

Achieving Freedom in Eighteenth-Century America: María Rafaela Whitten

Lesson Plan

Overview

In this lesson, students will read about the life of [María Rafaela Whitten](#), whose Story is featured on [Enslaved.org](#). María Rafaela Whitten was a South Carolina-born enslaved woman who seized freedom for her family and achieved success in Spanish Florida. Students will read her story and analyze it in the context of the American Revolution and the socioeconomic colonial structures in place in Spanish Florida. Drawing from their analysis of the story and supplemental secondary sources, students will discuss the relationship between individual life experiences and larger socioeconomic contexts and events in history.

Length: 2 class periods of 50 minutes including the final assignment

Grade/Subject: high school U.S History classes

Lesson Objectives

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- 1) Describe the particular struggles of an enslaved woman and her family to fight against slavery and achieve freedom and success in eighteenth-century America.
- 2) Analyze and discuss how the socioeconomic and geographical context of the mid and late eighteenth century's United States and colonial Spanish Florida shaped the life and experiences of Maria Rafaela Whitten and her family.
- 3) Develop research skills by searching for secondary sources to frame the analysis of the story.

- 4) Develop analytical skills by integrating an individual life story into the analysis of larger accounts of history.
- 5) Reflect on the relationship between individual life stories and larger socioeconomic and geographical contexts.

Necessary Materials

- [María Rafaela Whitten](#) from Enslaved.org
- [Juan Bautista 'Big Prince' Whitten](#) from Enslaved.org
- Steven Niven, "Proud and Free in Spanish Fla.: Juan Bautista Whitten Led a Black Militia," *The Root*, February 29, 2016, <https://www.theroot.com/proud-and-free-in-spanish-fla-juan-bautista-whitten-l-1790854425>.
- Laptop or Tablet (for reading and word processing)
- Printout or projection of group questions and assignment instructions
- Note-taking materials

Vocabulary (see [Controlled Vocabularies](#) from Enslaved.org for more):

- Baptism or Naming Ceremony
- Enslaver or Owner
- Legal Proceeding
- Relocation
- Godparent
- Plantation, Estate, or Ranch
- Runaway Advertisement

Activities/Procedures

Note: This lesson uses the Story of [María Rafaela Whitten](#), but you can choose any other Story from Enslaved.org that fits the topics of your class. Alternatively, you can assign different Stories to different groups and they can learn from each other about the lives of various individuals.

1. Divide the class into groups and ask each group to read the complete story and look at the timeline of [María Rafaela Whitten](#) from Enslaved.org.
2. Ask each group to discuss and write down answers to the questions: After reading Maria Rafaela's story and looking at the timeline, discuss with your group the following questions:
 - What was life like for Maria Rafaela in South Carolina?
 - What happened to Maria Rafaela and her family during the American Revolution?
 - How did their life change in Spanish Florida? Why?
 - Why did they migrate to Cuba in 1821?

3. Bring the class back together for a full-group discussion. Ask each group to briefly summarize their answers.
4. Ask the students to go back to their groups and read the article "[Proud and Free in Spanish Fla.: Juan Bautista Whitten Led a Black Militia.](#)" and the Story of [Juan Bautista 'Big Prince' Whitten](#). Both the article and the Story provide additional information on Maria Rafaela's life and narrate the story of her husband, 'Big Prince' Whitten. After reading the article and the Story, ask each group to answer the questions below:

The "Proud and Free" article and the story of 'Big Prince' provides additional information on Maria Rafaela's life and the historical context in which she and her family lived. Using that additional information and secondary sources and information that your group will browse on the internet, answer the following questions:

- How was Maria Rafaela able to change her status from an enslaved to a free person?
 - What was the context in which she lived in South Carolina and Georgia? What were the socio-economic structures in place?
 - How was it different in Spanish Florida? Why?
 - What was the religious sanctuary policy in place in Spanish Florida by the end of the eighteenth century?
 - Why do you think that Spain would implement a policy like that in one of its colonial territories?
 - What were the elements that contributed to Maria Rafaela and her family achieving success in Spanish Florida?
 - Why was Spanish Florida sold to the United States in 1821?
 - What was the socioeconomic context in Cuba, where Maria Rafaela and her family migrated to, in 1821?
5. Bring the class back together for a full-group discussion. Ask each group to briefly summarize their answers. Additionally, each group will discuss the secondary sources that they searched for to help them answer the questions. Discuss as a group the following question: What have you learned about American history and colonial contexts from reading and analyzing Maria Rafaela's story?
 6. As a final assignment, each student will write a short essay of approximately 2 pages reflecting on the relationship between individual life stories and experiences and larger socioeconomic structures and contexts. This can be completed as an outside-of-class assignment or during the last portion of the second class that this lesson covers.

After reading and discussing Maria Rafaela's story and the larger historical context in which she and her family lived, write a 2-page essay answering the following question: How do you see the relationship between individual life stories and experiences and larger historical contexts?

To help you think through this question, you might consider the following questions:

- How does history shape individual lives?
- How do individuals take advantage of existing social and political conditions to fight for freedom and emancipation?
- Would you say that you have a different understanding of the lives of enslaved and free Black people after reading Maria Rafaela's life and how she navigated different socioeconomic conditions throughout her life? If so, how can life stories and experiences help us understand slavery and colonial socioeconomic structures?

Lesson Creator

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