some thirty miles below, and I gave Harriet ten dollars to hire a man with carriage to take them to Chester County. She said a man had offered for that sum, to bring them on. I shall be very uneasy about them, until I hear they are safe. There is now much more risk on the road, than there has been for several months past, as we find that some poor worthless wretches are constantly on the look out on two roads, that they cannot well avoid, especially with carriage; yet as it is Harriet, who seemed to have had a special agent to guard her on her journey of mercy, I have hope.

Thy friend,
Thomas Garrett

STUDENT INTERPRETATION

William Still is sometimes called the “Father of the Underground Railroad.” He was a famous abolitionist who tried to help free slaves and help them escape to freedom. He received this particular letter from Thomas Garrett concerning Harriet Tubman’s whereabouts. Garrett informed Still that Harriet was in “their parts” and that her journey would be dangerous and unsafe. In the letter he states, “I gave Harriet $10 to hire a man with carriage to take them to Chester County.” He also told Still that she had a “special agent” with her to help lead the way.

Thomas Garrett is the author of the letter. He was also a station master on the Underground Railroad, just like Still was. Garrett is a male in his 30s or 40s. He resides in Wilmington, Delaware, an active part of the Underground Railroad where a lot of “safe houses” and abolitionists were located.

This document was written on December 1, 1860. During this time, the Underground Railroad was most likely at its highest peak, probably because slaves passed word of freedom in the North through songs, quilts and stories.

Garrett wrote the letter because he wanted Still to know where Harriet Tubman was and that he was very concerned about her safety. The letter shows how the Underground Railroad operated between Wilmington, Delaware, where Garrett lived, and Philadelphia, where Still lived. It also shows that both of these men were good friends who put their lives at risk to help runaway slaves.
This student demonstrates a strong ability to integrate fact, concept and explanation in her writing. She opens with the concept “William Still is sometimes called the ‘Father of the Underground Railroad’” and explains why in the next sentence. The student tells us that Still was “a famous abolitionist who tried to help free slaves and help them escape to freedom” and also reinforces his critical role by revealing his association with two other famous agents, Thomas Garrett and Harriet Tubman. In this sense, the essay does a nice job of describing the content of the letter as well as offering the student’s insight into its importance.

The interpretation also demonstrates some good deductive reasoning in the third and fourth paragraphs. After the student identifies the date of the letter as December 1, 1860, she places it in a historical context by noting that “the Underground Railroad was most likely at its highest peak” at this time. She then surmises that the popularity of the movement was “probably because slaves passed word of freedom in the North through songs, quilts and stories.” Whether conscious or not, her wording demonstrates intellectual honesty. To be sure, there was greater accessibility to the Underground Railroad for all the reasons she mentions by 1860. But the mythology of the movement, especially regarding the use of quilts as secret codes, does cast enough doubt on the methods of communication to warrant the use of the term probably.

Accordingly, teachers will want to emphasize the important distinction between the myth and the reality of the Underground Railroad with students. Encourage them to think about the letters they write to friends. How do they try to portray themselves, their achievements and/or shortcomings, to a close friend? What kinds of biases do they bring to their letter writing? Have they ever written a confidential letter or kept a diary in a secret code to prevent someone else from gaining sensitive knowledge? How will grandchildren or great-grandchildren interpret their writings years from now? These are the kinds of issues that will give students a better appreciation for the secrecy as well as questionable accuracy of documents regarding the Underground Railroad and why it is important to speculate about a letter writer’s intention rather than to state it as fact.

Finally, this student’s identification of the letter’s importance—its revelation of “how the Underground Railroad operated between Wilmington, Delaware, where Garrett lived, and Philadelphia, where Still lived” and “that both of these men were good friends who put their lives at risk to help runaway slaves”—is precisely the kind of lesson students should learn from this exercise.

Another letter taken from Still’s book, shown on the following page, offers a more cryptic description of the manner in which the Underground Railroad operated.11
Washington, D.C., June 22, 1854

MR. WILLIAM STILL: —Sir—I have just received a letter from my friend, William Wright, of York Sulphur Springs, Pa., in which he says, that by writing to you, I may get some information about the transportation of some property from this neighborhood to your city or vicinity.

A person who signs himself Wm. Penn, lately wrote to Mr. Wright, saying he would pay $300 to have this service performed. It is for the conveyance of only one small package; but it has been discovered since, that the removal cannot be so safely effected without taking two larger packages with it. I understand that the three are to be brought to this city and stored in safety, as soon as the forwarding merchant in Philadelphia shall say he is ready to send on. The storage, etc., here, will cost a trifle, but the $300 will be promptly paid for the whole service. I think Mr. Wright’s daughter, Hannah, has also seen you. I am also known to Prof. C.D. Cleveland, of your city. If you answer this promptly, you will soon hear from Wm. Penn himself.

Very truly yours,

J. BIGELOW, ESQ.

STUDENT INTERPRETATION

This primary source is a letter written to William Still. While the letter appears to be about a package and merchants, these are probably metaphors for slaves, stations and conductors on the Underground Railroad. The author informs William Still that a man who writes under the name “William Penn” will pay $300 to have three slaves transported to safety, and also to seek his help.

The author signs as J. Bigelow, Esq. The “Esq.” means “esquire” or “gentleman.” Since lawyers use that title, Bigelow was probably a lawyer. He is against slavery, but does not write like a conductor. He is very formal in the letter where other letters from conductors to William Still call him “friend” and are more casual. Therefore, Bigelow is someone who doesn’t regularly help runaways, but may be helping a friend who is an Underground Railroad agent. One key sentence is, “I am also known to Prof. C.D. Cleveland, of your city.” If Bigelow knew Still, he would not have needed to identify himself in this way.

Bigelow writes from Washington D.C. where slavery was legal, even though it was close to free states. It was not a popular place to hide slaves, which also supports that this was not an ordinary case.

This document is important not only because it helps to give three people their freedom, but because it shows that even people who were not directly involved with the Underground Railroad were sympathetic to that cause.
This student does an impressive job of interpreting an extremely challenging letter. He identifies the use of commercial vocabulary as a metaphor for escaping slaves. Thus, he explains that the runaways are referred to as “packages” to be “conveyed” from Washington, D.C., to Philadelphia “as soon as the forwarding merchant,” or stationmaster, “shall say he is ready to send [them] on.” Just as important, the student correctly identifies the author of the letter, J. Bigelow, as a lawyer assisting a friend, William Wright, who was an agent. Such individuals were referred to on the Underground Railroad as a “friend of a friend.” What tipped the student off was Bigelow’s “formal” writing style, which is not like the “more casual” style of other conductors who refer to William Still as “friend.” Additionally, the student points out that Bigelow feels it necessary to mention a mutual acquaintance, Prof. C. D. Cleveland, in order to gain Still’s trust.

Those students who may find the concept of cryptic language difficult might be encouraged to write their own code letters, using a secretive vocabulary that they are more comfortable with. Ask them to provide a vocabulary key or definitions for the code words at the end of the letter. This method of learning by doing is often helpful for students who have difficulty with abstract thinking skills.

Although individuals like Bigelow were not active participants on the Underground Railroad, they were critical to the operation of the enterprise. They served as important liaisons, especially in cases where the local stationmasters or conductors were illiterate and could not communicate directly with Still. Sometimes they also provided the finances necessary for transportation to the North. The student grasped this significant point in the final line of his essay, indicating that the letter “shows that even people who were not directly involved with the Underground Railroad were sympathetic to that cause.”

The letter contains one other important reference to the operation of the Underground Railroad, though it eluded the student: runaway children rarely, if ever, escaped alone. Children, like single women, were almost always accompanied by one or more adult males. Bigelow registers this point in his reference to “only one small package” whose “removal cannot be so safely effected without taking two larger packages with it.”

Another way to teach students how to interpret primary source letters is to have them write their own. The following student was asked to read a series of four letters, including the two just discussed, and then write her own, requesting assistance in aiding a runaway slave in such a manner that someone intercepting it would not know what it was about. After reading the letters, the student made a list of all the code words contained in the letters. She identified the following code words: trips of mercy to God’s poor (helping runaways escape to freedom in the North); special agent (God); poor, worthless
wretches (slave catchers); Moses (Harriet Tubman); and packages (runaway slaves). Then she wrote the following letter:

**STUDENT INTERPRETATION**

Wilmington, 8th Mo. 2nd, 1860

Dear Friend, William Still,

On the 30th of 7th Month, I had a dream that Moses sent me five of God’s poor. Moses told me that each of God’s poor needs help in escaping to the Promised land. I said that I would help them. I will notify you on how my dream turns out.

Today, six packages arrived at my house. I told the delivery man that I will give the packages to a friend of mine in Kennett, Isaac Mendenhall. I also told him that I have a special agent helping me and that the packages will be delivered safely. The man asked that I tell him when the packages, especially the smallest one, are delivered to their new home. I told him I would.

Your dear friend,

Thomas

This student does several impressive things in her letter. First, she demonstrates her understanding of nineteenth-century Quaker etiquette by dating the letter “8th Mo. 2nd, 1860” and then identifying, in the letter, July 30 of that same year as “30th of 7th Month.” She also addresses William Still as “Dear Friend,” also a Quaker custom. Second, she demonstrates her understanding not only of code words but also of the religious nature of those words. Her use of “Moses” refers to Harriet Tubman, who was often called the Moses of her people because, like Moses of the Old Testament, who led the Jews out of bondage in Egypt, Tubman led black slaves out of bondage in the South.14 Similarly, the student uses “God’s poor” to refer to runaways and “Promised land” as a reference to freedom in the North. While all Underground Railroad agents used the vocabulary of the railroad to disguise the true meaning of this illegal route to freedom, Quakers also used religious language, probably as a reminder that their involvement, though illegal according to civil law, was consistent with God’s law. Finally, the student demonstrates her knowledge of the types of runaways who escaped on the Underground Railroad, noting that the “packages” to be delivered were not just adults, but children, a point she makes by referring to the “smallest” package and the concern she has that it is delivered safely to its “new home.”

**Summary**

Regardless of the document, public declarations, diaries, newspaper advertisements, and letters are the stuff of history. Although they present a partic-
ular bias held at a particular period of time, documents also bring students face-to-face with the actual words and thoughts of the stationmasters, conductors, and, sometimes, former slaves who shaped the Underground Railroad. In the process, documents can help students understand the human element of history, personalizing it in a way that no textbook can. In Chapter 3, we will explore two other types of primary source documents: photographs and engravings.

Endnotes


3. Ibid., 210–11.


11. Ibid., 22–23.


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