The Anti-Slavery Alphabet, 1846

by N'Dia Riegler (created in 2025)

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NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 1

GRADE LEVEL: 3–5

LESSON OVERVIEW

This lesson plan is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards for Grades 3–5 and should be completed in a 45-minute class period. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary source materials. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents of historical significance.

This lesson explores *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* (1846), an ABC book created by abolitionists Hannah and Mary Townsend. Through guided discussion, small-group collaboration, and evidence-based writing, students will examine selected letters to discover how abolitionists taught and persuaded others, especially young people, to oppose slavery.

Students will be able to

- Read, discuss, and analyze a primary source document
- Use evidence from a primary source to demonstrate an understanding of its intended purpose (e.g., *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* was created to teach young people about the conditions of enslavement and to advocate for the abolition of slavery.)
- Collaboratively engage in class discussion and group work.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did young people in the 1840s learn about slavery?
- How did abolitionists explain why slavery was bad?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 4 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

MATERIALS

- Historical Background: "Abolitionism in the 1840s" by Chandra Manning, Georgetown University
- Primary Source: The Letters A and B from *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*

  Hannah and Mary Townsend, *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet,* printed for the Anti-Slavery Fair, Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1846, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, https://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/asa
- Activity Sheet 1: Notice/Wonder (1 per student)
- Activity Sheet 2: Discussion Space (1 for every group of 4)
- Activity Sheet 3: Exit Ticket (1 per student)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Abolitionism in the 1840s

by Chandra Manning, Georgetown University

Abolitionism was an interracial movement that stood apart from other anti-slavery movements because both Black and White abolitionists believed that slavery was wrong for moral (not just economic or political) reasons and they demanded its immediate, not gradual, eradication. Moreover, abolitionists opposed all forms of inequality, including discrimination against women. In addition, some abolitionists rejected politics because they believed the US political system was too corrupted by slavery to fight against it effectively. By protesting slavery apolitically, they offered women and children ways to participate in the struggle, even though they could not vote. Abolitionism's emphasis on moral opposition to slavery also enabled women's participation because society assigned responsibility for upholding society's morals to women. In the 1840s, high-profile escapes from slavery raised the stakes even further. Some abolitionists came to believe that politics could provide a useful tool against slavery. These developments readied abolitionists for new developments in the 1850s.

The first opponents of slavery were enslaved people, who resisted from slavery's beginning and reinvigorated the fight in the 1830s. Nat Turner's 1833 slave rebellion exposed false claims about contented slaves. Black publications, including David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), made forceful arguments for the immediate cessation of slavery.[1] In September 1830, free Black delegates gathered at Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and launched the "Colored Convention" movement of Black political organizing. Inspired by Black activism, White newspaper editor William Lloyd Garrison called for the formation of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which gathered in December 1833 and chose biracial leadership. Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*, became the mouthpiece for the new organization.

[1] David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (Boston, 1829).

Black and White women participated in abolitionism. Some formed their own interracial abolitionist societies, such as the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, which publicized suffering endured by enslaved people, flooded Congress with petitions demanding abolition, hosted anti-slavery fairs, and raised money to open schools for Black children.

In 1840, the American Anti-Slavery Society splintered, partly because Abby Kelley was elected to the executive committee and some members broke away to form the new American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society because they opposed women in leadership. Despite the split, women continued advocating. They also published works to educate White children about the immorality of slavery, including *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*.

Throughout the 1840s, formerly enslaved people heightened attention to slavery. Frederick Douglass fled from Maryland in 1838. From 1841 to 1844, he delivered abolitionist lectures for the American Anti-Slavery Society that one listener described as "the volcanic outbreak of human nature . . . at last bursting its imprisonment."[2] Douglass later published his own newspaper and autobiography, which argued for abolitionism. So did daring escapes made by many other enslaved people. They often relied on the secret network of interracial abolitionists known as the Underground Railroad to get to freedom. When Lewis and Harriet Hayden absconded from Kentucky, White abolitionists Calvin Fairbanks and Delia Webster assisted in the courageous getaway. The Haydens, in turn, aided more escapees by hiding them in their Boston home. Even escapes that failed, such as an audacious attempt in 1848 to sail to freedom from Alexandria, Virginia, before the ship, the Pearl, was caught grabbed national headlines.

In 1849, Harriet Tubman escaped from Maryland and then returned thirteen times to guide others out of slavery. Yet once they arrived in the North, they were not safe because of the harsh Fugitive Slave Act passed by Congress in 1850. That law ignited a new phase in the struggle against slavery. Abolitionists—Black and White, male and female—were ready to face the fight.

Chandra Manning is professor of history at Georgetown University and director of the Georgetown Institute for Global History. She is the author of Troubled Refuge: Struggling for Freedom in the Civil War *(2016).*

[2] "Frederick Douglass in Concord, N.H.," *The Liberator*, February 23, 1844.

PROCEDURE

Preteaching Note

Read *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* in advance. It contains powerful language and imagery about slavery, including violence and the separation of families. It also uses antiquated language and terms/phrases common in the mid-1800s, but outdated today.

- This lesson is based on using the letters A/B with your students.
- If you would like to use more of the letters from the *Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, carefully choose the letter(s) students will analyze, ensuring that they are developmentally appropriate. Students will analyze one or two letters in small groups. Select a variety of letters and print a copy for each student. The link to additional letters can be found in the Materials list.
- Prepare materials: Print selected letter(s), activity sheets, and exit tickets and organize them for distribution.

The Anti-Slavery Alphabet, 1846 List of Words	
Suggested letters for primary source analysis - A/B, C/D, E/F, G/H, M/N, Q/R, S/T, U/V, Y/Z	
Abolitionist	Negro
Brother	Orange Tree
Cotton-Field	Parent
Driver	Quarter
Eagle	Rice Swamp
Fugitive	Sugar
Gong	Tobacco
Hound	Upper Canada
Infant	Vessel
Jail	Whipping Post
Kidnapper	Xerces
Lash	Youth
Merchant	Zealous

Notice/Wonder: Whole Class (4 minutes)

1. Display the front cover and the A/B page from *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet.*
2. Pass out Activity Sheet 1: Notice/Wonder.
3. Ask the class, “What do you notice?” and “What do you wonder?”
4. Give students two minutes of silent thinking time to generate ideas.

5. Choose one of the following options for students to share their thinking:
    - **Option A: Turn & Talk:** Ask students to turn to a partner and share their ideas for 1–2 minutes, taking turns so both partners have an opportunity to share. Select a few pairs to share out with the whole class.
    - **Option B: Activity Sheet:** Ask students to write their ideas on Activity Sheet 1: Notice/Wonder. After 2 minutes of independent writing, call on a few students to share with the whole class.
    - *Teaching Note: Try not to answer any of the "wonders," so students can engage in their own inquiry throughout the lesson. However, if any misconceptions arise, please address them briefly.*
    - After sharing, ask, "How could we find out the answers to some of your wonders?" Encourage students to suggest ways they can learn more about history (e.g., looking at other documents, reading letters or newspapers from the time, using trusted websites, reading books about a time period, etc.).

Introduce the Essential Questions (1 minute)

6. Display or read aloud the essential questions and say, "Before we look at *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, let's read our essential questions for today. By the end of this lesson, we will be able to use evidence from this source to answer both questions."
    a. How did young people in the 1840s learn about slavery?
    b. How did abolitionists explain why slavery was bad?

Teaching Vocabulary: Whole Class (5 minutes)

7. Tell the class, "Today we will explore *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* written in 1846. Before we read, let's learn two important words: abolitionist and slavery. Learning these words will help us as we figure out what this book was trying to teach young people."
8. Teach the words "abolitionist" and "slavery" using your classroom's vocabulary routine.

Modeling a Discussion Space Using a Fishbowl Strategy: Whole Class (10 minutes)

9. Explain to students that they will read, analyze, and discuss *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet, a* primary source from 1846. The alphabet book was created by two sisters named Mary and Hannah Townsend in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
10. Display and "share read" the text for letters A and B: "Share read" the text with the students by having them follow along silently while you read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading the second time, while you continue to read along with the students, still serving as the model for the class.
11. Preselect 3 students to demonstrate a "Fishbowl Strategy" using a Discussion Space.
    - *Teaching Note (optional): Use chart paper to recreate a large and more interactive version of the Discussion Space. This gives students more space to write and can be displayed at the end of the lesson.*

12. Model Collaborative Work Time using a Fishbowl Strategy: Ask the 3 preselected students to act as the "group" to model the collaborative work time. Tell each volunteer they will get to write in one "corner" of Activity Sheet 2: Discussion Space on the board/chart (numbers 1–4 are in the corners of the organizer so students can count off and write in their assigned corner).
13. Fishbowl Strategy: Have students not participating gather around you and the three preselected students in a circle, surrounding the group like you are in a fishbowl. If this structure does not work for your class, model with the small group in front of the class.
14. Model the Discussion Space

Step 1: Silent Write (2–3 minutes)

- Point to your assigned corner box on the activity sheet for students.
- Say, **"**First, we are all going to Silent Write. This means we write our own ideas in our box first. My number is 1, so I am going to write here (point to the box labeled 1). Here are the questions we will think about as we think about Letter A from the *Anti-Slavery Alphabet*:
  - What letter is this and what does it say about slavery?
  - What message about slavery was the author sharing?
  - What evidence supports my answer?
- Teacher Prompt/Model Thinking: "Let's look at the letter together. This is the letter 'A' and the text says . . . [briefly read text aloud]. It says that an abolitionist is a person who wants slavery to end. I know this because it says 'give to all an equal liberty.' The message the author was trying to share is that . . . because . . . I'm going to write that in my box. Remember, write your own ideas—no talking yet!"
- Give students 1–2 minutes to independently write in their box. Tell the rest of the class, "Now everyone is writing their own ideas in their box and waiting for everyone to finish."

Step 2: Share (3--4 minutes): Have students in the Fishbowl turn to the group and share their ideas.

- Say, "Now each person in the group will share. Let's take turns reading what we wrote in our box."
- Allow each person to read what they wrote in their box, prompting students to follow and refer to discussion norms and protocols used in your classroom.
- Tell the rest of the class, "In this step, we each had a chance to share our ideas, taking turns and listening carefully to each other."

Step 3: Agree & Write (3–4 minutes): Ask the group to decide the most important ideas and to summarize them in the center box.

- Say, "Now it's time for Agree & Write. Together, we need to decide the most important ideas from our discussion. We want to answer the questions and use evidence from our primary source, from the letter A."
- Reread the questions and guide the group in finding commonalities in responses. Say, "Let's reread the questions: What letter is this and what does it say about slavery? What message about slavery was the author sharing? What evidence from the text supports my answer?"

- Lead a brief discussion to come to a consensus. Say, "What is similar or different in our answers? Let's talk for a minute to make sure we all agree on one response. I notice we all mentioned that . . . so maybe that's important to include in our summary."
- Say, "One person will write in the center box. This will be our group's summary to share with the class." For timing considerations, ask the group if you can write the summary, rereading it when you are done. Ask the group for a thumbs-up if they agree.
- Ask the group, "Does this summary answer the same questions: What letter is this and what does it say about slavery? What message about slavery was the author sharing? What evidence from the text supports my answer?"
- Praise: Thank the small group for sharing and the whole class for quietly observing how the group worked together to think, discuss, and write about their letter.

Discussion Space in Small Groups (10 minutes)

15. Send students to work in groups with Activity Sheet 2: Discussion Space displayed. Keep track of time for each section using a visual timer and let students know when they should switch.
16. **Silent Write (3 minutes)**: Say, "First, we silent write. Everyone writes their own ideas in their own box—no talking yet. I will set a timer."
    - Circulate during silent writing. If students need support analyzing the primary source, use additional prompts:
        - What letter is this and what does it say about slavery?
            - What is the letter? (A, B, C . . .?)
            - Can you put the sentence or idea into your own words?
        - What message about slavery was the author sharing?
            - How did the author describe enslaved people or what happened to them?
            - Did the author want people to feel sad, or feel angry, or want to do something?
            - If you were telling a friend about this letter, what would you say the author wanted them to know?
        - What evidence supports your answer?
            - Can you underline or write down 1–2 words that show the main idea of the message?
            - Why do these words help you understand the author's message? What did the author want this letter to teach the reader?
            - "What makes you think that?"
17. **Share (4 minutes)**: Say, "Now it is time for everyone to share. Take turns reading what you wrote in your box. Remember to listen carefully and follow our discussion norms. I will set a timer."
    - Students: Each student reads their ideas aloud to their group and listens when others are sharing.

- Teacher: Circulate. Ensure all students read their ideas aloud and listen to their peers. Prompt groups to explain their thinking: Can you explain why you wrote that? What evidence did you use? Does anyone else have a similar idea?
- Say, "In this step, each person shared their ideas and they all listened carefully to each other. Great work taking turns and using evidence to support your thinking."

18. **Agree & Write (3 minutes):** Say, "Now it's time for Agree & Write. As a group, decide on the most important ideas from your discussion. Your group's summary of the most important ideas will go in the **center box**. Make sure your summary answers the questions. I will set a timer."
    - Students: Discuss as a group to find common ideas, decide which ideas to include in the center box, choose one person to write out the summary or the teacher can write it.
    - Teacher: Circulate. Ask guiding prompts to promote consensus (What ideas are similar in our responses? What evidence from the text should we include? Do we all agree this answers the questions?) and assist groups with writing.
    - Say, "Thank you for working together, listening, and using evidence from your group's letter to create your summary. Excellent discussion, collaboration, and thinking!"

Wrap Up: Whole Class (7 minutes)

19. Select 2–3 groups to share. Display the letter(s) they analyzed while they present.
20. Say, "Thank you for working so carefully with your groups. Now let's bring our ideas together to think about what this alphabet teaches us."
21. Call on groups to share and say, "I'd like to hear from a couple of groups. Please share your center box summary. Let's start with Group 1."
22. After each group shares, give them praise and paraphrase and/or chart their idea on the board.
23. Say, "I notice that even though we looked at different letters, many of you pointed out that the alphabet shows and tells young people about the conditions of slavery. It also talks about being free and the idea of freedom."
24. Say, "This helps us as we think about how abolitionists used this alphabet to teach young people and inspire them to care about ending slavery."

Exit Ticket: Individuals (5 minutes)

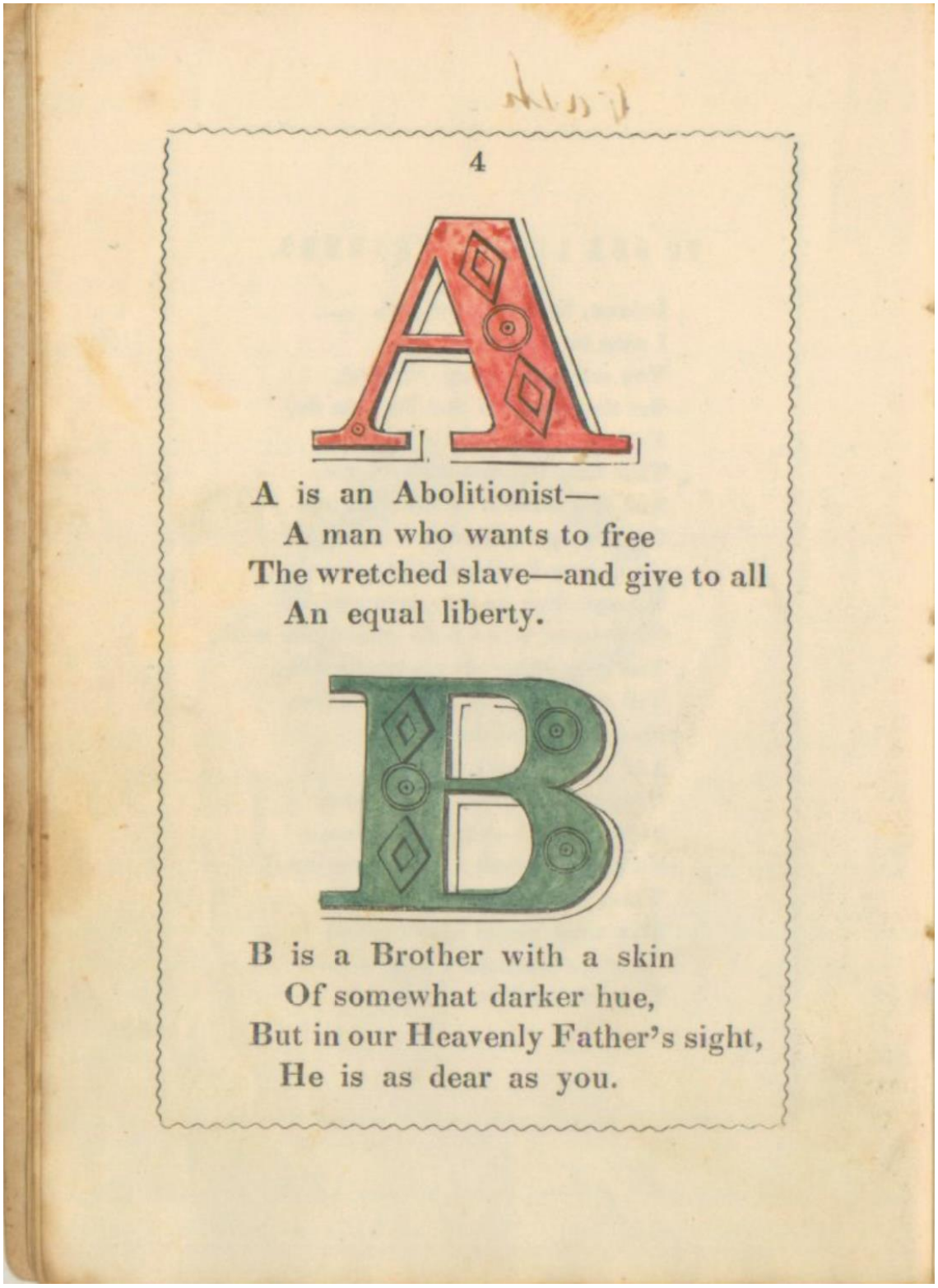
25. Say, "Today we read and analyzed *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* today, and now it's your chance to show what you've learned and discovered!"
26. Hand out Activity Sheet 3: Exit Ticket.
27. Say, "You will answer two questions and can also let me know what you are still wondering."
    - "First: How did young children in the 1840s learn about slavery?"
    - "Second: How did abolitionists explain why slavery was bad?"
    - "Third: Write one question you still have, and what you could do to find out the answer."

28. Say, “You can use the Discussion Space and anything you noticed or wondered during the lesson. Write your ideas using evidence from the text. Work quietly and do your best. I will collect your Exit Tickets when everyone is finished.”

Follow Up with Students (After Exit Ticket)

29. After collecting Exit Tickets, review students’ answers to identify:
    - Common understandings and discoveries
    - Misconceptions or areas of confusion
    - Questions or “wonders” that students still have
30. Follow up using one or more of these strategies:
    - Class Discussion: Share patterns you noticed from Exit Tickets and ask students to explain their thinking. Highlight evidence from the text.
        - Example: “Many of you noticed that children in the 1840s learned about slavery through books like this alphabet. Let’s talk about what that tells us about how young people learned history.”
    - Small-Group Revisit: Have students return to their Discussion Space or letters to explore lingering questions or refine their ideas.
    - Individual Feedback: Provide brief, specific feedback on how students used evidence or explained the author’s message.
    - Future Inquiry: Add unanswered questions to a class “Wonder Wall” or journal for exploration in future lessons.
31. Connect this follow-up to the earlier Notice/Wonder routine so students see that inquiry and using evidence is an ongoing process, not just a one-time activity.

The Letters A and B from *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, 1846



4

A

A is an Abolitionist—
A man who wants to free
The wretched slave—and give to all
An equal liberty.

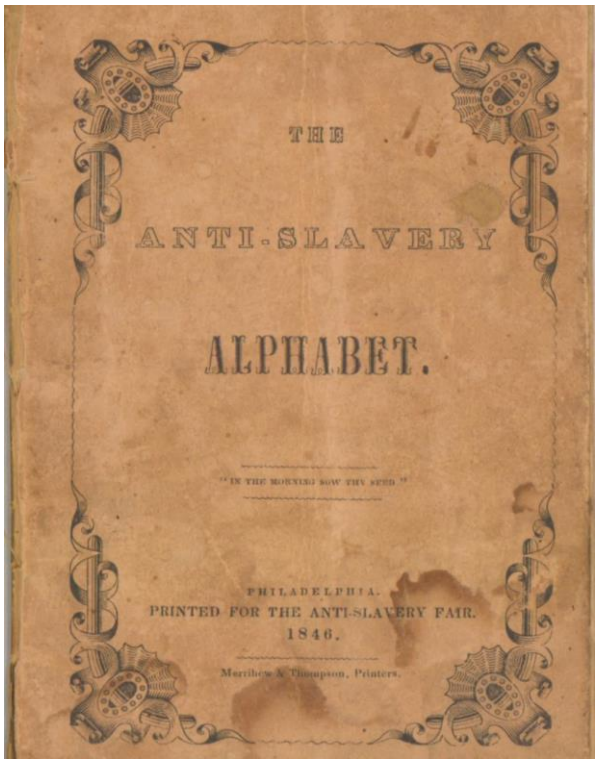
B

B is a Brother with a skin
Of somewhat darker hue,
But in our Heavenly Father's sight,
He is as dear as you.

Hannah and Mary Townsend, The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, Philadelphia, 1846 (Mississippi Department of Archives and History)*

Name _____ Date _____

Activity Sheet 1: Notice/Wonder


THE

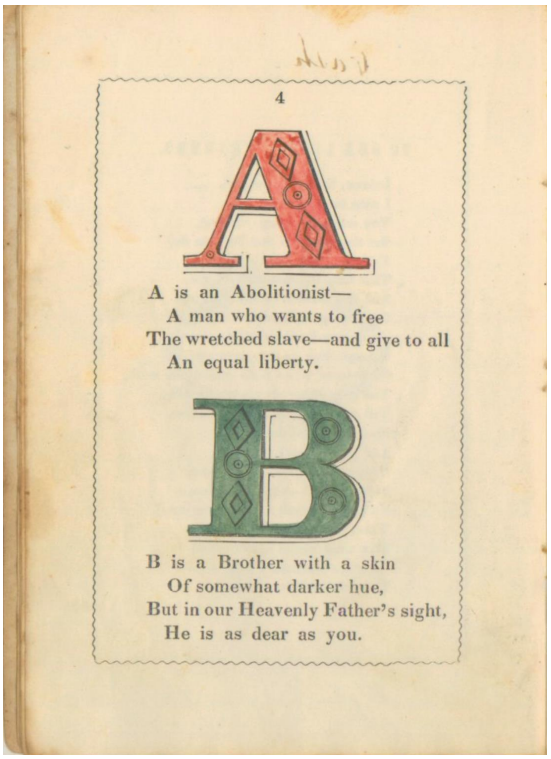
ANTI-SLAVERY

ALPHABET.

"IN THE MORNING SOW THY SEED"

PHILADELPHIA.
PRINTED FOR THE ANTI-SLAVERY FAIR.
1846.

Merrihew & Thompson, Printers.


4

A

A is an Abolitionist—
A man who wants to free
The wretched slave—and give to all
An equal liberty.

B

B is a Brother with a skin
Of somewhat darker hue,
But in our Heavenly Father's sight,
He is as dear as you.

What do you **NOTICE**?	What do you **WONDER?**

Names _____ Date _____

Activity Sheet 2: Discussion Space

Directions:

1. **Silent Write:** Write your own answer to the questions in your assigned box.
2. **Share:** Take turns to share your answers with the group and talk about what you all think.
3. **Agree & Write:** Together, decide the most important ideas to share and write a summary in the center box. Be ready to share out with the class!

Name: _____ 1.	Name: _____ 2.
What message about slavery was the author sharing with this letter? **What evidence supports my answer?**	
Name: _____ 3.	Name: _____ 4.

Name _____ Period ____ Date _____

Activity Sheet 3: Exit Ticket

How did young children in the 1840s learn about slavery? Use evidence from *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* to support your answer:

_____

_____

_____

_____

How did abolitionists explain why slavery was bad?

_____

_____

_____

_____

One question I still have is _____

_____

_____

_____

I could find out an answer to this question by _____

_____

_____