

LESSON PLAN IX - Slavery and American Democracy in the Jacksonian Age

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Grade Levels: 10-12

Time Period: Two class periods of preparation work and then 1 full-class period lesson plan (75 minutes)



SUBJECT AREAS:

- History and Social Studies > U.S. > AP U.S. History
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Slavery
- History and Social Studies > Themes > U.S. Constitution

RHODE ISLAND GSE:

- HP 1-1; HP 1-2; HP 1-3; HP 2-1; HP 2-2; HP 2-3 2
- C&G 1-1; C&G 1-2; C&G 3-2

SKILLS:

- Critical analysis
- Critical thinking
- Discussion
- Evaluating arguments
- Historical analysis
- Interpretation
- Making inferences and drawing conclusions
- Online research
- Presenting ideas and information orally, graphically and in writing
- Using primary sources
- Writing skills

BACKGROUND:

This lesson is designed to help teachers work with their students on issues relating to slavery and the Constitution. Ideally this lesson should be used before teachers dive into Lesson Ten which focuses on antislavery and proslavery politics in Rhode Island in the 1830s.

In preparation, teachers should begin with the question of slavery in the making of the U.S. Constitution. Teachers should work through components of this [classic article](#) by historian Paul Finkelman. This should take an entire class period. Here are the key components that can be discussed in class. Four provisions dealt directly with slavery: Art. I, sec. 2, par. 3; Art. I, sec. 9, par. 1; Art. I, sec. 9, par. 4. Art. IV, sec. 2, par. 3. In the following class, teachers should cover material highlighted below and assign related pages in the textbook for homework.

In the years after the ratification of the Constitution slavery emerged as a potentially disruptive political issue, but not one that threatened the sanctity of the union. The federal consensus, the idea that slavery was the product of local, state law and that, therefore, not fully recognized by federal law, enabled sectional harmony to take hold. An informal pattern of balanced state admission had been established in the early 19th century: Ohio (free in 1803) and Louisiana (slave in 1812), Indiana (free in 1816) and Mississippi (slave in 1817). These arrangements

were tested with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 that doubled the size of the young nation. The representation of 3/5 of the slaves written into the Constitution gave southern states from 1792-1802 twelve congressmen they would not have had had slaves been entirely excluded from the basis of representation. The number went to 15 from 1802 to 1811, and then to 18 from 1811 to 1822.

In 1819-1820, the issue over the admittance of Missouri as a slave state led to an intense battle in the U.S. Congress. In February 1819, New York Congressman James Tallmadge introduced an amendment to the Missouri statehood bill that prohibited further introduction of slavery. Tallmadge's proposal marked the beginning of the controversy, which would not be settled until 1820 with the admittance of Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. Slavery was prohibited north of the 36°30' line. Students can read the bill [here](#). A key timeline can be found [here](#). A lot can be drawn from Jefferson's [famous letter](#) to John Holmes about the impact of the Missouri Compromise.

Though the Missouri Compromise is often used to demonstrate the end, temporarily, of sectional discord, tensions actually continued to simmer under the surface throughout the 1820s. A distinct, state-rights, proslavery theory of the Constitution was clearly on the rise in these years. Teachers should take time to examine the controversy over South Carolina's statutes governing African-American sailors in the U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine. These statutes were passed in response to the Denmark Vesey conspiracy, a slave uprising that was thwarted five months earlier in the capital city of Charleston. Whites uncovered evidence that Vesey, a free Black man, was at the heart of a plan for scores of enslaved persons to revolt and perhaps flee to the Black republic of Haiti. Thirty-five slaves were hanged and another thirty-one were transported out of the state. That same year free Black sailors entering the port of Charleston were apprehended upon arrival to prevent them from spreading revolutionary ideas to local slaves. At the end of the 1820s, the Black abolitionist David Walker published a fiery pamphlet in Boston attacking both racism and slavery. In his 1829, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, Walker also called for southern Blacks to rise up against their masters. Legislators in Georgia became so alarmed after reading the pamphlet that they enacted laws restricting black literacy, including a ban on the distribution of antislavery literature. Copies of Walker's *Appeal* had been found in Savannah's Black communities.

The South's reaction to Walker's pamphlet, along with William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* newspaper, helped to demonstrate to northerners that the growing Slave Power posed a threat to their way of life. Abolitionist activism led the South to eventually shut off the flow of antislavery mailings from the North and restrict discussions of slavery in Congress. Northern distaste for these unconstitutional measures led to a strengthening of northern resolve against the slave system in the South.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE LESSON:

1. In what ways was the sectional harmony created by the 1787 Constitution holding in the 1820s and 1830s? In what ways was it faltering?
2. How did proslavery and antislavery politicians understand the power and limits of the Constitution when it came to issues relating to slavery?

LESSON ACTIVITIES

Activity #1: The contours of the proslavery debate (½ the class - Group 1)

Students read and breakdown the [constitutional argument](#) of Charles Pinckney, one of the few framers still alive (read pp.1310-1316). What powers did the federal government possess (if any) to act against slavery according to Pinckney?

Activity #2: The contours of the Antislavery debate (½ the class - Group 2)

Students read and breakdown the position of Massachusetts Congressman Timothy Fuller relating to antislavery and the Constitution during the [debate](#) over Missouri's admittance to the Union (pp.1180-1182)

Activity #3: Students post highlights on the white board and discuss.

Activity #4: Students in Group 1 examine Garrison's [1833 Declaration of Sentiments](#) for the position of the American Anti-Slavery Society on slavery and the Constitution.

Activity #5: Students in Group 2 examine the [pamphlet](#) from the Third Annual National Black Convention in Philadelphia (1833).

EXTENDING THE LESSON: Presidential Election of 1836

Students should read a short [overview](#) of the Election of 1836 to learn about Democrat Martin Van Buren's victory over several Whig candidates in the field. Reflecting the political divide in the country, the presidential election of 1836 had five candidates for office. The election was readily won by Martin Van Buren, a Democrat, who had served as Andrew Jackson's vice president for the previous term. He carried states in both the North and South for a total of 170 Electoral College votes. The newly formed Whig Party offered multiple candidates for the office. In the North, William Henry Harrison carried seven states (Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Vermont) for a total of 73 Electoral votes. In the South, Whig candidate Hugh L. White carried only two states (Tennessee and Georgia) for a total of 26 Electoral votes. As historian William Shade has noted, the 1836 election is "essential to understanding the relationship between the development of the Democratic party and the set of issues in relation to slavery and race in antebellum American society."

By 1840 the anti-slavery movement in the United States would be sufficiently strong enough to offer its own candidate for president, the former slave owner turned abolitionist James Birney. Birney ran as the candidate on the Liberty Party ticket.

Students should analyze the portion of Van Buren's inaugural address excerpted below for an understanding of how the Democratic Party was going to

approach issues relating to slavery, politics and the Constitution right up until the start of the Civil War:

...

Certain danger was foretold from the extension of our territory, the multiplication of States, and the increase of population. Our system was supposed to be adapted only to boundaries comparatively narrow. These have been widened beyond conjecture; the members of our Confederacy are already doubled, and the numbers of our people are incredibly augmented. The alleged causes of danger have long surpassed anticipation, but none of the consequences have followed. The power and influence of the Republic have arisen to a height obvious to all mankind; respect for its authority was not more apparent at its ancient than it is at its present limits; new and inexhaustible sources of general prosperity have been opened ...

In justly balancing the powers of the Federal and State authorities difficulties nearly insurmountable arose at the outset and subsequent collisions were deemed inevitable. Amid these it was scarcely believed possible that a scheme of government so complex in construction could remain uninjured ...

The last, perhaps the greatest, of the prominent sources of discord and disaster supposed to lurk in our political condition was the institution of domestic slavery. Our forefathers were deeply impressed with the delicacy of this subject, and they treated it with a forbearance so evidently wise that in spite of every sinister foreboding it never until the present period disturbed the tranquility of our common country. Such a result is sufficient evidence of the justice and the patriotism of their course; it is evidence not to be mistaken that an adherence to it can prevent all embarrassment from this as well as from every other anticipated cause of difficulty or danger. Have not recent events made it obvious to the slightest reflection that the least deviation from this spirit of forbearance is injurious to every interest, that of humanity included? Amidst the violence of excited passions this generous and fraternal feeling has been sometimes disregarded; and standing as I now do before my countrymen, in this high place of honor and of trust, I can not refrain from anxiously invoking my fellow-citizens never to be deaf to its dictates. Perceiving before my election the deep interest in this subject was beginning to excite, I believed it a solemn duty fully to make

known my sentiments in regard to it, and now, when every motive for misrepresentation has passed away, I trust that they will be candidly weighed and understood. At least they will be my standard of conduct in the path before me. I then declared that if the desire of those of my countrymen who were favorable to my election was gratified "I must go into the Presidential chair the inflexible and uncompromising opponent of every attempt on the part of Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia against the wishes of the slaveholding States, and also with a determination equally decided to resist the slightest interference with it in the States where it exists."

I submitted also to my fellow-citizens, with fullness and frankness, the reasons which led me to this determination. The result authorizes me to believe that they have been approved and are confided in by a majority of the people of the United States, including those whom they most immediately affect. It now only remains to add that no bill conflicting with these views can ever receive my constitutional sanction. These opinions have been adopted in the firm belief that they are in accordance with the spirit that actuated the venerated fathers of the Republic, and that succeeding experience has proved them to be humane, patriotic, expedient, honorable, and just. If the agitation of this subject was intended to reach the stability of our institutions, enough has occurred to show that it has signally failed, and that in this as in every other instance the apprehensions of the timid and the hopes of the wicked for the destruction of our Government are again destined to be disappointed. Here and there, indeed, scenes of dangerous excitement have occurred, terrifying instances of local violence have been witnessed, and a reckless disregard of the consequences of their conduct has exposed individuals to popular indignation; but neither masses of the people nor sections of the country have been swerved from their devotion to the bond of union and the principles it has made sacred. It will be ever thus. Such attempts at dangerous agitation may periodically return, but with each the object will be better understood. That predominating affection for our political system which prevails throughout our territorial limits, that calm and enlightened judgment which ultimately governs our people as one vast body, will always be at hand to resist and control every effort, foreign or domestic, which aims or would lead to overthrow our institutions.

For myself, therefore, I desire to declare that the principle that will govern me in the high duty to which my country calls me is a strict adherence to the letter and spirit of the Constitution as it was designed by those who framed it. Looking back to it as a sacred instrument carefully and not easily framed; remembering that it was throughout a work of concession and compromise; viewing it as limited to national objects; regarding it as leaving to the people and the States all power not explicitly parted with, I shall endeavor to preserve, protect, and defend it by anxiously referring to its provision for direction in every action. .

{**Source:** Martin van Buren, Inaugural Address Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/201813>}