

The First Slaves

One of the problems with telling the history of slavery from the standpoint of the victors is that the stories often paint a benign picture of the “peculiar institution” of slavery. While most of our students are quick to condemn such an interpretation, very few know much about the way enslaved African Americans felt about bondage. Likewise, while most of our students know something about resistance to enslavement, they know little about the full extent of such resistance or the actual involvement in and commitment to resistance by the enslaved. They often know about the voices and actions of famous white abolitionists—John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe—and a few important black abolitionists—Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman—but they are largely unfamiliar with the voices of ordinary African Americans—enslaved or free.

The documents in this chapter provide ample evidence that many of the ordinary men, women, and children who were enslaved drew upon vast resources of conviction, courage, and cunning to plan their escape, stage revolts, file petitions with colonial governors, and plead with the men in power to grant them their freedom. Most of the enslaved were neither passive nor pleased with their enslavement, neither cheerful about nor complacent with their living and working conditions. And when they did love their masters and the families they served, their affection was tinged with mistrust, uncertainty, and fear.

Document-Based Questions

THREE DOCUMENTS ON SLAVE REVOLTS

1. White men who discovered plans for rebellion wrote two of these documents, and an enslaved African American wrote the third document. Although they are written from different perspectives, enough similarities exist to provide information about the goals and grievances that motivated such

plans. What are they? Do the white authors appear to have any understanding of these grievances? How? Why, or why not?

2. What role does religion play in these documents? What does this tell you about the roles of religion in Euro-American colonial societies? In slave societies? How do you think the roles of religion in both societies were similar and dissimilar?
3. How do the authors of the first two documents describe the enslaved African Americans involved in the planned revolts? Do the contents of the third documents support these descriptions? How and why?

FOUR PETITIONS AGAINST SLAVERY

1. What similarities do these four petitions share in terms of their grievances, goals, and actual requests? How are they dissimilar?
2. Which of these petitions do you find most persuasive? How and why? Least persuasive? How and why?
3. What do these petitions tell you about their enslaved authors? About their conditions of servitude? About their family relationships?
4. How is the fourth petition, which was written after the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the beginning of the Revolutionary War, different from the other three in terms of its tone, goals, and grievances?

BENJAMIN BANNEKER'S LETTER

1. What are Benjamin Banneker's goals for writing this letter? What are the particular strengths of Banneker's letter to Jefferson? What are its weaknesses?
2. How do you think Jefferson responded to this letter? Why?
3. To what was Banneker referring when he wrote that at one time, Jefferson "publicly held forth" the "injustice of a State of Slavery"? (p. 60) Do you think Jefferson truly believed that "all men are created equal"? Why, or why not?

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 2, “The First Slaves”

After reading Chapter 2 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are four possible main points.

1. Enslaved African Americans persistently and courageously resisted slavery from the time it was institutionalized into colonial laws until it was abolished.
2. Enslaved African Americans clearly articulated their grievances; they were particularly eloquent in their arguments that slavery was antithetical to the goals of a “free and Christian people.”
3. The fear of rebellion by the enslaved shaped the lives of white Americans in all the colonies.
4. In their petitions for freedom, ordinary enslaved African Americans were respectful and deferential to the “men of great Note and Influence” who controlled the political, economic, and social system of colonial America.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 2, “The First Slaves,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 2, “Drawing the Color Line”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 2, “Drawing the Color Line.” Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

5. Within forty years after Africans arrived in British North America, slavery had become a legal, socially accepted institution.
6. Slavery was not simply a regional problem confined to the southern colonies; rather, it was a national problem that shaped the lives of all who lived in North America.
7. Most whites and black who shared common problems, common work, and common enemies treated each other as equals.
8. Despite the efforts of the slave system to destroy families, family ties and

hopes for reunification remained strong within the communities of enslaved African Americans.

9. The two greatest fears the colonial white establishment faced were the fear of black rebellion and the fear that discontented blacks and whites might unite to destroy the existing political, economic, and social order.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 2, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. As slavery became more intimately embedded in American society, most southern colonies passed laws prohibiting anyone from teaching enslaved African Americans to read and write. How, then, can we account for such articulate and eloquent written pleas for freedom from the enslaved?
2. A contemporary political debate revolves around the issue of reparations for slavery. What are reparations? What specific arguments could be extracted from these documents to support reparations? What are the current arguments for and against reparations?
3. In colonial America, deterrence was believed to be the best way to prevent the colonists from committing crimes. What is deterrence? What methods of deterring the enslaved from rebelling are discussed in these documents? Which do you believe were most successful and why? Least successful?
4. Until the early 1960s, most history textbooks described slavery at its worst as a benign institution and at its best as a socially acceptable way to “civilize” an “uncivilized” race and to keep blacks happy and productive. What evidence to the contrary do you find in these documents? Why do you believe the horrors of slavery were not exposed or discussed in our schools prior to the 1960s? What changed in the 1960s?
5. What specific types of resistance by the enslaved are described in these documents? What other types of resistance do you know about? What others would you like to learn about?

6. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in “Main Points in *Voices*”?
7. Several of these documents focus on the fact that many of the enslaved African Americans were “freeborn Pepel” (p. 56) and they were “unjustly dragged” (p. 57) from freedom into servitude. Is this an effective argument for emancipation? How do you think slave owners were able to counter these arguments? Do you think that arguments for freedom for those born in Africa changed after 1808 when the slave trade was prohibited and the vast majority of the enslaved were no longer freeborn, but rather, born into slavery? How and why?
8. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 2 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

9. Why do you think slavery is so often referred to as the “peculiar institution”?
10. What is the “color line”? How does Howard Zinn describe the way this color line was drawn in early America? Do you think the drawing of this line was intentional or unintentional?
11. What “clues” are provided in the documents of Chapter 2 in *Voices* and the narration in *A People's History* to the question Howard Zinn asks, “Is it possible for whites and blacks to live together without hatred” (p. 23, *People's History*)? Do you think living together was possible in colonial America? How and why? In contemporary America? How and why?
12. What new information did you acquire about African societies in this chapter? How does this new information shape your understanding of slavery and the way it developed in North and South America?
13. How does Howard Zinn describe the differences between slavery as it

existed in Africa versus its existence in America? Do you believe that these differences are significant? How and why?

14. How much did you know about resistance and rebellion of enslaved African Americans before reading these two chapters? Why do you think these “unimportant” voices are usually missing from our textbooks?
15. Despite the courageous efforts of thousands of the enslaved who resisted, rebelled, and tried to overthrow slavery, the “peculiar institution” thrived for over 240 years. What factors do you think were most responsible for its longevity? What factors do you think motivated the enslaved to resist, despite the terrible consequences of getting caught?
16. What are some specific examples from both chapters that illustrate the “complex web of historical threads” used to “ensnare blacks for slavery in America” (p. 38)?
17. Throughout the chapters, evidence exists of various divide-and-conquer strategies that whites used to create disunity among enslaved African Americans. Why was this so important to the empowered? Provide some examples of these divide-and-conquer strategies. What are some contemporary efforts of those in power to divide-and-conquer certain groups of Americans? How are their purposes for using these strategies similar to and dissimilar from those of those in positions of power in colonial America?
18. In *A People's History*, Howard Zinn indicates that Africans became victims of the largest forced migration in world history, not because they were uncivilized or weak, but because their white adversaries were so strong. What evidence of this white strength do you find reinforced in the documents in Chapter 2 of *Voices*?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. Some of the voices of the enslaved you read were written by or about those who were enslaved in the northern colonies. However, we are often led to believe that slavery was restricted to the southern colonies. What evidence can you find in the reading to indicate that slavery was an issue for all the colonies, not just those in the south? Why do you think the belief that slavery and all its problems was confined to the southern colonies and later to the southern states continues to have credence in contemporary society?
2. Learn more about family relationships under the system of slavery. What do you believe are the short- and long-term repercussions of the deliberate steps that were taken to destroy the family structure of enslaved African Americans?
3. In 2002, a lawsuit was filed in the United States District Court in New York that claimed descendants of the enslaved had the right to seek reparations because such companies as the Lehman Brothers brokerage firm, Aetna Insurance, and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco made money off slavery. Learn as much about this case as possible—about the arguments made in court for and against reparations and the most recent disposition of the case. Compare the goals of this case for reparations with other attempts to gain reparations. Which do you feel are most viable, and why?
4. Peter Bestes' Petition (p. 55) mentions support for the return to Africa movement. What was this movement? Who supported it and why? Was it successful? How and why?
5. Beginning in the 1990s, many African Americans demanded that the federal government apologize for its support of and involvement in the system of slavery. Learn more about the arguments for and against such an action. What is your position? Do you feel an apology could "right the wrongs" of slavery? How and why?
6. During the New Deal, employees of the Federal Writers' Project conducted over 2,000 interviews with those who had been enslaved prior to and during the Civil War. Read a summary of these slave narratives and search through some of the actual narratives at this site: www.newdeal.feri.org/asn/. What questions the interviewers asked were of most interest to you? What additional questions might you have asked if you had been an interviewer? Which of these narratives added to your understanding of slavery? How and

why? What are some of the difficulties researchers face when accessing these stories under the conditions they were told between 1936–1938?

7. Learn more about Benjamin Banneker. What was his background? What were some of his greatest accomplishments? Why do you think he is he not mentioned in most of our textbooks?
8. Learn more about the original religions of the Africans. Since few, if any, were Christians prior to being forcibly kidnapped and taken to America, how and why did Christianity come to play such a prominent role in the lives of the enslaved African Americans? Why do you think that many African Americans began to convert to Islam beginning in the 1930s? What is the role of Islam within the African American population today?
9. Using a search engine of choice, find a web site that includes a variety of narratives by enslaved African Americans. What new information did you get about slavery from this web site? How does this new information complement what you learned from the documents in Chapter 2 in *Voices*?
10. Watch any feature-length movie or television program that deals with the topics discussed in Chapter 2 in both *Voices* and *A People's History*. Some possibilities include *Roots*, *Amistad*, and *Beloved*. How did the movie(s) reinforce or refute the voices that you learned about in these chapters? What parts of the movie do you feel to be historically accurate? Inaccurate?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Some historians have argued that you cannot study the civil-rights movement without learning about the 240 years that slavery was a legal and socially acceptable institution. Do you agree or disagree with this argument? Be sure to support your answer with examples from your reading.
2. Relying upon what you know about Thomas Jefferson's beliefs and practices in regard to slavery, compose a response that Jefferson might have written to Benjamin Banneker's letter.
3. Drawing upon the voices of enslaved African Americans and their masters found in both chapters, explain the role of fear in both white and slave societies. What do you think to be the short- and long-term repercussions of growing up in a society based on fear?

4. Describe several divide-and-conquer strategies that the men with power in colonial America used to maintain the status quo. Which do you think were most successful and why? Least successful?
5. How does the information in *Voices* (and in *A People's History*, if students are reading both) support any or all of the themes we discussed in commenting on *Voices*?
6. How did the stories of resistance add to your understanding of slavery in early America? Do you believe that these stories are relevant to your life today? Why, or why not? How?
7. What voices of resistance in chapters 2 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
8. Howard Zinn poses an important question in this chapter: "Is it possible for whites and blacks to live together without hatred" (*People's History*, p. 23)? Using information from your reading, from other relevant sources, and from your own experience, write an essay that attempts to answer this question.
9. Howard Zinn refers to the "complex web of historical threads to ensnare blacks for slavery in America (*A People's History*, p. 38)." What were some of these historical threads?

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Stage a debate about the contentious political issue of whether or not the United States government should officially apologize for the institution of slavery. Be sure that each side draws upon historical and contemporary arguments, as well as on the research conducted by President Bill Clinton's commission on racial relations in regard to the contemporary problems of race in American society. If time permits, have students research the United Kingdom's Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to formally apologize to the Irish for the potato famine and ways in which the United States might learn lessons from Blair's action.
2. Prepare students to conduct a mock trial in the Supreme Court based on lower court records and findings to date of the 2002 reparations lawsuit

filed in the United States District Court in New York against the Lehman Brothers brokerage firm, Aetna Insurance, and R.J. Reynolds. Students will have to draw upon the appellate court decisions to imagine how the Supreme Court would decide in this case.

3. Have students read a chapter in a traditional book for elementary students about slavery. Then ask them to work in groups to write a new chapter, adding information they have acquired from the voices of the enslaved African Americans and from Howard Zinn's narrative. The chapters should include relevant photographs, artwork, and maps. After the chapters are completed, have groups compare and contrast their chapters. Classmates should select one group's chapter for presentation to an elementary classroom.
4. Divide the class into several groups of students, each of which will work on a video collage of images about slavery. Students should find one-to-three-minute excerpts from various movies and documentaries about slavery and put them together into a maximum ten-minute computer-based presentation. Presentations can be PowerPoint or video. Each presentation must have a theme that links together all the images and that is prominently displayed on the opening slide. On the due date, groups will go to the computer lab, where each group will display and explain its video collage to classmates. Concluding discussion should include the ways in which the themes and content of the video collages compare and contrast.
5. Invite a number of historical characters to a tea party for a discussion that you imagine might have taken place in 1804. When making the list of whom to invite, be sure to include at least one prominent American policymaker, a slave trader, a slave owner, an abolitionist, a freed African American, and a journalist. During the course of the tea party, the participants will discuss the possible abolition of the slave trade. As the conversation becomes more heated, someone invites the slave who is serving tea for his opinion.