

*History*  
UNFOLDING

# THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT



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# Introduction

## Slavery and Abolitionism

Today, slavery seems so evil, so cruelly unjust, that we tend to forget that for centuries just about every culture on earth regarded it as normal. Sad to say, slavery was a very common institution. It had existed in Egypt, Greece, Rome, China, and many other civilizations in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. And after 1492, Europeans brought slavery with them to most of the areas they settled in both North and South America.

In a way, what is surprising is not the existence of slavery in the Americas, but the rise and ultimate victory of a movement to abolish it. Calls for the abolition of slavery began in England and the United States among the Quakers and other religious sects. But the most important phase of the abolitionist struggle in the U.S. did not begin until the 1820s and 1830s. Then, under the influence of a powerful religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening, small groups of inspired reformers began to agitate for the immediate abolition of slavery. The end of slavery in the British empire also helped encourage these abolitionists. Yet for several decades, they met powerful and, at times, violent opposition. In the end, they helped push the nation into the crisis that would end once and for all an evil that these abolitionists regarded as the nation's great sin.

The twelve illustrations in this booklet focus on a number of central themes in the history of the abolitionist movement. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **Slavery: Reality & Myth**

These three illustrations focus on those aspects of slavery that made it such a degrading form of labor—and on the myths Southerners used to hide the ugly reality of slavery from others, and from themselves.

### **Runaways & Resistance**

Slaves could rarely take action against their bondage. But runaways and occasional acts of rebellion show how hateful slavery was to them.

### **The Abolitionist Cause**

The militant abolitionist movement that emerged in the 1830s was deeply inspired by a wave of religious feeling and a faith in human perfectibility. The illustrations here focus on some key abolitionists, the ideas that moved them, and the opposition they provoked.

### **Slavery Divides the Nation**

Abolitionists hoped for repentance from the nation and a peaceful end to slavery. But the deep opposition they inspired, especially in the South, kept that from happening. Instead, the movement fueled a growing spirit of violence that divided the nation and plunged it into civil war. It was in the fires of that war that slavery finally met its end.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The Abolitionist Movement***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will understand slavery not only as a different form of labor, but as a system of total control over human beings.
2. Students will discuss the myths about slavery common in the South.

# Slavery: Reality & Myth

*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

By the early 1800s, the new American nation was growing rapidly. Its wealth was increasing. Its citizens were winning more freedom and more control over their own lives. Except, that is, for slaves. In colonial times, indentured servants of several sorts had existed. But these other kinds of servitude soon faded, leaving two starkly different forms of labor. Most whites either owned their own lands or shops, or they worked for wages at jobs freely chosen. Nearly all African Americans were owned outright. They faced a lifetime of unpaid labor for others. And as this drawing shows, slavery was not just a matter of economics. It was a system of power in which one group of human beings dominated another totally.

**Illustration 2**

Slavery turned each human being into a commodity to be bought and sold. Slave auctions such as this one in Richmond, Virginia, made that horribly clear. At such auctions, human beings were inspected as if they were common work animals. After 1808, it was illegal to import slaves into the United States. But a huge internal slave trade existed. Slaves were raised in Virginia and elsewhere in order to be sold and sent to other parts of the South. Families could be split up and sold at auctions. This was not common. But the fact that it *could* happen was enough to terrify every slave and make all of them much easier to control.

**Illustration 3**

In the late 1700s, many Americans expected slavery to die out on its own. At that time, not even many Southerners defended slavery as a good thing. They simply said it was necessary and could not be ended easily. But the Cotton Gin made cotton “King,” spreading cotton and slavery throughout the South. Wealthy plantation owners and other leaders in the South soon began to defend slavery more forcefully. They saw it as the South’s “Peculiar Institution,” one that made the South different, gentler, more old-fashioned than the North. According to them, most slave owners were kind to their slaves—for economic reasons if not out of a sense of duty. And these owners supposedly gave their grateful slaves a better, more secure life than many Northern workers had. This drawing sums up this typical Southern view of slavery.



## Lesson 1—Slavery: Reality & Myth

# Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### **Discussing the Illustration**

1. This drawing shows a group of slaves being led through the nation's capital, Washington, D.C. If you knew nothing at all about American slavery, what could you learn about it just from this drawing alone? What differences between slaves and other kinds of workers does the drawing by itself help to show?
2. Can you describe any other differences between slave and non-slave labor, differences that are *not* shown in this drawing?
3. What extra problems would an owner of slaves have that someone who hired free laborers would not have?
4. In spite of these problems, thousands of plantation owners, farmers and some owners of factories in the South preferred to use slaves as their workers. Why do you suppose that was true?

### **Follow-up Activities**

1. Create a dialogue or one-act play involving some of the figures in the above illustration. Your dialogue should include at least the couple watching on the left, the man with the whip, the slave mother and child, and one or two of the other slaves. In the dialogue have each figure explain how he or she came to be at this place in Washington D.C., and have the figures describe their reactions to the scene shown above.
2. The nation's founders agreed to these words in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Yet few leaders in the early 1800s objected to scenes like the one shown above. Choose one of the following leaders and learn more about his views on slavery: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, or Alexander Hamilton. Now, pretend you are that person. Write a letter to a friend commenting on the above scene in the nation's capital.

## Slavery Divides the Nation

# Illustration 3



Courtesy of the Library of Congress