

THE SONGS OF JOSHUA SIMPSON, CIVIL WAR ABOLITIONIST - CREATIVE WRITING - PRIMARY DOCUMENT ACTIVITY

MAIN IDEA

Students will learn about the struggles and contributions of Joshua McCarter Simpson, an African American abolitionist during the Civil War, and write a song or poem based on their life difficulties.

TIME

25–35 minutes

GRADE LEVEL

8th grade–high school

BACKGROUND

Dr. Joshua McCarter Simpson was a free-born African American abolitionist during the Civil War. That alone makes him a unique case study. More interestingly, he was a trained herb doctor and the author of a collection of abolitionist songs titled *The Emancipation Car*.¹ According to Vicki Eaklor, former teaching fellow at Washington University, his work is “unique in several ways, yet an ideal representative of its genre.”²

Simpson was born a free person in Windsor, Ohio, around 1920 but was “bound out” and worked for a “hard master until twenty-one years old.”³ He worked hard to become educated by

¹ Eaklor, 93-94

² Eaklor, 92

³ Simpson, V

attending Oberlin Collegiate Institute after being released from his forced servitude. The songs he wrote were sung by abolitionists along the Underground Railroad, and inspired many to oppose the horrors of slavery. At the end of his work *The Emancipation Car* there is a section entitled “How I Got My Education.” In it he says, “I will answer this inquiry, hoping it may inspirit the fainting hearts of some young persons, whose unfavorable circumstances have well nigh’ blasted the hopes and anxieties, that here-to-fore have spontaneously sprung up in their mind.”

This activity is designed to allow the poetic works of Simpson and the struggles he faced to inspire a new generation of young people.⁴

OBJECTIVES

Students will...

1. Understand the agency and contributions of African Americans to the Civil War and the abolitionist movement.
2. Learn how art can express personal struggles and inspire social change.
3. Explore primary and secondary documents for content.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Barclay, Thomas S. *The Liberal Republican Movement in Missouri, 1865–1871*. Columbia: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1926.
- Bellamy, Donnie. *Slavery, Emancipation, and Racism in Missouri, 1850–1865*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1975.

⁴ Simpson, 128

- Federal Writers’ Project, ed. *Missouri Slave Narratives*. Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2006.
- Frazier, Harriet C. *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763–1865*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004.
- ———. *Slavery and Crime in Missouri, 1773–1865*. Boston: McFarland, 2001.
- Trexler, Harrison Anthony. *Slavery in Missouri, 1804–1865*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1914.

MATERIALS

African American experience info sheet

“No, Master, Never” and “A Brother’s Farewell” by Joshua Simpson (one copy for each student)

“The Proclamation Day” by Joshua Simpson (one copy for each student)

Excerpt from *The Songs of the Emancipation Car: Variations on an Abolitionist Theme* by Vicki L. Eaklor (one copy for each student or project on overhead)

Pens/pencils

Paper

GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

GLE	Content
SOCIAL STUDIES	

SS7.A Identify, select, use, and create appropriate resources for social science inquiry	Students will use and interpret primary documents.
SS2a.H Understanding the causes and consequences of the Civil War	Students will learn about abolition as a cause and consequence of the Civil War.
SS7.A Using primary and secondary sources	Students will analyze primary documents and contextualize them.
SS2a.G Knowledge of continuity and change in history of Missouri, the United States, and the world	Students will explore the activities and impact of the abolitionist movement in the United States.
COMMUNICATION ARTS	
Writing 1C, D	Students will write a creative story, poem, or song.
Listening and Speaking 2A	Students will present their findings several times in a clear, concise manner.
Information Literacy 1B	Students will use primary sources to acquire relevant information.
Information Literacy 1C	Students will record information in an organized fashion.
Reading 1I	Students will compare text ideas to their own experience, and to the world.

PROCEDURE

Phase	Description
-------	-------------

<p>Introduction</p>	<p>Step 1: As a class, read the African American experience info sheet.</p> <p>Step 2: Discuss the ways that African Americans contributed to the war and their eventual emancipation.</p> <p>Step 3: Tell students that they are going to explore the poetry and personal story of one African American who beat all odds and fought for the cause of emancipation.</p>
---------------------	--

Main

Step 4: As a class, read an excerpt from *The Songs of the Emancipation Car: Variations on an Abolitionist Theme* by Vicki L. Eaklor, which gives a biography of Joshua Simpson.

Step 5: Split students into groups of three or four and instruct them to read as a group “No, Master, Never,” “A Brother’s Farewell,” and “The Proclamation Day” by Joshua Simpson

Step 6: Ask students to interpret what each song is about, and what message it is trying to send.

Step 7: Have each group present its findings with the entire class.

Step 8: Instruct students that like Simpson they can use art to reflect their own struggles and push for change. Tell them that they should write a poem, song, cartoon, or story about a personal struggle or a social, economic, or political issue they have a personal connection to. Remind them that their poem does not need to rhyme. Be sure to set specific constraints on their work like length, school appropriateness, etc.

Conclusion	Step 9: As a class, listen to the work of select volunteers.
------------	--

Excerpt from *The Songs of the Emancipation Car: Variations on an Abolitionist Theme* by Vicki L. Eaklor

The Songs of *The Emancipation Car*: Variations on an Abolitionist Theme

by Vicki L. Eaklor
Teaching Fellow,
Washington University

THE MOVEMENT BEGUN ABOUT 1830 TO abolish slavery in the United States produced a fascinating array of individuals and a variety of action and rhetoric. Long a subject of scholarly attention, the abolitionists continue to be discussed and evaluated in terms of their motives, goals, methods, and influence in an effort to understand the ideology and dynamics underlying the moral crusade against slavery.

A body of documents which has yet received little attention, however, is the large number of songs about slavery and emancipation written by abolitionists.¹ These works not only reveal much about the musical ideology and practices of a group of mid-nineteenth-century Americans, but also can potentially expand upon present knowledge of antislavery in the antebellum period. For these reasons, this writer began a search for these songs and has, thus far, located over seven hundred different texts, with and without music. Included in this number

¹The term "song" as used in this article designates any combination of words and music, or any set of lyrics definitely sung or intended to have been sung. As is the case with the songs under consideration here, often only the name of the tune to which the song is to be sung is indicated after the title of the lyrics.

²The search for songs was begun originally in order to determine the extent of the use of music, and its actual function, in the abolition movement. The results are written up in this writer's M.A. thesis, "Music in the American Antislavery Movement, 1830-1860" (Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, 1979). The titles of the fourteen song collections are included in the above thesis, but two have not

yet been located.

are fourteen song collections, and it is one of these collections, *The Emancipation Car*, which is the subject of this study.² *The Emancipation Car* was printed twice in Zanesville, Ohio; first in 1854 and again in 1874.³ The first edition contains a few prose passages and the texts of forty-three songs, and the later edition includes minor changes in the prose content and fifty-three songs, forty-nine of which might be termed antislavery. Under consideration here is the 1874 edition, which at first glance seems to be just another compilation of antislavery songs. Upon closer inspection, however, it is found to be unique in several ways yet an ideal representative of its genre as well.

A flyleaf, essentially an advertisement, immediately offers clues that demand further inspection. "No one can read, or sing the songs, or pieces," it states, "without becoming deeply interested in the natural gifts, and qualifications of the Author . . ." and it asserts that "This is the only book of Original Poetry

yet been located.

³[Joshua] McC[arter] Simpson, *The Emancipation Car* (Zanesville: E. C. Church, 1854; rpt. Zanesville: Sullivan & Brown, 1874). The copies used for this study are housed in the Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio (1854) and the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri (1874). As far as is presently known, Simpson wrote a total of fifty-nine songs, fifty-five of which are on antislavery subjects. Five are in broadsheet form only: four in the Missouri Historical Society and one in the Ohio Historical Society. In the passages quoted, the original punctuation, capitalization and italics have been retained; only spelling has been modernized or corrected.

Car:
ome
Eaklor
ellow,
iversity

of these
is the

wise in
174.³ The
and the
edition
and fifty-
termed
the 1874
t another
r inspec-
eral ways
ell.
mediately
"No one
it states,
ne natural
" and it
nal Poetry

ipation Car
Sullivan &
oused in the
54) and the
74). As far as
-nine songs.
Five are in
rical Society
he passages
n and italics
dernized or

and Songs, that was ever published by a Colored Author in the United States . . ." The author, referred to as "Dr. McSimpson" or "J. Mc. C. Simpson," was Joshua McCarter Simpson, a free black resident of Zanesville. Though biographical information on him is scarce, a few facts can be discerned.

Simpson was born a free black in Windsor, Ohio, about 1820 and, despite little formal education, attended preparatory school at Oberlin College (1844-1848). After marrying Eliza Parrot of Zanesville (1847), he eventually settled in that city, where he operated a business, practiced as an herb doctor, and apparently gained the respect of his fellow citizens, both black and white.⁴ As to his "natural gifts and qualifications," Simpson himself offers an interesting passage as evidence:

As soon as I could write, which was not until I was past twenty-one years old, a spirit of poetry, (which was always in me,) became revived, and seemed to waft before my mind horrid pictures of the condition of my people, and something seemed to say, 'Write and sing about it — you can sing what would be death to speak.' So I began to write and sing.⁵

Motivated by the desire to use his self-acclaimed abilities to aid his race, then, Simpson wrote his first song in 1842.⁶ Ten years later a pamphlet of thirteen of his songs was printed in Zanesville,⁷ and was followed in 1854 by the first edition of *The Emancipation Car*.

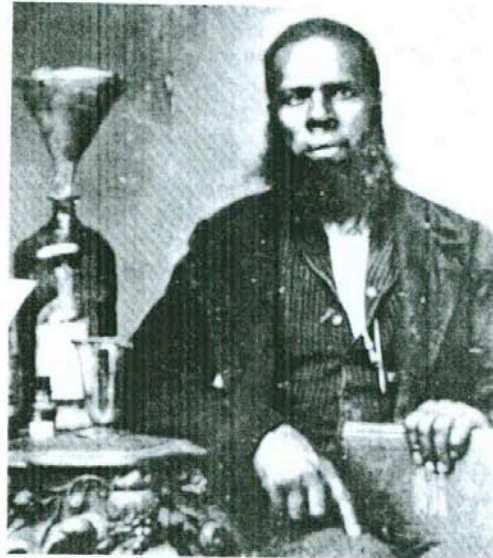
If it is assumed that all texts in the book are Simpson's product, as the flyleaf claims, *The Emancipation Car* is outstanding in at least three ways: not only may it well be the first book of "poetry and

⁴The biographical information on Simpson is a composite of autobiographical passages in *The Emancipation Car* and information in his file at Oberlin College, the *General Catalogue of Oberlin College 1833-1908* (Oberlin, 1909), 885, and articles by Norris F. Schneider in the *Zanesville Signal* (February 11, 1943) and the *Zanesville News* (January 19 and 26, 1941).

⁵*The Emancipation Car*, iii-iv.

⁶*Ibid.*, iv.

⁷*Original Anti-Slavery Songs* (Zanesville: Printed for the author, 1852). One song in this pamphlet is not reproduced



Joshua McCarter Simpson (photograph courtesy of Norris F. Schneider, Zanesville, Ohio)

songs" by a black author printed in the United States, but it represents the greatest number of antislavery song texts by any one person, and it is the only known antislavery song collection in which all lyrics were written rather than compiled by a single person, black or white.⁸

Paradoxically, another reason the volume is of special interest lies in the fact that it is similar in

elsewhere.

⁸Former slave William Wells Brown is responsible for the song collection *The Anti-Slavery Harp* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848; rpt. Philadelphia: Rhistoric Publications, 1969), but he functioned as editor, not author. Also, Eliza Lee Follen is probably the author of [*Anti-Slavery Hymns and Songs*], No. 12 of *Anti-Slavery Tracts* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, [1859]; rpt. Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970), but it is not known whether all fourteen works were either intended to be sung or were actually set to music and sung.

content to other antislavery songsters. In other words, because the texts were written by a black man in Ohio rather than a white man in Boston (or New York), one might reasonably expect that they would differ from others in their approach, content, even in the choice of tunes. The fact that they do not is significant in its broader implications as to communication and unity within the movement, and renders *The Emancipation Car* a useful vehicle for a comparison and discussion of antislavery song-writing techniques.

The lyrics of the songs in *The Emancipation Car* may be categorized generally as follows: appeals or protests against slavery on moral grounds; "rallying" songs; songs that celebrate or protest specific events; and songs about the underground railroad.

The moral appeal against slavery involved arguments based on both religion and democracy, and was best summarized, perhaps, in a resolution of Henry B. Stanton, who stated that the newly-formed American Anti-Slavery Society "... commends itself to the patriot and the Christian."⁹ To the latter, slavery, as a sin against God, had to be abolished immediately. Similar to the conversion experience of revivalism, the doctrine of immediatism involved an individual realization of the sin and the subsequent commitment to eradicate it at once. The religious overtones are further reflected in the words of William Lloyd Garrison: "We shall spare no exertions nor means to bring the whole nation to speedy repentance."¹⁰

The sin of slavery and call for repentance is, then, at the heart of abolition, and thus a common theme of the literature and songs of the cause. A typical example is "The Abolitionist Hymn":

⁹First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society (New York: Dorr & Butterfield, 1834; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1972), 23.

¹⁰"Declaration of the Anti-Slavery Convention, Assembled in Philadelphia, December 4, 1833," printed, e.g., in the *Liberator*, December 14, 1833, 198.

¹¹Second and fourth verses, sung to the tune of "Old Hundred." It can be found set to music in Jairus Lincoln, ed., *Anti-Slavery Melodies; for the Friends of Freedom* (Hingham, [Mass.]: Elijah B. Gill, 1843), 5, for example. The first three of the four verses can also be found in Edith Fowke

We ask not that the slave should lie,
As lies his master, at his ease,
Beneath a silken canopy,
Or in the shade of blooming trees.

We only ask, O God, that they,
Who bind a brother, may relent:
But, Great Avenger, we do pray
That the wrong-doer may repent.¹¹

The idea that slavery is morally wrong underlies Simpson's view that slave-holding is inconsistent with Christianity:

Who are those who preach and pray
On the Holy Sabbath Day;
Yet for slaves have naught to say?
'Tis the band of thieves.¹²

* * *

Lo! ten thousand steeples shining
Through this mighty Christian land,
While four million slaves all pining
And dying 'neath the Tyrant's hand.
See the 'blood-stained' Christian banner
Followed by a host of saints
While they loudly sing Hosannah,
We hear the dying slave's complaints:
Hear ye that mourning?
Anglo-sons of God,
O! ye Hypocrites take warning,
And shun your sable brother's blood.¹³

A similar approach is used in other antislavery songs:

Where human law o'errules Divine,
Beneath the sheriff's hammer fell
My wife and babes, — I call them mine, —
And where they suffer, who can tell?
The hounds are baying on my track,
O Christian! will you send me back?¹⁴

* * *

and Joe Glazer, *Songs of Work and Protest* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973), 167. The poem is by John Pierpont.

¹²*The Emancipation Car*, "The Band of Thieves," 44; second verse; tune — "In the Sabbath School."

¹³*The Emancipation Car*, "To the White People of America," 13-15; second verse; tune — "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground."

¹⁴"The Fugitive Slave to the Christian," third verse; tune unknown, words by Elizur Wright, Jr. See William W. Brown, ed., *op. cit.*, 27-28.

**“No, Master, Never”
By Joshua Simpson**

A BROTHER'S FAREWELL.

A SCENE AT THE SLAVE PEN.

By J. McC. SIMPSON,
THE A. A. S. DAVID.

AIR.—“Hard Times come again no more.”

I am sold down to Georgia—
My grief none can tell;
Fare you well—we'll meet on earth no more.
My friends and relations,
I'll bid you all farewell;
Fare-you-well—we'll meet on earth no more.
When the lash of the driver is sounding,
'Way down—way down upon old Georgia's shore,
I will trust in my Saviour,
His grace I will implore—
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.

Fare-you-well, my dear mother,
I leave you now behind;
Farewell; we'll meet on earth no more.
Though a slave in Virginia,
You have been good and kind;
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.
When my sighs and groans are ascending—
'Way down—way down upon old Georgia's shore,
O! remember, my troubles
And grief will soon be o'er:
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.

Fare-you-well, my companion,
Our union now must end;
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.
Let your courage never fail you,
For God will be your friend:
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.
When the night overshadows my sleeping,
'Way down—way down upon old Georgia's shore,
I will come in dreams to greet you,
And watch your cabin door;
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.

'Tis no use to weep, my sister—
I'm sold, and now must yield;
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.
I must languish in sorrow,
In Georgia's cotton field:
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.
When the sun bids adieu to my labors,
'Way down—way down upon old Georgia's shore,
We will meet at the altar,
To tell our sorrows o'er:
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.

[There a voice is calling roughly, “Come,
Boy, come, we must go! Stop that foolishness!”]
Now my master is calling,
And I must soon depart:

Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.
Here to leave my dear children,
It almost breaks my heart:
Farewell—we'll meet on earth no more.
When the trumpet of Gabriel is sounding—
'Way down—way down upon old Georgia's shore,
I will hail you in that morning,
On Canaan's happy shore:
Fare-you-well—we'll meet on earth no more.

NO, MASTER, NEVER:

Or the true feelings of those slaves who say they would
not be free. The following shows their feelings when
they are free.

By J. McC. SIMPSON,
THE A. A. S. DAVID.

AIR.—“Pop goes the Weasel.”

Old master always said,
Jack will never leave me;
He has a noble head;
He will not deceive me.
I will treat him every day
Kindly and clever;
Then he will not run away.
No, master, never!

One night I heard him say,
He was going to Cleveland.
A thought struck me right away,
That this was a freeland.
I thought if I too could go,
The dearest ties I'd sever,
And never would come back no more—
Never—no never!

The next morn, at early dawn,
I heard old master knocking;
He says, “Jack, we must be gone—
Put on your shoes and stockings.
Quickly I bounded out,
And got my clothes together,
And told my wife I'd not come back—
No, Lizzy, never!

Soon we were on the way,
Towards the Forest City.
There to leave my wife a slave,
I thought it was a pity.
I heard mistress slightly say,
“We'll all keep together,
Or Jack will go to Canada.”
“No,” says master, “never!”

“Jack,” says he, “be wide awake,
And let no body tease you;
And don't go too near the lake—
The cold winds will freeze you!”
Do you think I would run away,
And leave a man so clever,
And seek a home in Canada?
No, master, never!

We stopped at the Weddell House,
The thought then came o'er me,
That now's the time to go across,
As many have gone before me.
I went down to the steamboat wharf—
Got on the Jacob Astor,
And cried aloud as she shoved off,
“Farewell, old master!”

The next day, in Malden Town,
Who should I see but master.
He says, “Jack, you must go home;
You'll starve and freeze to death, sir.”
Says I, “you are a nice old man;
Very kind and clever;
But think I'll wear my chains again?
No, master, never.”

“The Proclamation Day”
By Joshua Simpson

THE PROCLAMATION DAY

J. McG. SIMPSON.

MUSIC—TRAMP! TRAMP!! TRAMP!!!

Come my friend and let us sing,
Let us make the welkin ring,
For it is a glorious Celebration Day,
When one dash of Lincoln's pen,
Made Four Million *Chattels, Men,*
And their yoke and galling fetters wiped away.

CHORUS—Hark! Hark! Hark! the Trumpet's sounding,
Hear ye the echo on the breeze?
"Ninety days and you shall be,
From your yoke of bondage free,
And may labor for just whom and where you please."

When the Rebel hordes with might,
Were preparing for the fight,
O, how gloomy was our sad condition then;
We could see no glimmering ray,
Not a cheering hope of day,
Till we saw Old Father Abraham raise his pen.

CHORUS—Hark! Hark! Hark! &c.

When the rebels took their stand,
With their muskets in their hand,
And declared the Stars and Stripes should cease to wave,
Father Abraham replied,
If the Union you divide,
You shall cease to hold the Negro as a slave.

CHORUS—Hark! Hark! Hark! &c.

Now we'll join the merry lay,
This is Abr'am Lincoln's day,
And we'll let the Nations know that we are free,
While this banner proudly waves,
We will never more be slaves;

O, how thankful to our God we ought to be.

CHORUS—Shout! Shout! Shout! the Trumpet's sounding
"All men from bondage now are free,"
On Columbia's pleasant soil,
We no more as slaves shall toil,
Now we'll join in the general jubilee.