

Lesson 11

The Nature of Slavery in the Antebellum South

Objective

- To understand the impact of slavery in the South and how the North responded to this “peculiar institution”

AP* Correlations

Skill Type II

Skill 4: Comparison

Thematic Learning Objective: Politics and Power

POL-3: Explain how activist groups and reform movements, such as antebellum reformers, civil rights activists, and social conservatives, have caused changes to state institutions and U.S. society

Notes to the Teacher

Before the Nat Turner Rebellion in 1831, very few Southerners gave much thought to slave rebellions. After defeat of a proposal to emancipate their slaves, the South hardened its position on slavery, and opposition to slavery in the South waned. Slavery became the “peculiar institution” that the Old South became determined to preserve.

During the antebellum period, slaves were considered property with no individual rights. Ideas justifying slavery included the “positive good theory” and the “mud sill theory.” Southern clergymen preached that slaves should obey their masters and that the Bible supported slavery. In 1857, a Southern dominated Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, declared in the Dred Scott decision that neither slaves from Africa nor their descendants were citizens of the United States. Slave codes were in place throughout the South. Often slaves would resort to various forms of resistance. Slaves also turned to religion and the ideas that slavery was a test and that one day God would lead the slaves out of bondage, just as Moses led the Jews to the Promised Land.

Despite clear Southern support for slavery, only a quarter of Southern whites possessed slaves, and few had more than twenty.

In this lesson, students research attitudes toward slavery in the antebellum South and North. Students conduct a class discussion on the life of slaves and role-play opponents and supporters of slavery.

Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 18**, and have students conduct research to answer the questions.
2. Ask about the status of slaves in the South prior to the Civil War. (See Notes to the Teacher.) Review responses to **Handout 18**.

Suggested Responses

1. Slaves in the Upper South—Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland—were sold into the Lower South—Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi.
2. The sale of slaves and the presence of holding pens were vivid reminders to visitors, especially foreigners, that this nation, founded on the principles of liberty and justice for all, did not include slaves in this equation.
3. Following Nat Turner's rebellion, the South was panic-stricken. White mobs throughout the region attacked and murdered more than two hundred blacks who were thought to have participated in the rebellion. The Virginia legislature briefly debated abolishing slavery; when this failed, the South seemed resolved to defend this "peculiar institution" without looking back.
4. Fitzhugh argued that the slaves were like children who must be governed by parents. Without the master's help, slaves would revert to barbaric ways; therefore, slavery actually saves them from extinction.
5. Roswell King Jr., manager of the estate, used a system of rewards and punishment to control the slaves. He found that his slaves were content because he allowed them to plant and raise their own crops and that by being fair to them he had a higher yield in his crops than others nearby.
6. Poor white men were considered superior to blacks and Indians and often supported slavery.
7. There was little or no protection of slave families. The threat of being sold was constantly on the minds of all. Female slaves had no protection from sexual advances. The offspring of such unions were considered slaves. Among slaves, the Christian religion suggested that their condition was a test of faith.
8. The Weeping Time refers to the largest sale of slaves in the history of America when Pierce Butler was forced by huge debts to auction more than four hundred slaves.
9. It was inhumane, slaves were treated like property, women were exploited sexually, slaves had no individual rights, slaves were brutalized by beatings and mutilations, families had no

protection under the law, and “All men are created equal” clause of Declaration was not applied to slaves.

10. Few agreed with him because Garrison’s views were too radical even for most abolitionists of the day.
 11. The Indian Removal Act opened up new land for white settlers.
 12. The Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women met in this center of abolitionist sentiment along with three thousand other reformers. The next day the building was burnt to the ground. Most people in the North were indifferent to slavery and preferred not to deal with it.
 13. This book was the first open discussion of the sexual abuse of slave women.
 14. These books outraged Southerners. Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe converted many to the abolitionist cause.
 15. Some abolitionists felt justified in using violence to resist slavery because returning escaped slaves to the South was unacceptable.
 16. The Dred Scott decision declared that blacks had no rights because they came to the United States in a condition of servitude. The Missouri Compromise line was declared unconstitutional; therefore, slaves could be taken by their masters to any western territory because they were property.
 17. Lincoln believed that the Dred Scott decision would lead to the legalization of slavery since slaves could be lawfully taken to free states.
 18. The Fugitive Slave Law was the most controversial because it required citizens to assist in the recovery of escaped slaves. Many Northern states responded by passing personal liberty laws to protect the rights of escaped slaves. Abolitionists felt that it was now legitimate to use violence. John Brown’s use of violence at Harper’s Ferry and his call for a slave rebellion were not condemned in the North by abolitionists.
3. In preparation for a role-playing exercise, have each student select one of the proslavery or abolitionist characters. Distribute **Handout 19**, and have students answer the questions for their characters.
 4. Have each student introduce his or her character with about thirty seconds of background information. Then, acting as moderator, ask questions and have students respond in character. It might be advantageous to have the class assemble their desks in a circle. Debrief by reviewing students’ responses and discussing the presentations.

Suggested Responses

Proslavery Voices

1. George Fitzhugh was against the abolition of slavery on the grounds that slavery is a “positive good” which uplifts slaves and protects them from reverting to their barbaric ways. Fitzhugh would support states’ rights over national government rule. He was a strong supporter of the institution of slavery.
2. James Henry Hammond supported the mud sill theory. Like most Southerners, he supported states’ rights and would not believe that slaves had natural rights since they were not equal to whites and could not exist without their support. Slavery was a “positive good” beneficial to blacks and to America, which reaped benefits from a permanent slave class.
3. Dr. Samuel Cartwright stated that two diseases common among the Negro race caused slaves to run away and caused rascality. He used the respectability of the medical profession to lend credence to his position.
4. Pierce Butler was the largest slave holder in the South and the son of the senator who wrote the first fugitive slave law. Extreme in his position, he did not seem to be bothered by the condition of slaves on his plantation.
5. Stephen A. Douglas, a moderate supporter of slavery and popular sovereignty in the Nebraska territory, courted Southern approval so that an intercontinental railroad would be built through Illinois, thereby causing the unraveling of the Missouri Compromise and the tragedy of “Bleeding Kansas.”
6. White clergymen of the South supported the institution of slavery, justified on the grounds that it was a “positive good” and it is mentioned in the Bible.
7. Northern merchants and textile mill owners supported slavery because the cotton trade made business profitable for them. If slavery was abolished, masses of freed slaves would migrate north looking for jobs, destroying the United States.
8. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney wrote in the opinion on the Dred Scott case that slaves and their descendants were not citizens of the United States and therefore had no rights. He believed that the framers of the Declaration did not include them as being “created equal” since they did not participate in its writing.
9. John C. Calhoun, a supporter of the “positive good” theory, helped craft the Compromise of 1850, which included the controversial Fugitive Slave Law.

Antislavery or Abolitionist Voices

1. Fanny Kemble thought she could convince Pierce Butler to free his slaves. After viewing firsthand the horrors of slavery, she wrote a journal of her experiences. It was the most detailed account of slave conditions by someone sympathetic to abolition.
2. David Walker, born a free black, was considered very dangerous because he wanted slaves to rebel. A pamphlet he wrote, "Appeal," was read by slaves.
3. William Lloyd Garrison followed the doctrine of Moral Suasion, a nonviolent and passive approach. He believed in immediate emancipation of all slaves.
4. Henry Highland Garnet, a former slave and abolitionist, at first felt that abolition would come through white people using political means. Later he adopted one of the most radical positions, calling for slaves to revolt.
5. Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, became a leading spokesperson for abolitionism.
6. Angelina Grimké Weld knew of the horrors of slavery and spoke out against them. She said that there was no neutral ground on slavery.
7. Elijah Lovejoy was the first martyr of the abolitionist movement. His printing press was repeatedly destroyed; he died during one such attack. In the North, Whigs and Democrats did not want to discuss the issue of abolition. Those who did were subject to attack by anti-abolitionist mobs.
8. Wendell Phillips believed that the enemy was not only the slave owner, but also the person of good will who did not want to talk about slavery. Phillips helped to destroy the conspiracy of silence.
9. John Brown justified the use of violence in attacking slavery. He became nationally known when he participated in the murder of proslave settlers in Pottawatomie, Kansas. Later he attacked a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in an attempt to start a war against slavery in Virginia.
10. Harriet Tubman led many people to freedom through the Underground Railroad, earning the nickname "Moses."

The Peculiar Institution

Directions: Use your textbook, the Internet, and other resources to answer the following questions on the nature of slavery in the antebellum South.

1. What is meant by being sold “down river” or “sold south”?
2. Why was the presence of slave markets in Washington, D.C. so controversial?
3. Describe the impact of the Nat Turner Rebellion on the institution of slavery.
4. What is the “positive good” argument of George Fitzhugh?
5. Describe the management of the Butler estate and slave conditions there. How did the plantation owner, the overseer, and the slaves relate to each other?
6. How did slavery affect poor whites?
7. Describe the typical slave family and religion.
8. What was the “Weeping Time”?
9. What are some of the antislavery arguments of the time?

10. Who agreed with William Lloyd Garrison's call for the immediate emancipation of slaves?

11. How did the Indian Removal Act impact the growth of slavery in the South?

12. What was the significance of the burning of Pennsylvania Hall by an angry mob of anti-abolitionists in 1838?

13. What was the significance of the book by Harriett Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*?

14. What were the reactions in the North and the South to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?

15. How did the Fugitive Slave Act affect the abolitionist movement?

16. What was the significance of the Dred Scott decision in terms of western settlement and rights of blacks?

17. What was Abraham Lincoln's message in his "House Divided" speech when he ran for the senate in 1858?

18. What was the most controversial part of the Compromise of 1850? Why?

A Set of Beliefs about Slavery

Directions: Research the position held by your character. Then answer each question from your character's point of view.

Proslavery Voices

1. George Fitzhugh—the “positive good” argument
2. James Henry Hammond—the mud sill theory
3. Dr. Samuel Cartwright—“Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race”
4. Pierce Butler—one of the wealthiest plantation owners in the South
5. Senator Stephen A. Douglas, moderate proslave
6. White clergyman of a Southern church
7. Northern merchant, textile mill
8. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney
9. Senator John C. Calhoun, South Carolina

Antislavery or Abolitionist Voices

1. Fanny Kemble, British actress, wife of Pierce Butler
2. David Walker, radical free black
3. William Lloyd Garrison, abolitionist, newspaper publisher
4. Henry Highland Garnet, called for slaves to revolt
5. Frederick Douglass, escaped slave, lecturer
6. Angelina Grimké Weld, Southern abolitionist
7. Elijah Lovejoy, first martyr of abolitionist movement
8. Wendell Phillips, abolitionist orator
9. John Brown, abolitionist
10. Harriet Tubman, Underground Railroad

Questions

1. Do you favor slavery? How did you develop your position?
2. What is your position on the abolition of slavery?
3. Who should decide whether a state should be slave or free? Explain.
4. Should any reference to slavery be made in the Constitution? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe that the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness pertain to slaves?
6. Some have said that slavery is a “positive good.” Do you agree or disagree?
7. If people do not agree with laws, who has the right to change them—the states or the central government?
8. Do you believe that slavery may eventually destroy the nation?
9. Do you support the Fugitive Slave Act? Why or why not?