Rationale: “James Pennington’s Quest for Freedom” is an educational program that examines the moral and practical dilemmas for both escaping slave James Pennington and William Wright, a Quaker who aided in his journey to freedom. This activity encourages participants to think deeply about the experience of persons, fleeing from slavery, departing the world they knew. This decision was not always a simple one and parallels can be seen today as people flee their homes today under horrible circumstances in other countries. By examining ways that people acted in the past and outcomes of these actions, it can help students take informed action in the present and future.

Cognitive Objectives (At the end of this lesson, participants will be able to):

- Describe conditions for those enslaved in Maryland and how this led to a desire to escape.
- Identify the risks that escaped slaves faced.
- Explain the reasons William Wright aided James Pennington.

Affective Objectives:

- Recognize the moral and practical dilemma for both James Pennington and William Wright regarding slavery and escape.
- Build critical thinking skills through analysis of primary source material.
- Demonstrate historical empathy by evaluating the decisions of Pennington and Wright.

As we try to get students to CARE, this lesson employs these four teaching methods:

- Compelling story, with tension
- Actionable results—How can I act on this new information today?
- Reactions from all—Dialogic questions spur conversations
- Encourage empathy

Procedure:

Guide will recount the story of James Pennington utilizing primary and secondary sources. Participants will be provided a handout with quotes and questions. Facilitator will fill in the narrative. At various points in the program, visitors will have the opportunity to address questions for comprehension.
The overarching goal of this program is to recognize all as humans, worthy of dignity and respect. We do not know, by looking at them, the experiences of refugees or what they may be capable of if given the right opportunities.

Program:

James Pembroke is born in 1809. He enters a world where his master has total control over all aspects of life, including where he lives, what he does for work, and how he spends his time. While enslaved persons in Maryland toil for masters, the primary role of the region in this era is exporting enslaved to the cotton fields of the Deep South, where they would be worked until death. Pembroke had seen this happen time and again to other enslaved persons.

Pembroke, by the time he is eighteen, has learned three trades--He is an apprentice stonemason from the time he is 9 until 11 and is later trained as a blacksmith and carpenter. His skills add to his value for his master.

At the age of eighteen, he witnesses his father being brutally beaten by an overseer. Pembroke, himself, is assaulted for making eye contact with his master during work. His mother is threatened. Weighing these events, he makes the difficult decision to seek his freedom:

(Participant reads): “It is impossible for me now to recollect all the perplexing thoughts that passed through my mind during that forenoon; it was a day of heartaching to me. But I distinctly remember the two great difficulties that stood in the way of my flight: I had a father and mother whom I dearly loved,—I had also six sisters and four brothers on the plantation. The question was, shall I hide my purpose from them? Moreover, how will my flight affect them when I am gone? Will they not be suspected? Will not the whole family be sold off as a disaffected family, as is generally the case when one of its members flies? But a still more trying question was, how can I expect to succeed, I have no knowledge of distance or direction. I know that Pennsylvania is a free state, but I know not where its soil begins, or where that of Maryland ends.”

Prompts for discussion:

1. What are the dangers that Pembroke faces by leaving? What are the dangers he faces by staying? If he stays, what obstacles may present themselves down the road?
2. What decision would you make, given this information?
3. Imagine you are a member of Pembroke family. Describe how you would feel when you discovered James had escaped.

Pembroke spends six days escaping, during which he must hide from his pursuing master in a barn and spend an entire day squatting in a corn shock. At one point, he is captured, but breaks free.

As he gets further from the plantation, he experiences joy, followed by extreme sadness. He does not know where he will go, what he will do to make a living, and how he will survive without his family. He also is concerned with how he will explain to people where he was born and his ignorance.

Eventually, a friendly passerby directs Pembroke to a home where she says he will be helped. He later recalls the next steps of his journey:
(Participant reads): “In about half an hour I stood trembling at the door of [Quaker] William Wright. After knocking, the door opened upon a comfortably spread table; the sight of which seemed at once to increase my hunger sevenfold. Not daring to enter, I said I had been sent to him in search of employ. "Well," said he, "Come in and take thy breakfast, and get warm, and we will talk about it; thee must be cold without any coat." "Come in and take thy breakfast, and get warm!," These words spoken by a stranger, but with such an air of simple sincerity and fatherly kindness, made an overwhelming impression upon my mind. They made me feel, spite of all my fear and timidity, that I had, in the providence of God, found a friend and a home. He at once gained my confidence; and I felt that I might confide to him a fact which I had, as yet, confided to no one.”

William Wright lives just north of Gettysburg. As a member of the Quaker faith, slavery is incompatible with his religion due to the violence inherent in the system. Wright, however, is taking a risk. Assisting fugitive slaves was illegal and carried monetary punishment. In 1847, Daniel Kaufman, of Cumberland County (approximately 20 miles north of Gettysburg), was fined $4,000 for aiding runaway slaves. After the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, a person aiding or harboring a fugitive slave could face up to a $1000 fine and six months in jail. Though, Pennington’s story precedes the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 was in place which prompted the payment of $500 if an individual was accused of harboring or aiding an escaped slave.

Prompts for discussion:

1. Why do you think William Wright is taking these risks?
2. Would you take these risks were you in Wright’s shoes?

William and Phoebe Wright took in James Pembroke for a period of six months where he learned arithmetic, astronomy, and writing. He changed his name to James Pennington and just ten years after escaping bondage, became an ordained minister after studying at Yale. Later in life, he became an outspoken advocate for anti-slavery and abolition in the years prior to the Civil War.

Similarities to immigration:

In the book, *Enrique’s Journey*, Sonia Nazario chronicles Enrique’s path from Honduras to America. Enrique must make the difficult decision to leave his home and everything he knows to seek his mother, and a better life, in America. He has fallen into drugs and cannot stay in Honduras: “Enrique’s shame eats at him. He feels guilt for what he has done to his family...He has to go find his mother. She is his salvation. Maria Isabel [Enrique’s girlfriend] pleads with him to stay...But Enrique fears if he says in Honduras right now, he will end up on the streets or dead.”

Like Pennington, Enrique must rely on the generosity of strangers to keep from starving: Enrique approaches a house and speaks softly, his head slightly bowed. “I’m hungry. Can you spare a taco? Some water?” The woman inside sees injuries from the train-top beating he took during his last attempt to go north. She gives him water, bread, and beans.”
Dialogic summarizing questions:

1. Besides Enrique, how are others in the world today experiencing situations similar to James Pennington’s?
2. How can your knowledge of James Pennington’s situation, Enrique’s situation, and William Wright’s assistance inform or change your view of the world today?
3. If you were faced with a law that contradicted what you thought was right, how would you react?
4. How can you act on this new information today?

Follow-up activities:

- Follow through on question number 4 above. Write a letter to an elected official, start a petition, etc.
- Learn more about people who are trying to immigrate to America. What are their stories? How do they compare to James Pennington’s?
- Read all of Enrique’s Journey by Sonia Navarro. Find comparisons to James Pennington’s and other escaping slaves’ experiences.
- Write a story that finishes James Pennington’s journey. Compare with the real story by reading The Fugitive Blacksmith (https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/pennig49/summary.html) and American to the Backbone.
Works Referenced


Pennington, James W.C. “The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States.” *Documenting the American South*, 1849.


“It is impossible for me now to recollect all the perplexing thoughts that passed through my mind during that forenoon; it was a day of heartaching to me. But I distinctly remember the two great difficulties that stood in the way of my flight: I had a father and mother whom I dearly loved,--I had also six sisters and four brothers on the plantation. The question was, shall I hide my purpose from them? Moreover, how will my flight affect them when I am gone? Will they not be suspected? Will not the whole family be sold off as a disaffected family, as is generally the case when one of its members flies? But a still more trying question was, how can I expect to succeed, I have no knowledge of distance or direction. I know that Pennsylvania is a free state, but I know not where its soil begins, or where that of Maryland ends?”

Questions for discussion:

4. What are the dangers that Pembroke faces by leaving? What are the dangers he faces by staying? If he stays, what obstacles may present themselves down the road?
5. What decision would you make, given this information?
6. Imagine you are a member of Pembroke family. Describe how you would feel when you discovered James had escaped.
“In about half an hour I stood trembling at the door of William Wright. After knocking, the door opened upon a comfortably spread table; the sight of which seemed at once to increase my hunger sevenfold. Not daring to enter, I said I had been sent to him in search of employ. "Well," said he, "Come in and take thy breakfast, and get warm, and we will talk about it; thee must be cold without any coat." "Come in and take thy breakfast, and get warm!," These words spoken by a stranger, but with such an air of simple sincerity and fatherly kindness, made an overwhelming impression upon my mind. They made me feel, spite of all my fear and timidity, that I had, in the providence of God, found a friend and a home. He at once gained my confidence; and I felt that I might confide to him a fact which I had, as yet, confided to no one.”

Questions for discussion:

3. Why do you think William Wright is taking these risks?
4. Would you take these risks were you in Wright's shoes?

Tying it to today: Enrique’s Journey by Sonia Nazario

Enrique must make the difficult decision to leave his home and everything he knows to seek his mother, and a better life, in America. He has fallen into drugs and cannot stay in Honduras: “Enrique’s shame eats at him. He feels guilt for what he has done to his family...He has to go find his mother. She is his salvation. Maria Isabel [Enrique’s girlfriend] pleads with him to stay...But Enrique fears if he says in Honduras right now, he will end up on the streets or dead.”

Like Pennington, Enrique must rely on the generosity of strangers to keep from starving: “Enrique approaches a house and speaks softly, his head slightly bowed. “I’m hungry. Can you spare a taco? Some water?” The woman inside sees injuries from the train-top beating he took during his last attempt to go north. She gives him water, bread, and beans.”

Summarizing questions:

5. Besides Enrique, how are others in the world today experiencing situations similar to James Pennington’s?
6. How can your knowledge of James Pennington’s situation, Enrique’s situation, and William Wright's assistance inform or change your view of the world today?
7. If you were faced with a law that contradicted what you thought was right, how would you react?
8. How can you act on this new information today?