

DOING HISTORY  
AN EXERCISE FROM THE HISTORY ACADEMY, JUNE, 1992  
NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR HISTORY EDUCATION.

In an academy experience for Ohio teachers, the NCHE asked participants to read the following letter and then "do history." Here were their instructions.

"In order to do history, an historian needs to evaluate documents. For the purpose of this exercise, you should think of yourself as someone who is engaged in learning about the ways in which African-Americans reacted to emancipation. Someone has suggested that you evaluate the attached document in this connection.

What questions would you ask about the document?

What kinds of information can you learn from this document?

What criteria would you use to evaluate the significance of this document?

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After my students and I used this exercise, we had a number of questions so we wrote to the director of the academy, Dr. Arthur Silversmit. Part of his reply to our letter follows. *RBell*

Your letter raises the issue of authenticity and that is, of course, crucial. At this stage, the best answer I can give is that I'm not sure whether or not it was originally written by a black person named Jourdon Anderson. I asked Leon Litwack, who included it in his *Been in the Storm So Long*, and he said that he was not sure either. During the Ohio History Academy, a number of us tried to find the original in the *Cincinnati Commercial*. We looked at a number of issues and also at a number of editions of the paper and we were not able to locate it. That does not, of course, mean that it did not appear in that paper -- it might have been in an edition that we did not find.

What needs to be done, of course, is more research. We might try to use city records to see if there was a Jourdon Anderson in Dayton and we might try to use Tennessee records to investigate Col. Anderson. To my knowledge this research has not been done.

Another issue, however, is whether the feelings and one point of view expressed in the letter represent those of a former slave who had settled in the North. Certainly the people who reprinted it thought so! The letter indicates, in graphic terms, the fact that African Americans recognized that slavery was a form of economic exploitation and that the labor that had been demanded of them had a real value. It also indicates their concern about their family and their perceptions of the threats to the family that slavery posed. On the basis of reading many other sources on the views of African Americans about slavery and emancipation, Prof. Litwack thinks that the letter fairly represents the point of view of a former slave and I agree.

A short answer to the question raised by you (and your students) is that historians do not definitively know the answer to the question. That is one reason that I think this is such a good teaching device -- we are asking students to answer a genuine question, not one that the teacher already knows the answer to.

Dayton, Ohio, August 7, 1865

To My Old Master, Colonel P.H. Anderson  
Big Spring, Tennessee

Sir: I got your letter and was glad to find you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Col. Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville hospital, but one of the neighbors told me Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here; I get \$25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy (the folks here call her Mrs. Anderson), and the children, Milly, Jane and Grundy, go to school and are learning well; the teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher. They go to Sunday-School, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated; sometimes we overhear others saying, "Them colored people were slaves" down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks, but I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to belong to Col. Anderson. Many darkies would have been proud, as I used to was, to call you master. Now, if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free-papers in 1864 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department at Nashville. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you are sincerely disposed to treat us justly and kindly—and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years and Mandy twenty years. At \$25 a month for me, and \$2 a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to \$11,680. Add to this the interest for the time our wages has been kept back and deduct what you paid for our clothing and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. Please send the money by Adams Express, in care of V. Winters, esq, Dayton, Ohio. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night, but in Tennessee there was never any pay day for the negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve and die if it comes to that than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood, the great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

P.S.—Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.

From your old servant,

Jourdon Anderson

This letter is reproduced by Leon F. Litwack in *Been In The Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1979, pp. 333-335. The citation indicates that the letter was originally printed in the *Cincinnati Commercial*. It was reprinted many times: *New York Tribune*, Aug. 22, 1865, as a "letter dictated by a servant," also "Letter from a Freedman to His Old Master, written just as he dictated it," in Lydia Maria Child (ed.), *The Freedmen's Book* (Boston, 1865), 265-67, and Carter G. Woodson (ed.), *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis 1800-1860* (Washington, D.C., 1926, 537-39.