

UPRISING!

A RESOURCE KIT

Introduction

Set amidst a free black community in secession-era America, **UPRISING** explores the interior lives of antebellum free African Americans; the fragility of their civil liberties; and their resourceful negotiation of the circumstances handed them – using a toolkit of culture, spirituality, political opportunity, memory, and love.

The play asks, “What freedoms are you willing to sacrifice and fight for?” Addressing societal complexities of enduring relevance, this ethical question and its staged interpretation are simultaneously classic and contemporary, making **UPRISING** a crucial dramatic text for our time.

Resource Kit

*This resource document supports further reading on the sociological themes, historical events, and archetypal figures that have shaped the characters and complex dilemmas rendered in **UPRISING**.*

Sal's Role Models

Movement Women, Abolitionist Agitators:

The Writings of Frances E.W. Harper, Isabella Baumfree and Others

African American women participated actively in the public discourse of abolition and racial uplift. Black women's oratory and grassroots activism in the 1850s contributed critical perspectives on both women's subordination and black oppression. The persuasive speeches of black abolitionists Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Sara Parker Remond, Isabella Baumfree/Sojourner Truth, Frances Harper, and Mary E. Bibb were particularly influential for their framing of antislavery arguments in feminist terms.

Ossie's Mission

Militant Abolitionism

Enslaved and free African Americans confronted a basic choice. They could seek to better themselves within the established racial system or they could risk personal security and family life by resisting the system. While African Americans resisted slavery by multiple means, armed rebellion served as a mainstay of resistance since before the American Revolutionary War. Major antislavery insurrections include: New York City Rebellion (1712, Manhattan, NY); Stono Rebellion (1739, South Carolina); Gabriel's rebellion (1800, Virginia); Denmark Vesey Insurrection (1822, South Carolina); Nat Turner Uprising (1831, Virginia); Amistad Mutiny (1839, at sea); and John Brown's Raid (1859, modern-day West Virginia).

John Brown's Plan

The 1859 Harper's Ferry Raid

In October 1859, militant abolitionist John Brown and an armed band of 21 men seized a U.S. government armory and several other strategic points in Harper's Ferry. Their goal was to capture an arsenal of weapons, and instigate a guerrilla war against slaveowners and defenders of slavery. The plan anticipated that many of the free African Americans in the Northern states and enslaved persons in the South would follow suit, armed with weapons obtained from the armory raid. Although the raiders' plan was foiled, Brown's attack on a federal installation dramatically increased tensions between North and South. Brown's trial and execution focused attention on the issue of slavery and propelled the nation toward civil war in 1861.





Freddie's Ordeal

Kidnapping of Free Black Children

Disproportionately orphaned and impoverished, many free black children's lives were made worse as victims of attempted and successful kidnapping. Children were particularly vulnerable as they were easier to take than adults: they were less likely to have freedom papers on their person, and lacked the credibility to convince others of their free status.

Children hired out to employers to contribute to the household income were often sold into slavery instead of being released back to their family at the end of their labor agreement. Free African American children living in Pennsylvania and Delaware – states bordering the Mason-Dixon line – faced the most danger.

Mary Ellen's Philadelphia Safe House

Urban Black Women's Economic Autonomy and Social Activism

Boardinghouses, many of which were operated by black women, served as a critical link to community life for transient black populations of seamen, single men and women looking for employment, orphaned children, and runaway slaves in the urban North. Such establishments enabled boarders to gather information about employment prospects, social events, and civic associations. While sheltering fugitives in these houses was a dangerous business, black woman abolitionists like Mary Still of Philadelphia and Harriet Hayden of Boston, risked everything to provide safe haven and cultivate young activists in their boardinghouse establishments.

The Revolutionary Barber: Charlie Pick's Secret

Activists of the Underground Railroad and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

Throughout the antebellum period, there were numerous Underground Railroad "stations" along the Mason-Dixon line: temporary places of refuge for formerly enslaved persons escaping to freedom in the North. One notable Underground Railroad agent in Franklin County, southern Pennsylvania (the general area of Sal's community) was a free black barber, Henry Watson, who assisted fugitives by helping to keep them safe and undetected by the slave-catchers and bounty hunters empowered by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law to capture and return runaways to their former masters.



Additional Reading:

Apetheker, Herbert (1941) "Militant Abolitionism," *Journal of Negro History*.

Bennet, Lerone (1982) *Before the Mayflower*.

Bracey, John et al., eds. (1971) *Free Blacks in America, 1800 – 1860*.

Foner, Philip Sheldon (1975) *History of Black Americans*.

Franklin County, Pennsylvania Visitors Bureau website, www.explorefranklincountypa.com

Hutton, Frankie (1993) *The Early Black Press in America, 1827 to 1860*.

Litwack, Leon (1961) *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*.

Shiffrin, Steven (1971) "The Rhetoric of Black Violence in the Antebellum Period: Henry Highland Garnet," *Journal of Black Studies*.

Wilson, Carol (1994) *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865*.

For comments or for more information, contact UPRISING! Exhibit Curator Dr. Kali-Ahset Amen, Assistant Director, The James Weldon Johnson Institute for the Study of Race and Difference at Emory University (kali.amen@emory.edu).