



Lesson: African Americans in the Maritime Trades

Objective: Students will demonstrate knowledge of the role of free African Americans roles in Baltimore's maritime trade and industries by writing a letter describing opportunities in Baltimore, based on primary sources.

Grade Level: Grades 4 and 8

Voluntary State Curriculum Correlation:

Grade Four:

2.B.1 Analyze how Maryland society was influenced by the contributions of people and groups

4.A.3.b. Explain how technological ideas, such as the building of roads, impact the way people live and work

Grade Eight:

5.C.5.b. Analyze the experiences of African American slaves in the South, freed blacks in the North, and the rise of the abolitionists

Estimated Time:

Two 45 minute class periods

Advance Preparation:

1. Create color copies of the following objects:

[caulking iron](#)

[caulking mallet](#)

[pitch funnel](#)

2. Make copies of the "[How to Interpret an Object](#)" worksheet and [Baltimore American 1](#), [Baltimore American 2](#), [Baltimore American 3](#), [Baltimore American 4](#) and [Baltimore American transcription](#).

New Vocabulary:

carpenter: a person who builds or repairs structures made of wood

caulker: a person who makes a ship watertight by filling the seams between the planks with oakum and pitch

caulking iron: a wedge shaped piece of iron used with a mallet to force oakum into the seams between the planks of a ship

mallet: a hammer-like tool usually made of wood

maritime trades: jobs associated with the building, repairing, and sailing of ships

oakum: a loose fiber obtained by picking apart old ropes; the fiber is then used in the caulking of ships

pitch funnel: a special tool used to pour hot pitch (tar) over oakum and into the seams between a ship's planks

primary source: a first-hand account of something or someone from the past

Historical Background:

There were (and still are) many different types of shipbuilding trades. These trades include carpentry, sailmaking and rigging, caulking, ropemaking, and the actual sailing of the finished ships. During the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century in Baltimore's Fells Point area, many of the workers in the maritime trades were either free or enslaved African Americans. In particular, African Americans dominated caulking jobs.

Caulking is the process by which wooden ships are made watertight. To seal the cracks between the ship's wooden planks, caulkers use a caulking iron and mallet to stuff them with oakum (pieces of old rope) soaked in pitch (a dark, sticky substance like tar). When the wood gets wet, it swells, narrowing the cracks between the planks. The oakum also swells, ensuring that absolutely no water can leak through the cracks. Caulking requires a great degree of skill and experience to be done properly.

Both free and enslaved African Americans worked as caulkers in Fells Point's shipyards in the first half of the 1800s. Although blacks also worked in other maritime trades (although they were banned from the prestigious position of ship carpenter), their roles as caulkers is especially significant because they dominated this industry. By 1838, African American caulkers had organized the Caulker's Association, which protected their domination of the trade by negotiating wages and working conditions with shipwrights.

Fells Point's most famous caulker was Frederick Douglass. Douglass was an enslaved person living in Fells Point as a servant of Hugh and Sophia Auld, his Eastern Shore master's relatives. The Aulds hired Douglass out to shipbuilder William Gardner and later Walter Price. He learned the art of caulking and was able to earn high wages of six to seven dollars per week, which he turned over to Auld. Once he had become an accomplished caulker, Douglass convinced Auld to allow him to contract his own work and collect his own wages. However, Douglass still had to pay Auld a sizeable portion of his wages each week in addition to paying for his own room and board and caulking tools. Working as a caulker in Fells Point provided free and enslaved African Americans, including Douglass, a great deal of freedom and opportunity. Perhaps the greatest benefit was the ability to associate with other free blacks and blend into the city's African American community. Douglass used information gathered and friendships made while working in Fells Point to make possible his escape. (For more information on Frederick Douglass in Baltimore, consult *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An*

Out of Slavery

A Primary Source Kit

from the Maryland Historical Society

American Slave, Douglass' autobiography. It can be found online at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/10.html>.)

White shipyard workers resented the power of African American caulkers, and racial tensions in the shipyards increased throughout the first half of the 1800s. By the 1850s, shipyards began hiring less-skilled white caulkers, especially immigrants, to replace African American caulkers. As a result, violence between whites and blacks broke out in many shipyards. By the mid-1860s, white workers had almost completely replaced black caulkers.

In response to this crisis, another important African American caulker named Isaac Myers led the effort to open the Chesapeake Marine Railway and Dry Dock Company, a black-owned and operated shipyard in Fells Point, in 1866. Myers was a free black born in Baltimore in 1835. He received a common school education and was apprenticed to a caulker at 16 years old. By the age of 20, he was a master caulker who supervised caulking in shipyards. When racial hostilities broke out in the shipyards, he and 14 other African Americans raised \$10,000 from black churches and established the Chesapeake Marine Railway and Dry Dock Company. The business employed 300 workers, including some white caulkers and carpenters, and was very successful. After 18 years of operation, the company closed due to changes in technology and the labor market.

Motivation:

As a class, discuss the condition of African Americans in Baltimore in the first half of the 1800s. Remind students that Maryland was a slave state at that time, and that many African Americans living in Baltimore were enslaved. Explain that, at the same time, Baltimore had the largest free black population in the country. Enslaved and free African Americans lived near each other, worked side by side, and formed friendships. Ask students what opportunities African Americans might have in a city like Baltimore that they wouldn't have in the country during this period? How would living in Baltimore be beneficial for enslaved African Americans? What sorts of work might be available for African Americans in the port of Baltimore?

Procedure:

PART ONE - "READING" CAULKING TOOLS

- 1) Explain to students that many free and enslaved African Americans in Baltimore worked in Fells Points shipyards as caulkers. Provide basic background information. Explain that students will be examining some of the tools that these caulkers used.
- 2) Divide the students into three groups.
- 3) Give each group a photograph of the following objects: caulking iron, caulking mallet, and pitch funnel. Each group should also receive a copy of the "How to Interpret an Object" worksheet.
- 4) Explain to students that historians use objects from the past to learn about the lives and values of the people who made and used those objects. Objects from the past are a type of primary source, a first-hand account of something or someone in history. Students will use photographs of these objects to learn something about the African Americans who

worked in Fells Point's shipyards.

5) Provide the following focus question: What can we learn about African American caulkers from the tools that they used? (Do they do physical or mental labor? Are they skilled or unskilled workers? Are they strong?)

6) Allow the students 15 minutes to examine their picture and complete their "How to Interpret an Object" worksheet.

7) Each group should select a reporter to share their picture and findings with the class.

8) As a class, answer the focus question.

PART TWO - CONFLICTS BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK CAULKERS

(Eighth Grade Only)

1) Explain to students that African Americans dominated the caulking trade in Fells Point during the first half of the 1800s. They formed a powerful association, or union, to protect their domination of the trade and negotiate wages and work conditions with white shipbuilders. Many white shipyard workers resented the African American caulkers' power. By the 1850s, racial violence was breaking out in shipyards as white caulkers tried to force black caulkers out of their jobs and black caulkers retaliated. Eventually, by the mid-1860s, the power of the African American Caulkers Association was broken, and white caulkers (mainly immigrants) replaced black caulkers in the shipyards.

2) Explain that students will be reading a newspaper article from the July 8, 1858 edition of the *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser* that reports on this racial tension.

3) Divide the class into three groups and then pair students. Ask students to read the article (or excerpts from the article that you have selected) and assign each of the three groups to answer one of the following focus questions (write questions on the board to guide reading):

What specific incident at the Skinner shipyard caused this article to be written?

What is the nature of the tension that existed between the white and black caulkers in Fells Point?

What does the position of the *Baltimore American* seem to be on the issue? Do they support the black caulkers, the white caulkers, or neither?

4) Come back together as a class and have representatives from each group share the answer to their focus question.

5) Ask students how and why they think African American caulkers were able to become so powerful at a time of severe prejudice and discrimination.

Closure/Assessment:

Students should imagine that they are free African American caulkers working in the

Fells Point shipyards. They are members of the black caulkers union and are doing extremely well in Baltimore. Have them write a letter (reminding students that most African Americans at this time were illiterate) to a free African American friend living on the Eastern Shore and working on a white person's farm to persuade the friend to move to Baltimore and work in the shipyards. Students should describe opportunities presented by living in Baltimore and working in the shipyards.

Extension:

In his book Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself, Douglass writes, "Going to live in Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity." Direct the students to use what they now know about the lives of free and enslaved African Americans in the Fells Point maritime trades to explain what they think Douglass meant by this quote.

Caulking Irons



Out of Slavery
A Primary Source Kit
from the Maryland Historical Society

Mallet



Pitch Funnels



Out of Slavery
A Primary Source Kit
from the Maryland Historical Society