

Lesson One: School Days

Teacher's Guide

Introduction

The African Free School was established by the New York Manumission Society in the late 1780s and operated until it became a part of the New York public-school system in 1834. During the years of its operation, the school educated hundreds of boys and girls from New York City's African American community, many of whom went on to hold positions of great importance. In this unit, students will be introduced to the African Free School and its organization, curriculum, and expectations.

Grade Level

9–12

Time Allotment

Five to nine class sessions

Subject Matter

American History, New York History, African American History, History of Education

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Read, ask questions of, and draw conclusions from primary documents
- Compare and contrast historic and contemporary educational systems
- Better understand life for African American children in early-nineteenth-century New York City

Preparation

The teacher will need to do the following before beginning this lesson:

- Thoroughly review the Examination Days Web site, with special attention paid to the essay regarding the African Free School and its curriculum
- Review the materials from the African Free School Collection listed below
- Print out and make copies of the Primary Documents PDF for your students

Primary Documents

Documents available on the Examination Days Web site

Pages from the African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, v. 4.

"John Burns. Inspector General of Reading" (Image number 8 in the collection)

"The New York African Free School" (Image number 48 in the collection)

Documents available in the Primary Documents 1 PDF

Charles C. Andrews, "School Exercises," in *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools, from Their Establishment in 1787, to the Present Time . . .* (New York: M. Day, 1830), 71–75.

Charles C. Andrews, "Lines on the Manner of Conducting a Monitorial School, Spoken at a Public Examination," in *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools, from Their Establishment in 1787, to the Present Time . . .* (New York: M. Day, 1830), 139–43.

"Education of Children," in *An Address to the Parents and Guardians of the Children Belonging to the New-York African Free School, by the Trustees of the Institution* (New York: Samuel Wood, 1818), 13–20.

Learning Activities

Activity 1: Welcome to Our School

(two to three class sessions)

Once a year the African Free School would hold public "examination days," in which the accomplishments of the best of the school's students would be displayed or performed before members of the family, members of the boards of the school and the New York Manumission Society, and interested members of the community. (Lesson 3, Performance Days, focuses on these events in greater detail.) The two documents for this activity, John Burns's drawing of the New York African Free School and his work entitled "John Burns Inspector General of Reading," are samples of his "performance" at one of these examination days.

Show your students these documents, which can be printed from the Web site, or display them to the entire classroom using a digital projector.

1. Have your students view the African Free School drawing by John Burns. While they are examining the document, lead your students through the following questions.
 - Discuss the handwriting. How many different styles of handwriting are on this document? Does this look difficult? Where do you think John Burns learned to write like that?
 - Describe the drawing. What is it, and how do they know that? Is John Burns a good artist?
 - Who made this? Who is John Burns? What was it made for? How do you know this?
 - When was this made? How do you know? (*Based on an examination of the document, it is impossible to say just when it was made, although it would have to have been after the 1815 construction of the building in the picture.*)
2. Lead your students through a reading of the entire text of the document. There is a text transcript of the document available online, but your students may find it more challenging to read through the handwritten version of the document. Your students will be unfamiliar with some of the spelling and handwriting conventions of early-nineteenth-century New York City. For example, the double s in words such as *Manumission* are written like *Manumifsion*. Your students may also need to look up or be provided definitions for some of these terms. Abbreviated names and titles may also need to be examined. Your students may be able to decipher most of these abbreviations through group discussion.
 - Discuss the meaning of the text itself, beginning at the top of the document. What do they think the phrase "John Burns' performance No. 2" might mean? (Accept a variety of answers.)
 - Have your students tell you what they can about the African Free School from an examination of Document 6. List all the facts about the school found in the document on your chalkboard.
3. Lead your students through a reading of the entire text of the document. Discuss with your students the ways in which the administrative structure of

the African Free School is similar to or different from the administrative structure of your school (with boards of education, district supervisors, principals and teachers, for example).

- Divide your students into four groups and give these four groups ten minutes to sort the people mentioned in the document into an organization chart, arranged in hierarchical order. Have them place the student John Burns within this organizational chart.
 - Ask one of the groups to present their findings to the class. Through directed classroom discussion, see that your students arrive at a consensus regarding the organizational structure for the governance of the New York African Free School.
4. Have your students view "John Burns Inspector General of Reading." This, the fourth of four documents by John Burns in the African Free School Collection at the New-York Historical Society, is labeled "John Burns' Performance No. 4." While they are examining the document, lead your students through the following questions:
- Discuss the handwriting. How many different styles of handwriting are on this document?
 - Describe the artwork in the document. What is it, and what might it represent?
 - From an examination of this document, what more do you know about John Burns?
 - When was this made?

Activity 2: Students Teaching Students—The African Free School Method (two to three class sessions)

The African Free School was organized upon the Lancasterian, or monitorial, system of education. Developed in England by Joseph Lancaster for schooling the poor, the monitorial system relied upon advanced students, or monitors, to teach younger, less advanced students. (In schools today, student helpers may still be called monitors.) While discipline was often strict and learning accomplished by rote recitation and repetition, the monitorial system made it possible to provide education to a large number of students at a modest cost. Judging from the number of graduates who went on to hold positions of responsibility in religious, political and business fields, the monitorial system likely served as a leadership training ground for New York City's African American community.

1. African Free School students began their school days at 9 in the morning. Their morning session lasted three hours. From noon to 2 p.m. they had a break in their school day. The afternoon session began at 2 and ended at 5.
2. Make copies of the document "School Exercises" and distribute them among your students. Explain that the document is from *The History of the New-York African Free-Schools*, a book written in 1830 by the principal of the school, a white man named Charles C. Andrews. The passage describes a typical school day and how student monitors instructed the younger students.

Select a student to read the first paragraph of the document. Discuss the following:

- In their own words, have students explain how the morning and afternoon sessions begin.
- What purpose, do you suppose, is served by the reading of scriptures and "moral or instructive" subjects to the assembled students?
- What is meant by the statement that the school's method of education is "founded upon a principal of Order and Discipline"?

Explain that society in early-nineteenth-century New York City was very deferential. People were expected to "know their place" and to behave accordingly. To many people, the children who attended the African Free School occupied the very lowest tier in this system of deference.

- In their own words, have your students explain what is meant by the language of the third paragraph: "[I]t has been found to be no more difficult to select suitable boys for monitors among this description of children, than among whites." Why does the author find it necessary to make this statement?

Have your students examine the schedule for Monday morning. Taking into account the entire document, have your students consider some of the following questions.

- What are the different classes that students attend on Mondays?
- What do you think "lesson boards" and "slates" are? What is "ciphering"? (The document refers to "drafts" and "draughts," which are simply selected groups of students.)
- What seems to be the role of the teacher (sometimes referred to as the "master")?

- What are the different responsibilities of the student monitors?
 - Books and school supplies were expensive and hard to come by during this time in our history. How does the curriculum at the African Free School address this problem?
 - How does a typical day at the New York African Free School compare to a day at your school?
 - Have your students create a rough schedule for a Monday at the African Free School, keeping in mind that the morning session lasts from 9 to 12 and the afternoon session from 2 to 5.
3. With its strict discipline, specifically designed lessons, systems of reward and punishment, and focus on rote and recitation, the Lancasterian method of education attracted unfavorable attention from critics, who considered it little more than factory education, instructing the children of the poor in the routines and discipline of the workplace. "Lines on the Manner of Conducting a Monitorial School, Spoken at a Public Examination," a poem included in Charles C. Andrew's *History of the New-York African Free-Schools*, give a sense of what a typical day in the classroom might have been like.

Make copies of the document "Lines" and distribute them among your students. Have your students take turns reading the poem out loud, taking time to stop and address confusing words or passages or new information. Consider some of the following questions:

- What are the steps a student has to go through before he or she can "take a pen in hand"?
 - Look again at the handwriting samples used in Activity 1 and compare John Burns's finished work with the handwriting instructions in stanzas 5 and 6 of the poem. Does John's finished work meet the standards of the poem?
 - Stanza 7 of the poem refers to "tickets." How are these tickets used?
 - Stanzas 12 through 17 discuss grammar. How do students learn the parts of speech? What does the poem have to say about the way lawyers write? What examples of bad grammar are given in the poem?
 - Stanzas 18 through 21 discuss rules and regulations. What are some of the school's rules? Why are these rules enforced and what punishments are given for the violation of school rules? Do these rules and punishments seem fair?
 - Review the different subjects mentioned in the poem? How do they compare with today's curriculum?
4. "The Education of Children"

In 1818 the trustees of the African Free School published a short pamphlet addressed to the parents of school children. The pamphlet outlines the rules and regulations of the school, and discusses the behavior that is to be expected of both the school children and their parents and guardians. "The Education of Children," from *An Address to the Parents and Guardians of the Children Belonging to the New-York African Free School*, gives the rules and regulations for the school and explains the ticket system of rewards and fines in force at the school.

Make copies of "The Education of Children" and distribute them to your students. Give your students time to read through the excerpt. Have your students discuss some of the following questions:

- According to the pamphlet, why is it important that parents understand the school's rules and regulations?
- Discuss each of the 11 rules given in the excerpt. In what way are these rules similar or different from rules in your school? Do these rules seem reasonable?
- What special rules or requirements are given to girls attending the sewing school? Why do you think the school officials think "it is essential for the girls to learn to use of the needle."
- Discuss the use of tickets to reward good behavior and school work, and to punish bad behavior. Do you think this is an effective way to ensure school discipline?
- Have your students review the "list of offences" given at the end of the document. Do these offences seem fair? Do your students feel that the fines for the various offences are appropriately weighted?

Culminating Activities

(one to three class sessions)

The following are suggested culminating activities that students might engage in after completing the preceding activities.

1. In New York City in 1820 there was an African American family named Burns living in Manhattan's Third Ward. (The students can get a rough idea of the location of the Third Ward from the map of New York City on the Web site. Point them to the large but faint 3 to the immediate southwest of City Hall.) The U.S. Census for 1820 tells us that the Burns household consisted of a woman over 45 years of age, a man between the ages of 26 and 45, and a young man and young woman, both between the ages of 14 and 25. This may have been John Burns and his family. Aside for the four examples of his work in the African Free School Collection, not much is known about John Burns.

Using the map, timeline, and other materials on the Web site, write a story about John Burns and what his life might have been like in New York City during the early 1800s.

2. Using the material from the previous activities, have your students organize their classroom according to the Lancasterian System, including the selection of student monitors, the creation of class rules, and the development of a rewards and fines system. Following this exercise, have students write a reflective essay comparing the educational philosophy of the African Free School with that of their own school.
3. Using the example of the poem "Lines," write a poem describing a typical day in your classroom.