

# TEACHER'S GUIDE

## Document Based Activity

### Part 2: Runaway!

#### MISSION 2: "Flight to Freedom"

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Selections from  
**Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave**

Henry Walton Bibb was born into slavery on a plantation near Louisville, Kentucky in 1815. His mother was a slave and of mixed race; his father was a white state senator. Bibb escaped to freedom and was recaptured at least three times. His autobiography, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*, published in 1849-1850 when he was living in Boston, became one of the most successful antebellum slave narratives.

With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, Bibb left Boston for Canada and settled permanently as a free man. In Canada, he spoke against slavery and for the total integration of the races. He was a founding director of the Refugee Home Society, the work of which was to help the 25-35,000 fugitive slaves in Canada to "recolonize." He also edited the first black newspaper in Canada, *Voice of the Fugitive*.

*A Note to the Educator:*

*While the circumstances of Lucy's enslavement and the strategies she considers in her escape are based on thorough research, Lucy is a fictional character. The circumstances of Henry Bibb's enslavement and the record of his attempts to escape are factual, regardless of whether or not he has embellished them for his readers. Bibb's story provides a real-life companion to the second part of "Flight to Freedom," and it will reinforce the historical aspects of the period to your students.*

*Since this activity is also available to you as a Word document, you can edit the excerpts, and remove or modify the annotations to suit the needs of your students. You might define more or fewer words, or use the margin to write discussion or comprehension questions.*

*Potential discussion questions include:*

- 1. For Bibb, it is ironic that the person who presumes to own him is a deacon. Why is this? (A deacon assists the minister of a Christian church. We infer that Bibb feels that to be a Christian means to be compassionate to others, so to be a slaveholder, and a heartless one at that, seems contradictory to him.)*
- 2. Why does Bibb decide to run? (Bibb mentions several reasons for his actions, some that seem more immediate [fear of whippings, fear for the safety of his wife and child], some that are a bit further away [fear of his family being sold away from him], and some that are more philosophical [such as when he discusses with the reader why he took the risks that he did].)*

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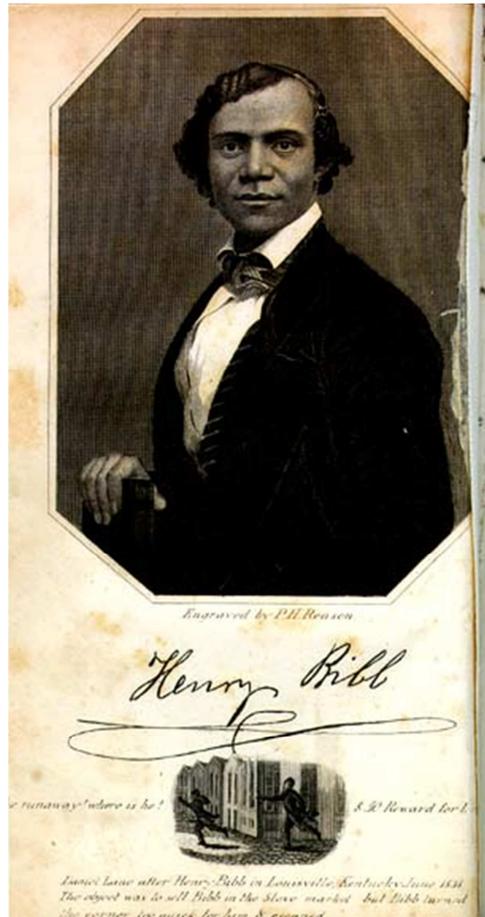
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3. *Does Bibb intend to attempt an escape when he first decides to go to the religious meeting? When he decides to escape, how does Bibb complicate matters and risk an even worse punishment? (He decides to increase his chances for escape by taking a mule and a knife with him. Either of these increases the possible penalty from a whipping to death.)*
4. *What are some of the ways Bibb resists enslavement over the course of the story? (He attends a religious service after being prohibited from doing so; he steals a mule and a bowie knife, and runs away twice, the second time with his wife and baby daughter. We can infer that Bibb continued to resist and to oppose slavery because later in his life, he writes the book from which this passage is excerpted.)*
5. *What are all the reasons Bibb feels he must try to escape? (He will be whipped; his family will be punished even if they remain behind; his wife and daughter might be sold off; he loves liberty and hates his state of bondage. The first three paragraphs of Chapter 12 are particularly powerful, and you might consider reading that part aloud.)*

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**Henry Bibb**

Source: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html>

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*Note: Most of American English spelling was standardized by the beginning of the 19th century, but readers will notice certain differences from current spellings not corrected here.*

*It was a literary convention of the times to open each chapter with a brief summary of the content.*

*Malinda is Henry' Bibb's wife. Deacon Whitfield is their slaveholder. A deacon is a person who works as an assistant to a minister in a church. In this case, because of his temperament and actions, Bibb has difficulty believing he is a Christian; the neighbor, by contrast, allows slaves to attend services.*

*Superannuated- too old to do hard work, these enslaved might mind children or do less demanding errands.*

**Narrative of the life and adventures of Henry Bibb, an American slave, written by himself. With an introd. by Lucius C. Matlack. (1849)**

Source: Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library  
<http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/BibNarr.html>

**CHAPTER XI.**

**I attend a prayer meeting. -- Punishment therefor threatened. -- I attempt to escape alone. -- My return to take my family. -- Our sufferings. -- Dreadful attack of wolves. -- Our recapture.**

Some months after Malinda had recovered from her sickness, I got permission from the Deacon, on one Sabbath day, to attend a prayer meeting, on a neighboring plantation, with a few old superannuated slaves, although this was contrary to the custom of the country -- for slaves were not allowed to assemble for religious worship. Being more numerous than the whites there was fear of rebellion, and the overpowering of their oppressors in order to obtain freedom.

But this gentleman on whose plantation I attended the meeting was not a Deacon nor a professor of religion. He was not afraid of a few old Christian slaves rising up to kill their master because he allowed them to worship God on the Sabbath day.

We had a very good meeting, although our exercises were not conducted in accordance with an enlightened Christianity; for we had no Bible -- no intelligent leader -- but a conscience, prompted by our own reason, constrained us to worship God the Creator of all things.

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*The 8th Amendment (1787) made it illegal and unconstitutional for the justice system to mete out punishments that were "cruel or unusual," but slaveholders could do whatever they liked to punish slaves.*

*Note the predicament in which Bibb finds himself and how his desperation to avoid punishment for attending a religious service causes him to decide to run away and to steal a mule to do it.*

When I returned home from meeting I told the other slaves what a good time we had at our meeting, and requested them to go with me to meeting there on the next Sabbath. As no slave was allowed to go from the plantation on a visit without a written pass from his master, on the next Sabbath several of us went to the Deacon, to get permission to attend that prayer meeting; but he refused to let any go. I thought I would slip off and attend the meeting and get back before he would miss me, and would not know that I had been to the meeting.

When I returned home from the meeting as I approached the house I saw Malinda, standing out at the fence looking in the direction in which I was expected to return. She hailed my approach, not with joy, but with grief. She was weeping under great distress of mind, but it was hard for me to extort from her the reason why she wept. She finally informed me that her master had found out that I had violated his law, and I should suffer the penalty. which was five hundred lashes, on my naked back.

I asked her how he knew that I had gone?

She said I had not long been gone before he called for me and I was not to be found. He then sent the overseer on horseback to the place where we were to meet to see if I was there. But when the overseer got to the place, the meeting was over and I had gone back home, but had gone a nearer route through the woods and the overseer happened not to meet me. He heard that I had been there and hurried back home before me and told the Deacon, who ordered him to take me on the next morning, strip off my clothes, drive down four stakes in the ground and fasten my limbs to them; then strike me five hundred lashes for going to the prayer meeting. This was what distressed my poor companion. She thought it was more than I could bear, and that it would be the death of me. I concluded then to run away -- but she thought they would catch me with the blood hounds by their taking my track. But to avoid them I

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<p><i>Tackled up- put a harness, etc. on the mule</i></p> <p><i>A cane break is a section of reeds in a swamp.</i></p> <p><i>Twenty rods: a rod is about 16.5 feet, so about 100 yards</i></p> <p><i>Heart-rending- heartbreaking</i></p>	<p>thought I would ride off on one of the Deacon's mules. She thought if I did, they would sell me.</p> <p>"No matter, I will try it," said I, "let the consequences be what they may. The matter can be no worse than it now is." So I <u>tackled up</u> the Deacon's best mule with his saddle, &amp;c., and started that night and went off eight or ten miles from home. But I found the mule to be rather troublesome, and was like to betray me by braying, especially when he would see cattle, horses, or any thing of the kind in the woods.</p> <p>The second night from home I camped in a <u>cane break</u> down in the Red river swamp not a great way off from the road, perhaps not <u>twenty rods</u>, exposed to wild ferocious beasts which were numerous in that section of country. On that night about the middle of the night the mule heard the sound of horses feet on the road, and he commenced stamping and trying to break away. As the horses seemed to come nearer, the mule commenced trying to bray, and it was all that I could do to prevent him from making a loud bray there in the woods, which would have betrayed me.</p> <p>I supposed that it was the overseer out with the dogs looking for me, and I found afterwards that I was not mistaken. As soon as the people had passed by, I mounted the mule and took him home to prevent his betraying me. When I got near by home I stripped off the tackling and turned the mule loose. I then slipt up to the cabin wherein my wife laid and found her awake, much distressed about me. She informed me that they were then out looking for me, and that the Deacon was bent on flogging me nearly to death, and then selling me off from my family. This was truly <u>heart-rending</u> to my poor wife; the thought of our being torn apart in a strange land after having been sold away from all her friends and relations, was more than she could bear.</p> <p>The Deacon had declared that I should not only suffer for the</p>
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*How does Bibb think about taking a mule in terms of right and wrong? Is breaking a rule right as long as you don't get caught?*

*The family's plight escalates: Bibb's wife and child would be guilty as accomplices, so they must all run away.*

*Parched corn- dried corn  
Pawpaw- a sweet yellow tree fruit  
Persimmons- a soft juicy red-orange fruit resembling a tomato*

crime of attending a prayer meeting without his permission, and for running away, but for the awful crime of stealing a jackass, which was death by the law when committed by a negro.

But I well knew that I was regarded as property, and so was the ass; and I thought if one piece of property took off another, there could be no law violated in the act; no more sin committed in this than if one jackass had rode off another.

But after consultation with my wife I concluded to take her and my little daughter with me and they would be guilty of the same crime that I was, so far as running away was concerned; and if the Deacon sold one he might sell us all, and perhaps to the same person.

So we started off with our child that night, and made our way down to the Red river swamps among the buzzing insects and wild beasts of the forest. We wandered about in the wilderness for eight or ten days before we were apprehended, striving to make our way from slavery; but it was all in vain. Our food was parched corn, with wild fruit such as pawpaws, percimmons, grapes, &c. We did at one time chance to find a sweet potato patch where we got a few potatoes; but most of the time, while we were out, we were lost. We wanted to cross the Red river but could find no conveyance to cross in.

I recollect one day of finding a crooked tree which bent over the river or over one fork of the river, where it was divided by an island. I should think that the tree was at least twenty feet from the surface of the water. I picked up my little child, and my wife followed me, saying, "if we perish let us all perish together in the stream." We succeeded in crossing over. I often look back to that dangerous event even now with astonishment, and wonder how I could have run such a risk.

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*Bibb takes time to reflect for the reader. Why has he put his family and himself at such risk? "...the strongest love of liberty, humanity, and justice to myself and family...."*

*Faced with a pack of bloodthirsty wolves, Bibb summarizes his situation for himself and for the reader.*

What would induce me to run the same risk now? What could induce me now to leave home and friends and go to the wild forest and lay out on the cold ground night after night without covering, and live on parched corn?

What would induce me to take my family and go into the Red river swamps of Louisiana among the snakes and alligators, with all the liabilities of being destroyed by them, hunted down with blood hounds, or lay myself liable to be shot down like the wild beasts of the forest? Nothing I say, nothing but the strongest love of liberty, humanity, and justice to myself and family, would induce me to run such a risk again.

When we crossed over on the tree we supposed that we had crossed over the main body of the river, but we had not proceeded far on our journey before we found that we were on an Island surrounded by water on either side. We made our bed that night in a pile of dry leaves which had fallen from off the trees. We were much rest-broken, wearied from hunger and travelling through briers, swamps and cane-brakes -- consequently we soon fell asleep after lying down. About the dead hour of the night I was aroused by the awful howling of a gang of blood-thirsty wolves, which had found us out and surrounded us as their prey, there in the dark wilderness many miles from any house or settlement.

My dear little child was so dreadfully alarmed that she screamed loudly with fear -- my wife trembling like a leaf on a tree, at the thought of being devoured there in the wilderness by ferocious wolves.

The wolves kept howling, and were near enough for us to see their glaring eyes, and hear their chattering teeth. I then thought that the hour of death for us was at hand; that we should not live to see the light of another day; for there was no way for our escape. My little family were looking up to me for protection, but I could afford them none. And while I was

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*piety- devotion to God or religion.*



*Bowie knife*  
[http://www.historickansas.org/images/interior/ham\\_img\\_bowie1.jpg](http://www.historickansas.org/images/interior/ham_img_bowie1.jpg)

offering up my prayers to that God who never forsakes those in the hour of danger who trust in him, I thought of Deacon Whitfield; I thought of his profession, and doubted his piety. I thought of his hand-cuffs, of his whips, of his chains, of his stocks, of his thumb-screws, of his slave driver and overseer, and of his religion; I also thought of his opposition to prayer meetings, and of his five hundred lashes promised me for attending a prayer meeting. I thought of God, I thought of the devil, I thought of hell; and I thought of heaven, and wondered whether I should ever see the Deacon there. And I calculated that if heaven was made up of such Deacons, or such persons, it could not be filled with love to all mankind, and with glory and eternal happiness, as we know it is from the truth of the Bible.

The reader may perhaps think me tedious on this topic, but indeed it is one of so much interest to me, that I find myself entirely unable to describe what my own feelings were at that time. I was so much excited by the fierce howling of the savage wolves, and the frightful screams of my little family, that I thought of the future; I thought of the past; I thought the time of my departure had come at last.

My impression is, that all these thoughts and thousands of others, flashed through my mind, while I was surrounded by those wolves. But it seemed to be the will of a merciful providence, that our lives should be spared, and that we should not be destroyed by them.

I had no weapon of defence but a long bowie knife which I had slipped from the Deacon. It was a very splendid blade, about two feet in length, and about two inches in width. This used to be a part of his armor of defence while walking about the plantation among his slaves.

The plan which I took to expel the wolves was a very dangerous one, but it proved effectual. While they were

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advancing to me, prancing and accumulating in number, apparently of all sizes and grades, who had come to the feast, I thought just at this time, that there was no alternative left but for me to make a charge with my bowie knife. I well knew from the action of the wolves, that if I made no farther resistance, they would soon destroy us, and if I made a break at them, the matter could be no worse. I thought if I must die, I would die striving to protect my little family from destruction, die striving to escape from slavery. My wife took a club in one hand, and her child in the other, while I rushed forth with my bowie knife in hand, to fight off the savage wolves. I made one desperate charge at them, and at the same time making a loud yell at the top of my voice, that caused them to retreat and scatter, which was equivalent to a victory on our part. Our prayers were answered, and our lives spared through the night. We slept no more that night, and the next morning there were no wolves to be seen or heard, and we resolved not to stay on that island another night.

We travelled up and down the river side trying to find a place where we could cross. Finally we found a lot of drift wood clogged together, extending across the stream at a narrow place in the river, upon which we crossed over. But we had not yet surmounted our greatest difficulty. We had to meet one which was far more formidable than the first. Not many days after I had to face the Deacon.

We had been wandering about through the cane brakes, bushes, and briars, for several days, when we heard the yelping of blood hounds, a great way off, but they seemed to come nearer and nearer to us. We thought after awhile that they must be on our track; we listened attentively at the approach. We knew it was no use for us to undertake to escape from them, and as they drew nigh, we heard the voice of a man hissing on the dogs.

After awhile we saw the hounds coming in full speed on our

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track, and the soul drivers close after them on horse back, yelling like tigers, as they came in sight. The shrill yelling of the savage blood hounds as they drew nigh made the woods echo.

The first impulse was to run to escape the approaching danger of ferocious dogs, and blood thirsty slave hunters, who were so rapidly approaching me with loaded muskets and bowie knives, with a determination to kill or capture me and my family. I started to run with my little daughter in my arms, but stumbled and fell down and scratched the arm of little Frances with a brier, so that it bled very much; but the dear child never cried, for she seemed to know the danger to which we were exposed.

But we soon found that it was no use for us to run. The dogs were soon at our heels, and we were compelled to stop, or be torn to pieces by them. By this time, the soul drivers came charging up on their horses, commanding us to stand still or they would shoot us down.

Of course I surrendered up for the sake of my family. The most abusive terms to be found in the English language were poured forth on us with bitter oaths. They tied my hands behind me, and drove us home before them, to suffer the penalty of a slaveholder's broken law.

As we drew nigh the plantation my heart grew faint. I was aware that we should have to suffer almost death for running off. I was filled with dreadful apprehensions at the thought of meeting a professed follower of Christ, whom I knew to be a hypocrite! No tongue, no pen can ever describe what my feelings were at that time.

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<p><i>Note that Bibb felt freer facing wolves than he did here; at least he was free to defend himself.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CHAPTER XII.</b></p> <p><b>My sad condition before Whitfield. -- My terrible punishment. -- Incidents of a former attempt to escape. -- Jack at a farm house. -- Six pigs and a turkey. -- Our surprise and arrest.</b></p> <p>The reader may perhaps imagine what must have been my feelings when I found myself surrounded on the island with my little family, at midnight, by a gang of savage wolves. This was one of those trying emergencies in my life when there was apparently but one step between us and the grave. But I had no cords wrapped about my limbs to prevent my struggling against the impending danger to which I was then exposed. I was not denied the consolation of resisting in self defence, as was now the case. There was no Deacon standing before me, with a loaded rifle, swearing that I should submit to the torturing lash, or be shot down like a dumb beast.</p> <p>I felt that my chance was by far better among the howling wolves in the Red river swamp, than before Deacon Whitfield, on the cotton plantation. I was brought before him as a criminal before a bar, without counsel, to be tried and condemned by a tyrant's law. My arms were bound with a cord, my spirit broken, and my little family standing by weeping.</p> <p>I was not allowed to plead my own cause, and there was no one to utter a word in my behalf.</p> <p>He ordered that the field hands should be called together to witness my punishment, that it might serve as a caution to them never to attend a prayer meeting, or runaway as I had, lest they should receive the same punishment.</p> <p>At the sound of the overseer's horn, all the slaves came forward and witnessed my punishment. My clothing was</p>
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*Slave collar with bells.*

<http://faculty.umf.maine.edu/walter.sargent/public.www/web%20103/slave%20collar.gif>

stripped off and I was compelled to lie down on the ground with my face to the earth. Four stakes were driven in the ground, to which my hands and feet were tied. Then the overseer stood over me with the lash and laid it on according to the Deacon's order. Fifty lashes were laid on before stopping. I was then lectured with reference to my going to prayer meeting without his orders, and running away to escape flogging.

While I suffered under this dreadful torture, I prayed, and wept, and implored mercy at the hand of slavery, but found none. After I was marked from my neck to my heels, the Deacon took the gory lash, and said he thought there was a spot on my back yet where he could put in a few more. He wanted to give me something to remember him by, he said.

After I was flogged almost to death in this way, a paddle was brought forward and eight or ten blows given me with it, which was by far worse than the lash. My wounds were then washed with salt brine, after which I was let up. A description of such paddles I have already given in another page. I was so badly punished that I was not able to work for several days. After being flogged as described, they took me off several miles to a shop and had a heavy iron collar riveted on my neck with prongs extending above my head, on the end of which there was a small bell. I was not able to reach the bell with my hand. This heavy load of iron I was compelled to wear for six weeks. I never was allowed to lie in the same house with my family again while I was the slave of Whitfield. I either had to sleep with my feet in the stocks, or be chained with a large log chain to a log over night, with no bed or bedding to rest my wearied limbs on, after toiling all day in the cotton field. I suffered almost death while kept in this confinement; and he had ordered the overseer never to let me loose again; saying that I thought of getting free by running off, but no negro should ever get away from him alive.

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