

A. J. McElveen, letter to the slaver Ziba B. Oakes, 19

January 1854

A.J. McElveen

Introduction

A letter written by A. J. McElveen to Z.B. Oakes regarding an enslaved man named Isaac.

This text is part of the Teaching Hard History Text Library and aligns with Key Concept(s) 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10

Sumterville Jan 19th 1854

Mr. Z B Oakes

Dear Sir,

I have bought the boy Isaac for \$11.00 (I think him very ---- his equal cannot be found in capacity. He is a general horse lover and a splended carriage driver. He is also a fine painter varnisher (and the boy says he can make a fine pannel (door. He is a genious and it's strange to say I think he is smarter than I am. Also he performs well on the violin and other musical instruments. Give him a fair trial and if you do not get \$1500 for him I am very much mistaken. His master says he is a first rate cook in meats.

I am not restricted to have him sent out of the state unless I choose. I am under promise to not let him come back to Sumter District therefore sell him in Charleston if you can. I paid one half cash the other I pay the 6 -- that is -- sale day. I leave here tomorrow and will be here the last of next week. Write me on the arrival of Isaac. And say what

you think of him. As no.1 fellow(

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I expect to buy some negroes down below +

several -- to be sold here on the 6th --

If I buy I will put off paying as long

as I can. I will draw small amounts

tomorrow in order to meet my arrangements

if I should buy more negroes then I

can get money to pay for I will come down

about February without you make

arrangements with the bank. I will

write you from Kingstree. A sale takes

places on the 26th -- and they will be 5-

negroes sold. I will tell you J.M. E. Shafer

offered \$1200 for Isaac and expected

to get him but the Doctor -- him

out of jail. He would not take

any -- for him and he was about

sending the boy to Robinson + call to

sell for him. I hope you will get fine

price for him.

the --Dr will give me a

certificate as regards his capacity. He has

owned him from a child up he is 28 years old

about 5 feet 10 in. weigh 150 lbs. or 160. Fine legs

a little whiped. the Doct is ready to give any

man his opinion and will say everything in

his favor he can. The boy was -- of

by mean person caused him to flee

perhaps I have said more than is necessary

yours in haste

A. J. McElveen

TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

Was Isaac skilled or educated?

What is the difference between the two and why might that be relevant to slavers like McElveen?

What language in the letter shows how slavers used white superiority to justify slavery?

What does the letter tell us about the different tasks that enslaved people were forced to perform?

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TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question

Was Isaac skilled or educated? What is the difference between the two and why might that be relevant to slavers like McElveen?

Answer

Answers will vary; The letter does not speak explicitly to Isaac receiving formal education, but he is described as possessing several skills, along with being a "genious" (genius). An enslaved person learned in a skill or trade may have been more marketable to enslavers, while an enslaved person educated in reading and writing may have been seen as a threat.

Question

What language in the letter shows how slavers used white superiority to justify slavery?

Answer

Answers will vary; It is clear that the buying and selling of human beings was a common practice and had been normalized by those who profited from the business, along with the idea that enslaved people were distinctly different from slaveholders, as seen in McElveen's comment "...it's strange to say I think he [Isaac] is smarter than I am".

Question

What does the letter tell us about the different tasks that enslaved people were forced to perform?

Answer

The fact that a slaver highlights Isaac's skills show that these would be valuable to an enslaver, which means Isaac would be required to a wide range of different types of work for his enslaver. While slavery is commonly represented as a largely agricultural institution, many enslaved people were forced to work in cities, and in different trades outside of agriculture.