

The Voice of the Fugitive Newspaper

Title: The Voice of the Fugitive Newspaper

Subtitle: Historical Inquiry, Writing

Duration: 3-5 classes

Best Course(s) Fit: History, English, The History of a Canadian Ethnic Group, Business

Background Information

The *Voice of the Fugitive*, founded by Henry and Mary Bibb, was the first successful Black newspaper in Canada. It had a significant impact in the Detroit River region. The newspaper was published in Canada West from 1851 until 1854.

Henry Bibb was born into slavery in 1815 in Kentucky. He escaped to freedom in Detroit, Michigan where he became involved in abolitionist activities. Mary Elizabeth Miles was a freeborn Black teacher from Rhode Island. The couple married in 1848 and after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in the United States, they migrated to Canada West where they became community leaders.



Task:

1. Read the five articles from the University of Detroit Mercy Black Abolitionist Archive. All five articles appeared in the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper.
2. Answer the questions based on the articles.
3. **Historical Question: What was the purpose of the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper?** Write a one-page response. You must use evidence from at least four documents to support your claim.

Document A

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[Editor]
Editorial

**What do the Fugitives in Canada Stand
Mostly in Need of.**

NUMBER II.

In our last number we endeavored to show what our refugee brethren in Canada stood mostly in need of, or what was best calculated to strengthen and elevate us. A want of space in our small sheet necessarily compels us to be brief in our examination of the subject from time to time.

We shall now endeavor to show that there is no foundation in the *United States* for the fugitive from Southern bondage to stand upon; and, on the other hand, the honor of the *British Government*, the road to elevation is as open to the colored population, (even to the hunted fugitives here) as to any other class of men. Why, then, are the people of color in North America, not more respected and elevated than they are? Is it because we are black? We say, No—judging from what we have seen on Southern plantations, four-fifths of which are literally stocked with mulatto slaves most of whom are fathered by their masters. Disgraceful as it is to the supporters of that system of wholesale adultery, it furnishes the strongest proof that slaveholders, from the Ex-Vice-President *Richard M. Johnson*, down to the meanest slave-driver, have no distaste to our color, when they can make money or gratify their hellish lusts by it. They will even buy and sell their own children as slaves. Many of our brethren who have felt the galling chain on their limbs, have fled for their liberty to the North, but have stopped even before they were out of danger.— They have been too easily flattered into the belief that they were safe in the Northern States, which has proved fatal to the liberties of many, and erroneous to all. The whole

government of the *United States* are sworn to handcuff the fugitive who escapes from his bonds, and carry him back, and to punish with fines and imprisonment any who may aid him on his escape from oppression.

This fact is so well established that it needs no argument to sustain it; therefore it is worse than folly for a fugitive to suppose that he is free in the *United States*.

On the other hand, we deem it almost an insult to intelligence to say that education with honesty and persevering labor, will elevate any class of men in a country like Canada, surrounded with beautiful lakes and rivers of navigable water, with a mild and healthy climate, with a rich and congenial soil to agricultural pursuits—protected with good and wholesome laws, which operate alike upon all men without regard to the color of their skin.

Now, with the above facts before us, if we desire to be elevated, we must elevate ourselves; if we would accomplish the end, we must use the means which God has placed within our reach. We feel satisfied from careful observation, that there is nothing so much needed among us in Canada, as knowledge and strength. Without it, we shall ever be degraded and oppressed. When we say knowledge, we do not mean a knowledge of imitating any of the examples which have been set by our oppressors, which are degrading; neither do we mean a knowledge of living in villages and cities, to follow boot-blackening, table-waiting, &c. But we mean knowledge that is calculated to make us wise and useful, knowledge, to read, write, and cipher, knowledge and strength to practice and improve the various branches of *Agriculture*, which we look upon as being the foundation of our elevation. In order to carry on agricultural pursuits, we must have land. We

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can do nothing without it. Money, clothing, and provisions will always be acceptable to the needy, but it soon will be eaten up, worn out, and forgotten. Not so with a gift of land, for on it an industrious man can produce all the necessaries of life; he can always have honest employment and a home without being dependent upon others.

If this be correct, then, land is more needed in Canada, among the fugitives, than food or clothing; for, while the former furnishes them with homes and effectual means of supplying all of their temporal wants, the latter makes them dependent, stupid, and degraded. We admit that to be poverty-stricken and ignorant is no disgrace to any people, when they are made so by the force of circumstances without their own consent. We admit also that it is more honorable to beg than to steal or starve. But we do say that to submit tamely to wear the mantle of ignorance, or to live year after year, in a country like this, as a class of paupers, without showing uncompromising resistance to it, is unmanly and disgraceful to any people. Was ever willful ignorance respected by true intelligence? Was ever a class of beggars elevated to terms of social equality with those from whom they begged? If our people must beg, we hope they may beg for something that is permanent. Let them beg for an honorable livelihood, for education, for their children, and land on which they can support them.

This is what they mostly need, and what they must have, if we are ever elevated as a class. Our plan, however, would not be to give them land directly, nor to settle our people altogether in counties or towns.

Document B

Bibb, Mary E.

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Schools among the Refugees.

My school is not as large as it has been during the winter. Many have hired out to farmers for the season, yet it is now quite large — too large for the room we occupy. I have not yet received a dollar for my labor. I hardly know what is duty in regard to continuing it. I cannot afford to give all my time. A small compensation would satisfy me, but even this has not yet been given. I do not think schools can be kept up here without aid from the States. The public money is almost entirely under the control of the French, and they are Catholics; consequently nothing can exceed their bitterness to the colored people because they are protestants.

There is so much to be done in the States, it seems inhuman to think they can do much for foreign charities, yet this is the work of their hands: they made the Fugitive Slave Law, they are supporting it now.

MARY E. BIBB.

Anti-Slavery Bugle, April 12, 1851

Voice of the Fugitive, April 12, 1851

Document C

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[Editor]
Editorial

LOOK OUT FOR KIDNAPPERS.

A prudent man will never be found walking through a forest, which he knows to be infested with savage wolves, reptiles and venomous snakes, without being prepared to defend himself against them, but how much more careful should a man be in a city or state, which he knows to be infested with kidnappers and soul drivers, in preparing to defend himself against their invasion upon his liberty! We would caution our colored brethren in Michigan and especially about Detroit, to be on the look out for themselves. If you will not, come to Canada, where you will be perfectly safe. We hope that you will not forget to be true to yourselves—remember friends, that death is far more preferable to American slavery, and that the states prison of Michigan is a paradise compared to it—remember that you have no law to protect you, but the law of self-defense. Remember that the hireling who steps into the shoes of the slave-hunter, to capture or enslave a human being, is no better than the former, and should be treated just as you would a man whom you know to be seeking your heart's blood. Are you ready for the contest, if you should be laid hold of to-day?

Document D

[Editor]

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LAND IS BOUGHT FOR THE FUGITIVES.—
The Refugees' Home Society have just purchased a beautiful tract of unimproved Canada Land, for the benefit of the homeless refugees in this section of the Province. The land is to be divided into 25 acre lots for actual settlers. It is known to be well stocked with good marketable timber, and that wood will command a liberal price on the land if chopped and corded. For particulars, those who are interested can address H. Bibb, by letter at Sandwich, C. W., or Detroit, Michigan. As we have not room this week to give the detail, we promise that it shall be laid before our readers hereafter: suffice it to say that the location and quality of soil have been examined by a committee of competent men, among whom were two practical farmers, viz., Nathan Power, Mich., L. Clark, N. Y., accompanied by H. Bibb, of Canada, who unite in pronouncing it to be the best selection that could have been made, all things considered.

The society have also contracted for another still larger tract, for the same purpose, but have not funds on hand to make payment to secure the land, until those who have subscribed to aid this object shall send in their subscriptions. We hope that this will be done at once, or we may lose this valuable bargain.

Document E

[Editor]
Editorial

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"THE CRY IS, STILL THEY COME!"—The Underground Railroad is doing good business this spring. Not less than fifteen passengers have landed here from the South within a few days, who never knew what freedom was before. One man said that he could chop more cord wood for himself in one day here, where he knew that he should get the cash for it, than he ever chopped for his master in two days at the South where he had only to expect the lash for it. Here we have motives which induce us to work, namely, the protection of life, liberty and property, together with a rich reward for honest labor, which prompts us to active perseverance and self-respect.

Questions

1. When were these articles published?

2. What are three things that the articles have in common?

3. What do these articles suggest about what life was like for Black people living in the Windsor-Detroit region during this period?

4. Why do you think the editors published these articles?

Document A

1. What does this document suggest about enslavers and slavery?

2. What does this document suggest about how Black people were viewed in the United States?

3. According to the author, what were the things that Black people in Canada needed most? Why?

Document B

1. What does this document suggest about Mary E. Bibb?

2. Why does the author feel that the United States should financially support schools for refugees from slavery in Canada?

3. How does the author feel about educating refugees from slavery?

Document C

1. How does the author feel about slavery? How does the phrase “*death is far more preferable to American slavery*” capture those feelings?

2. Based on this document, describe the state of affairs in Detroit.

3. Why would this type of article have been necessary in 1851 in the Windsor-Detroit region?

Document D

1. Why would it have been necessary for the Refugee Home Society to purchase land for refugees from slavery?

Document E

1. What does this document suggest about how freedom-seekers felt upon arriving in Canada?

2. What does this document suggest about the skills of freedom-seekers?

What was the purpose of the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper?

You must use evidence from at least four documents to support your claim.