

George Moses Horton



The AFRICAN
AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE
in North Carolina

North Carolina Freedom Monument Project

Lesson Plan

OBJECTIVE: *To better understand the impact of George Moses Horton on the history of North Carolina and the United States.*

Social Studies Objectives: 4.04, 9.02

Social Studies Skills: 1, 2, 3

Language Arts Objectives: 1.03, 1.04, 2.01, 5.01, 5.02, 6.01, 6.02

Resources/Materials

- Biographical sketch of George Moses Horton
- Responding to Reading Activities
- Poems by George Moses Horton

Procedures

- Students will read and discuss biographical sketch of George Moses Horton either as a whole class or in groups. Reading can also be done independently.
- Students will complete Responding to Reading activities as designated by the teacher.

Evaluation

- Student participation in reading and discussion of George Moses Horton
- Student performance on the Responding to Reading Activities

Bibliography

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Biographical Sketch

The historic poet laureate of Chatham County, North Carolina, George Moses Horton, was the only person to publish a book while living in slavery. George was born into slavery about 1797 on William Horton's tobacco plantation in Northampton County in North Carolina. His master moved to Chatham County in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, where George grew up as a cow-hand. Young George Moses Horton taught himself to read by using an old speller, the scriptures, and a copy of a Methodist hymnal. He composed poems in his head, but he was unable to write them down. Therefore, he recited his poems while others transcribed them.

In the year of 1815 when Horton was 17, he became the property of William's son, James Horton. He plowed the farm with a horse-drawn plow and was often sent to Chapel Hill by his master to sell produce. In Chapel Hill, his opportunities expanded by meeting students from the University of North Carolina. Recognizing his sophisticated vocabulary, the students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill encouraged Horton to recite his own verses. The literary reputation of George Moses Horton spread, and he began to sell poems for students to send to their sweethearts. Writing acrostic poems based on the names of the young men's sweethearts, Horton would compose many of the poems while plowing the fields. He would retain the poetry in his head until he could dictate the poems to one of the gentlemen for which he wrote. He received 25 cents for each of his poems. However, some gentlemen bestowed upon Horton 50 to 75 cents a poem in addition to giving him respectable suits of clothes and books. Horton's goal was to use the money he earned to buy his freedom.

Through his literary accomplishments, he earned the admiration and support of astute people such as Governor John Owen, Joseph Caldwell and David L. Swain, presidents of the university, and newspapermen, William Lloyd Garrison, and Horace Greeley. Caroline Lee Hentz, a professor's wife and novelist, befriended Horton and helped him publish some of his poems in local newspapers. *The Hope of Liberty*, a book of twenty-one poems, was

published in 1829. The book did not sell enough copies to purchase his freedom. Using his income from selling his poems and from doing handyman work for the university, Horton paid his master in lieu of service. In 1845, George published *Poetical Works*. However, the books failed to raise sufficient funds for Horton to buy his freedom.

He spent the Civil War on the farm of his master. In April 1865, George Moses Horton walked to Raleigh to be with the liberating Union army who took him under their protection. *Naked Genius*, Horton's last volume of poetry, published in 1865, was written in the three months that he was with the northern army. In his sixties when *Naked Genius* was published, Horton had written ninety poems for the book. After gaining his freedom, Horton spent his final years in Philadelphia writing Sunday school stories and working for North Carolina friends who had moved to the North. He did not attain the popularity in Philadelphia that he had in Chapel Hill, and the details of his death are unknown.

George Moses Horton was the first African American to publish a book and was considered a genius of his time. In June 1978, Governor Jim Hunt declared June 28 as "George Moses Horton Day." In 1996, George Moses Horton was inducted into North Carolina's Literary Hall of Fame. In 1997, Chatham County Commissioners declared Horton "Historic Poet Laureate" of Chatham County and a national organization was created in his name, the George Moses Horton Society for the Study of African American Poetry. In 1999, the North Carolina Division of Archives and History approved placement of a historic marker, the first for an African American. The marker was placed on Highway 15-501 near Mt. Gilead Church Road and reads:

GEORGE MOSES HORTON
Ca. 1798-1883

Slave poet. His *The Hope of Liberty* (1829) was the first book by a black author in the South.
Lived on farm 2 mi. SE.

George Moses Horton



Background

Poems

Early Affection

I LOV'D thee from the earliest dawn,
When first I saw thy beauty's ray,
And will, until life's eve comes on,
And beauty's blossom fades away;
And when all things go well with thee,
With smiles and tears remember me.

I'll love thee when thy morn is past,
And wheedling gallantry is o'er;
When youth is lost in ages blast,
And beauty can ascend no more,
And when life's journey ends with thee,
O, then look back and think of me.

I'll love thee with a smile or frown,
'Mid sorrow's gloom or pleasure's light,
And when the chain of life runs down,
Pursue thy last eternal flight,
When thou hast spread thy wing to flee,
Still, still, a moment wait for me.

I'll love thee for those sparkling eyes,
To which my fondness was betray'd,
Bearing the tincture of the skies,
To glow when other beauties fade,
And when they sink too low to see,
Reflect an azure beam on me.

Death of an Old Carriage Horse

I WAS a harness horse,
Constrained to travel weak or strong,
With orders from oppressing force,
Push along, push along.

I had no space to rest,
And took at forks the roughest prong,
Still by the cruel driver pressed,
Push along, push along.

Vain strove the idle bird,
To charm me with her artless song,
But pleasure lingered from the word,
Push along, push along.

The order of the day
Was push, the peal of every tongue,
The only word was all the way,
Push along, push along.

Thus to my journey's end,
Had I to travel right or wrong,
"Till death my sweet and favored friend,
Bade me from life to push along.

(Continued on the next page)

The Slave's Complaint

Am I sadly cast aside,
On misfortune's rugged tide?
Will the world my pains deride
Forever?

Must I dwell in Slavery's night,
And all pleasure take its flight,
Far beyond my feeble sight,
Forever?

Worst of all, must Hope grow dim,
And withhold her cheering beam?
Rather let me sleep and dream
Forever!

Something still my heart surveys,
Groping through this dreary maze;
Is it Hope?—then burn and blaze
Forever!

Leave me not a wretch confined,
Altogether lame and blind—
Unto gross despair consigned,
Forever!

Heaven! in whom can I confide?
Canst thou not for all provide?
Condescend to be my guide
Forever:

And when this transient life shall end,
Oh, may some kind eternal friend
Bid me from servitude ascend,
Forever!

George Moses Horton, Myself

I feel myself in need
Of the inspiring strains of ancient lore,
My heart to lift, my empty mind to feed,
And all the world explore.

I know that I am old
And never can recover what is past,
But for the future may some light unfold
And soar from age's blast.

I feel resolved to try,
My wish to prove, my calling to pursue,
Or mount up from the earth into the sky,
To show what Heaven can do.

My genius from a boy,
Has fluttered like bird within my heart;
But could not thus confined her powers employ,
Impatient to depart.

She like a restless bird,
Would spread her wing, her power to be unfurl'd,
And let her songs be loudly heard,
And dart from world to world.

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Activities

Personal Response

Generate questions that you would ask George Moses Horton if you could meet him today.

Analyzing Biographical Information

1. Explain why George Moses Horton had to move with his master.
2. Design a web or a graphic organizer that describes events in the life of George Moses Horton that show his determination.
3. Explain why George Moses Horton traveled to Raleigh in 1865.
4. Create a map of North Carolina. On the map locate and label Northampton County, Chatham County, and Chapel Hill. On the map, describe the significance of each location in Horton's life. Give your map a title.
5. Construct a graphic organizer that describes the ways George Moses Horton has been honored in the twentieth century.
6. The words of George Moses Horton are inscribed on a public artwork in Raleigh known as "The Education Wall." The quote from Horton is: "When things are at their worst, that's when I write the best." Given what you've read about Horton's life, what do you think he meant by those words? What purpose did writing serve in his life?
7. **NCFMP:** North Carolina's first silver-and-black historical marker was dedicated in the Stovall community of Granville County in 1936. The plaque identified the homesite of John Penn, one of the state's three signers of the Declaration of Independence. By the end of 2000, there were a total of 1,434 markers dotting the landscape of our state, with at least one marker in every county. Why do you think the marker for George Moses Horton, erected some 63 years after the very first marker was dedicated, was the first to celebrate the achievement of an African American in North Carolina? How does this fact inform your opinion about plans to create the NC Freedom Monument?

Interpreting Meaning

Directions: Find the term in the passage. Copy the sentence that contains the term. Explain the term by using context clues and/or a dictionary.

1. poet laureate
2. composed
3. sophisticated
4. literary
5. dictate
6. bestow
7. astute
8. transcribed
9. in lieu of
10. recite

Creative Responses

Select one of the activities to complete.

Activity 1:

Directions: A writer uses imagery to create a scene, an event, or a character. Read and interpret one of George Moses Horton's poems. Use examples and details from the poem to explain your interpretation. In addition, you may create graphics to explain Horton's work.

Activity 2:

Directions: George Moses Horton wrote acrostic poems for his university friends to give to their sweethearts. Using your mother's, grandmother's, older sister's or aunt's name, or other special female caretaker, write a poem expressing your love and respect for that special person that has influenced your life.

Example:

S ensitive to my needs.
H elpful every day of my life
A ngelic towards my actions.
R espectful of my choices.
O bservant of my different moods.
N aturally understanding and loving.

George Moses Horton



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Activities ■ Answer Key for Teachers

Personal Response

Generate questions that you would ask George Moses Horton if you could meet him today.

Answers will vary and can serve as a springboard for discussion.

Analyzing Biographical Information

1. Explain why George Moses Horton had to move with his master.

George Moses Horton was born into slavery. Therefore, he was the property of his master and had to move with his master.

2. Design a web or a graphic organizer that describes events in the life of George Moses Horton that show his determination.

Students may include some of the events listed below or select other events.

<i>George Moses Horton: Events in his life that reflect his determination.</i>
Taught himself to read
Asked others to transcribe his poems
Composed poems while plowing the fields
Wrote poems to earn money to hopefully buy his freedom
Paid his master money in lieu of service
Walked to Raleigh to seek protection of Union army to gain his freedom
Wrote his last volume of poetry in his sixties while under the protection of the Union army

3. Explain why George Moses Horton traveled to Raleigh in 1865.

George traveled to Raleigh to seek protection of the Union army thereby gaining his freedom.

4. Create a map of North Carolina. On the map locate and label Northampton County, Chatham County, and Chapel Hill. On the map, describe the significance of each location in Horton's life. Give your map a title.

Student should draw a map of North Carolina following the directions given.

5. Construct a graphic organizer that describes the ways George Moses Horton has been honored in the twentieth century.

Students may include some of the information below.

<i>Saluting George Moses Horton in the twentieth century</i>
1978: Governor Jim Hunt declared June 28 as "George Moses Horton Day".
1996: George Moses Horton was inducted into North Carolina's Literary Hall Of Fame.
1997: Chatham County Commissioners declared Horton "Historic Poet Laureate" of Chatham County
1997: George Moses Horton Society for the Study of African American Poetry was created in his honor.
1999: The North Carolina Division of Archives and History approved placement of a historic marker, the first for an African American.

6. & 7. Responses will vary.

Interpreting Meaning

1. The historic poet laureate of Chatham County, North Carolina, George Moses Horton, was the only person to publish a book while living in slavery.

Historic poet laureate: an honored poet of the past

2. He composed poems in his head but was unable to write them down.

Composed: created

3. Recognizing his sophisticated vocabulary, the students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill encouraged Horton to recite his own verses.

Sophisticated: knowledgeable; mature; cultured

4. The literary reputation of George Moses Horton spread, and he began to sell poems for students to send to their sweethearts.

Literary: of or dealing with literature

5. He would retain the poetry in his head until he could dictate the poems to one of the gentlemen for which he wrote.

Dictate: to speak aloud for someone else to write down

6. However, some gentlemen would bestow upon George 50 to 75 cents a poem in addition to giving him respectable suits of clothes and books.

Bestow: to present as a gift

7. & 8. He earned the admiration and support of astute people such as Governor John Owen, Joseph Caldwell and David L. Swain, presidents of the University, and newspapermen, William Lloyd Garrison, and Horace Greeley.

Astute: clever; intelligent; smart. Recited: to say from memory

9. Therefore, he recited his poems while others transcribed them.

Transcribed: to write out

10. Using his income from selling his poems and from doing handyman work for the university, Horton paid his master in lieu of service.

In lieu of: instead of

Creative Responses

See Activities page. Answers will vary.