

## *African Americans, the White House and the Nation's Capital, 1800–1860*

### *Blackline Masters*

The Nation's Capital: A Unique Place for African Americans  
African American Population of Washington, D.C., 1800–1860  
Archy Gains His Freedom  
African Americans Build the White House and the Capitol  
African Americans Cut Timbers for the White House  
Slavery in the White House  
Paul Jennings Recalls the Madisons in the White House  
Paul Jennings Recalls the Madisons in the White House – Questions

### *Activities*

1. Have students read the blackline master **The Nation's Capital: A Unique Place for African Americans**. In a class discussion, consider the three ways Washington was different from other southern, slaveholding cities and speculate how these differences would provide hope to both Free Blacks and enslaved people. Then consider how these differences might affect the way slave owners treated their enslaved people.
2. Have the students study the blackline master **African American Population of Washington, D.C., 1800–1860**, and then answer the math questions that follow.
3. Read the blackline master **Archy Gains His Freedom** with students. Then, following the directions, have students talk in small groups, considering reasons why a master might free a slave in his will and also why he might free him during his lifetime. Ask students to consider personal, economic, and ethical reasons. In each group, one student should record all ideas. Then have each group, in turn, report to the whole class.
4. Have students read the blackline master **African Americans Build the White House and the Capitol**. List all the jobs enslaved or Free Blacks did to build the Capitol and the White House. Then have the students do the math problems on the blackline master **African Americans Cut Timbers for the White House**.
5. For a brief overview of the topic, have students read the blackline master **Slavery in the White House** and answer the questions.
6. Have students read **Paul Jennings Recalls the Madisons in the White House**. Paul Jennings was an enslaved worker at Montpelier, President James Madison's estate in Virginia. He worked at the White House and was present when British forces burned it during the War of 1812. After reading and discussing Jennings's

memoir, have students complete the blackline master **Paul Jennings Recalls the Madisons in the White House – Questions** and discuss their answers.

7. As an alternative to activity 6, ask students to act out the scene of the burning of the White House by role-playing Paul Jennings, Mrs. Madison, unnamed enslaved people, and the white gardener and door keeper who rescued the Gilbert Stuart painting of George Washington, or have them draw a picture of the this scene in the White House.

### *Understandings*

1. The location of the District of Columbia as well as its role as the nation’s capital created a unique environment for African Americans, bringing both opportunities and challenges.
2. One of the distinctive features of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Washington was its large community of Free Blacks.
3. The White House and Capitol were built largely with African American labor.
4. Southern presidents brought their enslaved plantation workers to Washington to assume domestic chores in the White House. These presidents include Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, James Polk, and Zachary Taylor. George Washington, a slave owner, never lived in the White House, but he brought his enslaved domestic workers to the presidential mansions in New York and Philadelphia.

### *National History Standards*

*US History ERA 4 Standard 2D* Students will understand the rapid growth of “the peculiar institution” after 1800 and the varied experiences of African Americans under slavery.

## *The Nation's Capital*

### *A Unique Place for African Americans*

Nineteenth-century Washington was a unique place for African Americans in a number of ways. It was a southern city, located between Maryland and Virginia, both slaveholding states. But the fact that it was the Nation's Capital made it special. Congressmen from all over the United States lived in Washington when Congress was in session. Businessmen and merchants came from many places, and officials from other countries came as well. The influence of so many people from other places was important. Their disapproval of slavery created a less restrictive atmosphere for the enslaved people of Washington and probably encouraged some slave owners to free their enslaved people in their wills, or even during their lifetime. Manumission (the freeing of an enslaved person) was relatively common in Washington.

The practice of "hiring-out" enslaved people was common in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Washington, and that is another reason why the Nation's Capital was a unique place for African Americans. After tobacco prices fell and local plantations began growing wheat and other grain crops instead of tobacco, the need for enslaved labor decreased. To offset costs of owning slaves, owners began hiring-out their workers when they were not needed on the plantation. Owners often allowed their workers to keep a part of what they earned, and many enslaved people were able to buy their freedom.

Frequent manumissions and the ability of enslaved people to earn money to buy their freedom created a large, successful community of Free Blacks in Washington, and that is a third way in which the city was unique. The Free Black community naturally attracted other African Americans, and between 1800 and 1850 the percentage of Free Blacks increased from 19 percent of the total Black population to 73 percent. These people worked as domestic servants and laborers, started businesses, and began to acquire property. They opened schools for their children and built churches to worship in.

Free Blacks were required to carry Certificates of Freedom, or freedom papers. Generally, these papers were respected and kept Free Blacks safe from slave catchers. Sometimes, however, dishonest bounty hunters would kidnap a Free Black and sell that unfortunate person to a slave owner in a distant state. Free Blacks had to be very careful.

A distinguishing feature of the Free Black community was the degree of support and cooperation among the people in it. They worked for the freedom of all African Americans and created kin networks to help in emergencies, such as the death of a spouse or parent. When necessary people would risk their own safety to provide refuge for someone in need, and they often chipped in to buy the freedom of an enslaved friend or family member. Washington became a city of hope and possibilities for both the Free Black and enslaved population.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

***African American Population of Washington, D.C., 1800–1860:***

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total D.C. Population</b>	<b>Enslaved</b>	<b>Free Blacks</b>
1800	14,093	3,244	783
1810	24,023	5,395	2,549
1820	33,039	6,377	4,048
1830	39,834	6,119	6,152
1840	43,711	4,687	8,360
1850	51,678	3,687	10,059
1860	75,080	3,185	11,131

The following questions are based on the data given in the table. Here is an example:

*In 1800 the Free Black population of Washington was 19% of the total African American population. We get this figure by adding the number of enslaved and the number of Free Blacks and dividing the number of Free Blacks by that number:*

$$\frac{783}{3244 + 783} = \frac{783}{4027} = 19 = 19\%$$

***Questions:***

1. What percent of the total D.C. population was the Free Black population in
  - a) 1800
  - b) 1830
  - c) 1860
  
2. What percent of the total D.C. population was the enslaved population in
  - a) 1800
  - b) 1830
  - c) 1860
  
3. What percent of the total D.C. population was the total African American population in
  - a) 1800
  - b) 1830
  - c) 1860

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Archy Gains His Freedom***

*In his will, John Tayloe of the Octagon House in Washington, D.C., granted an enslaved servant named Archy his freedom. This is what the will states.*

I will that my body servant Archy, may be liberated and may be allowed one hundred dollars per annum [year] during his life. My motive for liberating him is his long tried fidelity, especially since I have been in bad health, & upon one occasion, he was the means, under the direction of Providence, of saving my life.

#### ***Directions:***

Divide into groups of four or five students to think of reasons why a master might free a slave in his will and also why he might free him during his lifetime. Consider personal, economic, and ethical reasons. One student in each group should record all ideas. When each group has completed the assignment, ideas can be shared with the whole class.

#### ***Personal Reasons:***

#### ***Economic Reasons:***

#### ***Ethical Reasons:***

## ***African Americans Build The White House and the Capitol***

*The National Archives describes documents in its collection.*

Two of Washington, DC's most famous buildings, the White House and the United States Capitol, were built in large part by enslaved African Americans....

In 1791 Pierre L'Enfant, who planned the City of Washington, leased African American slaves from their masters to clear the sites for the "President's House" and the Capitol. Once the land was cleared, Washington's three-man Board of Commissioners, who oversaw the new city's construction, tried to recruit laborers from Europe and America to build the two structures. Unable to find as many workers as they needed, the commissioners turned to African American slaves. Most slaves hauled building materials and sawed lumber, but others performed skilled labor such as carpentry, stonecutting, and bricklaying. A list of persons who were employed to build the Capitol and White House, between 1795 and 1800, contains 122 names labeled "Negro hire."

Wage rolls preserved at the National Archives list the African Americans who worked on these projects as carpenters and brick makers. One such roll is a 1795 "Carpenter's Roll" for the President's House. The document lists four slaves, "Tom, Peter, Ben, [and] Harry," two of whom were slaves owned by James Hoban, the architect of the President's House. The rolls record the number of days worked and the rate at which each person was paid. A slave's wages were paid directly to the slave owner who signed the rolls as receipt of payment.

A second document is a 1795 promissory note from the commissioners to Jasper M. Jackson for the hire of his slave, "Negro Dick at the Capitol, from 1st April to 1st July 1795, 3 Months, at 5 Dollars per Month." Little is known about the lives of the men who, like "Negro Dick," built the Capitol. Most of them lived in shacks on the building site, where they received medical care, food, and occasionally, a small incentive payment above what was given to their masters.

*Source: "National Archives to Display Pay Stubs of Slaves Used to Build U.S. Capitol and White House," National Archives Press Release, December 29, 2000.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### ***African Americans Cut Timbers for the White House***

Many of the African Americans who built the White House and the Capitol—symbols of our country’s freedom—were enslaved people. Enslaved men provided most of the labor, although some Free Blacks and Scottish stonemasons also worked on the construction. One task was to cut the timbers for the joists in the White House. The pit saw crews involved two people, called sawyers, working together, and black men, free and enslaved, did most of the work. Records show that they worked seven days a week, straight through the month of August 1795.

The following math problems are based on factual information related to the work of two sawyers owned by a man named Dr. Blake.

1. Two of Dr. Blake’s sawyers cut 2,100 feet of oak joists in 21 days. If Dr. Blake was paid \$33.60 for this work, how much did he get paid per day for the work performed by his enslaved workers?
2. If Dr. Blake’s workers worked for 12 hours a day, how many feet of oak did they saw every hour?
3. How many feet of oak could the two men saw in June, July, and August, assuming they cut the same amount of wood per day?
4. If Dr. Blake used four of his enslaved workers, how much wood could they have sawed in June, July, and August, and how much money would Dr. Blake have received for their work?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## ***Slavery in the White House***

In the 19th century, Presidents were personally responsible for the cost of staffing the White House. The White House was a big house, and it took about 16 servants to run it. In addition, it was politically valuable for the president to invite important people to dinners and other social events. The government provided a small allowance for domestic expenses, but mostly the President had to pay out of his own pocket. How could a President afford such expense?

President John and Mrs. Adams, who were the first to live in the White House, decided they could *not* afford it. They were northerners who did not believe in slavery and so did not do what later southern Presidents would do—bring enslaved workers from their plantations to serve them in Washington. Abigail Adams defended her refusal to entertain lavishly by saying they were not rich like George Washington. (Although Washington never lived in the White House, he did bring enslaved domestic workers to the presidential mansions in New York and Philadelphia during his Presidency and entertained in style.)

Thomas Jefferson staffed the White House with enslaved people from Monticello. James Madison, under some pressure to try to hold off war with England, entertained extensively, using the White House as a place where people could meet and talk. He brought slaves from Montpelier, his Virginia estate. Presidents James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, James K. Polk, and Zachary Taylor also used enslaved people in the White House. Both Jackson and Polk replaced paid White House servants with enslaved people they either brought from home or bought locally.

African Americans who worked in the White House did not sleep in the attic rooms that had been built as servants' quarters. People worried too much about being trapped there in case of fire. Instead, they had rooms on the ground floor. They slept on cots, with sheets and blankets, and their rooms usually had a pine table and benches or chairs. Sadly, this furniture was not always in good condition.

The kitchen was also on the ground floor, as was the servants' hall. A bell system was used, which meant that servants did not need to stand around the upstairs rooms waiting to be called. They could be more comfortable, and do chores, while waiting in the servants' hall until summoned by the ring of a bell.

1. Which Presidents used enslaved servants in the White House?
2. Which President used enslaved servants, but not in the White House?
3. Why did so many Presidents feel it was financially necessary for them to bring slaves from their plantation homes to serve in the White House?

## *Paul Jennings Recalls the Madisons in the White House*

When Mr. Madison was chosen President, we came on and moved into the White House [1809]; the east room was not finished, and Pennsylvania Avenue was not paved, but was always in an awful condition from either mud or dust. The city was a dreary place. . .

After the [War of 1812] had been going on for a couple of years, the people of Washington began to be alarmed for the safety of the city, as the British held Chesapeake Bay with a powerful fleet and army. Everything seemed to be left to General Armstrong, then Secretary of war, who ridiculed the idea that there was any danger. But, in August, 1814, the enemy had got so near, there could be no doubt of their intentions. Great alarm existed, and some feeble preparations for defense were made. . . .

Well, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August [1814], sure enough, the British reached Bladensburg [Maryland], and the fight began between 11 and 12. Even that very morning General Armstrong assured Mrs. Madison there was no danger. The President, with General Armstrong, General Winder, Colonel Monroe, Richard Rush, Mr. Graham, Tench Ringgold, and Mr. Duvall, rode out on horseback to Bladensburg to see how things looked. Mrs. Madison ordered dinner to be ready at 3, as usual; I set the table myself, and brought up the ale, cider, and wine and placed them in coolers, as all the Cabinet and several military gentlemen and strangers were expected. While waiting, at just about 3, as Sukey, the house-servant, was lolling out of a chamber window, James Smith, a free colored man who had accompanied Mr. Madison to Bladensburg, galloped up to the house, waving his hat, and cried out, "Clear out, clear out! General Armstrong has ordered a retreat!"

All then was confusion. Mrs. Madison ordered her carriage, and passing through the dining-room, caught up what silver she could crowd into her old-fashioned reticule [handbag], and then jumped into the chariot with her servant girl Sukey, and Daniel Carroll, who took charge of them; Jo. Bolin drove them over to Georgetown Heights; the British were expected in a few minutes. . . . People were running in every direction. John Freeman (the colored butler) drove off in the coachee with his wife, child, and servant; also a feather bed lashed on behind the coachee, which was all the furniture saved, except part of the silver and the portrait of [George] Washington (of which I will tell you by-and-by).

I will here mention that although the British were expected every minute, they did not arrive for some hours; in the mean time, a rabble, taking advantage of the confusion, ran all over the White House, and stole lots of silver and whatever they could lay their hands on. . . .

[After the British burned the White House] we moved into the house of Colonel B. Tayloe . . . where we lived until news of the peace arrived . . .

It has often been stated in print, that when Mrs. Madison escaped from the White House, she cut out from the frame the large portrait of Washington (now in one of the parlors there), and carried it off. This is totally false. She had no time for doing it. It would have required a ladder to get it down. All she carried off was the silver in her reticule, as the British were thought to be but a few squares off, and were expected every moment.

*Paul Jennings Recalls the Madisons in the White House (continued)*

John Susè (a Frenchman, then door-keeper, and still living) and Magraw, the President's gardener, took [the portrait] down and sent it off on a wagon, with some large silver urns and such other valuables as could be hastily got hold of. When the British did arrive, they ate up the very dinner, and drank the wines &c., that I had prepared for the President's party. . . .

After the news of peace, and of General [Andrew] Jackson's victory at New Orleans, which reached here about the same time, there were great illuminations. We moved into the Seven Buildings, corner of 19<sup>th</sup> street and Pennsylvania Avenue, and while there, General Jackson came on with his wife, to whom numerous dinner-parties and levees were given.

Mr. Madison also held levees [parties] every Wednesday evening, at which wine, punch, coffee, ice-cream, &c., were liberally served. . . .

*An excerpt from "A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison," by Paul Jennings. White House History, No. 1 (1983) published by the White House Historical Association*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Paul Jennings Recalls the Madisons in the White House – Questions***

1. What room of the White House was not finished when James Madison moved in as President? What was Pennsylvania Avenue like?
2. Why were the people of Washington beginning to be alarmed?
3. On the day of the battle of Bladensburg, Maryland, what three items was Jennings preparing to serve at dinner?
4. What object did Jennings say Mrs. Madison carried off from the White House before the British arrived?
5. What object did many people say Mrs. Madison carried off? What is Jennings's explanation for why she did not do this?
6. A hero of the War of 1812 visited the Madisons in Washington. Who was it?
7. After the British burned the White House it had to be rebuilt. Meanwhile, the Madisons lived in two other places in the nation's capital. Name the temporary homes of the president and first lady.

## ***Answer Key for Blackline Masters***

### ***Archy Gains His Freedom***

Answers will vary but may include wanting to repay an enslaved servant for special service, a change in economic circumstance leading to an owner being unable to afford slave ownership, a personal aversion to slavery.

### ***African American Population of Washington, D.C., 1800–1860*** *(rounded to nearest percentage)*

1a.	6%	2a.	23%	3a.	29%
1b.	15%	2b.	15%	3b.	31%
1c.	15%	2c.	4%	3c.	19%

### ***African Americans Cut Timbers for the White House***

1. \$1.60
2. 8.33 feet
3. 9,200 feet
4. They would have sawed 18,400 feet, and Dr. Blake would have received \$294.40 for their work.

### ***Slavery in the White House***

1. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, James K. Polk, Zachary Taylor
2. George Washington
3. Presidents had to pay servants themselves.

### ***Paul Jennings Recalls the Madisons in the White House***

1. The east room was not finished. Pennsylvania Avenue was not paved, always muddy or dusty.

2. The people of Washington were alarmed for the safety of the city because British troops were getting closer.
3. Paul Jennings was getting ready to serve ale, cider, and wine.
4. Dolley Madison carried off the silver.
5. Many people said Dolley Madison carried off George Washington's portrait, but she had no time to get it off the wall and no ladder to reach it.
6. General Andrew Jackson, who defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans.
7. The Tayloe House and the Seven Buildings.

***Learn More:***

*American Visions Magazine*, February/March 1995

“Building Liberty’s Capital: Black Labor and the New Federal City,” by Robert Kapsch  
“Capitol Construction,” by William C. Allen

*Footsteps: African American History*, November/December 2002 (issue on “Blacks and the White House” Cobblestone Publishing)

“Serving the Jefferson Presidency,” by Dianne Swann-Wright  
“The First White House Memoir,” adapted from an essay by Franklin Edwards and Michael R. Winston

*White House History*, number 1 (1983) published by the White House Historical Association

"A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison," by Paul Jennings