

A DURABLE MEMENTO

*Portraits by Augustus Washington
African American Daguerreotypist*



Smithsonian
National Portrait Gallery

A Durable Memento: Portraits by Augustus Washington, African American Daguerreotypist

Teacher's Guide

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Glossary

Abolitionism. Advocacy of the elimination of slavery.

American Colonization Society. Founded in 1816 by an influential group of white American politicians and philanthropists, including Francis Scott Key (attorney and author of “The Star Spangled Banner”) and George Washington’s nephew, the society sought to obtain government funding for a plan to relocate free blacks to a colony in Africa.

Brown, John (1800–1859). American abolitionist. Active in Kansas fighting for admission of that state as a free state in a series of violent skirmishes that gave the territory the name “Bleeding Kansas,” Brown believed in the use of violence when necessary as a means of ending slavery. In 1859, Brown and twenty-one followers captured the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), in an attempt to launch an invasion and uprising of the South to liberate slaves. His group was defeated, and Brown was hanged after a trial, which gained national attention and made Brown a martyr for the abolition movement.

Compromise of 1850. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States Congress was faced with a series of threats to the balance of power as western states began to apply for admission to the Union as either slave or free states. The last of these major threats came when California applied for admission as a free state. Southern congressional leaders, headed by South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, demanded that slavery be permitted in the west-

ern territories and that southerners had the right to have slaves who had escaped to the North returned. The southerners considered these slaves as property. Calhoun threatened secession—the southern states’ withdrawal from the union—if these demands were not met.

Calhoun died during the debate on these issues, and a group of senators, led by Stephen Douglas of Illinois and Henry Clay of Kentucky, pushed through legislation that became known as the Compromise of 1850. The main points of the compromise were:

- Admission of California as a free state
- Organization of remaining western territories without restriction on slavery
- An end to slave trade in the District of Columbia
- A strict federal fugitive slave law
- Assumption of Texas’s debt by the federal government

Daguerreotype. A one-of-a-kind image made directly on a sheet of copper, plated with silver, and then polished and exposed to iodine vapor, so that it is sensitive to light. The sensitized plate is placed in a camera obscura, exposed, and then developed with mercury vapor, which creates a chemical reaction with the iodine and silver. Mercury deposits form on the plate, the most remaining where the plate received the most light, and the least (or none at all) in the shadows. Then the plate is washed with a solution that removes the rest of the light-sensitive material, so that only the image remains. Finally, it is cleaned with water, dried, and mounted under glass. The process was developed by French artist Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre and scien-



Glossary

tist Nicéphore Niepce, and was announced to the public in Paris in January 1839.

Douglass, Frederick (1817–1895). American abolitionist, writer, and lecturer who escaped from slavery in 1838 and traveled in the North and Europe speaking out against the institution of slavery. He was the author of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and editor and cofounder of a prominent abolitionist newspaper called *The North Star*.

Fugitive Slave Law. A key part of the Compromise of 1850, this act obligated citizens to help capture escaped slaves in the North. It rejected a fugitive slave's right to a trial by jury, requiring cases to instead be administered by specially appointed commissioners who would be paid \$5 if an accused fugitive were let go and \$10 if he or she were returned. The act made it easier for a slaveholder to file for a claim, and appointed more federal officials to help enforce the law. Any free black man living in the North could be more easily accused of being a fugitive and returned to slavery in the South on the slimmest of evidence. Those most affected by the law, however, were former slaves living in the North, many of whom fled to Canada. From 1850 to 1860, it is estimated that twenty thousand black people immigrated to Canada.

Garrison, William Lloyd (1805–1879). A prominent American abolitionist leader and founder and publisher of *The Liberator*, an antislavery newspaper. Garrison called not only for a complete, immediate end to slavery, but also for full

rights of citizenship for all blacks in America.

Liberia. A country located on the Atlantic Ocean on the western coast of Africa. It was founded as a colony in 1821 through the efforts of the American Colonization Society and from 1822 to the 1860s was largely settled by freed slaves from America. Established as a country in 1847, it is the oldest independent republic in Africa. Today its population is roughly 1,911,000, and Monrovia is the capital and largest city.

Manumission. The freeing of a person from slavery or bondage. Emancipation.

Slave states. The fifteen states of the Union in which slavery was legal in the years before the Civil War: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

Underground Railroad. A covert system, established in the years before slavery was abolished in the United States, that helped slaves escape to freedom in the northern states or Canada. This network relied on secret supporters spread out along the pathway to freedom who would aid the escaped slaves in passing from one safe house to another. These helpers or “conductors” were often free blacks or Quakers, who usually operated at night. Usually the pathways to freedom took advantage of the terrain to facilitate undetected travel, following natural boundaries such as rivers or mountain ranges.



Who was Augustus Washington?

Augustus Washington was one of the first black photographers in the United States. He was born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1820 or 1821, and he was educated as a young boy at private schools alongside white students. He later studied at the Oneida Institute in New York, and then taught at a school for black children in Brooklyn, where he was also active in the African American community, working for abolition and acquiring voting rights for free blacks. He was one of the first African Americans to be accepted to Dartmouth College, where he studied for a year before having to drop out for financial reasons. In 1844, he took a teaching position in Hartford, Connecticut. In 1846 he set up a successful business taking daguerreotypes, a skill he had learned while at Dartmouth to help pay off his debts. He made hundreds of daguerreotypes of Hartford citizens, both prominent and ordinary, wealthy and middle class. He made three daguerreotypes of the radical abolitionist John Brown while Brown was living in nearby Springfield, Massachusetts. Only one of these plates is known to have survived, and it is now in the National Portrait Gallery collection. He also made a portrait of abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison in the summer of 1853, while Garrison attended a convention in Hartford. This image is not known to have survived. In November 1853 Washington, with his wife Cordelia and their two young children, immigrated to Liberia in Western Africa under the partial patronage of the American Colonization Society through funds appropriated by them to the Connecticut state legislature. In Liberia, Washington prospered as a

daguerreotypist and farmer, and in 1865 was chosen as Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Liberia. Washington continued to prosper financially and politically, and in 1871 was elected a senator. In August 1873 he founded a newspaper called the *New Era*. He died in Monrovia, Liberia, on June 7, 1875.



Voices from the Past—Primary Source Material

William Lloyd Garrison from *The Liberator*, January 1, 1831

Growing up in Trenton, New Jersey, Augustus Washington learned to read and was inspired by *The Liberator* and other abolitionist newspapers. In this passage from Garrison's editorial in the first issue of *The Liberator*, Garrison set the tone for this publication, which for the next thirty-five years denounced slavery and advocated the rights of black Americans:

Assenting to the "self-evident truth" maintained in the American Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights—among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population. In Park Street Church on the Fourth of July, 1829, in an address on slavery, I unreflectingly assented to the popular but pernicious doctrine of gradual abolition. I seize this opportunity to make a full and unequivocal recantation, and thus publicly to ask pardon of my God, of my country, and of my brethren, the poor slaves, for having uttered a sentiment so full of timidity, injustice, and absurdity. . . .

I am aware, that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell

him to moderately rescue his wife from the hand of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.



Voices from the Past—Suggested Activities for Students

William Lloyd Garrison from *The Liberator*, January 1, 1831

1. Garrison not only advocated the abolition of slavery, but also the enfranchisement of black people. Have the students discuss and research other rights of citizenship that were denied to black Americans at the time. When did these rights, such as the right to vote or the right to hold elected office, finally come about?
2. Garrison's position is uncompromising, but he does not say what specific means should be used to achieve his goals. Have the students discuss and write about ways in which individuals or organizations can bring about changes in laws. Research what kinds of methods Garrison and other abolitionists used. Was violence the only solution?
3. Have the students research other viewpoints on the issue of slavery and civil rights for black Americans. What would a pro-slavery individual say about Garrison's editorial? Garrison uses the Declaration of Independence to support his views. Is it possible for a pro-slavery writer to use the same document or other documents like the Constitution to support slavery?
4. Have the students research the "moderate" abolitionist viewpoint that Garrison claims to have once had, but now denounces. Who were those espousing this viewpoint, and what sorts of measures did they advocate to bring about an end to slavery? Have the students write an editorial from a moderate viewpoint responding to Garrison's stand.
5. The tone of Garrison's writing is not one seen often in newspapers today. Have the students search the editorial pages of a current newspaper and select an issue on which to write an editorial using a tone similar to that of William Lloyd Garrison.



Voices from the Past—Primary Source Material

American Colonization Society: A Memorial to the United States Congress, 1820

During a time in the North when the public was growing increasingly wary of free blacks and their place in society, the American Colonization Society petitioned Congress on February 1, 1820. The members of the society used their influence to promote the goals of the organization under the appearance of quelling the illegal slave trade and “civilizing” Africa:

The last census shows the number of free people of color in the United States, and their rapid increase. Supposing them to increase in the same ratio, it will appear how large a proportion of our population will, in the course of even a few years, consist of persons of that description.

No argument is necessary to show that this is very far indeed from constituting an increase of our physical strength; nor can there be a population, in any country, neutral as to its effects upon society. The least observation shows that this description of persons are not, and cannot be, either useful or happy among us; and many considerations, which need not be mentioned, prove, beyond dispute, that it is best, for all the parties interested, that there should be a separation; that those who are now free may . . . be provided with the means of attaining to a state of respectability and happiness, which it is certain, they have never yet reached,

and, therefore, can never be likely to reach in this country.

The two last reports of the Society, to which your memorialists beg leave to refer, show the success of your mission to Africa, and the result of their inquiries upon that continent. From those it is manifest that a situation can be readily obtained, favorable to commerce and agriculture, in a healthy and fertile country, and that the natives are well disposed to give every encouragement to the establishment of such a settlement among them. Thus, it appears, that an object of great national concern, already expressly desired by some of the States, and truly desirable to all, receiving, also, the approbation of those upon whom it is more immediately to operate, is brought within our reach.



Voices from the Past—Suggested Activities for Students

American Colonization Society: A Memorial to the United States Congress, 1820

1. This passage makes the assumption that black and white people cannot live together in an integrated nation. Ask the students to examine what might be the societal fears inherent in this viewpoint. What aspects of society would be changed by this growing population of free blacks that might frighten the members of the American Colonization Society? Ask the students to think about things like employment, housing, and education.

2. As a research assignment, ask students to find out the United States census numbers for the black and white populations in the years prior to the Civil War. What was the actual percentage of increase in the overall black population versus the white population? What was the difference in the population of free black people versus slaves? Have the students chart or graph these figures to compare them. Ask them to look at where the population increased and why. In particular, why might the population of free blacks in some states be greater than in others?

3. What assumptions do the authors of this document make about Africa versus America? What kinds of things do the students think black colonists might bring to Africa—i.e., technology, religion, agricultural knowledge. Would all of these things really be improvements? Have the students research the early history of Liberia to specifically look at what changes were brought by settlers like Augustus

Washington and his family. Did these changes have a lasting effect that can still be seen in the country today?

4. Ask the students to predict what someone like William Lloyd Garrison would say about the American Colonization Movement's petition. What would free blacks living in the North say about it? What aspects of the plan would be seen as positive to free blacks and what aspects would seem negative? Organize a debate between two factions of free blacks: those opposing colonization and those in favor.



Voices from the Past—Primary Source Material

Thoughts on the American Colonization Society, by Augustus Washington, 1851

Washington had originally rejected the idea of colonization, but changed his mind mainly for two reasons. The first was the changing political climate in the United States. Not only were more laws being passed restricting the rights of free black people in politics and education, but the passage of the Compromise of 1850, with its strict Fugitive Slave Law, made things even more intolerable. Secondly, when Liberia was established as a republic in 1847 and reports from friends and others began coming back saying how livable the country actually was, he began to have a change of heart:

What is Colonization? For the benefit of those who treat it with contempt, and think that no good can come out of it, I may merely remark that the thirteen original States, previous to the Declaration of Independence, were called the colonies of Great Britain, the inhabitants colonists. The companies and individuals in England that assisted in planting these colonies were called Colonizationists. These colonists came from the land of their birth, and forsook their homes, their firesides, their former altars, and the graves of their fathers, to seek civil and religious liberty among the wild beasts and Indians on a foreign, bleak, and desolate shore. . . . That very persecution and oppression of the mother country planted in America the purest civil and religious

institutions the world had ever seen. And now this powerful republic, by her oppression and injustice to one class of this people, will plant in Africa a religion and morality more pure, and liberty more universal, than it has yet been the lot of my people to enjoy.



Voices from the Past—Suggested Activities for Students

Thoughts on the American Colonization Society, by Augustus Washington, 1851

1. Washington draws a comparison between black Americans colonizing Africa and the pilgrims who colonized America. Is this a valid comparison? Ask the students to list the similarities and the differences between the two.
2. Imagining themselves as Augustus Washington and his family, ask the students to make a list of things they would want to take with them to Africa. Would they need different clothing, for example? Research the climate of Liberia versus that of New England. What kind of crops would they grow? What type of housing would they build? What natural resources might they find there? What about transportation? Was there a railroad system? Are there navigable rivers? What diseases were they in danger of contracting?
3. Have the students research the Fugitive Slave Law and the Compromise of 1850. Besides colonization, what other actions were advocated by abolitionists and free blacks in the North to deal with this issue? How many blacks actually chose colonization as an option? Ask the students why they think more people did not immigrate to Liberia.
4. Have the students make a list of reasons why people decide to immigrate to other countries. Economics? Religion? Politics? Have them research other groups who immigrated to the United States during this period, such as the Irish and Eastern Europeans. Do people today still immigrate for the same reasons? Do the students think that people in the world tend to immigrate more or less than they once did?



For Discussion and Writing after the Tour and the Performance of Augustus Washington: An Image of Liberty

1. Have the students pay careful attention to the people in the daguerreotypes in the Augustus Washington exhibition. They should pay particular attention to the way the people are dressed, what objects they are holding or standing or sitting on in the portraits. The identities of many of these sitters are unknown. Have the students draw conclusions about the people based on their observations of their portraits. Is it possible to tell the income level of each person? Is it possible to tell things about the person's personality or mood at the moment the picture was taken? Compare these portraits with contemporary portraits. What does the style of a portrait say about the values of that historical time period?

2. Have the students research the history of daguerreotypes, how the process was developed, and how it evolved into photography. Have the students think about how this new invention revolutionized so many aspects of life. Have them analyze its impact on politics, war, business, and fashion, to name a few. Do they think photography is still evolving? In what ways? What twentieth-century inventions do the students think had the greatest impact on life in our century? Television? Computer? Airplane?

3. Do the students think that the work of a man like Augustus Washington is worth exhibiting at the Smithsonian? They probably had not heard of him before. Ask them to think

of ways he may have made a significant contribution to American life and culture, both through his art and his other accomplishments in life. Does someone have to be famous to have a significant impact on their country? In what ways could the students imitate Augustus Washington's life today? Have them think about ways in which they can get involved in important social and political issues. Do they have their own means of artistic expression that might one day be the subject of a museum exhibition? If so, what would the exhibition tell people 150 years from now about the person and the time period in which they lived?

4. Ask the students to write their impressions of the play *Augustus Washington: An Image of Liberty*. Specifically, what events in the character's life do they think had the most significant impact? Which people were most influential in either a positive or negative way? Do they think the actor, director, and playwright accurately portrayed the character? What kinds of challenges did they face in presenting a play like this about a real character? Is this a useful tool for teaching people about an individual's life and work? Encourage the students to think of a person from history they would like to see a play about and have them research and write a short play or skit about that person.

