

Daily Lives of Slaves – What Really Happened?

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Grade Level: Middle/High

Duration of lesson: 2 periods

Overview:

Thanks to the Depression-era Federal Writers' Project, over 2000 ex-slave narratives have been preserved to help us discover what African-American slaves' lives were like. But as with all historical sources, the reliability of those narratives is partly open to question. For one thing, many of the subjects were elderly at the time of the project, and so their remembrances may have changed or faded over time. Secondly, there are the biases of the white interviewers that should be taken into account. This lesson uses the ex-slave narratives and other primary sources like photographs and advertisements to explore the varieties of slave life in antebellum America. Using those sources, students will learn about the relationships between masters, overseers, and plantation hands. They will also recognize the conflicts between different groups of slaves, such as the field workers and the house servants. Learning to "read" photographs and other images will also teach students how to glean historical information from visual sources. In the process, they will come to understand that all sources contain certain biases, and an understanding of history comes from interweaving a variety of documents from the past.

Related National History Standards:

Content Standards:

Era 2: Colonization and Settlement (1585-1763)

Standard 3: How the values and institutions of European economic life took root in the colonies, and how slavery reshaped European and African life in the America

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- C. Read historical narratives imaginatively.
- D. Evidence historical perspectives.
- G. Draw upon visual, literary, and musical sources.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- C. Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations.
- D. Consider multiple perspectives.
- G. Compare competing historical narratives.

H. Hold interpretations of history as tentative.

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

A. Formulate historical questions.

C. Interrogate historical data.

D. Identify the gaps in the available records, marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place, and construct a sound historical interpretation.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will identify and describe various aspects of slave life.
- Students will draw conclusions about the institution of slavery.

Topic Background

In the 1930's, the U.S. government created many different programs to help bring the country out of the Depression. These programs offered jobs to Americans that varied from building highways to working at National Parks. One program was created to give the more "academic" person a boost. This was the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). The purpose of this project was to collect the "life stories" of thousands of people from all over the United States. As the project got underway, many sub-categories were formed: folklore, women coping with the Depression, social customs of ethnic groups, and ex-slave narratives. The ex-slave narratives proved to be the most enduring of the projects, with oral historians amassing over 2,000 ex-slave life stories detailing the finer points of slave life and describing the answer to the most commonly asked question, "What was it like to be a slave?"

Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, slave stories were sought for the mere purpose of promoting the antislavery and proslavery crusades. Many abolitionists gathered information from fugitive slaves and published their stories to gain support. Pro-slavery Southerners also used slave stories to argue that slaves "were as happy as a human could be." After the Civil War, interest in slave narratives became almost non-existent until the creation of the FWP and the social realization that many slave stories would be lost, if they were not recorded soon. As the slave narratives were documented and analyzed, the reliability of those narratives were questioned. Many slaves were in their eighties when their narratives were recorded. Would time have changed the memories? There was also concern about the "biases and distortion of white interviewers."¹ Could the interviewers, who were instructed to write in "negro dialect" of the times, have changed the content and meaning?

Still, in today's world, the slave narratives give the best insight into what it was like to "be a slave." Many people would say that they have the general idea of what life was like, but reading the narratives can give a whole new perspective to one's point of view. The working and living conditions portrayed a very hard and troubled time for slaves, but according to the *Journal of Afro-American History*, the recreational times actually offered slaves "a break from the daily hard work that they had endured throughout the year." For example, during the Christmas season, most slaves received a break from the plantation and had time to celebrate with loved ones. Though ex-slaves, like Frederick Douglass would claim "those holidays were among the most effective means in the hands of slaveholders of keeping down the spirit of insurrection among slaves." In reading through the narratives, one does notice that there are many different viewpoints on what life was like for a slave.

There are various reasons for the differences amongst the slaves' viewpoints during the antebellum period. Some stem from differences in the slave/master relationships. Slaves on the large cotton plantations received their instructions for work from the overseer. Slaves in some mid-western states toiled along side their masters working the crops. The interpretations of the slaves in both situations would be different based on the relationship the slaves had with

the planter or the overseer. Slave viewpoints also varied in terms of where a slave was to work on the large plantations. "Slave owners...often saw house servants and craftsmen as members of a slave 'aristocracy.'"ii This division amongst the slaves would lend itself to different interpretations of how the slaves themselves viewed their situation. There is considerable evidence that there was resentment between the house servants and field hands. "Domestic slaves are often found to be traitors to their own people."iii This social division among slaves led to a variety of narratives being told to those working for the FWP.

For one to draw better conclusions about slave life, one should also evaluate other types of primary sources. Photographs help stimulate the visual learner, making the narratives come to life. Photographs also make a great introduction to the topic. They captivate the people and inspire questions. Using photographs helps to develop analytical skills where one must "read" the photograph. Looking at the smallest detail can lead a viewer to analyze the photograph from a different point of view. Advertisements are not as visually stimulating, but the short pieces of information tend to be more direct. Students who get caught up in the dialect of long narratives have a better time concentrating on the short advertisements of the time period. But, both photographs and advertisements are not without their bias. As Susan Veccia has pointed out, "While a photograph records an authentic image, what the photographer chooses to capture can be used to convey different messages."iv In other words, photographs can conceal as much as they reveal.

The Civil War ended over 139 years ago, and the FWP wrapped up their project in the 1940's, but general conclusions about how slaves felt about slavery are still debated today. The *New York Times* has reported that in North Carolina, college professors that deal in the teaching of Confederate Heritage claim that seventy percent of slaves were happy with their lives prior to the Civil War.v Slave auction re-enactments stir controversy in Williamsburg because the "slaves" in the re-enactments are too friendly with the slave owners, and they are dressed too well to be common plantation workers.vi Evaluating different types of primary sources helps to open the mind to different viewpoints and interpretations. The discussions and questions that these sources create are the most important part of the learning process. We learn that "history is not one story, but many that may interweave."vii

Annotated Bibliography:

Kolchin, Peter. *American Slavery 1619-1877*. New York: Whill and Wang, 1993.

This book discusses the history of slavery from many different historical perspectives. Kolchin key focus is on the geographical differences in slavery across North America. He studies the slavery from it's start during the colonial period to the end of slavery in the United States.

Litwack, Leon. *Been in the Storm So Long, the Aftermath of Slavery*. New

York: First Vintage Books, 1979.

This source chronicles the history of slaves from the “faithful slave” to “becoming a people.” Information in the first chapter, “Faithful Slave” shares a variety of slave narratives with interpretations by Litwack about the lives of slaves. The introduction to the book warns about the scribing of slave narratives with bias and incorrect dialects.

Veccia, Susan H. *Uncovering Our History – Teaching with Primary Sources*. Chicago, American Library Association, 2004.

This book gives insight on how to teach using primary source documents. Website collections, teaching methods and ideas, as well as sample questioning techniques make this book useful for teachers at all grade levels.

Born in Slavery. 23 Mar. 2001. Library of Congress. 01 June 2004
<<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>>.

This website gives an account of the creation of the Federal Writers’ Project, as well information about how slave narratives were collected how slave narratives should be used, and problems that exist within the narratives. This website breaks down each area so that the overall website is not cumbersome, but leads the searcher through guided questions to get to the desired information.

Vocabulary

- Historian:** a person who researches, analyzes, and interprets the past through primary source documents.
- Auction:** A public sale in which property or items of merchandise are sold to the highest bidder.
- Plantation:** A large estate or farm on which resident workers raise crops.
- Quarter:** A place of residence, especially a building.
- Massa/Missus:** Slave slang referring to the plantation owner, master, and the plantation owner's wife, misses.

Teaching Procedures

1. As a motivational activity project Resource Sheet #1, "Slave Auction at Richmond Virginia." Students should view the document and write down what they see in terms of objects, people, and actions. You may want to have students write a caption for the picture.
2. As the students view the document, have them answer the following questions on a sheet of paper: (These questions are from Resource Sheet #2, "Primary Source Questions Historians Ask.")

What clues can you find about the location and date?

What are the main messages in the photograph?

What is the most important historical information this source provides?

Conduct a discussion about the possible answers to the questions. During the discussion, inform the students that this is an actual engraving taken of a slave auction house in the time period around the 1850's. Generate a class list of other questions that may not have been answered, but questions that a historian may want answered about the engraving.

3. Inform the students that they will be viewing different primary sources that help define what the life of a slave living prior to the Civil War may have been like. They will examine all aspects of life from the auction, to working, living, and even recreational time on a plantation.
4. Hand out the Resource Sheet #3, "Slavery in the South." Have students complete the prediction portion of the worksheet. The predictions should be several sentences/phrases in which the student describes what each aspect of life may have been like for a slave. Prior knowledge will play a part here. Take some time to let students share their predictions.
5. Have students review the auction picture by placing it on the overhead. Remind students that this may be one of the first views for a slave upon entering the United States. Explain that advertisements about upcoming auctions were placed in newspapers to alert plantation owners about sales. Project Resource Sheet #4, "Slave Auction Advertisements," and have students discuss the information in the advertisements. This can be done in small groups and then as a whole class.
6. Share Resource Sheet #5, "Josiah Henson's Description of Plantation Life," in which the author's family was sold to several different owners. Discuss the excerpt. Next have students go back to their prediction sheet.

Using information from the narrative, the advertisements, and the picture, have students complete the row titled, "Actual Findings" about what they actually learned about slave auctions. This can be modeled with the students, so that it is understood how to complete the next part on his/her own.

7. Distribute Resource Sheet #6, "Slave Narratives." Students will review narratives from various slaves about the working, living, and recreational conditions on a plantation. Reviewing the narratives and photographs should be done in groups.

Have students categorize them into 3-piles: Living, Working, and Recreational. Once they have read and determined the category of each source, have the students go back to Resource Sheet #3 and complete the second row titled, "Actual Findings." Students can discuss their actual findings about the various conditions as well as discuss bias that may be formed in the narratives/photographs

Ask students to determine which type of source offers the most accurate description of slavery?

8. Upon completion of Resource Sheet #3, have students review their predictions vs. their actual findings. Have students place a plus sign (+) if the narratives agreed with their prediction, place a negative sign (-) if the narratives disagreed with their prediction, and place a zero (0) if it was not in the narratives at all. Students should correct all disagreements in different color ink.
9. In order to draw conclusions about the institution of slavery, have students create a poem using quotes from the narratives, as well as their own thoughts about slavery. To help students organize their thoughts have them complete the Resource Sheet #7, "Conclusion." Statements in the poem and the title should reflect what they have learned about the life of a slave in the south in antebellum America.

10. Possible extension activities include:

Have students rate the primary sources used in this lesson (photographs, narratives, and advertisements) from most effective to least effective in determining how life was for southern slaves. Have them explain why each of these sources received this rating and why each is important to the job of a historian.

Print an unabridged entry from a slave narrative. Have students transcribe the narrative into Standard English and identify political, social, and economic characteristics throughout the entry. Students should circle political characteristics, underline social characteristics, and box economic characteristics.

Have students examine illustrations or other secondary sources from the same time period. Have them complete a compare/contrast diagram to that of a primary source.

Let each student pretend that he/she is working for a new branch of the Federal Writers' Project. Have the students interview a family member about an important event in U.S. history and document it by typing up a narrative and sharing it with the class.

Students can complete the Resource Sheet #8, "Lost in Space," as a homework assignment or as an extension activity comparing the information learned to the answers on the worksheet.

Primary Source Annotation

Slave Auction at Richmond Virginia

http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/reform/jb_reform_slaveauc_1_e.html

Housed at the Library of Congress, this engraving illustrates a slave auction, that will be used by students as a motivational activity.

Two sections of the American Memory website

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/>

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/psources/slavpho2.html>

These are used for both slave narratives and the photographs of slaves in antebellum America. Students will use these documents to verify predictions made about the daily lives of slaves.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave

<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/>

The Berkeley Digital Library SunSITE provides a full text of this classic slave narrative that students use to verify predictions made about the daily lives of slaves.

Up From Slavery: An Autobiography

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/WASHINGTON/cover.html>

This narrative by Booker T. Washington is available at the American Studies website sponsored by the University of Virginia. Students use the text to verify predictions made about the daily lives of slaves

Documenting the American South

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/index.html>

This University of North Carolina offers three distinct types of slave narratives: autobiographical, biographical and fictionalized. Students will examine excerpts

from the reading to offer insights into the “recreational” or free time allotted to slaves.

The University of California – Davis History Project

<http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/imageapp.php?Major=BA&Minor=S>

This is a site designed especially for educational use with an expansive list of photographs, illustrations, and paintings that will be used by the students in the lesson presented, as well as in extension activities. This website offers clear photographs that can be easily enlarged to engage student interest.

The American Abolitionism website

http://americanabolitionist.liberalarts.iupui.edu/auction_block.htm

Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis has posted several slave auction notices, plus quotes from Solomon Northrup about his experiences of being on the auction block.

Uncle Tom's Story of His Life: An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson

<http://authors.aalbc.com/josiah.htm>

The African American Literature Book Club has posted the story of Josiah Henson, a slave from Maryland who wrote an autobiography about his life, and was the inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Henson's description of what life was like for him on the auction block as a young boy is very moving. This source has a personal connection for Maryland students being that Henson was born in Charles County, Maryland and was part of an auction in Montgomery County, Maryland.

Lester, Julius. *To Be a Slave*. New York: Scholastic, Inc, 1968.

This novel is a categorized collection of slave narratives from the Federal Writers' Project. Mr. Lester learned that many of the slave narratives from the project had not been published and took the time to read and transcribe several manuscripts. His mix of both his analysis of slavery and of the actual slave narratives gives an interesting interpretation to how slaves felt about slavery.

ⁱ Leon Litwach, *Been in the Storm So Long, the Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: First Vintage Books, 1979), xiii.

ⁱⁱ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-187* (New York: Whill and Wang, 1993), 107.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kolchin, 107.

^{iv} Susan H Veccia, *Uncovering Our History – Teaching with Primary Sources* (Chicago, American Library Association, 2004), 7.

^v Adapted from the *New York Times*, “Class Teaches That Slaves were Happy” at <http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~anthro/courses/306/educ-slavery.html> on November 16, 1998.

^{vi} Dan Eggen, “In Williamsburg, the Painful Reality of Slavery,” *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, July 7, 1999, A1.

^{vii} Veccia, 59.