

# Seeking a More Perfect Union

## *The Underground Railroad: Experiences of Freedom Seekers*

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### Watkins Museum of History Primary Lesson Plan

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#### Kansas History, Government and Social Studies Educational Standards

1. Choices have consequences
  - Human choices cause change dependent upon conditions which the decision maker may not be able to control or anticipate.
  - Every choice comes with a cost. (cause and effect of historical events)
2. Individuals have rights and responsibilities
  - Rights tell the bearer what they are at liberty to do but are not a requirement to exercise them.
3. Societies are shaped by the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals and groups.
  - Beliefs are considered or accepted by individuals as true, and impact behaviors and reactions.
4. Societies experience continuity and change over time.
  - Change is generally continuous, not simply discrete events happening at their own pace, and are often determined by “turning or tipping” points.
5. Relationships among people, places, ideas, and environments are dynamic.
  - Dynamic relationships involve circumstances which often create shifts in priorities, leading to tension and adjustments toward progress.

# Overview



This plan is designed to support classroom instruction in history, government, and social studies. It can be completed in 1-3 hours depending upon how many pre and post activities you choose to include. The specific theme of this lesson is *The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom-seekers*. Before teachers review the key vocabulary with the class, they should discuss the theme of the lesson and talk about what is meant by “Seeking a More Perfect Union” and how that is related to the experiences of freedom seekers. Follow that with the Four-Square vocabulary activity.

*The classroom teacher should review the information in the Overview prior to students completing discussions and activities.*

Possible intro: Have you heard of the Underground Railroad? It wasn't a real railroad with tracks and trains. It was a system of escape routes for people who needed to get out of danger and into a safer place. It was called 'underground' not because it was under the ground but because it had to be a secret. Do you know why it had to be a secret? It's because the people who were escaping were enslaved Black people no different from you and me except for the fact that there was a law that said that white people could own Black people as property.

The key vocabulary that we are going to discuss today will help you understand what the Underground Railroad was and how it worked.

## **Key vocabulary to front load for students:**

**Underground Railroad**

**Master/Mistress**

**Abolitionist**

**Slave**

**Free people of color**

**Freedom seekers**

**Station**

**Market**

**Steamboat**

## **Four-Square Word Activity**

Before beginning this unit introduce each vocabulary word one at a time by displaying the words for the students to see on a word wall, flip chart, or white board. Say the word aloud and have students repeat the word. Then briefly discuss each word asking students what they think each means and then sharing a student-friendly definition that is easy to understand, uses everyday language, and captures the word's use in this unit.

Divide the class into small groups and provide each group with a copy of the Four-Square graphic organizer on slide 9. Have each group select one of the vocabulary words ensuring that no words are being used by more than one group. Each group will then complete the graphic organizer by writing their selected word in the center and completing the information called for in each square. Once the Four-Square activity is complete ask each group to share their work with the class.

# Overview (continued)



Following the completion of the vocabulary activity, review the foundation information on this slide with the students explaining that Kansas, and in particular Lawrence, was part of the Underground Railroad. It may help to focus the conversation on the guiding questions below:

What do you think slavery is?

If you lived in the 1800s when slavery was allowed, what do you think you could do to help the Underground Railroad run?

It was dangerous being part of the Underground Railroad, because if anyone was caught trying to help enslaved people escape—or even trying to support the conductors or stations by offering food or money—they could be sent to jail or even killed. Can you think of a time when a person might risk their own safety to help another person stay safe?

In the early years of the Kansas Territory many slaves came through Kansas on their way to freedom. The informal network that aided these formerly enslaved people in their escape attempts was called the Underground Railroad. It helped escaped enslaved people, known as freedom seekers, reach places that were safe in free northern states and Canada, where slavery was illegal. Along the way, people who were against slavery, called abolitionists, would hide the freedom seekers and help them to their next stop along the route. The system was called the Underground Railroad because its activities were carried on in secret and because railway terms were used as code words. The routes to freedom were called “lines.” The hiding places on the lines were called “stations.” The people who moved or hid the enslaved people were called “conductors.” The enslaved people themselves were sometimes called “freight.” The people who ran the Underground Railroad were known as abolitionists—they wanted to abolish, or end, slavery in all states.

Though the journey on the railroad occasionally involved water travel or train travel, most passengers on the railroad traveled in small groups by foot. The routes were indirect and seldom the same to confuse people who might come looking for them. Passengers on the Underground Railroad would usually travel at night and sometimes walked between 10 to 20 miles from station to station. Since the Underground Railroad was secret, nothing was written down about where to go or who would help. So once enslaved people decided to make the journey to freedom, they had to listen for tips from other enslaved people, who might have heard tips from other enslaved people.

The reason the Underground Railroad had to be so secret was because it was against the law. Laws called the Fugitive Slave Acts protected slaveholders’ rights even in states that did not allow slavery.

Lawrence, KS was an important stop on the Underground Railroad, the city played a central role in the state’s anti-slavery struggle. The city was founded in 1854 by the New England Emigrant Aid Society to keep the territory free from slavery. It is said that Lawrence is one of the few cities in the U.S. founded strictly for political reasons. It is estimated that as many as 900- 1000 enslaved people were helped to escape through Kansas along The Underground Railroad routes from 1856-1860.

# Seeking a More Perfect Union

## *The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers*



### DISCUSSION

We know the Underground Railroad was illegal and it was also illegal to teach enslaved people to read and write. So, how do we know about the Underground Railroad? Oral traditions—stories that were passed down through families or communities are an important source of information.

That is the case with Henry “Box” Brown who orally shared the story of his brave escape from slavery when he was packed and mailed to freedom in a three-foot-long wooden box with only three air holes. After traveling along the Underground Railroad for 27 hours by wagon, train, and boat, Brown was delivered safely to agents of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



### LEADING QUESTIONS

Why was “oral history” important to the Underground Railroad?

Why did Henry mail himself to Philadelphia?

What problems do you think Henry Brown faced while he traveled in his box?

Do you think you could mail yourself somewhere today?



### HANDS ON ACTIVITY

Display the image of Henry’s narrative on on slide 10. (or provide students with a printed copy) After giving students a chance to look at the image (read the text to the class if necessary) ask the leading questions below.



### LEADING QUESTIONS

When do you think this item was printed?

How much did it cost to buy this book?

What does the term narrative mean?

Who is the author of this book?

What do you think “With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery” means? If you have a hard time answering this question, try defining the words remarks and remedy and see if that helps.

# Seeking a More Perfect Union

## The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers



### DISCUSSION

Explain to students they are going to watch a YouTube video of the book *Henry's Freedom Box* that was written by Ellen Levine, illustrated by Kadir Nelson and based on Henry's narrative. Let the students know that during the video they will be called on to answer questions about what they are seeing and hearing to make sure they understand how this book is an example of the experiences of freedom seekers. Before starting the video, show students the image of the book's cover on slide 11 and ask the leading questions below.



### LEADING QUESTIONS

Who do you think the little boy on the cover is?

How old do you think that boy looks?

What do you think the boy is thinking or feeling?

What else do you notice in the picture?

### Student Support

Link to the YouTube video Henry's Freedom Box.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6rf9bxDK1o>



### HANDS ON ACTIVITY

View the Henry's Freedom Box YouTube with the students. Pause the video at each time marker listed below and ask the connected Leading Question.



### LEADING QUESTIONS

- (0:30) Why didn't Henry know how old he was?
- (0:52) Even though Henry wasn't brutalized while enslaved, what was his mother's warning?
- (1:34) Why didn't Henry thank his captor for giving him to his son?
- (1:51) As he was preparing to leave the home where he had been enslaved, what two things did Henry see that made him think of freedom?
- (2:07) How did Henry's the new person enslaving Henry differ from the first person to enslave him?
- (2:30) Why do you think enslaved people did not dare sing in the streets?
- (4:04) Why were Henry's wife and children sold and enslaved by another person?
- (4:45) What two things gave Henry his idea to escape?
- (6:07) How was Henry able to get off work?
- (8:25) What day did Henry arrive in Philadelphia?

# Seeking a More Perfect Union

## The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers



### DISCUSSION

If time allows, let the students watch the YouTube video again without any interruptions. If not go directly to displaying the Author's Note on slide 12. Allow the students time to read the information or read it to them if appropriate. Ask the Leading Questions below.



### LEADING QUESTIONS

Was there any information in the Note that you had not heard about the Underground Railroad before?

What were the only items that Henry took with him in the box?

How far did Henry travel in the box?

How long did it take the box to get to Philadelphia?

What are you wondering about Henry?

### Student Support

Link to the YouTube video Henry's Freedom Box.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6rf9bxDK1o>



### Key Facts & Information

The information below may be helpful in answering questions that students may have after viewing the video.

- Henry was born in Louisa County, Virginia in 1815 or 1816.
- When his enslaver died, Henry was given to the son of his enslaver – he was only 13.
- Henry worked in a tobacco factory.
- His wife Nancy was enslaved by a different family.
- Henry and Nancy had to have permission from both of their enslavers to marry.
- Henry paid money to his wife's enslaver so that she and their children wouldn't be re-sold; but the deal was broken and they were sold anyway.
- Henry's crate was only 3 ft. long, 2 ft. wide and 2 ½ ft. deep.
- Henry was over 6 feet tall and weighed over 200 pounds, so it was a tight fit.
- Henry fled at the age of 33.
- Brown's box was transported by wagon, railroad, steamboat, wagon again, railroad, ferry, railroad, and finally delivery wagon.
- Henry was criticized for telling how he escaped because some feared it would only make it harder for other enslaved people slaves to follow the same path to freedom.
- Henry fled to England once the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act became law.
- Henry married a British woman in 1855 and they had a daughter together.
- Henry left England, moved to Canada, and remained there the rest of his life.
- It is believed that Henry died in 1897 in Toronto, Canada.



## Wrap Up Activity

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Review with students what they learned about slavery and the Underground Railroad.

Have students look at The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown on slide 13. Share with students that although some of the people shown in this painting were real people, they were not all present when the box was opened.

Have students find the man holding the pry bar. Share that his name is Frederick Douglass who, after escaping from slavery, became a national leader of the abolitionist movement.

Next, have them make observations about other details in the picture.

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## Leading Questions

Do you think this is really how Henry Box Brown looked when he emerged from his box?

How did the Underground Railroad help Henry escape?

Other people first learned about Henry Brown from oral history. Do you think that oral history is still important today?

# Follow Up Activity

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Discuss with the students that a book and a painting tell a story based on how the author or artist understands a situation or event.

- Divide students into teams of two. Tell them that they are each going to take a turn drawing a picture that tells a story as told to them by their teammate. The teller should not see what the drawer is doing until the picture is finished.
- Have students share their results with the class explaining how the drawing may differ from what the teller actually said.

Addressing Social, Emotional Learning (SEL) skills:

- Writing and drawing can provide a method of reflection and allow students to express feelings regarding their educational experiences. The format can vary depending on the students' needs and the instructor's goals.
  - Ask each student to write or draw how what they learned about the Underground Railroad made them feel.
  - Include SEL skills by asking students to include words or images that show how they felt about Henry's story.
    - Discuss whether learning about this topic might change their treatment of others.

Providing Scaffolding:

- Younger students or those who are challenged by the writing can create these entries by drawing.
- Allow the student to share their ideas with a scribe who writes it down for them.

Providing Enrichment:

- Advanced students can replace writing what they learned with creating journal entries for a slave traveling the Underground Railroad.



## Four-Square Vocabulary Graphic Organizer Activity

Definition	Synonym
Sentence	Drawing

Word

Price 25 Cents.

NARRATIVE

OF

**HENRY BOX BROWN,**

WHO

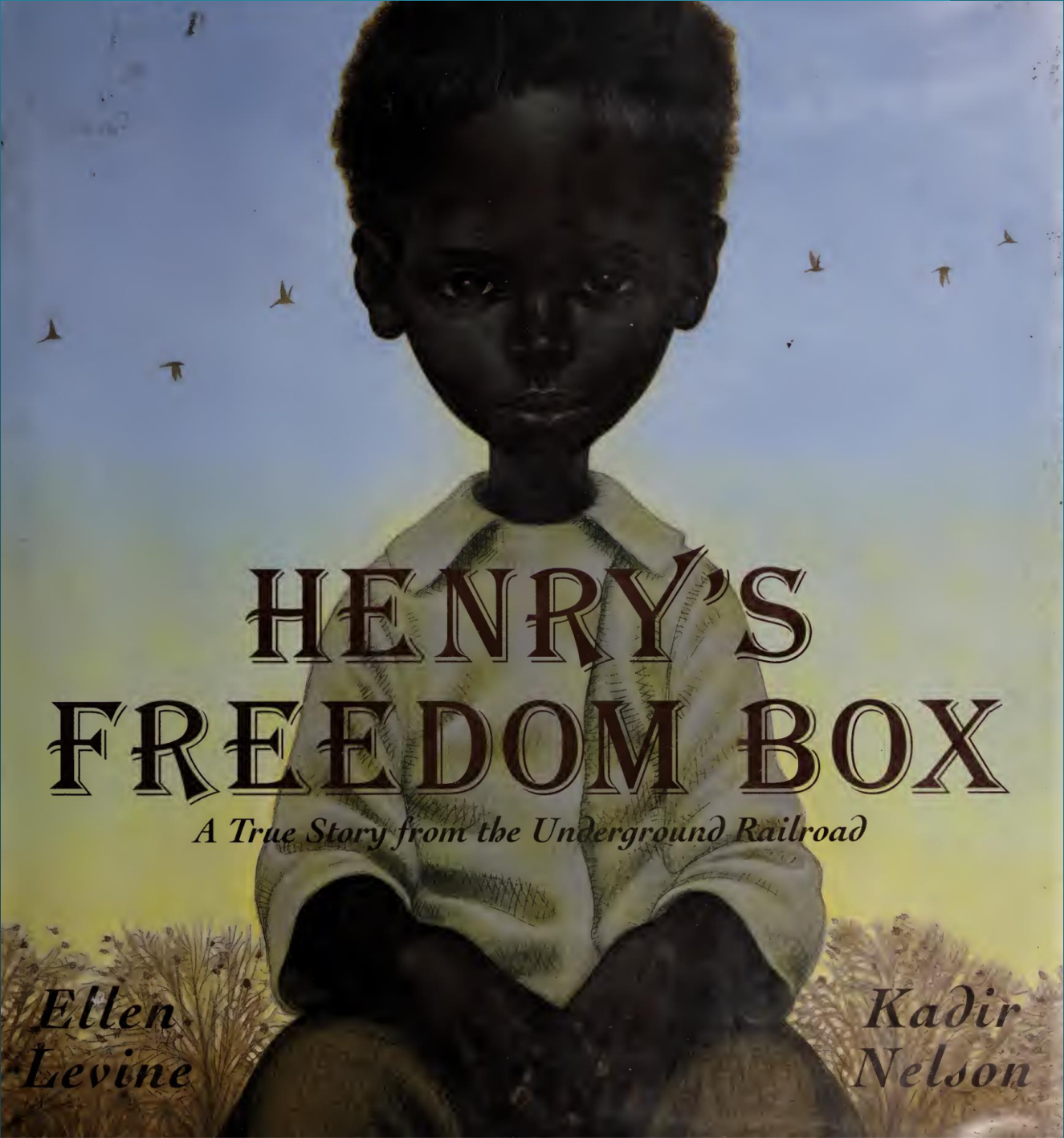
ESCAPED FROM SLAVERY, ENCLOSED IN A  
BOX THREE FEET LONG, TWO WIDE,  
AND TWO AND A HALF HIGH.

WRITTEN FROM A

STATEMENT OF FACTS MADE BY HIMSELF.

WITH REMARKS UPON THE REMEDY FOR SLAVERY,

BY CHARLES STEARNS.



**HENRY'S  
FREEDOM BOX**

*A True Story from the Underground Railroad*

*Ellen  
Levine*

*Kadir  
Nelson*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

IN THE MID-1800s, THERE WERE ABOUT FOUR MILLION SLAVES LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES. Slaves were owned, like tables, or cows, or wagons. Historians believe between 60,000 and 100,000 slaves escaped to freedom. They traveled on what became known as the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad, of course, wasn't a real railroad. It was all the secret ways slaves made their way from the South to the North. The fugitives hid in carts, rode on horseback, walked hundreds of miles through forests and swamps, and crossed flowing rivers in summer and icebound rivers in winter. They traveled any way they could to reach freedom. "Conductors" and "station masters" hid them and helped them throughout their journey.

When Henry Brown climbed into his Freedom Box, he hoped he'd be carried to a safe world. He brought along a small tool to make air holes, a little water, and a few biscuits. His only worry was about being caught. Henry arrived safely in Philadelphia, having traveled 350 miles from Richmond, Virginia, in twenty-seven hours. His story made newspaper headlines in America and Europe, and Henry "Box" Brown became one of the most famous runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad — the man who mailed himself to freedom.





THE RESURRECTION OF HENRY BOX BROWN AT PHILADELPHIA,  
Who escaped from Richmond Va. in a Box. 3 feet long 2½ ft. deep and 2 ft wide.