

American Paradox: Freedom & Slavery in the Early Republic

Civics/History Lesson Plan Grades 7-12

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Overview:

This lesson provides students an opportunity to use primary source documents as they examine the paradoxical support for both freedom and slavery during the late colonial and founding periods. Many different perspectives on the social studies themes of **power, authority, and governance** and **civic ideals and practices** are found in this lesson.

Purpose:

To encourage students to examine the apparent silence of James Madison and George Washington and other central founding figures on the issue of slavery during the Constitutional Convention and in the early American republic.

Connection to the Curriculum:

Civics, American Government, American History

Grade Level:

7-12

Time:

2-3 class periods

Objectives:

- Students will use information from original text sources to explain how and why the institution of slavery came to be accepted as part of the Constitution.
- Students will demonstrate application of the historian's skills of asking historical questions, acquiring historical information, and answering historical questions.
- Students will engage in a group discussion on the necessity for compromise in the Constitutional Convention on the issue of slavery.

NCSS Thematic Strands:

- **Power, Authority, and Governance**
 - a. Examine persistent issues involving the rights, roles, and status of the individual in relation to the general welfare (High School);
- **Civic Ideals and Practice**
 - a. Explain the origins and interpret the continuing influence of key ideals of the democratic republican form of government, such as individual human dignity, liberty, justice, equality, and the rule of law (High School).

NCSS Standards:

Era 3 Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s) Standard 3:

The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Historical Thinking Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

- a. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- b. Identify the central question(s) the historical narrative addresses.
- e. Draw upon data in historical maps.

Historical Thinking Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- b. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.
- d. Consider multiple perspectives.

Materials Needed:

- Slave petition to the Governor, Council, and House of Representatives of the Province of Massachusetts (May 25, 1744). [Page 435 of [The Founders' Constitution](#)]
- Notes from Pierce Butler at the Constitutional Convention [*digitalhistory* website noted in resources below]
- Letter to Benjamin Rush from James Madison (March 20, 1790). [Pages 477-478 of [James Madison: Writings](#)]
- Letter to Robert Morris from George Washington (April 12, 1786). [Pages 113-114 of [George Washington: A Collection](#)]
- Newspaper article by "John Humble" in Philadelphia's *Independent Gazetteer* (October 29, 1787). [Pages 224-226 in Part One of [The Debate on the Constitution](#)]
- Statement by General William Heath on Slavery (January 30, 1788). [Pages 915-916 in Part One of [The Debate on the Constitution](#)]
- "Publius," The Federalist LIV; James Madison in *New York Packet* (February 12, 1788). [Pages 196-201 in Part Two of [The Debate on the Constitution](#)]
- George Mason and James Madison Debate the Slave-Trade Clause (June 17, 1788). [Pages 706-708 in Part Two of [The Debate on the Constitution](#)]

Procedures:

1. Briefly review the events of the Constitutional Convention.
2. Have students **read** the letters, speeches, articles, and petition closely **and interpret** the documents using the key questions for interpreting historical documents and placing them in historical context.
3. Discuss as a whole group the context and meaning(s) of the documents with special attention to speculation as to why there seems to be little said or written by Washington and Madison about the issue of slavery during the Constitutional Convention.
4. Divide the class into 6-8 groups, assigning roles to individuals within each group, i.e., individual students have particular tasks, duties, or responsibilities ensuring full participation within the group as they move towards their goal(s). One-half of the groups will use the information provided to formulate an interpretation or explanation of why the institution of slavery came to be accepted as part of the Constitution. The other half of the groups will formulate an explanation of the necessity for compromise in the Constitutional Convention on the issue of slavery.
5. Have each group present their findings to the entire class, using posters, speeches, panel discussions, or multimedia presentations. Encouraging creativity in presentation of findings will stimulate the focus on perspectives in interpreting historical documents.

Assessment:

- Student note-taking and questions about assigned text/document readings.
- Small-group presentations – use a rubric or checklist to assess both content and format.

Extensions/Enrichments:

Students can research and develop position papers and/or debate the issue of slavery using the positions of the founders discovered during this project.

Students can examine the status of slavery and the slave trade after 1815 and speculate on why slavery seemed to be strengthened in the southern states during this time period.

Students can compare the experience during the 18th and 19th centuries of the slave trade and the institution of slavery in the United States with other nations of the world.

Resources:**Books**

- Allen, W. B. (ed.). George Washington: A Collection. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988.
- Bailyn, Bernard (ed.). The Debate on the Constitution. New York, NY: Library of America, 1993.
- Kurland, Philip B., and Lerner, Ralph (eds.). The Founders' Constitution [Volume 1: Ch. 14, No. 9]. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987.
- Rakove, Jack (ed.). James Madison, Writings. New York, NY: Library of America, 1999.

Websites

- How to work with primary and secondary documents in the study of history:
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/psources/analyze.html>
- Resources for original source documents:
<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/P/tj3/writings/slavery.htm>
- Resources for information on slavery in the colonies, Constitutional Convention and the early republic:
<http://www.slaveryinamerica.org>
http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/documents/documents_p2.cfm?doc=309
<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/>
- The following websites can only be accessed with a subscription by the school/teacher:
<http://caho.columbia.edu/ps/10199.html>
<http://caho.columbia.edu/ps/tmid1281.html>