

Three Great Colonial Enslaved Women from Massachusetts Who Gained their Freedom Grades K-3

This lesson is intended to either be taught virtually or in the classroom. Students will hear about the lives, struggles, and accomplishments of three African American women who lived in colonial Massachusetts: Lucy Terry Prince, Phillis Wheatley, and Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett). They will understand that these women are great because they achieved more than people at the time thought was possible for Black women. The lesson about Lucy Terry Prince is best for grades 3 and up, as it refers to some violence. The lesson can be taught over the course of 3-4 sessions.

Needed for the Lesson:

- About Lucy Terry Prince
- About Phillis Wheatley
- About Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett)
- Three Great Women Resources
- Slideshow of “Three Great Women”
- Option: picture cards:
 - Triangular Trade map
 - 2 images on 1 page of a girl and a woman working
 - 1 image of people working on a plantation in Virginia
 - Lucy Terry Prince image
 - Phillis Wheatley image
 - Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman image
 - photo of a church

Teaching the lesson

1. Introduction- Show slide #2- North Atlantic Ocean

A long time ago, some white men from America sailed far away in ships to a place called Africa. They were ship captains and they wanted to kidnap African people to sell to people in America who wanted slaves.

Point out America and the west coast of Africa on the map.
Explain that “kidnap” means to steal someone.

Show slide #3- Triangular Trade map

They kidnapped a lot of Black people of all ages- from young children to old people- and made them get on the ships. They didn’t even ask the Black people if they wanted to leave their homes and go to a new place and the white men did not tell the Black people what would happen when they reached the new place. The Black people were brought to different spots very far away from Africa. One of these spots was here in Massachusetts.

Point out Massachusetts on the Triangular Trade map.

Show Slide #4- enslaved people working

Examine each image with the students. Ask:

- What are these people doing? (working- carrying something (maybe water), making a fire, sifting, cooking, grinding, maybe taking the leaves off corn, hanging things up to dry, Lucy might have just picked some vegetables from the garden for cooking)
- Are they all grownups?

As soon as the Black people walked off the ships, more white men bought them and “enslaved” them. That means the Black people were forced to work for the white people. They did the jobs you see in the pictures and a lot more work, too. They were not given any choices about it and they were not paid. The white people were their “masters” (or “bosses”) and told them what to do. It was not OK to say no to them and they were not allowed to go back home to Africa if they were unhappy in their new place.

- What do you think about all of this? Was it fair? Was it a good thing to do? Why?

After many years, a lot of Black and white people decided that slavery was not fair to the Black people. They should have their freedom. This means that they should be free to live and work wherever they want and be their own masters. They should be able to make their own choices. Not everybody agreed, though, so they fought a war about it, called the “Civil War”. Even though the people who wanted freedom for Black people won the war, it still took a long time before they all became free.

2. Read at least two of the three stories to the students and ask the following questions:

- What does it mean to be enslaved?
- Was slavery fair?
- What bad things happened to this woman? What was hard for her to do?
- What good things did this woman do?
- Do you think each woman was happy being a good slave?
- What is the best thing that she did? Why do you say that?
- Did these women have some wishes that were alike? (they wanted to be free and to learn to read and write) Did they have something about them that was like the others? (they all fought to be free; they were brave and spoke up for themselves)
- Questions about Lucy Terry Prince:
 - What did she do that was brave? Why was it a brave thing to do?
- Questions about Mum Bett:
 - What did she do that was brave? Why was it a brave thing to do?
- Question about Phillis Wheatley:
 - Why did she have to prove that she really did write her poems all by herself?
- Why is each woman important to learn about?
- Who is your favorite person? Why?

3. Ask students to draw what they will remember about each woman studied, or their favorite part of a story, or what they think is the most important thing about one of the women.

The teacher might create a “freedom collage” or “quilt” of students’ images to share online.

Note: If this is part of a larger unit, you might create a KWL chart.

About Lucy Terry Prince (Slide #5)

In 1735, a girl was captured from her home in Africa and brought to Deerfield, Massachusetts, to be the slave of Mr. and Mrs. Wells. The man who first bought her gave her the new name of her Lucy Terry. He didn't care what her African name was. She was 5 years old. She had to work for Mr. and Mrs. Wells, but Mrs. Wells thought it was important that Lucy learn to read and write too. When she was 16, Native Americans attacked and killed some Deerfield people while they were working in their farm fields. These people lived in Lucy's community, and she was very upset about what had happened, so she wrote a **poem** about the attack. She was a very good storyteller, and she told her poem to those around her for many years. It didn't get printed until after she died.

Lucy fell in love with a free Black man named Abijah (a-BYE-zha) Prince. He worked hard to save money to buy her freedom. Once he made her free, they married and moved to Guilford, Vermont. Some of their white neighbors didn't like having the Prince family next door because they were Black. These white neighbors were mean to the Princes, so Lucy asked the **governor** of Vermont for help. He ordered the leaders of Guilford to protect the Prince family.

According to stories told by Deerfield people who knew Lucy, one of her sons wanted to go to the brand-new Williams **College**, but leaders at the college would not let him be a student there because he was Black. They only wanted white students. Lucy asked for a special meeting with them. People say that she spoke to the leaders of the college for 3 hours about why her son should be allowed to be a student there. Unfortunately, the leaders did not agree with Lucy and her son never got to go to the new Williams College.

Another neighbor of Lucy's tried to say that part of the Prince's farm really belonged to him. This time the problem had to be settled by the most important **court** in Vermont, the Vermont State Supreme Court. Lucy argued with these men, and the **judge** and his court decided that the Princes were right, and the neighbor did not own part of their farm. The judge of this important court said that Lucy did a better job of fighting for her land than any **lawyer** in Vermont could have done! Also, going to court and speaking out as Lucy did were things women, even white women, did not usually do. That was considered a man's job. Everybody was very impressed with what Lucy had done!

Vocabulary for Lucy Terry Prince

College- students can go to college after they finish high school. They must pay to go to college.

Court, judge, lawyer- if somebody breaks a law or can't agree with somebody else about something important, they go to **court**, where a group of people called the "jury" listen to each person's story about what happened and then they decide who was telling the truth, or what should happen next. The people who tell the stories to the jury are called **lawyers**. The **judge** is like a boss of the court. The judge tells the person who did something wrong what their punishment will be, or he or she tells the people who don't agree what they should do.

Governor- the boss of a state

Poem- a way of writing that doesn't have sentences. A poem is made up of lines of writing and sometimes the words at the end of some lines rhyme. Here's an example of a poem:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

About Phillis Wheatley (Slide #6)

In 1760, a 7-year-old girl was captured from Africa and put on a ship to Boston with a lot of other enslaved people. The people who captured her didn't know what her African name was, and they didn't care. They gave her the new name of Phillis. She was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley to be their slave. They saw that Phillis was smart because she learned to speak English very quickly, so Mrs. Wheatley taught her how to read and write. This was something strange to do! Many white women could only read a little bit and might not know how to write, and many enslaved people could not read or write at all, but by the time Phillis was 9, she could do both quite well. She loved to write **poetry** and she was very good at that, too. One of her first **poems** told the true story of a ship that survived a storm at sea. This one was so good that it was printed in a newspaper. Phillis was only 14 and already she had published her first poem! She wrote many more poems and by the time she was 17, Phillis was famous for her poetry.

Even though she was smart and well-educated, and had very good manners, Phillis still could not sit at a dinner table with white people, except in her own home. At **church**, she and other Black people had to sit upstairs while white people had the better seats downstairs. Worse, some white people believed that Phillis had not written her poems all by herself because she was Black. They didn't believe a Black girl could be so smart! Mrs. Wheatley wanted all of Phillis's poems to be printed in a book, but before that could happen, the Wheatleys had to prove that she had written them all by herself. She had to stand up in front of 18 very important men who asked her a lot of hard questions. She answered them all, and the men finally believed that Phillis had written her poems, but still, nobody would print her book.

Mrs. Wheatley then decided to send Phillis to England to have her book printed there. She got to meet some important people. She was supposed to meet the king, but she learned that Mrs. Wheatley was very sick, so she sailed back to Boston right away instead.

Phillis's book of poems was printed in England and many people there bought it. Many people in America bought it, too. Because Phillis was so famous, she was given her freedom. She even got to meet General George Washington because she wrote some poems about how important it was for America to be free from

England. Phillis Wheatley was also the first Black American woman to have a book printed for all to read.

Vocabulary for Phillis Wheatley

Church- on Sundays, some people who believe in God go to a building called a church. A person there called a “minister” tells them about God and a man named Jesus, and sometimes everybody sings about God and Jesus.



This is a church in Bernardston, Massachusetts.

Poems, poetry- a way of writing that doesn't have sentences. A poem is made up of lines of writing and sometimes the words at the end of some lines rhyme. Here's an example of a poem:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

About Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett) (Slide #7)

Elizabeth Freeman was an enslaved woman who lived in Massachusetts in the 1700s, more than 250 years ago. She and her sister lived with their owners, Mr. and Mrs. Ashley. The Ashleys called Elizabeth “Mum Bett”. Mr. Ashley thought it was important that people living in Massachusetts have freedom and good laws to protect them. When he and his friends talked about this at his house, Mum Bett would listen. She decided that since she lived in Massachusetts, she should have her freedom and be protected by these laws too, even though Mr. Ashley had only been thinking about white people.

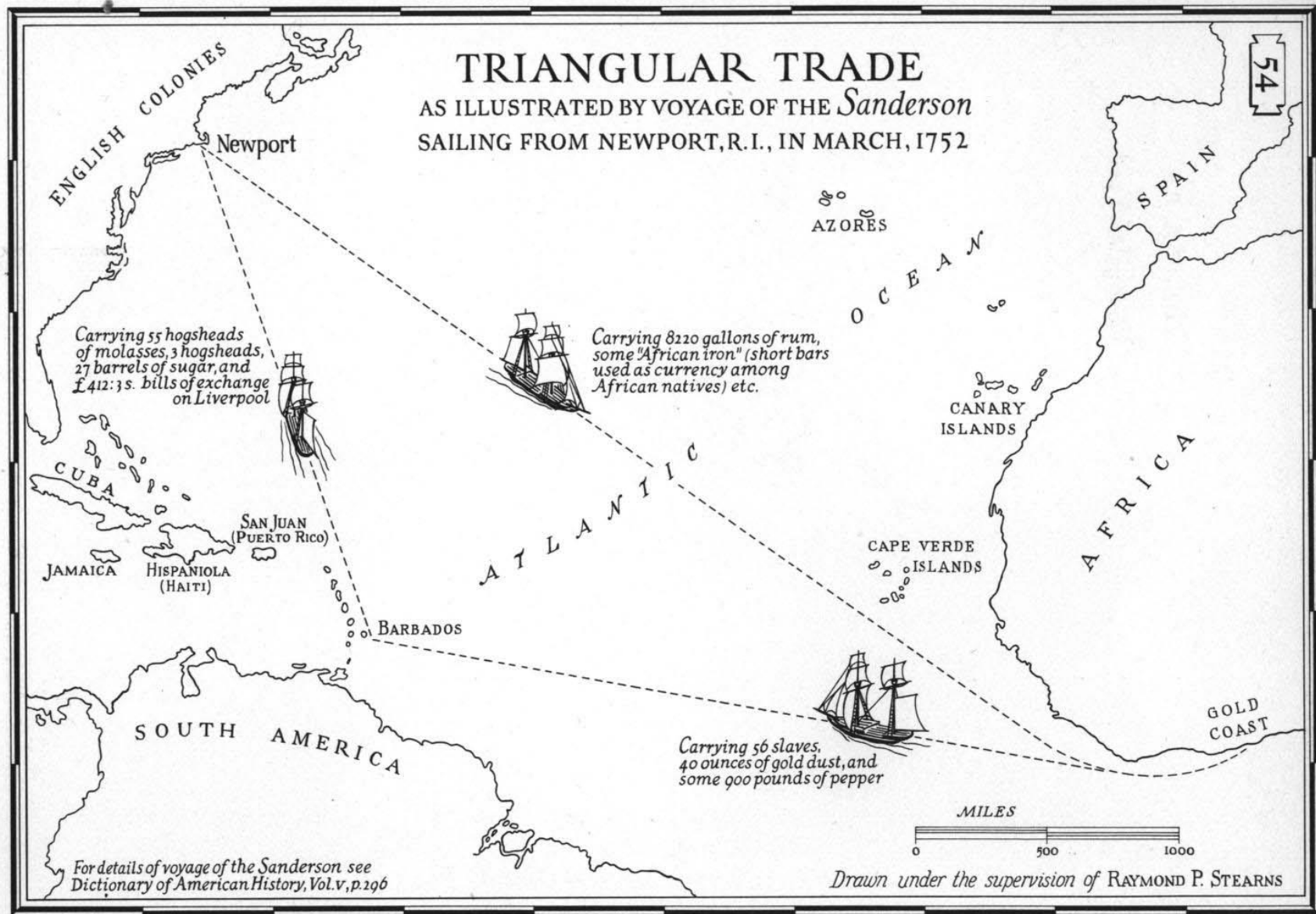
One day Mrs. Ashley got very mad at Mum Bett's sister and tried to hit her with a hot fireplace shovel. Mum Bett got in the way to protect her sister and the hot shovel hit her instead. Mum Bett was so angry that she left the house and asked a **lawyer** named Mr. Sedgwick to make Mr. Ashley free her. Mr. Sedgwick took Mum Bett's case to **court** and the **jury** decided that she could be free. The jury also decided that since Mum Bett had to pay Mr. Sedgwick to help free her, that Mr. Ashley should pay her back.

Even though Mr. Ashley promised to pay Mum Bett for her work if she would return to his house, she went to work for Mr. Sedgwick instead. She was his housekeeper and he paid her for her work. She also worked as a nurse and helped mothers to have babies. Eventually, Mum Bett and her sister got their own house. On her gravestone it says she never “failed to perform a duty” and “she was the most **efficient** helper and the tenderest friend. Good mother, farewell.”

Vocabulary for Elizabeth Freeman

Court, judge, jury, lawyer- if somebody breaks a law or can't agree with somebody else about something important, they go to **court**, where a group of people called the “**jury**” listen to each person's story about what happened and then they decide who was telling the truth, or what should happen next. The people who tell the stories to the jury are called **lawyers**. The **judge** is like a boss of the court. The judge tells the person who did something wrong what their punishment will be, or the judge tells the people who don't agree what they should do.

Efficient- able to get work done quickly without wasting time.



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Note to teachers: this map doesn't show slaves being carried from Barbados to Newport because, as the title states, this image is for one specific voyage. Many ships carried slaves from the Caribbean to the American colonies, including New England.



Enslaved girl in Virginia, by Mary Anne Custis, 1831
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Museum Purchase.

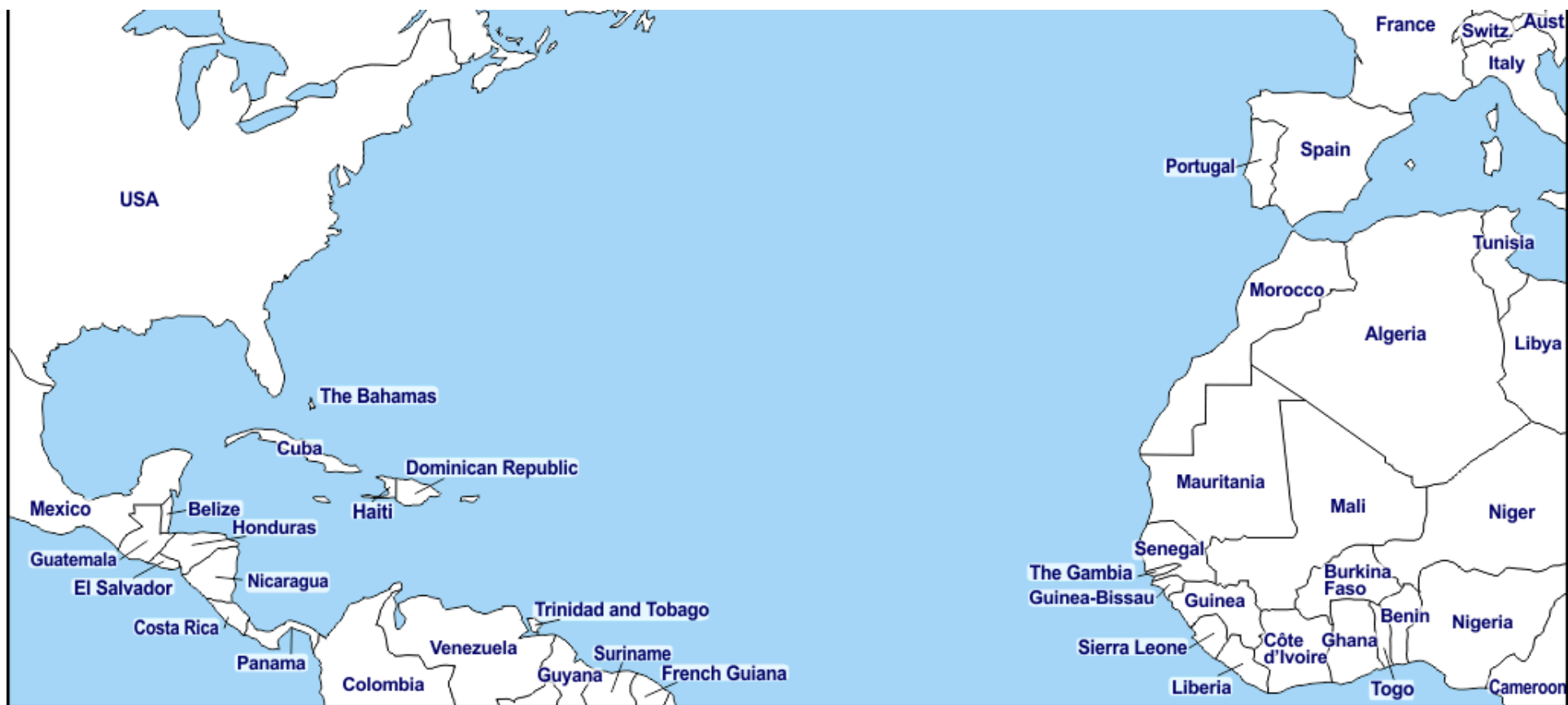


Artist's rendition by Louise Minks
PVMA digital collections

An enslaved girl and an enslaved woman working.



Enslaved people working in Virginia, 1670.
(unknown artist), Wikimedia Commons



d-maps.com



Maybe Lucy Terry Prince looked like this.
(by Louise Minks, PVMA collections)



Phillis Wheatley
(Library of Congress)



Elizabeth "Mum Bett" Freeman, 1811
(by Susan A.L.R. Sedgwick, used with permission from MA Historical Society)



A church in Bernardston, MA

Resources for "Three Great Women"

Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett)

[Elizabeth Freeman \(Mum Bett\)](#)

[Elizabeth Freeman](#)

[Mum Bett Challenges Slavery](#)

[Jury Decides in Favor of Elizabeth "Mum Bett" Freeman](#)

Laiz, Jana, *A Free Woman on God's Earth: The True Story of Elizabeth Mumbet Freeman, the Slave Who Won Her Freedom*, South Egremont, MA: Crow Flies Press, 2009.

Lucy Terry Prince

[Lucy Terry Prince - Singer of History](#)

[Lucy Terry Prince \(PVMA digital collections\)](#)

[Lucy Terry Prince](#)

[Lucy Terry Prince composes poem](#)

Phillis Wheatley

Lasky, Kathryn, *A Voice of Her Own: The story of Phillis Wheatley, Slave Poet*, Candlewick Press, MA, 2003

[PBS: Liberty!: Phillis Wheatley](#)

[Women in History: Phillis Wheatley](#)

[The End of Slavery in Massachusetts: Phillis Wheatley](#)

Massachusetts History and Social Science Frameworks

PreK-K

Concepts & Skills

6. Give examples that show the meaning of the following concepts: authority, fairness, justice, responsibility, and rules.

Learning Standards

PreK-K.5 Retell stories that illustrate honesty, courage, friendship, respect, responsibility, and the wise or judicious exercise of authority, and explain how the characters in the stories show these qualities.

Grade 1

Concepts & Skills

8. Give examples that show the meaning of the following words: politeness, achievement, courage, honesty, and reliability.

Learning Standards

1.8 After reading or listening to stories about famous Americans of different ethnic groups, faiths, and historical periods describe their qualities or distinctive traits.

Grade 2

Learning Standards

2.10 After reading or listening to a variety of true stories about individuals recognized for their achievements, describe and compare different ways people have achieved great distinction.

Grade 3

Content Standards-Topic 5. The Puritans, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Native Peoples, and Africans [3.T5]

Supporting Question: How did the interactions of Native Peoples, Europeans, and enslaved and free Africans shape the development of Massachusetts?

4. Explain that in the 17th and 18th centuries slavery was legal in all the French, Dutch, Spanish, and English colonies, including Massachusetts, and that colonial Massachusetts had both free and enslaved Africans in its population.

5. Explain the importance of maritime commerce and the practice of bartering – exchanging goods or services without payment in money—in the development of the economy of colonial Massachusetts, using materials from historical societies and history museums as reference materials.

b. trans-Atlantic and Caribbean trade, especially the Triangular Trade that included Africans to be sold as slaves in the colonies and goods such as sugar and cotton produced by slave labor to be sold in the colonies and in Europe.

Massachusetts English Language Arts & Literacy Frameworks

Kindergarten Reading Standards for Informational Text [RI]

Key Ideas and Details

1. With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
2. With prompting and support, identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.
3. With prompting and support, describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.

Craft and Structure Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy

4. With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text. (See kindergarten Language Standards 4–6 on applying knowledge of vocabulary to reading.)

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

8. With prompting and support, identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text.
9. With prompting and support, identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, procedures).

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

5. Add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions as desired to provide additional detail.

Grade 1 Reading Standards for Informational Text [RI]

Key Ideas and Details

1. Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
2. Identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.
3. Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text. Students read and listen to the teacher read biographies of individuals who were courageous in the pursuit of justice for a variety of reasons throughout United States history. Among the books read are *Elizabeth Leads the Way* (about Elizabeth Cady Stanton) by Margot Theis Raven; *Side by Side: the Story of Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez* by Monica Brown; *Jackie Robinson* by Wil Mar; and *Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles. After reading these true stories, students write their own biography of a person who worked for justice.

Craft and Structure

4. Ask and answer questions to help determine or clarify the meaning of words and phrases in a text. (See grade 1 Language Standards 4–6 on applying knowledge of vocabulary to reading.)

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

8. Identify the reasons an author gives to support points in a text.

9. Identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

4. Describe people, places, things, and events with relevant details, expressing ideas and feelings clearly and using appropriate vocabulary. (See grade 1 Language Standards 4–6 for specific expectations regarding vocabulary.)

5. Add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions when appropriate to clarify ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

6. Produce complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation. (See grade 1 Language Standard 1 for specific expectations.)

Grade 2 Reading Standards for Informational Text [RI]

Craft and Structure

6. Identify the main purpose of a text, including what the author wants to answer, explain, or describe.

9. Compare and contrast the most important points presented by two texts on the same topic.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

5. Create audio recordings of stories or poems; add drawings or other visual displays to stories or descriptions of experiences when appropriate to clarify ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

Grade 3 Reading Standards for Informational Text [RI]

Key Ideas and Details

1. Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

2. Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.

3. Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, mathematical ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.