

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

LESSON ONE
THE JUSTIFICATION OF SLAVERY AND ITS EFFECT ON WHITES

A. OBJECTIVES

1. To list at least three justifications of slavery used by whites.
2. To speculate on the validity of the justifications of slavery.
3. To explain ways in which white Southerners were legally required to support slavery.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND MATERIALS

Until the 1830s slavery was usually justified as a “necessary evil,” but the aggressive campaigning by abolitionists led slavery’s defenders to recast slavery as a “positive good.” Senator James Hammond of South Carolina was one of the leading champions of the institution of slavery. Hammond argued that in all social systems there must be a class that performs the ‘drudgeries of life’ to free others to pursue more noble interests. Biblical, historical, and constitutional arguments were also used to justify enslavement. Slavery’s apologists cited Bible passages where servants were directed to obey their masters and accept their lot. They also noted that enslavement had existed through history and that the greatest civilizations had all been built in part from enslaved labor. This was Hammond’s so called ‘mud-sill’ theory. Although the United States Constitution makes no mention of slavery by name in the document, it sets representation based on the number of free persons plus three-fifths of all other persons (i.e., slaves) Article I Section 2, prohibits any change in the importation of persons (slaves) before 1808 in Article I, Section 9, and specifically calls for the return of fugitives (i.e. runaway slaves) in Article IV Section 3.

The difficulty with these rationalizations of slavery was that they ran contrary to the main ideological tenets of nineteenth-century America: inalienable rights acquired at birth, individual liberty, economic opportunity, and democratic political participation. The defenders of slavery also had to consider the 75 percent of the southern white population who had no slaves and who did not share in the economic benefits of the system. Therefore, the principal justification of slavery came to hinge on racism, maintaining that all whites were superior to all blacks but equal to one another. The idea of democratic equality among whites was thus made consistent with slavery. But the real motive, though rarely admitted, was that slavery was profitable.

C. LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Distribute **Document A**, excerpts from a southern slave owner's letter to an English abolitionist which was later published and widely circulated as a response to abolitionist tracts. A modern version of the excerpts follows to help students with vocabulary and to clarify complicated phrases.
2. Read **Document A** aloud from an overhead projector while the students follow along from their copies. Students should be encouraged to ask the teacher to explain, but not interpret the text.
3. Begin a class discussion.
 - a. Have students identify the source of the document. It comes from a 19th-century newspaper but was originally a letter to an English abolitionist. The letter was published widely in several newspapers and as a pamphlet. Thus, historians regard it as a representative and accurate example of how slavery was publicly justified by masters. Ask students to speculate about why historians believe that it is a reliable guide to white southern opinion before the Civil War.
 - b. Ask students if they ever have private reasons for doing things that are different from the ones they admit to other people. Understanding the reasons for peoples' behavior is one of the historians' most difficult tasks. It is hard to know if the public reasons people use to explain their behavior are the most important ones.
4. Have students form groups of four or five. Each group should select one person as a recorder. Identify and discuss at least ten claims made by the author and have the group recorder make a list of these claims. They can include:
 - a. There are slaves.
 - b. Slavery is good.
 - c. Africans have slaves.
 - d. People in Africa have no culture or religion.
 - e. Africans are better off as slaves in the United States.
 - f. Slavery is important for good government.
 - g. Poor people do not have time to think about government.

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- h. Only educated people with money make responsible citizens.
 - i. There is a lot of land.
 - j. Enslaved Africans, if freed, would not work for wages.
 - k. Africans are better at doing hard work here than Europeans.
5. After studying the claims made by Hammond, the groups can discuss the three reasons derived from the claims used to justify slavery. Briefly they are:
- a. Blacks are better off as slaves in America, where they will get civilization and religion, than in Africa. Besides, masters treat their slaves well.
 - b. Slavery gives southern states good government because slaves, the poorest and least educated half of the people, are not allowed to vote or otherwise interfere with government.
 - c. Enslaved Africans are necessary to the southern economy. They do the agricultural work free laborers would not do willingly; blacks do this work better than whites could.
4. Regroup the students and discuss with the class as a whole the validity of the claims that form the basis of Hammond's justification of slavery. Since the students will often not be in a position to know which claims were actually true, and since many of the claims reflect a deeply ingrained racism, handle this discussion with sensitivity.
5. As a concluding activity, combine the collections of claims made by each group into a list on the chalkboard or bulletin board. The class should go over the list marking the statements as true, false, or needing investigation.
6. Distribute **Document B**, "The Alabama Slave Code of 1852" and **Worksheet 1**, an independent, self-contained activity using the Alabama Slave Code, which can be used as classwork or homework. This document shows that:
- a. Despite claims about the well-being of slaves, whites were deeply afraid that slaves would run away or rebel.
 - b. All whites were affected by slavery. They were compelled to sustain slavery by participating on patrols. Their privacy was always under threat and they were legally restrained from freely associating with blacks.
 - c. Moreover, the constant threat of slave rebellion created a perpetual climate of fear.

A Note to the Teacher:

This is not an attempt to compare the physical and overt tyranny felt by blacks with the mostly psychological and largely covert pressure slavery placed on whites. It is meant to show that slavery affected the whole society. Most whites did not own slaves, but fear and racism led them to tolerate and sustain slavery.

D. EVALUATING THE LESSON

1. Have students write a short one-page explanation of one of the justifications for slavery. Then have them explain which of the claims essential to that justification is false.
2. The bulletin board activity would also be a good evaluating activity.

A JUSTIFICATION OF SLAVERY

**Excerpts from James Henry Hammond's Letter to an English Abolitionist,
January 28, 1845, Silver Bluff, South Carolina**
(Primary Source)

From the original:

Besides, it may be possibly a novelty to you to encounter one who conscientiously believes the domestic Slavery of these States to be not only an inexorable necessity for the present, but a moral and humane institution, productive of the greatest political and social advantages, and who is disposed, as I am, to defend it on these grounds.

If kidnapping, both secretly and by war made for the purpose, could be by any means prevented in Africa, the next greatest blessing you could bestow upon that country would be to transport its actual slaves in comfortable vessels across the Atlantic. Though they might be perpetual bondsmen, still they would emerge from darkness to light—from barbarism into civilization—from idolatry to Christianity—in short from death to life.

I endorse . . . that "Slavery is the corner-stone of our republican edifice;" while I repudiate, as ridiculously absurd, that much lauded but nowhere accredited dogma of Mr. Jefferson, that "all men are born equal." No society has ever yet existed . . . without a natural variety of classes. . . . It will scarcely be disputed that the very poor have less leisure to prepare themselves for the proper discharge of public duties than the rich; and that the ignorant are wholly unfit for them at all It is a wretched and insecure government which is administered by its most ignorant citizens In the slave owning states, however, nearly one-half of the whole population, and those the poorest and most ignorant, have no political influence whatever, because they are slaves. Of the other half, a large proportion are both educated and independent in their circumstances. . . . Hence, Slavery is truly the "corner-stone" and foundation of every well-designed and durable "republican edifice."

You will promptly say, emancipate your slaves, and then you will have free labor on suitable terms. That might be if there were five hundred where there now is one, and the continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, was as densely populated as your Island. But until that comes to pass, no labor can be procured in America on the terms you have it.

Besides this, Slavery is rapidly filling up our country with a hardy race, peculiarly adapted to our climate and productions.

I have no hesitation in saying that our slaveholders are kind masters, as men usually are kind husbands, parents, and friends—as a general rule, kinder. A bad master . . . loses the esteem and respect of his fellow-citizens.

Modern Version:

You might never have met someone like me, who really believes that there should be slaves and that slavery is a good thing. Slavery is kind, fair, and helps everyone. I am going to defend slavery and explain why I believe these things.

Slavery already exists in Africa. The best thing that could happen to Africans would be if all the wars, kidnapping, and slavery stopped there. The next best thing would be to bring African slaves over to America in comfortable ships. Even though they would stay slaves, Africans would be happier and better off in America because they would get civilization and religion.

Slavery is necessary for our kind of government. People are just not equal. There will always be people who are rich and poor, educated and uneducated. People without money do not have the free time to prepare themselves to be responsible citizens; ignorant people should not even be citizens. The worst government would be one led by the most ignorant people. In slave states the poorest and most ignorant half of the people cannot hurt the government because they are slaves. Most of the other half of the people are educated and have money. Because only the best educated and wealthiest people govern in slave states, these states have good governments. This is possible because of slavery.

You say, free the slaves and then pay them for their work. That might be possible if the United States were like England, with lots of people and little land. But here we have lots of land and few people. If we freed the slaves, they would not stay and work.

Besides, slavery fills the land with strong, healthy people from Africa, who are better at doing hard farm work in this climate than Europeans.

I am sure that slaveowners are kind to their slaves, just as most men are kind husbands, fathers, and friends. Usually, slave owners are kinder than other men. Free people do not like bad slaveowners.

THE ALABAMA SLAVE CODE OF 1852

(Primary Source)

The Alabama Slave Code of 1852 was a list of laws about slavery. The code was long and mostly controlled slaves' behavior, but it also made rules that affected whites and showed how they felt about slaves. You are going to read parts of just a few of these laws. When people read these laws, they are usually shocked by how slaves were treated. When you read these laws, think about what they tell us about white Southerners.

Patrols

1. All white male owners of slaves . . . and all other free white persons . . . are subject to perform patrol duty.
2. Each detachment must patrol such parts of the precinct as in their judgement is necessary, at least once a week at night. . . .
3. The patrol has power to enter in a peaceable manner, upon any plantation. . . .
4. Any member of a patrol detachment may send a substitute.
5. The leader, or any member of the detachment, failing to appear . . . must be fined ten dollars.

Enslaved Africans

1. No slave must go beyond the limits of the plantation on which he [or she] resides, without a pass, or some letter from his master or overseer.
2. No slave can keep or carry a gun, powder, shot, club, or other weapon. . . .
3. No slave can, under any pretence, keep a dog.
4. No slave can own property.
5. Not more than five male slaves shall assemble together at any place off the plantation.

Source: *The Code of Alabama*, prepared by John J. Ormand, Arthur P. Bagby, and George Goldthwaite (Montgomery: Brittain and De Wolf, 1852), pp. 234-45, 390-93, 589-97.

Questions

1. What were these patrols for?
2. Only one white person in four owned enslaved Africans, but all whites had to join patrols. Why were all whites required to go on patrol?
3. How do you think people who did not own enslaved Africans felt about being made to go on patrol?
4. People who owned enslaved Africans were the richest people in the South, and many of them could pay someone else to take their place on patrols. Most of the white people without enslaved Africans were too poor to do this. How would you feel if the people with the most enslaved Africans never went on patrol, but you had to?
5. Why was there a law which fined people who did not go on patrols?
6. Patrols could go everywhere. Today there are laws that protect people's privacy. How would you feel about members of a patrol searching your house at night without your permission?
7. Why were enslaved Africans forbidden to have weapons or own dogs?
8. Why couldn't enslaved Africans own property?
9. Why was it against the law for more than five male enslaved Africans to get together?
10. These laws about patrols and enslaved Africans are important clues indicating that white people were afraid of enslaved Africans. Why were they afraid?
11. Despite the claims made by owners that enslaved Africans were well treated and better off than in Africa, their fear also suggests that owners did not think enslaved Africans believed these claims. Which was a more accurate understanding of enslaved Africans' true feelings, the belief that enslaved Africans were happy or the fear that enslaved Africans would run away or fight if they had the chance?

| Vocabulary | | |
|------------|------------|------------|
| assemblage | patrol | presence |
| detachment | plantation | resides |
| fined | powder | shot |
| overseer | precinct | substitute |