

Overview & Background to Activity:

This activity is designed to help students understand more about enslavement in the Antebellum South. Using the slavevoyages.org database and primary source documentation, students will see the human element of enslavement by focusing on families torn apart by the slave trade. This is an intensely difficult topic to learn about, but one that is essential to understanding the inhumane and horrific treatment of enslaved people. Many activities and lessons focus on the big picture, or bird's eye view, of slavery in the United States. This activity will show students a more intimate look at enslavement from a perspective they are probably familiar with: family. By the end of this lesson, students will know more about how routine the practice of family separation was. Through an engagement with primary source documents and Solomon Northrup's first-hand account of his enslavement, students will encounter historical documentation of this practice and reflect on it. This is important as forced family separation is still in practice today in various forms, notably with regards to immigrant families at the US-Mexico border.

The activity will begin with a timelapse that visualizes data from the Slave Voyages project. This visualization shows the movement of ships carrying enslaved people as cargo to New Orleans, one of the central hubs in the antebellum slave trade. In the city's colonial era, ships came primarily from the Spanish and British Caribbean. In the 19th century, after the United States outlawed the transatlantic slave trade, New Orleans became a major port in the domestic slave trade. The city's location near the mouth of the Mississippi River made it easily accessible from the sea. Equally as important, it provided an alternative route to the new and rapidly growing states in the interior of the continent instead of the arduous overland journey, although many still travelled this way. Approximately one million enslaved people were moved from older states on the East Coast to the newer territories in the Gulf South and Mississippi River Valley.

Solomon Northrup's memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* is an important component of this lesson. The book is a slave narrative, a type of biographical literature written by the formerly enslaved describing experiences in captivity. Many are familiar with the 2013 film version of Northrup's book that won the Academy Award for Best Picture, but this activity centers his written words. Northrup wrote *Twelve Years a Slave* in 1853. It is important to note who Northrup was before he was kidnaped. Northrup was free, living in Saratoga, New York with his wife and three children. He made his living as a landowning farmer and professional violinist. In 1841, two men offered him employment as a musician in Washington, D.C. This ended up being a trap and he was then kidnapped, taken to New Orleans on a ship transporting enslaved people in the domestic slave trade, and sold into slavery. For twelve years, Northrup was held in captivity and forced to work on a plantation in Louisiana. Eventually his family found him and were able to free him through the court system. We know this story to be true due to records left behind and through the work of historians to research the journey he made from Washington to the Louisiana plantation that purchased him.

This lesson incorporates two scenes from the book. The first narrates Northrup's capture and imprisonment before being shipped to New Orleans, and the second

describes the separation of a family from the the ship at the slave sale in New Orleans. These are emotionally challenging passages, but ones that intimately speak to the lived experience of enslaved people. While undeniably horrifying, Northrup's story was an outlier case. The vast majority of people moved in the domestic slave trade were legally enslaved rather than kidnapped as Solomon Northrup was. The shipment and sale of the other people on Northrup's ship (and many others like it) was legal, even though it was abhorrent.

The lesson plan includes detailed descriptions of violence, both physical and emotional. The excerpts included in this activity were written by Solomon Northrup to describe the actual events he lived through. The illustrations provided were part of his original text and help to visualize portions of the slave trade that the general public may have been unaware of. These are difficult and emotional passages, and care should be given to ensure they are handled respectfully and thoughtfully.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Understand the nature of the slave trade in the Antebellum Era
- Know about the role New Orleans played in the slave trade
- See what slavery was like outside of the plantation
- Engage with slave narratives to gain a deeper understanding of slavery on a human level
- Examine historical data and documents related to the domestic slave trade
- Draw conclusions based on these historical documents

Suggested Grade & Course:

This lesson is designed for a middle school (6th-8th grade) classroom. It should be used in a US history course that covers the Antebellum era, or nineteenth century American history more generally. This lesson can easily be scaled up to the high school level as well. This can be done by incorporating more readings from Solomon Northrup, adding questions that use a higher level of critical thinking, or whatever makes most sense for your own classroom.

Standards:

Common Core

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.3

Identify key steps in a text's description of a process related to history/social studies (e.g., how a bill becomes law, how interest rates are raised or lowered).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

National History Standards:

Era 4 Standard 2D

The student understands the rapid growth of “the peculiar institution” after 1800 and the varied experiences of African Americans under slavery.

Activities/Procedures:

1. Begin the class with a brief (< 5 minutes) discussion about what students already know about slavery in the United States. Likely this will be centered around the Civil War or the Underground Railroad and other commonly taught aspects of enslavement in America.
2. Show students a timelapse from the slave voyages project. ([LINK HERE](#)) This timelapse shows the number of ships traveling from the East Coast to New Orleans, a major hub of the slave trade. Explain to students that each dot represents a ship that carried enslaved people as its cargo. Throughout the video, occasionally click on a dot and it will give you the information for that specific voyage, including where the ship came from and how many enslaved people were aboard. After the video plays, discuss it with the class. Some questions to consider:
 - What are some of the places these ships were coming from?
 - What color dot do you see most often, and what does that color mean?
 - Knowing that each dot carried enslaved people, how does watching this video make you feel?
3. Together as a class, read the passages from Solomon Northrup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*. The first passage takes place in Washington, D.C. where Northrup was kidnapped and forced into slavery. He writes of his experience trying, but ultimately failing, to convince his captors of his status as a free man. This passage can symbolize part of the origin of dots in the timelapse from earlier.

The second passage takes place in New Orleans. Explain to students that this is the destination of all the dots on the timelapse. This passage focuses on the separation of a mother, Eliza, from her daughter Emily. It is an emotionally difficult passage to read, but will prepare students for the rest of the lesson.
4. When done with the readings, have students discuss in pairs what you just read together. After they talk with their partners, bring the class back together for five minutes to have students share what they spoke about. Some questions to consider:
 - Is this something you already knew about slavery?
 - How did you feel after reading this? Why?
 - Why does Freeman, their owner, not want to sell Eliza’s daughter?
 - What does this passage show about enslaved families?
 - What do these passages show about the experience of enslaved people outside of plantations?
 - Does this seem like another form of violence even though it isn’t physical?

5. **(This portion may change when more data becomes accessible to help make the lesson more aligned with the updated website)** After this discussion, break students into 5 groups. In this part of the activity, they will examine the names of enslaved people listed in historic ships' manifests to try and identify if families were often together on slave ships to New Orleans. This is admittedly an incomplete way of identifying family separations in the slave trade, but it is one technique historians have used to understand if groups are being kept together. As they look over their documents, have them answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper.
1. How many people on the manifest shared the same last name?
 2. How many people on the manifest do not share a last name with anyone on board?
 3. Do you think only people with the same last name felt strong connections to other people on the ship? Are there other types of connections enslaved people might have felt?
 4. If people didn't have the same last name, do you think they experienced separations?
 5. Why do you think so many teenagers were on these shipping documents? From the passages we read, is there anything that supports this?
 6. Even if there are people with the same last names, does that mean the entire family is onboard the ship? Is it possible some people were left behind?
 7. How can we connect these shipping documents to the passages from *Twelve Years a Slave*?
6. After the groups have answered their questions. Pose two final questions to the class and have them hand in their answers as an exit ticket.
1. Do the horrors of slavery always have to relate to physical violence or are there other forms of violence that were inflicted on enslaved people?
 2. Even though family separations happened all the time, after emancipation many formerly enslaved people traveled far and wide to reunite with their children, parents, siblings, or any other family member they could find. What does this say about the power of family ties?

LIST OF SLAVE VOYAGE IDS

-132586
-132626
-132615
-132601
-132689
-132539
-132563
-132692
-132521
-132541