

William Henry Singleton

Carol Jackson

Grade Level: 5

Time Required: one hour

Learning Objective: Students will come to understand the early life of a slave by analyzing parts of a primary source narrative written by William Henry Singleton

State Learning Standards (or Common Core Standards):

- Reading: Informational Text Standard 1
Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- Reading: Informational Text Standard 2
Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text
- Writing Standard 8
Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work
- Speaking and Listening Standard 2
Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally

Guiding Question(s): Who was William Henry Singleton, and what do his experiences tell us about the life of a slave? How does your life compare with his?

Materials List:

- Biography of Singleton's life: <http://theazalea.com/chronicle-william-singleton/>
- Copies of sections of his personal narrative
- Access to projector to show video reenactment of his runaway account

Primary Source document(s) needed:

- Singleton's personal narrative
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/singleton/singleton.html>
- Pictures of Singleton: <http://www.ncgenweb.us/ncusct/single.jpg>
<http://theazalea.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/winter13a-330x220.jpg>
- Link to "Boy Runaway" video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCc8gQzxi1Y>

Learning Activities:

- Show pictures of William Henry Singleton
 - Ask, “Does anyone know who this man is?”
 - Have the class describe everything they can see in the pictures
 - Give brief oral life sketch of Singleton from biography
- Show “Boy Runaway” video
- Project paragraph one of narrative
- Do close reading of paragraph one together
 - First reading: Ask students to read the sections silently to themselves, looking for the main ideas
 - Second reading: Read the narrative aloud with the students, modeling fluency
 - Third reading: As they read it again, ask students to come up and highlight ways Singleton was treated as a slave
- Divide class into five groups and give each group another section of the narrative with a question to answer after they read the section together as a group
- Ask groups to present the main idea of their section, the question they were asked, and their group answer to the rest of the class
- Tableau
 - Let groups pick one scene from the video or narrative to act out
 - Give them three minutes to prepare tableau scene in their groups
 - Present tableaus for class, other groups guess which scene it is

Assessment:

- Ask students to write one page reflection of how his/her life compares with Singleton’s life

Extensions:

- Read Singleton’s entire narrative to students during teacher read aloud time
- Play spirituals from CD: “Steal Away: Songs of the Underground Railroad” by Kim and Reggie Harris
- Ask students to write a short narrative from a slave child’s point of view
- Have students research and report on what Singleton’s role was in the Civil War
- Play actual recordings of slave narratives from the Federal Writer’s Project, 1936-1938: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>
- Ask students to write down the main ideas of the narratives in their journals as they listen

From RECOLLECTIONS OF MY SLAVERY DAYS

BY WILLIAM HENRY SINGLETON

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/singleton/singleton.html>

First section to close read as a class:

I have lived through the greatest epoch in history, having been born August 10, 1835, at Newbern, North Carolina. That was not so many years, you see, after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence and the winning of the Revolutionary War. But in the country of the Declaration of Independence I was born a slave, for I was a black man. And because I was black it was believed I had no soul. I had no rights that anybody was bound to respect. For in the eyes of the law I was but a thing. I was bought and sold. I was whipped. Once I was whipped simply because it was thought I had opened a book. But I lived to see the institution of slavery into which I was born and of which I was for many years a victim pass away. I wore the uniform of those men in Blue, who through four years of suffering wiped away with their blood the stain of slavery and purged the Republic of its sin. I met, too, that great man who led those men as their great Commander-in-Chief; he shook hands with me, yes, talked to me. I can still see his sad, tired worn face as he spoke to me that day. And in those days since I was whipped simply because it was thought I had opened a book. I have seen the books of the world opened to my race. And with the help and sympathy of God's good people I have seen them make a beginning in education. And in my old age when a nation across the seas sought to enslave the world as once my race was enslaved, I saw the boys of my race take their place in the armies of the Republic and help save freedom for the world.

Sections to be read in small groups:

Group 1: Why did William Henry Singleton write his narrative?

Comparing my position now, living in a good home, with my wife, with friends, respected in my community, with the same rights that every other man has, those days of my boyhood seem like a dream. But folks who know my story like to hear me tell about those days, how we lived, what we thought about, how we were treated, what kind of people our masters were. So I recall them for my friends and for other folks, who, though they do not know me, might like to hear a true story that may seem as strange to them, however, as a fairy tale.

Group 2: How were slaves assigned their last names?

Now, although I was born black and a slave, I was not all black. My mother was a colored woman but my father was the brother of my master. I did not learn this until some years later. It caused me much trouble. They were a high, proud family, the Singletons. My master's estate was one of the largest in Craven county, North Carolina, and he had more slaves than any other planter thereabouts. The first thing I remember is playing on the plantation with my little brothers and with the other slave children. While the men and women slaves were in the cotton, corn and potato fields working during the day, we children were taken care of by an old slave lady at a central house. She had grown too old to work and so acted as a kind of nurse for the slave children during the day. I was about four years old at that time. I had two brothers younger than I and one two years older. Nights we went home with our mother. The slaves lived in a row of houses a ways from the main house where our master lived. Of course my mother was supplied with all the food we wanted and we did not need much clothing because the weather was warm. I had nobody that I called father. I only knew my mother. Her name was Lettis Singleton. All the slaves on a plantation had the same name as their master. The slaves on Singleton's plantation, for instance, were known as Singleton's men and women. John Winthrop had a plantation adjoining ours and all the slaves on that plantation were called Winthrop's slaves. When a plantation changed owners the slaves changed their names. Our plantation had formerly been owned by a Mrs. Nelson, a widow. The slaves were then known as Nelson's slaves. When Singleton married Mrs. Nelson he succeeded to the plantation and all of the slaves, including my mother, were called from that time on Singleton.

Group 3: What led to William being sold?

One day when I was about four years old a strange man came to this central house where all us children were and asked me if I liked candy. I told him yes. So he gave me a striped stick of candy. Then he asked me if I liked him. I said, yes, sir, because he had given me the candy. There was a colored woman with him and he asked me then how I would like to go and live with him. Of course I did not know him nor the woman, but without saying any more the man took me away with him and gave me to the strange woman who took me to Atlanta, Georgia, and delivered me to a white woman who had bought me. That night when my mother came to get me and my brothers I was not there. I had been sold off the plantation away from my mother and brothers with as little formality as they would have sold a calf or a mule.

Group 4: Instead of being considered people, what were slaves known as?

Such breaking up of families and parting of children from their parents was quite common in slavery days and was one of the things that caused much bitterness among the slaves and much suffering, because the slaves were as fond of their children as the white folks. But nothing could be done about it, for the law said we were only things and so we had no more rights under the law than animals. I believe it was only the more cruel masters, however, who thus separated families. I learned afterwards that the reason I was sold was because there had been trouble between my master and his brother over me and as my presence on the plantation was continually reminding them of something they wanted to forget my master sold me to get me out of the way. I suppose they sold me cheap for that reason.

Group 5: What was a “slave farm?”

I was bought by a white woman in Atlanta, a widow, who ran a slave farm. That is, she would buy up young slaves whose pedigrees were good and would keep them till they grew up and sell them for a good price. Perhaps she would have them taught to do something and thus add to their value. These slave farms were quite common. Most of the work of the South in those days was done by slaves. Slaves were gingers, that is, they knew how to run cotton gins; they were carpenters, blacksmiths, ship carpenters and farmers. An ordinary slave sold for from \$500 to \$600 to \$700, but a slave of good stock who was a good carpenter or a good ginger would be worth from \$1,000 to \$1,500. And when such a slave got on a plantation he would not be apt to be sold. They would keep him on the plantation to do their work. So it was to a slave's advantage to learn to do some work, because then he would be treated better and would not be sold. A slave like that would have his wife and he would be of higher standing among the other slaves. But his children, of course, would belong to his master and he would have no legal right to keep his wife if his master chose to take her away from him. But a slave that was lazy or shiftless or inclined to run away would not be wanted on a plantation and he would be sold for almost nothing.