

SLAVERY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

A Unit of Study for Grades 5–8

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TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Slavery was a pervasive feature of southern culture, not just an isolated institution in southern life. As well as oppressing blacks, slavery put constraints on whites, including non-slave owning whites; it limited their options, distorted their choices, and stunted them as people. The lessons included in this unit attempt to make slavery comprehensible to students, showing its oppressiveness and yet explaining how white southern culture rationalized and sustained it. The unit also explains how blacks resisted the dehumanizing aspects of slavery and in the process created a distinct African-American culture. Finally, these lessons present the abolitionists, black and white, male and female, and develop appreciation for their courage, conviction, and understanding. Students should be exposed to people whose foresight and principles, while putting them at odds with the prevailing beliefs of their contemporaries, helped to shape the attitudes of future Americans.

This unit should help students see the importance of being active and thoughtful members of society. White southerners were ordinary people not very different from contemporary Americans. Students should be taught that unless people are educated to reflect actively on the values that shape their society, they are likely to accept uncritically those values. With the aid of this unit, students should see racism as a disease that threatens all people's freedom while crippling the judgement of those infected.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

Preceding this unit on nineteenth-century slavery, students should have had lessons on Colonial America, the Revolutionary War, and the early Republic. To make this study of slavery more comprehensible, students should already be aware of the origins of American slavery in the early colonial period and have a sense that slavery had been an issue of contention during the Constitutional Convention. Obviously, this unit can serve as a prelude to the Civil War, or as an introduction to a unit on immigration and cultural pluralism, showing how black cultural contributions can be compared to those of other ethnic groups and contrasting the black experience with the voluntary (although often under severe hardship conditions) immigration of other ethnic groups.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

Slavery in the Nineteenth Century provides teaching materials to support the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 4 Expansion and Reform (1801–1861)**. Lessons within this unit focus on the rapid growth of the “peculiar institution” after 1800 and the varied experiences of African Americans under slavery (**Standard 2D**) and the abolitionist movement (**Standard 4A**).

This unit likewise integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards including: reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration in which historical developments have unfolded (**Standard 1**, Chronological Thinking); differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations (**Standard 2**, Historical Comprehension); compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions, and examine the influence of ideas (**Standard 3**, Historical Analysis and Interpretation); and interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political and economic context in which it was created (**Standard 4** Historical Research).

IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To study historical documents and artifacts in order to experience history as a dynamic discipline which studies, interprets, and debates the meaning of human events and through those, humanity’s collective past.
2. To explain some of the arguments used by whites to justify slavery.
3. To give an example of how even non-slave owning white southerners were constrained by the system of slavery.
4. To provide written evidence demonstrating an understanding that the essential paradox of slavery was trying to make people property.
5. To experience and appreciate the African-American culture which was forged in slavery.
6. To explain some of the ways in which slave labor helped build this nation.
7. To list ways in which enslaved Africans resisted their bondage.
8. To identify at least two abolitionists and explain what they wanted and why.

IV. INTRODUCTION TO SLAVERY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The process by which slavery became the preeminent feature of antebellum southern society was gradual and complex. Enslaved Africans were used to raise the South's labor-intensive commercial crops: sugar, rice, tobacco, and cotton. Distinguishing southern agriculture from its northern counterpart, these cash crops could be extremely profitable, provided labor costs were minimal. Free laborers, used in the earliest days of colonization and again after the Civil War, could have raised these crops. Slavery was not an inevitable feature of southern agriculture; it was a deliberate choice made by men who sought greater economic returns than they could obtain either from their own labor or from wage labor. The relatively abundant land supply and scarce labor supply made wage labor both expensive and unreliable. After working just long enough to establish themselves, farm workers would often strike out on their own, becoming rivals to their former masters. Slavery ensured a constant source of reliable labor.

This bald economic explanation was not explicitly used to justify slavery. However, many people must have implicitly understood it. Until Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793, there was a widespread belief that slavery would gradually decline. But the rapid spread of cotton plantations through the fresh, fertile bottomlands of the Gulf states dispelled this hope. Only the wealthiest planters could afford gins. Their turn to cotton preserved slavery and the plantation system. From 1815 to 1860 cotton comprised more than half of all southern exports. Cotton, the principal source of southern economic vitality, was also crucial for the national economy. Cotton production soared from 461,000 bales in 1817 to 4.8 million bales in 1860. Paralleling the growth of the southern economy was the almost equally great increase in the number of enslaved Africans, from 1.5 million in 1820 to 4 million in 1860.

Understanding the antebellum South requires understanding a series of paradoxes. Although three fourths of white southerners owned no slaves, the whole society revolved around slavery. Among whites, economic mobility, social prestige, and political influence were all functions of owning slaves. The poorest 10 percent of white society took comfort in distinguishing themselves from slaves, though slavery contributed to their poverty by concentrating economic power in the hands of large landholders. The influence of slavery was also deeply embedded in the legal system which controlled the behavior of whites by strictly limiting the contact between whites and blacks as well as making all whites accomplices in sustaining slavery.

While most slave owners had fewer than ten slaves, the majority of slaves lived on plantations in groups of twenty or more. Despite the strident insistence by whites that slaves were savages, the presence of these large groups allowed for the gradual formation of a distinct African-American culture. The music, stories, and dancing of

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slaves were enjoyed by whites even as they were denied the status of legitimate culture. Similarly, most owners encouraged slaves to marry, believing that families made them more docile and less inclined to revolt or run away. But the stability of slave families was constantly threatened by violence, sexual abuse, and separation initiated by masters. Within the slave community, black women's roles required constant labor and made them more nearly equal to men than was the case for women in white society.

Brought to the Americas from all over Africa, slaves arrived with distinct languages, religions, and cultural practices. Yet they shared modes of understanding and cultural expression that became the basis for a common culture and world view. Moreover, as slaves, Africans struggled together to create strategies for living as satisfactorily as possible. Drawing on their African heritage while interacting with the European-American world, they forged their own values and ways of life. The slaves' toughness and resiliency in reacting creatively to their condition was a measure of their strength and the vitality of their culture.

Though enslaved Africans continued to be smuggled to the United States from Africa and the West Indies in limited numbers until the end of the Civil War, the slave trade from outside the United States was formally ended by an act of Congress in 1808. The influence of Africa on slave culture, however, did not disappear after this date. While enslavement was tremendously oppressive, there were limits to its coercive capacity. Masters set the external limits for their enslaved Africans, controlling work, diet, and shelter and limiting their mobility; but enslaved Africans organized their leisure time, expressed powerful religious feelings, created families, and maintained their traditions and values.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. The Justification of Slavery and its Effect on Whites
2. Slave Labor
3. African-American Culture Forged in Bondage
4. Slave Resistance
5. Abolition: The Leaders and Their Ideas
6. Abolition and Women's Rights