

## Thomas Dugan: An African American Life in 1820s Concord

### Lesson Plan

#### Overview

The Concord Museum exhibition, *Thomas Dugan: Yeoman of Concord*, was a visualization of an African American man's belongings based on a primary source – the inventory taken after Dugan's death in 1827. The inventory, along with an obituary, a newspaper ad, and Dugan's will, are the few remaining written records by which we can piece together parts of Dugan's life. Most of Dugan's contemporaries, white or black, left no written records at all, and his inventory is a particularly rare survival: it is a primary source detailing the material possessions of a free black man in New England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This lesson engages students with Thomas Dugan's life through the objects that were listed on his inventory. By carefully observing the objects, responding to open-ended questions, and thinking critically, students will consider concepts of wealth, race, daily life, material culture, and how we interpret history.

#### Lesson Objective

- What can Thomas Dugan's inventory teach us about him as an individual and about the life of a free African American in New England in the 1820s?

#### Essential Questions

- How can primary sources help us to understand the life of a person and their community during a specific time?
- How do we learn about people who don't write about themselves?
- Can a person's life be measured by what they leave behind?
- What should people be remembered for?

#### Grades

For US History Courses

#### Suggested Time Allowance

1-2 class periods

**Lesson Set-up:** This lesson is designed so that the outline below follows the PowerPoint presentation with coordinating slide numbers. Some background is included in this outline, and additional background information is included in the separate Dugan History and Approach document. Students will need copies of Dugan's Inventory during the lesson and, if you use the writing assignment, the Dugan Obituary Worksheet.

#### Teacher Resources

- History and Approach document
- Lesson PowerPoint (to be used with the outline below)
- Thomas Dugan Inventory – print one copy for each student or group of students.
- Obituary Worksheet (optional writing assignment)

#### Additional Resources

- *Thomas Dugan: Yeoman of Concord* online exhibition
- Annotated Inventory (this includes explanations of each object written by the Concord Museum curator)
- More information on some of Dugan's African American contemporaries in Concord, Mass. at [The Robbins House](#).

## Lesson Outline

### Suggested introduction

Today we're going to look at a grouping of objects that show the belongings of a free African American man named Thomas Dugan. He lived in Concord, Massachusetts, and died in 1827. When studying the past it can be difficult to find information about people who are not famous. Minorities, women, and anyone who didn't write about themselves or have their belongings saved can be missing from our stories. So how can we learn about these people? One way is through primary source documents written by or about them or people like them. Another way is to look closely at the objects people owned personally or objects that are from the time period that they lived.

Today we're going to try both of these techniques using images from a Concord Museum exhibition about Thomas Dugan and his probate inventory. Dugan's probate inventory listed the items he owned along with their values in 1827, the year he died. Inventories were usually taken after the owner of the property passed away, to determine the value of the items left behind. Most of the objects shown here were not owned by Thomas Dugan himself, but are the same types of items from the same time period, drawn from the Concord Museum collection.

### Slides 1-2: Thomas Dugan

**Explain:** Thomas Dugan was born 1747 and was enslaved in Virginia. It is not known how he came to be free, but he arrived in Concord by about 1791 where he lived as a free man until 1827. The Dugan property in 1827 included a house, barn, and seven acres of land valued at \$300. The image shown in the slide is of a similar-sized household to Dugan's.

#### Background information for slide 2

The Robbins House, in Concord, MA, was built in the early 1800s, and was occupied by a formerly enslaved African American man and his family.

### Slides 3-6: Objects on Dugan's Inventory

**Explain:** These are examples of all of the items listed on the inventory taken at Dugan's death.

#### **Discuss:**

- What do you notice?
- What do you see in the image that makes you say that? (*Have students give visual evidence to back up their answers*).
- What can you tell about Dugan's daily life from the objects that he owned?
- What kind of job(s) did he and his family have?
- What other activities might have happened in his home?
- Do you think he might have been rich, middle class, or poor? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How do you think his life or belongings might have been different from those of other people in town? Other African Americans? White neighbors?

#### Background information for slides 3-6

These images show everything listed on Dugan's inventory arranged as it might have been when counted. The items would have been in both his house and his barn. The activities happening with these objects could have included eating (meals or tea), sleeping, entertaining, lighting fires, cooking, dressing, storage, farming, hunting, repairing farm tools, etc.

## Slide 7: Farming Objects

**Explain:** Let's look more closely at a few of the items to see if we can learn more specific details about Dugan.

**Ask students about the item on the left (cider barrel):**

- What could this be used for? What do you notice about it?
- Does it remind you of anything you've seen before?
- What is a popular fruit harvested and eaten in the fall? (*apples*) What might he have grown on his farm? (*apple trees*)

**Ask students about the item on the right (butter churn):**

- What could this be used for? What do you notice about it?
- Has anyone ever seen or used one of these?  
*Establish that the item is a butter churn and what that is if necessary*
- What would Dugan have needed in addition to the churn to make butter? (*a cow*)

### Background information for slide 7 Cider Barrel

Dugan owned two cider barrels at his death. This tells us that Dugan had apple trees on his 7 acres of land. Most of New England's apples were pressed into cider at this time. Cider was often safer to drink than water because water could be unsanitary. Cider had a little alcohol and was considered safer, so it was the primary drink for many people at that time.

### Background information for slide 7 (continued)

#### Butter Churn

The main conclusion to be drawn from Dugan's butter churn is that he owned a cow. Dugan's cow was the most expensive item on his inventory (besides the land and house), valued at \$12. Having a cow means:

1. You have grass in the meadow and hay in a barn to feed your cow.
2. While alive, a cow can provide milk, butter, and manure to fertilize land. When slaughtered, a cow can be used for meat, leather, and fat to make soap or candles.

Butter is made by churning cream for an extended period of time. When butter is salted, it keeps longer than milk. For more evidence of the butter-making and the cow, notice the metal pans in slide 5. These are milk pans used in the milk/butter process. The amount of butter and milk produced was probably more than the family needed, so Dugan would likely have sold much of it to make money.

## Slide 8: Bed and Looking Glass

*Hand out the inventory list to students*

**Explain:** This is an image of Thomas Dugan's inventory. Let's look more closely at a few of the items on the list to continue our discussion of whether Dugan was poor, middle class, or rich.

**Ask students:** Look up the bed and looking glass in the inventory to find the value. What were they valued at?

**Discuss:**

- How would you describe these items (are they fancy, simple, in-between)?
- Are these items necessary for survival?

- Look at the other items on the inventory and think of the first few pictures we saw. Based on these, what conclusion can we now make about him being poor, middle class, or rich? Why? *After students have discussed, use the background information below to explain that Dugan was middle class.*

**Background information for slide 8**

**Bed**

On the inventory, what we think of as a “bed” is a few different items:

- The “bed” listed on the inventory is a featherbed, which is a bag of 40 – 50 pounds of feathers (not the frame).
- Bolsters - long pillows at the head of the bed to support the pillows.
- Bedding - sheets and blankets
- Stead - bed frame

A featherbed (as opposed to a less expensive bed filled with corn husks) is very expensive to fill with feathers. The bed frame has decorative elements.

**Looking Glass**

This is what we call a mirror today. Many, if not most, families would not have owned a looking glass. It’s not a necessity and mirrored glass was very expensive to make. This looking glass was valued \$0.25 (it is smaller than an 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper) and would have been small and fairly simple (other looking glasses you see in museums that are large with ornate frames were worth more).

**Dugan’s Inventory**

Dugan was not rich, but he also was not poor. He had enough money to own land, ceramic tableware, a featherbed, a looking glass, and a cow, but many of his possessions were less expensive such as earthenware pots, simple furniture, and farming equipment. The goods he owned were worth \$32.30 and his land, house, and barn were worth \$300. In 1827 a skilled laborer might earn \$1 a day; a common laborer \$0.50-\$0.75 a day.

- Most Concord farms were about sixty acres in size, which was enough to support a family. Dugan’s seven acres would have been enough to supply a grazing meadow in the summer and cut hay in the winter to feed his cow. It would not have been enough to grow all the food he and his family would have needed so most likely he did work as well.

**Slide 9: Dugan’s Musket**

**Discuss:** This musket actually belonged to Thomas Dugan.

- What are the possible purposes of this item?
- What does this tell us about Dugan?
- How might Dugan’s use of a gun differ from Concord residents who were white? *After students have discussed, use the background information to explain that Dugan was not allowed to serve in the militia like his white contemporaries.*
- What additional thoughts do you have knowing this object really belonged to Thomas Dugan?

**Background information on slide 9**

Guns like this musket, called a *fowler*, were used for hunting waterfowl, birds, and other small animals. Like most people in Concord at this time Dugan would have hunted in the area.

A gun might also have been used to serve in the local militia. During the Revolution militiamen had to supply their own weapons. However, at the time of Dugan’s death in 1827 it would have been against Federal Law for him to serve in the militia because he was Black. It is possible he served during the Revolutionary War as some African Americans did, but no records have been found about Dugan serving at that time.

## Slide 10: Thomas Dugan

**Explain:** Let's take a step back now that we've looked at so many of these objects and think about Dugan's life more broadly. Thomas Dugan was born almost thirty years before the start of the American Revolution and was enslaved in Virginia. The beginning of his life was not well documented. It is not known how he came to be free, but he arrived in Concord by about 1791 where he lived as a free man, married, raised a family, and farmed his seven acres. He died in 1827, without debt (unusual at the time), at the age of about 80 years old. At the time of his death his wife, Jenny, certainly lived with him and possibly some of his seven children.

**Reflect:**

- What were your assumptions of how African Americans lived in this time period?
- This farm could have belonged to either a white or a black farmer. Knowing Dugan was black, how do you think his life would have been different from a similar white farmer?

## Slide 11: What's Missing?

**Explain:** Not everything Dugan's family owned would have been listed on his inventory. There is much information an inventory doesn't tell us.

**Discuss:**

- Is there anything still missing about his life? What do we still not know?
- What do you think Dugan did in his free time?
- There are no books listed on the inventory. Do you think Dugan could read?
- We haven't seen any images of Dugan. What might we learn from an image of him?
- What questions are you left with?

**Background for slide 11:**

Not everything a person owned would have been on an inventory. For example, items of personal significance but no monetary value would have been excluded. There is no clothing for his wife, nothing that obviously belongs to his children. No books are listed – does this mean Dugan couldn't read? Because he signed his name with a mark, it shows Dugan could not write. Most likely he couldn't read either, but it's possible other family members could.

## Slide 12: Dugan's Obituary

**Explain:** In addition to the probate inventory, there are a few other sources that survive related to Thomas Dugan. One is an article written many years after his death which says Dugan "did much to advance the farming interests in Concord; he was industrious and a peace maker." Additionally, a story has been handed down in Concord that Thomas Dugan taught citizens of the town how to use a rye cradle (an important farming tool usually used in the South, which he presumably learned to use while enslaved). Finally, Dugan's obituary survives, and the text is shown here.

**Vocabulary for students:**

**Alias:** also known as; another name for someone.

**Absconded:** left hurriedly and secretly, typically to avoid detection of or arrest for an unlawful action (fleeing as an enslaved person was against federal law).

**Obituary:** a notice of a death, especially in a newspaper, typically including a brief biography of the deceased person.

***Discuss:***

- What is your first reaction?
- Does this obituary do him justice?
- How much does this tell us about his life? What is left out?
- What does this tell us about how people viewed him in his life and death?

**Suggested writing assignment:** See *Dugan Obituary Worksheet*. Consider what you have learned about Thomas Dugan's life through his belongings, the information from his inventory, and the other primary sources discussed in class. Write your own version of his obituary.

*This lesson was created with students in the Rivers and Revolutions program at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School.*

Concord Museum, Concord, Massachusetts  
[www.concordmuseum.org](http://www.concordmuseum.org)