

Animating History

Educational Resources

History

This curriculum guide was developed by
Michael Reynolds, History teacher
at Episcopal High School

Discussion Guide

The Bell Affair

History Teaching Resources

These resources were developed to support using the animated film *The Bell Affair* in high school classrooms. Teaching and learning about slavery is often challenging, and the reality that four million Americans were enslaved on the eve of the Civil War in 1860 is hard but essential history to learn. *The Bell Affair* tells the story of an African American family in Washington, DC, and their attempts to gain freedom and opportunity for themselves and their community. Slavery was never a static institution, and the people brutalized by the institution experienced different realities depending on many circumstances, including where and when they lived. *The Bell Affair* tells the story of Daniel and Mary Bell's pursuit of freedom amidst the realities of life in the Chesapeake region in the 1830s and 1840s. It was a world where slave traders and owners from the upper south region of Maryland, Virginia, and neighboring states trafficked approximately one million people to the deep south states, fueling a booming cotton and sugar-growing economy. It was also a world that saw a growing challenge to slavery led by free African Americans, white abolitionists, and, most significantly, the enslaved themselves. This supplemental guide focuses on three important themes from *The Bell Affair* and offers teachers resources to use in conjunction with viewing the whole film or shorter clips shared below. The goal is to create opportunities for students who are learning about the complex world of nineteenth-century America to explore, ask questions, and develop a deeper understanding of the lives that African Americans created for themselves in spite of the terrible reality of slavery.

The primary sources included, in some cases, relate directly to *The Bell Affair*. Others, not directly related to the film, will help students explore and engage key themes from the film: resistance, trafficking, and community building. The language in many of the primary sources used to describe people held in bondage is disturbing and should be read and discussed with appropriate care.

Additional Resources

The website for the film *The Bell Affair*, contains much more information on the historical background and the process of creating the film.

<https://animatinghistory.com/bellaffair/>

For more on Daniel and Mary Bell and their family, see the ArcGIS StoryMap created by Kaci Nash.

<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=8be4e667eb1644ee850df4e9c0a681ce>

See the digital project, *Oh Say Can You See: Early Washington, D.C., Law and Family*, for an amazing digitized archive with primary sources connected to freedom lawsuits like the ones brought by the Bell family and many others.

<https://earlywashingtondc.org/>



1.1 Resistance to Slavery

Men, women, and children resisted enslavement and worked to better their lives, seeking opportunities and freedom in an unfree world.

Historians looking to better understand nineteenth-century America from the viewpoint of enslaved people revolutionized our understanding of slavery by exploring the many ways in which resistance to enslavement was a daily reality. Responding to early historians of the American South who argued, similarly to enslavers themselves, that most enslaved people were content in bondage, scholars have focused on the many ways that resistance shaped life and informed the worldview of enslaved people. Engaging in violent revolt, like the famous Nat Turner uprising in Southampton, Virginia in 1831, represents an extreme example of resistance, but other forms included escaping from slavery and, as seen in *The Bell Affair*, pursuing opportunities in state and federal courts to sue for freedom. Less dramatic than escape or revolt, but more common were everyday forms of resistance like work slowdowns or breaking tools. A key part of Daniel and Mary Bell's story was their use of the court system in Washington, DC to try and attain freedom. After the courts failed them, the Bells coordinated with friends and neighbors to attempt to escape aboard *The Pearl*, a ship bound for Philadelphia. *The Bell Affair* is deeply informed by the many ways people held in bondage fought for freedom.



Scenes from The Bell Affair

Mary Bell's Freedom Suits, including the courtroom scene



Escape aboard The Pearl and its capture



Primary sources to explore and analyze

Newspaper article on *The Pearl* escape attempt

“Capture of Runaway Slaves” in the Washington, DC, *Daily National Intelligencer* and *Washington Express*, April 19, 1848.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NDrOrbADq5PVDsvbsUzjR2YsydU4Tyh5/view?usp=drive_link

Newspaper ad placed by Elizabeth Hudson to recapture Charles and Weden Miles

“\$200 Reward” in the Alexandria, Va *Alexandria Gazette* January 6, 1851

https://drive.google.com/file/d/12IKRXPsHyjO7fxVKxl=NpfDfyPHkyzo/view?usp=drive_link

Newspaper ad placed by Marcellus Jones to recapture Charles and Hezekiah

“Two Hundred Dollars Reward” in the Baltimore, Md, *Baltimore Sun*, November 19, 1844

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XKielnoBfxbddQNF4lOfrGo-V0lliqz/view?usp=drive_link

Report of arrest of John Jefferson an enslaved man accused of setting fire to a stable

“Arson” in the Richmond, Va, *Richmond Daily Times*, May 15, 1850

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1e65HZYLbgeC74EqAar3gXZ26piQjUpQ/view?usp=drive_link



Questions for discussion

What motivated Mary Bell to challenge Susan Armistead’s ownership of herself and her children in court? What were the risks to challenging one’s legal status as a slave?

What type of planning would be needed to organize an escape attempt, like the 1848 attempt on *The Pearl*, of over seventy enslaved people? What were factors that led to its failure?

How does a focus on resistance in its many forms help historians better understand the lives of enslaved people?



1.2 Trafficking Men, Women and Children

The domestic slave trade and “hiring out” led to a life of fear, disruption and uncertainty for many enslaved people.

Enslaved men, women and children knew that as people who were considered property, they could be separated and sold or hired away from family, friends and loved ones whenever enslavers found it profitable and expedient. That fear was one of the many reasons people chose to attempt to escape from slavery. From the close of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808 to the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 approximately one million people were sold and trafficked from the upper south to the lower south. Washington, DC and nearby towns and cities like Alexandria and Richmond, Va and Baltimore, Md became hubs of this trade. Large scale shifts in agriculture production in the upper south, from labor intensive tobacco to wheat and other grains, left many enslavers with more workers than they could profitably employ. At the same time, the demand for enslaved labor from the booming cotton and sugar plantations of the lower south increased dramatically. Enslavers could choose to sell people, or, in an increasingly diversifying economy, they could “hire” them out to other whites in need of labor and profit from renting those they enslaved for a set period of time. Daniel Bell was hired out to work at the Washington Navy Yard by his enslaver. Mary Bell’s enslaver, Robert Armistead freed her upon his death and set terms for her children to eventually be freed. But when he died, his widow Susan Armistead successfully challenged the manumission addendum to Robert’s will. When Susan threatened to sell members of the Bell family to slave traders, they chose to risk their lives and attempt to escape to freedom aboard *The Pearl*.

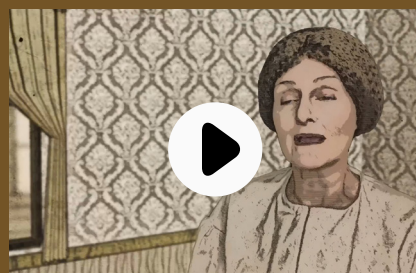


Scenes from The Bell Affair

Daniel Bell is accosted at the Washington Navy Yard and taken to be sold by “Georgia men,” aka slave traders.



Susan Armistead, after her husband’s death, brings the children of Mary Bell to an appraiser to ascertain their value if sold.



*After the freedom seekers aboard *The Pearl* were captured, many were sold but others attained freedom through purchase by family members.*



Primary sources to explore and analyze

Newspaper ad placed by Franklin & Armfield wanting to buy enslaved men, women, and children

“Cash for 400 Negroes” in the Alexandria, Va, *Alexandria Gazette*, December 19, 1834

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1u0BDZkbZmA50CRZ8jnmTHVnXWpgdPUo6/view?usp=drive_link

Newspaper ad placed by Joseph Bruin wanting to buy enslaved men, women, and children

“Cash for Negroes” in the Alexandria, Va, *Alexandria Gazette*, March 21, 1844

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rSgoUJZXz4hG43qY4cE6vN0qcr351Xc2/view?usp=drive_link

Newspaper ads placed by William Gouldin to hire out men, women, and children he enslaved

“For Hire” in the Richmond, Va, *Richmond Dispatch*, May 3, 1854

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TmC4eb2EDTHLswKx8TseY_A-c73HRDk4/view?usp=drive_link



Questions for discussion

In *The Bell Affair*, why did Susan Armistead hire an appraiser to place a valuation on Daniel and Mary Bell’s children? In what ways does the film show enslaved men, women and children being treated as both people and property?

In what ways do primary sources connected to trafficking enslaved people help us understand how enslavers viewed those they claimed to own?

Many of the freedom seekers who attempted to escape on *The Pearl* were sold after being recovered. Why was selling people sometimes seen as a preferable punishment by enslavers?

Daniel Bell and several of his children were “hired out” by their enslavers. Why would this practice be seen as a good option for enslavers? What problems could arise for enslavers, both owners and hirers?

What are some ways that “hiring out” could have impacted enslaved men, women and children? In what ways could it have been potentially beneficial and/or harmful to them?



1.3 Making a Way Out of No Way: Building an African American Community

Free and enslaved African Americans in the Washington, DC area and in communities around the country worked together to build lives for themselves despite the realities of slavery and racial prejudice.

Despite the discrimination and violence they often experienced, both free and enslaved African Americans worked to build lives for themselves and their families and created communities in the decades before the Civil War. Through manumission, self purchase, successful legal cases and other means, the number of free African Americans grew steadily in places like Washington, DC during the antebellum period. Many families included members who were both free and enslaved and this “freedom line” often created challenges for them. In *The Bell Affair*, this tension is explored as Mary Bell is shown discussing the future and how she was shunned by some free members of her family. Free and enslaved men and women married and at times this complicated the freedom status of their children. Legally the children of free women would be free, as the legal principle *partus sequitor ventrem* established in colonial Virginia dictated that slavery status was to be inherited from mothers. However in a world of race-based chattel slavery, it was often assumed that Black people were slaves unless they could prove otherwise. Unscrupulous whites often took advantage of these assumptions by kidnapping free African Americans and selling them into slavery. Solomon Northup, a free man visiting Washington, DC from New York was kidnapped in 1841 and sold South, famously writing his story after he was freed in *Twelve Years a Slave*.



Scenes from The Bell Affair

Mary Bell, an enslaved woman, confronts Anne and Mother Lucy (free African American women) for their unwillingness to include her in their social world.

Daniel and Mary Bell talk about their courtship, concerns for their children and their plans for when they will be free together.

*After Mary Bell loses her freedom suit, the Bell family plans to take “freedom making” into their own hands, collaborating with white abolitionists to escape on *The Pearl*.*



Primary sources to explore and analyze

Lewis Haney was born on December 16, 1853, to Henry Haney, his enslaved father, and Rachael Haney, his free mother.

Alexandria County Birth Registry, 1853.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1C1MUDGdq18ciTo2AzEZf-2WFBQFtCS4Y/view?usp=drive_link

Newspaper advertisement to capture “Aggy” also known as Mary Jefferson.

“Twenty Dollars Reward” in Richmond, Va, *Richmond Enquirer*, July 27, 1821

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TmC4eb2EDTHLswKx8TseY_A-c73HRDk4/view?usp=drive_link

Newspaper post announcing that free African Americans who had not paid the special tax levied on them had been “sold” to whites until their debts were paid in full

“Local Items-Sale of Free Negroes” in the Alexandria, Va *Alexandria Gazette*, August 21, 1860

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TmC4eb2EDTHLswKx8TseY_A-c73HRDk4/view?usp=drive_link

Deed of Manumission for Mary Bell and children.

<https://earlywashingtondc.org/doc/oscys.case.0243.007>



Questions for discussion

In what ways did free and enslaved African Americans support and help each other as they navigated a world of legal and social discrimination?

Why might there be conflict and discord between free and enslaved African Americans in a place like Washington, DC in the 1830s and 1840s? What issues could have caused problems for them?

How did discrimination by whites impact both enslaved and free African Americans? In what ways might it have been similar and in what ways different?

