

Teaching Slavery with Primary Source Documents

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A More Perfect Union

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Slavery is a difficult topic to adequately present within the time constraints of a typical survey course. Within a semester's time period, the curriculum calls for the coverage of all the important events from 1763 to 1877. Given the scope of the curriculum, and the narrow time frame, the presentation may be academic in nature, presented as an economic, or political argument. Often missing is the human component. The struggles, triumphs, courage, and suffering of slaves receive minimal attention. Standard textbooks do little to remedy the situation. Under these circumstances, students may approach the topic with some degree of apathy. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher to develop supplemental materials that will allow students to develop an understanding through connections to the human experience. In this regard, the works of Frederick Douglass, Theodore Weld, and Harriet Jacobs, combine to offer a valuable classroom resource. Excerpts used in combination with traditional methods of instruction will offer students a rich, and comprehensive look into the lives of American slaves.

The autobiographies of both Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass provide the reader with a detailed, and nuanced look into the lives of slaves. Both introduce a number of the different roles that slaves may undertake during their lives. Both provide human examples of the daily struggles, suffering, and triumphs of people under slavery. Additionally, Theodore Weld's book, American Slavery As it Is, provides numerous eyewitness testimonials that support and expand on the information in Douglass and Jacobs books. In combination, these works provide the necessary context to supplement traditional units on slavery.

Their applications in the classroom as a supplement for a unit on slavery are endless. Perhaps the most obvious is the assignment of nightly excerpts in combination with direct instruction in the classroom. All three works are readily available in full text versions on line. All three works are

complementary of each other. Careful selection of excerpts regarding topics such as childhood, family, working and living conditions, discipline, religion, and resistance, will add a rich level of detail.

To begin with, the experiences of slaves varied greatly with time and circumstance. Even within the life of a single slave, their roles changed dramatically throughout their lives. Students may find it surprising to learn that slave children were often spared the worst hardships of slavery. Harriet Jacobs recalls she never knew she was a slave until the age of six. Her father both a slave, and carpenter, had a degree of independence. He had arranged to pay his owner a sum of two hundred dollars a year in exchange for the ability to manage his own affairs. As a child, Jacobs lived in a comfortable home with her parents, and her brother. (Jacobs, 5) Frederick Douglass confirms the shelter of childhood in his narrative. Before he was old enough to work in the fields, he remembers having a great deal of leisure time. His duties were limited to light yard work, and errands. He even played with the masters son, and developed a strong connection to him as a child. (Douglass, 16)

Once children became old enough to work, they were assigned a new role. For many, this meant assignment to plantation. The life of a field slave was harsh. The monthly allowance of food typically consisted of “eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal.” (Douglass, 6) Their clothing for the year consisted of “two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, ... one jacket, one pair of trousers for the winter, ... one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes.” (Douglass, 6) Undergarments must be procured by themselves. (Weld, 13) The shoes were of such poor quality that they usually began to fall apart in weeks. It was not uncommon to see the shoes of a slave held together with wire. Additionally, the clothes were of the same poor quality. In order to preserve their clothes, male slaves typically worked bare to the waist, covered simply with a cloth. Women worked in their petticoats. Many small children went through their day virtually naked. (Weld, 19) Lack of

adequate food and clothing was only the start of their troubles. Life in the fields was among the most difficult roles a slave could undertake.

Assignment to the fields meant a monotonous, arduous, and uncomfortable existence. The slaves were forced to work in the fields all day, as long as it was light out. Theodore Welds work offers a bit more detail. One eyewitness reported that while a few of the strongest may finish there work before sunset, most worked until at least eight o'clock at night. Work was conducted under the supervision of an overseer, typically armed with both whip and gun. If they didn't finish their jobs, they were whipped. (Weld, 12) Even once the work day was done, and they were finally allowed to rest, their troubles were not over.

The houses of slaves were spartan in nature. They had no stoves, and perhaps only rudimentary fireplaces. Smoke was let out by removing boards in the roof. Fires burned even in hot weather in an attempt to ward off mosquitoes. (Weld, 19) Houses were typically around twelve feet wide by about twelve long, with a dirt floor. They usually consisted of a single room in which both genders, whether related or unrelated, were forced to live. (Weld, 43) A small blanket was provided to serve a dual purpose. The blanket was used both as a bed, and an additional garment for warmth, if their jackets proved inadequate. (Weld, 42) In these meager surroundings, slaves received little respite from the ordeals of the fields. Rested or not, the whole cycle would repeat itself the next day.

Assignment to the fields was not a foregone conclusion. Slaves assume a variety of roles. Frederick Douglass reports many activities such as “shoemaking, mending, blacksmithing, cartwrighting, coopering, weaving, and grain grinding,” were typical on larger plantations. (Douglass, 7) Some slaves were lucky enough to escape manual labor altogether. Both Jacobs, and Douglass, were

initially assigned as house slaves. Jacobs, from ages six to twelve, worked in the household of her mistress. She was spared grueling or undue tasks. She was treated kindly in comparison to many slaves. (Jacobs, 8) Douglass' life mirrors Jacobs in many ways. Frederick Douglass, once of working age, was sent to live in Baltimore. As a house slave in the city, he fared better than his agricultural counterparts. As a city slave, Douglass' work was light in comparison, and he seldom faced harsh discipline. Severe treatment of slaves in the city often brought condemnation and embarrassment to the slave owner. His new mistress was kind to him at first. She even began to teach him how to read. (Douglass, 20) Although less than ideal, both slaves in retrospect were appreciative of their moderate work conditions.

Selected excerpts from the auto-biographies provide insight into the additional hardships that women faced. At the age of fifteen, Jacobs reports that her master, Dr. Flint, began to make sexual advances towards her. (Jacobs, 28) For many slave girls, repeated whippings were used to make them comply. (Weld, 15) Jacobs was lucky in this regard. Her master opted for less violent means. He attempted to coerce Harriet Jacobs by both promises of reward, and punishment. Harriett refused to comply. She hoped that if she became pregnant with the child of a free black man, her master would leave her alone. The results backfired. Following the birth of her child, Dr. Flint tried to use the baby to coerce Harriet. If she continued to refuse his sexual advances, he warned, her child would be sold. Slave law at that time made this possible. The condition of the child followed condition of the mother. Despite being born to a free man, Jacob's baby was a slave, the same as Jacobs. (Jacobs, 76) .

Jacobs' experience was not atypical. Relations between slaves and their masters were more common than is popularly thought. In fact, Jacobs' master, Dr. Flint, had already fathered eleven slaves. (Jacobs, 32) Frederick Douglass in his narrative confirms this practice. He was the son of his

master. (Douglass, 2) Liaisons between slave and masters brought additional hardships for slaves. The wife of the plantation owner often responded harshly. This situation often resulted in the sale or transfer of the child to a different plantation. (Douglass, 3) The situation was much more severe to a mulatto child born to a free white woman. In this instance, the child was often smothered. (Jacobs, 52) Jacobs lived in constant fear of her children being sold. Dr. Flint used this to his advantage. He offered Jacobs the freedom of her children, a house of her own, and light labor such as sewing, if she would consent to his advances. Jacobs declined and was sent to work at a plantation owned by a relative of her master. (Jacobs', 85) In doing so, her worst fears came true, she became separated from her children.

Separation of families was a common condition of slave-hood. Douglass, recalls that this practice was used to break the bonds of family. Douglass was in fact, taken from his mother while still a babe in arms. His only memories of his mother were the few times she would sneak away from her plantation at night to visit him for a few short hours. When she died, he remembered receiving the information as one would in hearing of the death of a stranger. (Douglass, 2) Jacobs life parodies Douglass's mother. Once assigned to the plantation of Dr. Flint's son, she would steal away at night to visit her infant daughter, and son. The round trip approximately twelve miles. The trip had to be accomplished within one night in order to return to the plantation in time to work the next day. (Jacobs, 89)

Both Douglass, and Jacob's were assigned to plantations in their young adulthood. Their divergent experiences illustrate the wide range of roles slaves had within the plantation system. Jacobs recalls that she was the for the most part spared the hardships of slavery. She was never whipped, branded, or chained up. She was never cruelly overworked, or forced to toil in the fields. (Jacobs, 115) Harriet was a skilled seamstress. Her skills translated into work as a house slave. (Jacobs, 115) For

Douglass, his conditions became far worse. In 1832, following several deaths in his masters family, and subsequent transfers of ownership, Douglas was sent to live and work on the plantation of Master Thomas Auld. (Douglass, 30) At this plantation, Douglas was not given enough to eat, and was reduced to stealing and begging to supplement his meager fare. (Douglass, 31) His new master found Douglass to be a poor field slave. He was sent to a slave breaker named Mr. Covey.

On Covey's farm, Douglass was for the first time, personally exposed to the harsh discipline and punishment that was at the foundation of the slave system. Douglass remembers that he was whipped weekly. He recalls that he was so battered by the work and beatings, that his weekly day off was spent in a "stupor". (Douglass, 38) Harriet Jacobs, despite being spared the whip, was surrounded by the same brutality. Jacobs' recalls a runaway slave was put into a cotton gin after being whipped for the same number of days he had been away. He died and his body was left to be partly devoured by vermin. (Jacobs, 49) The prevalent reasoning for such cruelty was as much to discourage the other slaves, as it was to punish the person for their alleged crime. If the desired effects from the torture were not attained, the torture would be repeated on the hapless victim, hourly if necessary. (Weld 20)

An unexpected witness to the widespread nature of the cruelty of slavery are the slave masters themselves. Theodore Weld includes in his work, a collection of advertisements for runaway slaves. Student analysis of these descriptions will provide more than ample evidence of the pervasiveness of cruel conditions. Ads from both Missouri, Georgia, and Alabama calls for the return of runaway slaves who may be identified by ears that had been bitten off. Owners ads from Alabama, Tennessee, and Virginia identified their slave by missing fingers and toes. A Louisiana ad identified a slave named John, by knife scars on his face and throat. The descriptions of cruelty go on and on. Some are missing an eye, many are covered with scars on their backs, others had broken arms or legs, some are missing

teeth. (Weld, 80)

In between the short bursts of brutality and the hours of monotonous labor, slavery had the ability to take on the guise of normal life. Small breaks in the routine included church services. (Jacobs, 68) The role of religion was important in a slaves life. It provided an environment in which slaves, perhaps for the first time in their lives were treated as human beings by whites. Harriet Jacobs recalled that one Episcopal clergyman and his wife taught them reading and writing. His sermons were simple, adapted to the worldview of the slaves. The slaves, admittedly loved the couple. The words that he preached were powerful ones. He said “God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skin. “(Jacobs, 72) Despite this, Jacobs recalls the hypocrisy of slavery was pervasive even in church.

Following the Nat Turner Revolt, the reverend preached obedience and subservience. He warned “ Although your master may not find you out, God sees you and will punish you. You must forsake your sinful ways and be faithful servants.” (Jacobs, 68). In another instance, the role of leader of a religious class for slaves was given to the town constable. On one hand he was willing to act as a Christian minister, on the other hand, he freely bought and sold slaves, and was in charge of administering corporal punishment outside the jail. (Jacob, 70) Even within the confines of religion, slavery was ever present.

Given the conditions described above, many students may question why escape was not more prevalent. In this regard, the primary sources may provide an answer. Harriet Jacobs reports that from a young age, slaves are told of the deplorable conditions of runaways in the North. They are described as penniless, poorly treated, and without hope. (Jacobs, 43) If escape is attempted, the escapee would have to contend with patrols who are ordered to whip any slave caught without a pass on sight.

(Weld, 14) Many plantations were also equipped with bloodhounds that were renown for ripping slaves apart with their teeth. (Jacobs, 47)

Successful evading patrols was only the first hurdle. On the day of an escape, every ship heading north was searched and the Fugitive Slave Law was read to those aboard, warning against assisting slaves in any way. Additionally, advertisements were placed in the paper, describing the slave, and offering a reward for their return. (Jacobs 97) If caught, the punishments were considerable. Captured escapees were held in jail and whipped publicly. (Weld, 20) Ironically, students may be surprised to find out, that one of the biggest obstacles to escape was a slaves own family. When Harriet Jacobs began to contemplate escape, her grandmother attempted to discourage her. She warned Harriet to “Stand by your children, and suffer with them till death” because “if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment.” (Jacobs, 91) For many slaves, it is a testimony to their courage to have remained in order to protect their families.

Despite the obstacles, both Douglass and Jacob escaped slavery. For Jacobs, her escape was attempted in an effort to gain the freedom of her children. She believed that if she left, her owner would allow her children to be sold. She hoped her husband, a free black man would be able to secure their freedom. (Jacobs, 115) For Douglass, his turning point came in anticipation of another beating by Mr. Covey. Douglass, pushed to extreme on Covey's farm, fought back. In an epic battle that Douglass describes as lasting for hours, the two men fought to a standstill. Douglass maintains that this was a turning point in his life. From that point forward, with no family to bind him, he vowed to be free. (Douglass 43)

Successful escapes were not often spontaneous or individual undertakings. Slaves relied on a

network of friends, family, and even stranger sympathetic to their cause. In her escape attempt, Jacobs received much assistance. She hid in the home of a nearby friend, and later in the home a friend of her grandmother. Ironically, her grandmother's friend was also the wife of a plantation owner. (Jacobs, 99) Finally, with the help of yet another slave, she was brought back to her grandmother's house and concealed in the eaves of a shed. She remained in hiding for seven years. (Jacobs, 116) In the end, passage was arranged for her on a ship to Philadelphia. (Jacobs, 159) Once in Philadelphia, the captain introduced her to a minister of the Bethel Church, who offered Harriet Jacobs shelter and food. (Jacobs 160) Once in the Ministers home, Harriet was contacted by members of the Anti-Slavery Society, and arrangements were made for her to continue north to New York, where she was reunited with her children. (Jacobs, 166)

For Douglass, his escape was significantly easier. To begin with, he had the advantage of escaping from Maryland, further north than Jacobs' location in North Carolina. Secondly, Douglass in the last years of slavery, was hired out to a ship builder. Once he had become skilled enough, he was allowed to hire himself out and run his own affairs in return for paying three dollars a week. (Douglass, 57) With a skill and money of his own, Douglass reports leaving slavery and gaining his freedom in New York without the "slightest interruption of any kind" (Douglass, 63) From New York, and with the assistance of abolitionists, he eventually made his way to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he was able to apply his trade as a ships caulker. (Douglass, 65)

In conclusion, the use of primary sources add the necessary complexity to develop a more in-depth understanding of a difficult topic. The lives of Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs offer a comprehensive look into every stage of a slaves life. They reflects a dynamic rather than static set of events. The lives of slaves were subject to great changes in condition and circumstance. They add

human interest as well as context to units on slavery. In combination with Theodore Weld's compilation of first hand testimony, that provide an indispensable resource.

Typically in my class, slavery is incorporated into a larger unit on the causes of the Civil War. The Causes of the Civil War Unit begins with direct instruction on the addition of new territories, and the compromises made over slavery. In a chronological fashion, we cover the significant events ranging from the Missouri Compromise, to the Compromise of 1850, through Bleeding Kansas, the Lincoln Douglas Debates, and culminate with the Election of 1860. During the course of the Unit, time is spent on the conditions of slaves, the abolitionists, and their works. While accurate, the unit is largely lacking the human component of slavery.

In the future, students will be assigned nightly excerpts from Weld, Douglass, or Jacobs in anticipation for the section on slavery. Each night will cover one of the following topics: childhood, family, working and living conditions, discipline, religion, and resistance. Students will be read selected excerpts and answer a corresponding question open response question. Additionally, students will be given in class, selected copies of the runaway slave advertisements included in the Weld book. They will be split into groups and asked to reach conclusions based on the advertisements on the experiences of slaves. Answers will vary, but may include conclusions based upon physical features, clothing, and education. Finally, as a capstone for the unit, students will be asked to create a fictional letter from either Douglass, or Jacobs to their grandchildren. It will include their greatest struggle, and triumph they endured during slavery based upon the readings. The results will, hopefully, be greater interest, and understanding of a complex topic that defies generalization.

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