

## Unit 5, Lesson 7 : A Key to Freedom

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### Lesson Overview

In this lesson students will learn about agency and how a remarkable enslaved woman named Elizabeth Key exercised her agency while enslaved by suing successfully for her own freedom at a time when few could imagine this was possible.

### Delaware Standards:

- History Standard 1, 4-5 [Chronology]: Students will study historical events and persons within a given time frame in order to create a chronology and identify related cause-effect factors.
- History Standard 2a, 4-5 [Analysis]: Students will draw historical conclusions and construct historical accounts from primary and secondary source materials
- History Standard 2b, 4-5 [Analysis]: Students will examine historical materials relating to a particular region, society, or theme; chronologically arrange them; and analyze change over time.
- History Standard 4, 4-5 [Content]: Students will develop an understanding of selected themes in United States history, including...important people in American history.

**Big Ideas:** agency and resistance

### Essential Questions:

- How did enslaved people respond to their mistreatment?

### Enduring Understandings:

- Students will understand that some enslaved people such as Elizabeth Key exercised agency and sued successfully for their freedom at a time when few thought it was possible.

### Resources:

- [Google Slides](#)
- [Resource 1: Determining Meaning from Context](#)
- [Resource 2: A Key to Freedom Reading](#)
- [Resource 3: Create and Analyze a Chronology](#)
- [Resource 4: Develop your sense of agency](#)

### Procedures

1. **Introduce the Lesson:** Tell students that, today, they are going to learn about someone who had a sense of agency, acted on that sense, and improved her life in ways that we cannot imagine. The person that they are going to learn about can be a model for all of us.
2. **Develop Academic Vocabulary - Determining Meaning from Context:** Distribute copies of [Resource 1](#) to students (there are multiple, identical readings that you can cut out to save paper). Have them read the story then turn to a partner and discuss what the likely meaning of agency is based on contextual clues.
3. **Clarify Definition of Agency:** Project and pronounce the word “agency” for students to see and hear. Mention that the word has multiple meanings. One of them is closely associated with the study of history. To historians, **agency refers to the belief or feeling that a person or people have of control over their lives, actions, and their consequences.**

- a. Some people think that things that happen to them are beyond their control. Sometimes this is true. But people who believe that they have agency understand that they can control many things in their lives and that practicing agency can lead to better lives.
- b. Emphasize how important it is for students to have a sense of agency, to believe that they don't have to feel powerless or that they have no control over things.
- 4. **Reflection:** ask students to think of a time when they faced a challenge or problem, and rather than feeling powerless and doing nothing, they exhibited agency.
- 5. **Preparation for Reading:** Tell students that they are about to read about a pretty remarkable story about someone who believed she had agency and, as a result, her life became incredibly better.
- 6. **Reading for Content:** distribute copies of [Resource 2: A Key to Freedom](#). Have students read [Resource 2](#).
  - a. Ask them to consider the following question as they read. What was Elizabeth's "Key to Freedom?" [\[exercising agency by suing for her freedom\]](#)
- 7. **Making Text-to-Standards Connections:** Distribute copies of [Resource 3](#) to students. Have students create a chronology of events in Elizabeth Key's life then use the information on their timelines to complete tasks 2 and 3 on the Resource.
  - a. Review responses with students.

**VIDEO:** Clint Smith's *Crash Course Black American History: Elizabeth Key* is available [here](#) for consideration (approximately 8 minutes). **WARNING** - preview this video before showing as it references adult topics such as extramarital affairs and may only be suitable for teacher background knowledge. If in doubt, always check with an administrator.

- 8. **Demonstrate Agency:** distribute copies of [Resource 4](#)- Invite students to describe a challenge or problem that they are facing and develop a plan for agency by developing a plan to overcome the challenge or problem.
- 9. **Debrief:** Revisit the essential question for this lesson with follow-ups:
  - a. How did enslaved people respond to their mistreatment? [\[highlight that in the face of many odds, some embraced and exercised resistance and agency to secure their freedom through the legal system - the so-called "freedom suits"\]](#)
  - b. How does the story of Elizabeth Key highlight the benefits of treating one another well and cooperating? [\[sprinkled throughout the story of Elizabeth Key's journey are several examples of how Blacks and White formed loving relationships and worked together to achieve justice\]](#)

### Endnote

Elizabeth Key's victory was both great and historic. But it contributed to a sad but unintended effect. In response to Elizabeth Key's suit and other challenges, Virginia passed a law in 1662 establishing that the status of children born in the colony would be determined by the status of their respective mothers. In other words, if the mother was enslaved, her children were as well. This law differed from laws in England where a child's social status was determined by their fathers, who had an obligation to support both legitimate and illegitimate children.

