

HENRY'S FREEDOM BOX

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by Ellen Levine

Grades: 2-5; Ages: 7-10

Themes: Slavery, Biography, African-American history, Underground Railroad, Compassion

Running Time: 10 minutes

SUMMARY

This amazing true story tells about the life of a slave named Henry who mailed himself to freedom. Sold as a boy away from his family, Henry learned early about the many atrocities of life as a slave. After marrying and having a family of his own, Henry is heartbroken when he watches them be sold as well. He holds in his heart the dream of living a life that is his to control. With bravery, ingenuity, and the help of some friends, Henry nails himself into a cargo crate to be shipped to Pennsylvania – and freedom. Viewers will rejoice for Henry “Box” Brown who became one of the most famous runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad, and a true American hero.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will identify regions/states that had slavery and those that did not.
- Students will define and identify roles of people who participated in the Underground Railroad.
- Students will compare and contrast Henry's Freedom Box with other stories about the Underground Railroad.

BEFORE VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Use a KWL chart to elicit background knowledge (a three-columned chart: What I Know, What I Want to Know, What I Learned).

Encourage students to brainstorm what they know about slavery, the Underground Railroad, and important historical figures from this time. Record all of this information in the What I Know column of the KWL chart. Guide students with the following questions:

- What was slavery?
- What did slaves have to do?
- What part of the country had slavery?
- How were slaves treated?
- How did slaves become free?

- Who were important people who helped slaves?
- What was the Underground Railroad?

If students don't know the answers to any of these questions, record them in the W (What I Want to Know) column. Next, have students generate a list of other questions concerning what they want to know about slavery and the Underground Railroad. Record these ideas in the next column. Tell them that they are about to watch a movie about a slave named Henry, who escaped from slavery in a very unusual way. Encourage students to watch and listen for answers to their questions about slavery. Revisit the KWL chart after viewing the movie to fill in the What I Learned column.

Give students an outline map of the United States. Guide them through coloring the southern region where slaves were owned, and the northern region where most people did not own slaves. Briefly discuss some of the reasons that people in the south owned more slaves than people in the north (plantations, cash crops). Have students locate and label Richmond, Virginia, Henry's starting point and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, his ending point. Encourage students to watch and listen for the route that Henry took from Virginia to Pennsylvania. As an extension, demonstrate to students how to calculate the miles between the two cities using the map scale.

AFTER VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Revisit the KWL chart. Students should independently make a list of what they learned from the movie. Then, have students share what they learned and record it on the KWL chart. Ask students if they have any further questions at the end of the movie. Assist students in using the internet to research answers to these questions. For example, students may wonder what happened to Henry after he arrived in Philadelphia. Show students how to use a kid-friendly search engine to search for articles about Henry “Box” Brown. Then, share the results and encourage students to search for more information on their own.

Use a visual of a train car, conductor, and passengers to introduce the concept of the Underground Railroad. First, address misconceptions about the term “underground” by explaining that it is a word

with more than one meaning. Elicit students' definitions of the word. If it is not mentioned, tell students that a second meaning of the word underground is “secret” or “hidden”. Have students discuss how this meaning of the word relates with the movie *Henry's Freedom Box*. Then, use the visuals to introduce the different elements of the Underground Railroad. Ask the students what the train car was in Henry's story (a box), who the conductors were (James, Dr. Smith, the men in Philadelphia), who the passenger was (Henry), and where the station was (safe house in Pennsylvania). Finally, revisit the map from the **Before Viewing Activities**. Help students draw a line on the map that shows Henry's general route from Virginia to Pennsylvania.

Read aloud *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson and *Follow the Drinking Gourd* by Jeannette Winter. Use a Venn Diagram with three overlapping circles to compare and contrast the two books with *Henry's Freedom Box*. Guiding questions:

- Who was running away in each of these stories?
- What was similar about their escapes? What was different?
- Who helped the runaways in each story?
- Did these people have anything in common?
- Where did the runaway slaves go?
- How did they get where they were going?
- Did the runaways share any of the same character traits?
- What was different about them?
- Was the main idea or theme of the three stories the same or different? Why?

This activity can also be connected with the previous activity by having students identify the train car, the conductors, the passengers, and the stations in each story.

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