

## ALBUM [LITERACY AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE](#)

### Album Description

For Black Americans before and after Emancipation, reading and writing were “[fugitive](#)” acts that pushed back against White Supremacy.

?? 499 words, 2 minutes

### Why teach it?

- Students of all racial backgrounds should **learn about this country’s history of attempting to prevent Black people from learning to read and write.**
- Doing so will help young people understand that **reading and writing are powerful safeguards for freedom.**
- African American students in particular should get the opportunity to learn about the **heroic efforts Black Americans have made throughout their history to learn “[by hook or crook](#)”** at great personal risk to themselves.

### Why was literacy forbidden for Black people before Emancipation?

- Southern slaveholders feared that **reading and writing would empower Black Americans to escape** the mental and physical bondage of slavery.
- According to [Frederick Douglass](#), there was a notion among slaveholders that **literacy would “ruin” a person for slavery**, resulting in a slave’s “running away with himself.”
- [Newspaper ads](#) for fugitive slaves commonly described their [reading abilities](#). Slaveholders **worried that literate slaves would be able to write passes for themselves** to move freely toward escape.

### How were Black people prevented from reading and writing?

- Starting with [South Carolina](#) in 1740, states across the country passed **anti-literacy laws that banned the study of reading and writing** for enslaved—and sometimes free—African Americans.
- Violating these laws was dangerous. A North Carolina anti-literacy law passed in 1831 punished teaching an enslaved person to read or write with [39 lashes](#) or imprisonment.

### How did Black people resist anti-literacy laws?



- Enslaved and free Black Americans covertly learned to read and write in places where it was forbidden. They “[stole away to secret places at night to study](#),” according to educator and historian Carter G. Woodson.
- [Susie King Taylor](#), a Black Civil War nurse who grew up under Georgia’s anti-literacy law in the 1850s, wrote about how she “[wrapped books in paper](#) to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them.”

## When did these laws come about?

- The first known anti-literacy law was passed in South Carolina in 1740 in response to a **1739 slave uprising called the [Stono Rebellion](#)**.
- South Carolina legislators suspected that the rebellion had been aided and coordinated by literate Black people.

## Where was Black education limited?

- Although anti-literacy laws were particularly common in southern, slaveholding states, **northern “free” states also passed laws intended to prevent Black people from becoming educated**.
- In 1833, Connecticut [passed a law](#) that prevented Black people who had moved to the state from receiving an education.

## What happened after Emancipation?

- During Reconstruction, Black lawmakers and their allies [established](#) the **first [public schools](#) in the South** for Black and White students alike.
- Schools for Black children established in this period **persisted through violent backlash**. Between 1866 and 1876, more than 630 Black schools were [burned down](#).

## Go deeper

- [Watch](#) Harvard historian **Dr. Jarvis Givens** discuss barriers to literacy for Black Americans before and after Emancipation.
- [Read](#) Dr. Givens’ book, *Fugitive Pedagogy*.
- [Learn](#) how to teach language and **literacy as an act of resistance**.



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[Social Studies/History](#)

[English/Language Arts](#)

[Literacy](#)

[Black History](#)



**Teaching Notes:**

Watch Harvard historian Dr. Jarvis Givens talk about the history of racial barriers to literacy in the United States—and the long tradition of resistance in the face of efforts to limit Black education.

*Racial barriers to literacy.* (2022). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Khoan1ac3xM>

ST. CLOUD

2, IMAGE 1



### Teaching Notes:

This newspaper article provides a key detail about anti-literacy laws passed in the earlier half of the 19th century, but it also provides an opportunity for students to practice the skills of **sourcing** and **contextualizing** : reading the source in the context of the time and place it was created and with an understanding of the position of its creator.

Start by asking students to find out what the punishment was for teaching an enslaved person to read or write was in North Carolina in 1831.

Then move to questions of sourcing and contextualization:

- When was this newspaper published? How many years after the North Carolina law was passed? [Context]
- What was going on in the U.S. at the time that this article was published? [Context]
- What is the title of this newspaper? [Sourcing]
- What does the source tell you about where and by whom the newspaper was created? [Sourcing]
- What claim can you make about this newspaper's position on slavery? [Sourcing]

**Reference Link:** [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016836/1862-06-26/ed-1/seq-1/print/image\\_681x648\\_from\\_3692%2C7139\\_to\\_6133%2C9464](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016836/1862-06-26/ed-1/seq-1/print/image_681x648_from_3692%2C7139_to_6133%2C9464)

Newspaper: St. Cloud Democrat. [volume] (Saint Cloud, Stearns County, Minn.) 1858-1866

Newspaper Link: [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016836/1862-06-26/ed-1/seq-1/print/image\\_681x648\\_from\\_3692%2C7139\\_to\\_6133%2C9464](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016836/1862-06-26/ed-1/seq-1/print/image_681x648_from_3692%2C7139_to_6133%2C9464)



PDF Link: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016836/1862-06-26/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>

[SUSIE KING TAYLOR, K

AMERICAN ARMY NURSE]



### Teaching Notes:

This is a photographic portrait of Susie King Taylor, the first Black Civil War nurse and the author of an account included in this album of covertly learning to read as a child in Georgia. This image can be paired with that account and can also be part of a larger conversation about the [power of portraits](#) in the 19th century (see album on [Sojourner Truth](#)).

**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.57593/?loclr=blogtea>

### Summary

- Photograph shows portrait of Susie King Taylor, who served more than three years as nurse with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops Infantry Regiment during the American Civil War, although officially enrolled as a laundress. She also taught children and adults to read while serving with the regiment.

### Created / Published

- Boston : Published by the author, 1902 [from a photograph taken between 1862 and 1866]

### Genre

- Portrait photographs--1900-1910
- Book illustrations--1900-1910
- Halftone photomechanical prints--1900-1910

## Notes

- - LC Copy 1: Book is available in digital form on the Library of Congress Web site.  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/scd0001.20081001004re.2>
- - Title devised by Library staff.
- - Illus. in: Reminiscences of my life in camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops, late 1st S.C. volunteers, by Susie King Taylor, with illustrations. Boston : Published by the author, 1902, frontispiece.
- - Gift; Tom Liljenquist; 2018; (DLC/PP-2017:171-2, formerly deposit D074)
- - Purchased from: Chris Foard, The Foard Collection of Civil War Nursing, July 2018.
- - Forms part of: Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs (Library of Congress).
- - pp/liljpaper

## Repository

- Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA  
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

## Digital Id

- ppmsca 57593 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.57593





SUSIE K

LARNING

## II

### MY CHILDHOOD

I was born under the slave law in Georgia, in 1848, and was brought up by my grandmother in Savannah. There were three of us with her, my younger sister and brother. My brother and I being the two eldest, we were sent to a friend of my grandmother, Mrs. Woodhouse, a widow, to learn to read and write. She was a free woman and lived on Bay Lane, between Habersham and Price streets, about half a mile from my house. We went every day about nine o'clock, with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. We went in, one at a time, through the gate, into the yard to the L kitchen, which was the schoolroom. She had twenty-five or thirty children whom she taught, assisted by her daughter, Mary Jane. The neighbors would see us going in sometimes, but they supposed we were there learning trades, as it was the custom to give children a trade of some kind. After school we left the same way we entered, one by one, when we would go to a square, about a block from the school, and wait for each other. We would gather laurel leaves

### Teaching Notes:

The first two pages of Susie King Taylor's chapter "My Childhood" provide a first-person account of learning to read and write under Georgia's anti-literacy laws in the 1850s. Students should read this account after learning about the anti-literacy laws more generally and might consider:

- What was Susie King Taylor's experience of education as a child?
- How is Taylor's experience of school similar and different from yours?
- Why did Taylor hide her books in paper?
- What was the effect of anti-literacy laws on children who wanted to learn?

**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/resource/gdclccn.02030128/?sp=21>

Created / Published

- Boston, 1902.

Notes

- - LC Copy 1: Also available in digital form on the Library of Congress Web site. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/scd0001.20081001004re.2>
- - Gift; Tom Liljenquist; 2018; (DLC/PP-2017:171-2, formerly deposit D074)
- - LC Copy 2: Purchased from: Chris Foard, The Foard Collection of Civil War Nursing, July 2018.



Digital Id

- <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/gdclocn.02030128>
- <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.67943>

**GLIMPSES AT THE FREEDMEN - THE FREEDMEN'S UNION INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL,**



**Teaching Notes:**

This image from the Reconstruction Era illustrates African American women sewing at the Freedmen's Union Industrial School in Richmond Virginia. It can be used as part of a lesson about the schools for freedpeople that proliferated in the South in the years following Emancipation. This image offers opportunities for close reading and might be used as part of a [Zoom-In](#) or [Crop It](#) activity.

**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a38219/>

**Summary**

- Room of African American women sewing.

**Created / Published**

- 1866.

**Notes**

- - Illus. in: Frank Leslie's illustrated newspaper, v. 23, 1866 Sept. 22, p. 5.
- - Reference copy filed in: LOT 4422.



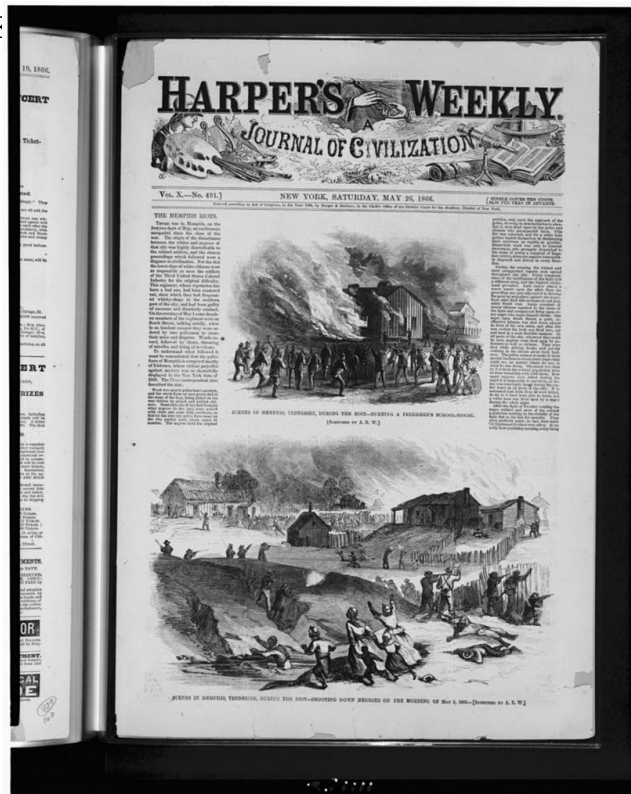
#### Repository

- Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

#### Digital Id

- cph 3a38219 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a38219
- cph 3a33775 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a33775

SCENE



E RIOT

### Teaching Notes:

This image from Harper's Weekly illustrates the violent White resistance to Black education that followed Emancipation. The burning of schools in Memphis in 1866 were part of a larger trend of more than 600 Black schools being burned down between 1866 and 1876.

**Reference Link:** <http://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c11152/>

Created / Published

- 1866.

Notes

- - 2 illustrations in: Harper's weekly, 1866 May 26, p. 321.

Digital Id

- cph 3c11152 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c11152

THE CHARLESTON *The Charleston Daily News.* ER 02, 1871, IMAGE 1



**Teaching Notes:**

This issue of the Charleston Daily News reports on the burning of a Black school in Laurens County, S.C. as part of a larger article on White vigilante tactics. It is worth emphasizing to students how this article downplays the burning of the school and suggests that things are by and large "perfectly quiet."

**Reference Link:** [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026994/1871-11-02/ed-1/seq-1/print/image\\_681x648\\_from\\_56%2C5169\\_to\\_1332%2C6384](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026994/1871-11-02/ed-1/seq-1/print/image_681x648_from_56%2C5169_to_1332%2C6384)

Newspaper: The Charleston daily news. [volume] (Charleston, S.C.) 1865-1873

Newspaper Link: [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026994/1871-11-02/ed-1/seq-1/print/image\\_681x648\\_from\\_56...](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026994/1871-11-02/ed-1/seq-1/print/image_681x648_from_56...)

Image provided by: University of South Carolina; Columbia, SC

PDF Link: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026994/1871-11-02/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>



## LEARNING TO READ

### Teaching Notes:

This poem, written during Reconstruction, describes the experience of an older woman learning to read after Emancipation and illustrates the fugitive tactics used by enslaved people to become literate before it was legal.

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

Have students read this poem in conversation with their discussion about anti-literacy laws and look for key details that help answer the question, "**How did African Americans resist anti-literacy laws before and after Emancipation?**"

## MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM

### Teaching Notes:

Frederick Douglass was one of the most famous Black writers, orators, advocates, and political figures of the 19th century. Enslaved at birth, Douglass escaped from bondage and wrote his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) seven years later. After becoming a more established newspaper editor and public figure, Douglass published this, his second book: *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855).

For a lesson about anti-literacy laws under slavery, focus on the section where Douglass quotes his former enslaver Hugh Auld about why literacy "ruins" a person for slavery:

The great mass of slaveholders look upon education among the slaves as utterly subversive of the slave system. I well remember when my mistress first announced to my master that she had discovered that I could read. His face colored at once with surprise and chagrin. He said that "**I was ruined, and my value as a slave destroyed**"; that a slave should know nothing but to obey his master; that to give a negro an inch would lead him to take an ell; that **having learned how to read, I would soon want to know how to write; and that by-and-by I would be running away**." I think my audience will bear witness to the correctness of this philosophy, and to the literal fulfillment of this prophecy (423).

Ask students to consider:

- What is Hugh Auld's perspective on enslaved people reading?
- Based on what Douglass says Hugh Auld said, where did the "value" of a slave come from?
- What does Douglass mean when he says that his audience will see the "correctness of this philosophy" and the "literal fulfillment of his prophecy"? Why is he saying that Auld was right?





## RESEARCH GUIDE: FUGITIVE SLAVE ADS

### Teaching Notes:

Use this research guide from the Library of Congress to learn or teach how to search LOC's Chronicling America newspaper collection for fugitive slave ads.

Fugitive slave ads were common in American newspapers before Emancipation. Between 1730 and 1865, an estimated 200,000 fugitive slave ads ran in U.S. newspapers, notifying readers of enslaved people who had run away and offering cash rewards for their return.

Students researching the connection that White slaveholders made between literacy and escape from bondage might research references to literacy in fugitive slave ads using this research guide.



## SOUTH CAROLINA SLAVE CODE OF 1740

### Teaching Notes:

This website has excerpts of the 1740 South Carolina Slave Code that includes the first known anti-literacy law. The whole thing is interesting, but the relevant passage about literacy is the following:

XLV. And *whereas*, the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, **may be attended with great inconveniences**; *Be it therefore enacted* by the authority aforesaid, That all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereinafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught, to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person and persons, shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.

After teaching students about the Stono Rebellion, ask them to read this excerpt from the 1740 law closely and consider:

- What are the "great inconveniences" the law refers to? What is this law trying to prevent?
- What effect do you think this law might have had? Consider the perspectives of both enslaved people and free people.



## THE STONO REBELLION

### Teaching Notes:

This short article from the Library of Congress provides some background information on the Stono Rebellion, the South Carolina slave uprising of 1739 that prompted the passage of the first anti-literacy law in 1740. This document can be used as a resource for your own background knowledge on the topic or could be a good place for students to start in learning about the roots of anti-literacy laws in the South.

## PRUDENCE CRANDALL'S SCHOOL AND CONNECTICUT'S

### Teaching Notes:

This article details the fascinating history of a school for Black girls founded by Prudence Crandall in Connecticut and her defiance of the state's "Black Law" of 1830 that made it illegal to educate Black children from out of state. This secondary source can be part of a conversation about how efforts to limit Black education defied regional boundaries (Connecticut is a northern state), but it can also be used as an example of interracial resistance to these efforts.

