



# *The Slave Who Went to Congress*

By Marti Rosner and Frye Gaillard

Illustrated by Jordana Haggard

NewSouth Books

**A Lesson Plan on the Life of  
Benjamin Sterling Turner**

**Time: 45 minutes – 1 hour**

## Book Description

**I**n 1870, Benjamin Turner, who spent the first 40 years of his life enslaved, was elected to the U.S. Congress. He was the first African American from Alabama to earn that distinction. In a recreation of Turner's own words, based on speeches and other writings that Turner left behind, co-authors Marti S. Rosner and Frye Gaillard have crafted the story of a remarkable man who taught himself to read when he was young and began a lifetime quest for education and freedom. As a candidate for Congress, and then as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Turner rejected the idea of punishing his white neighbors who fought for the Confederacy—and thus for the continuation of slavery—believing they had suffered enough. At the same time, he supported the right to vote for former slaves, opposed a cotton tax that he thought was hurtful to small farmers, especially blacks, supported racially mixed schools, and argued that land should be set aside for former slaves so they could build a new life for themselves. The authors celebrate the life of a man who rejected bitterness even as he pursued his own dreams. His is a story of determination and strength, the story of an American hero from the town of Selma, Alabama, who worked to make the world a better place for people of all races and backgrounds.

For more information online:

<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-3271>

<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/turner-benjamin-sterling-1825-1894>

<http://history.house.gov/People/Detail/23140>

[http://www.aaregistry.org/historic\\_events/view/slavery-congress-benjamin-s-turner](http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/slavery-congress-benjamin-s-turner)

# Skills Reinforced

- » Sequence (What happened first, next, then, after that . . .)
- » Organize chronologically (dates)
- » Cause/Effect
- » Description
- » Main idea
- » Vocabulary development
- » Primary sources



# NCSS Connecting Themes

- » Civic ideals and practices
- » Power, authority, and governance
- » Individuals, groups, and institutions
- » Individual development and identity
- » People, places, and environments
- » Time, continuity, and change

# Vocabulary

**AMNESTY:** offering forgiveness for past offenses. In his run for Congress, Ben promised amnesty to his white neighbors who had fought as Confederates.

**CONFEDERATES:** those who supported the Confederate States of America. When the Southern states withdrew from the North, they created a government of their own known as the Confederate States of America, or Confederacy. The people who supported their cause were known as Confederates.

**CONSTITUENTS:** voters who are represented by an elected official. Ben's constituents, the people he represented in Alabama, were surprised he would want to forgive the Confederates.

**EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION:** Issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, this announcement freed slaves in states that had withdrawn, or seceded, from the Union.

**LIVERY STABLE:** a building where horses and vehicles are cared for or rented out for pay. When the Union army came through Selma, they took everything from Ben's livery stable so the Union soldiers would have necessary resources.

**SUFFRAGE:** being allowed to vote in a political election. Ben believed in suffrage for all.

**UNION:** the United States, or the states that did not secede. When supplies were needed for the Union Army, they were stolen from Ben's livery stable.

**UNIVERSAL AMNESTY, UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE:** forgiveness and voting rights involving all people affected. This was Ben's campaign slogan. The slogan reflected his beliefs that former slaves should have the right to vote and that people on both sides should be forgiven and live in peace and equality.

## Before Reading

- » Give the students a summary of the story.
- » Read aloud the Author's Note highlighting the primary sources used to research facts and evidence used in telling Turner's life story. Share his photo.
- » Tell the students that, as you read the book, you'd like them to think about Turner's quest for education and freedom, his empathy towards others, his determination, strength, and other traits that would describe him.

## Reading the Book

- » Read aloud the book all the way through without stopping, other than to define vocabulary.

## During Reading

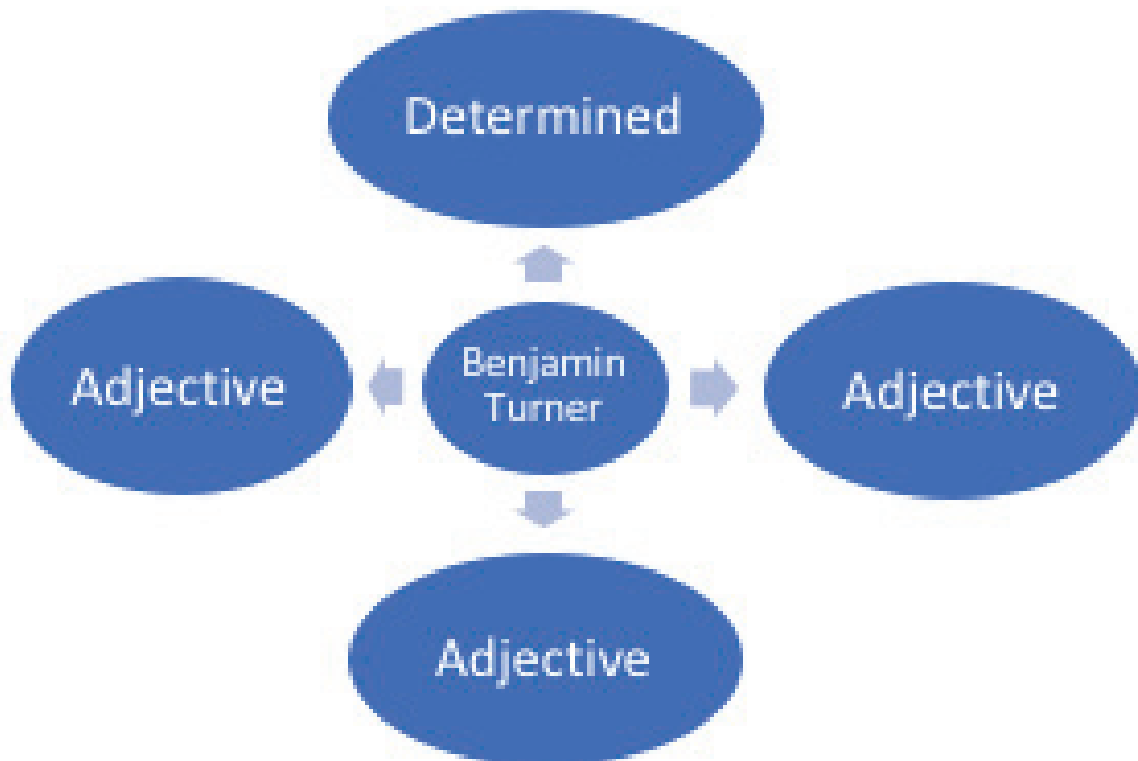
- » Students listen for words that describe Turner's civic mindedness and his personality. Examples might include determined, persistent, honest, reliable, trustworthy, caring, etc.



# After Reading

- » Students turn and talk, discussing what they heard and what words would describe Benjamin Sterling Turner.
- » Share answers with the class.
- » Create a class chart or graphic organizer describing Turner.

ADJECTIVE	EVIDENCE
Determined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>» He learned to read.</li><li>» He read the newspapers.</li><li>» He listened a lot.</li></ul>



# Questions for Discussion or Writing

- » How was it to Turner's advantage to remain within the same family? (He was sold once, and upon the deaths of these owners, a brother became his new owner.)
- » What events leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation being signed affected Turner? How was he affected?
- » Why did Turner join the Union when they had destroyed everything he had worked so hard to gain?
- » The following statement from the book were words Turner may have used when thinking of emancipation. “. . . *though the chains of slavery were unlocked, we remained tethered. We were free in the eyes of the law, but still enslaved by others' beliefs.*” What do you think these words mean, and what makes you think that?
- » How did Benjamin Sterling Turner practice civic responsibility?
- » Thinking about his campaign slogan *Universal Suffrage, Universal Amnesty*, what was his vision for Reconstruction?
- » What do you think he could have accomplished had people respected his ideas and listened to his speeches?



# To Purchase *The Slave Who Went to Congress*

*The Slave Who Went to Congress* is available for purchase directly from the publisher, NewSouth Books, by phone at 334-834-3556 and email at [harrison@newsouthbooks.com](mailto:harrison@newsouthbooks.com). Orders may be placed via the NewSouth Books website at [www.newsouthbooks.com/congress](http://www.newsouthbooks.com/congress). The book is also available from your favorite local or online bookseller.

NewSouth Books offers a trade discount on bulk purchases made for school use. For more information, contact Lisa Harrison at NewSouth Books using the contact information above.

## Book the Authors for Your School Event

Co-authors Marti Rosner and Frye Gaillard are available for school presentations. To arrange an event, contact Lisa Harrison by phone (334-834-3556) or email ([harrison@newsouthbooks.com](mailto:harrison@newsouthbooks.com)).

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