



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE: The Long Arm of Slavery	
AUTHOR: Christine Esposito	GRADE LEVEL & SUBJECT: US History through 1865 (6th grade)

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question(s) –Who benefited from slavery before and after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade?

2. Contextual Essay –

Slave trade. Slavery. Slaves. To many, these words lead people to conjure images of an agrarian economy, cotton fields, plantations, mansions, and the American South in the mid-19th century. Unfortunately, those images tell only a small part of the story. The real story behind the slave trade and slavery is much more complex. The images those words do not conjure are no less important to the story. A more industrial economy, textile mills, urban centers, docks, wheat fields, insurance offices, and sailors in New England and Britain must be included in the image before one can get an accurate picture of the long arm of slavery. To understand how and why Britain and New England also benefited from slavery after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, one must first understand how they benefited from the slave trade itself.

Helping students to understand that slavery encompassed far more than the Southern region of the United States is a vital part of leading them to a deeper and more accurate understanding of the history of their country. According to the Slave Voyages Database, more than 10,000 slave trading voyages originated in Great Britain. Almost half of those voyages began in the port city of Liverpool, making it the “most important slave trading port in the world by 1800.” (Morgan, 2000 p. 88) In the mid-17th century almost 19,000 Africans had been transported to Barbados by British ships. By the turn of the 18th century that total had surpassed 130,000. (Farrow, 2005 p.46) According to Morgan (2000), a visitor to Mount Vernon said that slavery took hold in North America due to “the greed of the Liverpool merchants who before the [American] Revolution peopled this County with Blacks.” (p. 36) Slavery and the slave trade have tied Britain and their American colonies together almost since their inception.

It would be a mistake, however, to solely blame Britain for the evolution of slavery and the slave trade in the colonies. A draft version of the Declaration of Independence included a paragraph that laid the blame for slavery at King George’s feet.

He [King George] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the personal of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation hither.

Though it may have made colonists feel better to lay the blame on Britain, it would be disingenuous to do so. One of the earliest slave trading voyages traveled from Boston and delivered its cargo to Barbados in 1645. (Farrow, 2005 p.47) More than 1,600 slave trading voyages originated in the United States. Despite its small size, it was from Rhode Island that the largest number of slave trading voyages in the United States began. It is believed that ships from Rhode Island transported more than 100,000 Africans to the Americas. (Farrow, 2005 p.xxviii) Directly engaging in the slave trade was not the only way to profit from slavery. Historian Bernard Bailyn stated, "Only a few new England merchants actually engaged in the slave trade, but all of them profited by it, lived off it." (quoted in Farrow, 2005 p.49) One cannot overlook the economic impact of building and insuring ships, making sails, and hiring captains and crew. There was money to be made from the slave trade without being an owner or captain of a slave trading ship. One often-overlooked aspect of the economic impact is the money made by feeding the slaves in West Indies. (Farrow, 2005 p.xxvi)

The slave trade was abolished in Britain in 1807 and in the United States in 1808. A surface understanding of the issue might assume that Britain and New England would have stopped profiting from slavery, yet that is not the case. Britain, and specifically Liverpool, remains an important port despite the abolition of the legal slave trade. The merchants and ship owners of Liverpool turn to importing slave-grown commodities in the wake of the loss of the slave trade. In the early 19th century, sugar imports run about 46,000 tons. By the mid-19th century tobacco imports in Liverpool are over 6,000,000 pounds, which was approximately a quarter of the total tobacco imports in Britain. (Sherwood, 2007 p.30-31)

Liverpool became a major port for the importation of cotton into Britain. Much of the cotton landing in Liverpool was sent to Lancashire, specifically, Manchester, for processing. (Sherwood p. 46). Liverpool was importing close to 90 per cent of the total cotton imported in Britain in 1830. Two hundred million pounds of cotton was imported by Liverpool in 1838, 96 per cent of the British total. (Sherwood, 2007 p.31) By 1861, 452,000 people were directly employed by the cotton industry in Britain. (Mitchell 1988) In addition to importing cotton, Liverpool played a large part in exporting cotton textiles. In 1851, "£18.2 million worth of these textiles [cotton] were sent to the slave-worked areas in the Southern United States." (Sherwood, 2007 p.31)

On December 20, 1860, South Carolina officially seceded from the United States of America. Six states would soon follow in the new year. All of these states were located in the Deep South. Unbeknownst to most, they had a friendly ally in the mayor of New York City, who stated:

With our aggrieved brethren of the Slave States, we have friendly relations and a common sympathy. As a free city, [New York] would have the whole and united

supported of the Southern States, as well as all other States to whose interests and rights under the constitution has always been true. (Farrow p. 3)

According to Farrow (2005, p. 4), the idea never gained much traction. Why, when slavery had been abolished in New York in 1827, would the mayor take this stance? Port cities in the North were built on the slave trade. Profits built on the backs of slaves were everywhere you looked in New England. The Industrial Revolution took hold and textile mills needed cotton. In the 22 years between 1835 and 1857, the number of mills in Lowell, MA more than doubled from 22 to 52. Consider the number of people who were benefiting – directly or indirectly – from slave-grown cotton: insurance brokers, merchants, farmers, fishermen, ship builders, blacksmiths, sail-makers. The North had plenty to lose at the dawn of the Civil War, though that is not generally understood to be the case. The ties between New England industrialists and Southern plantation owners caused Ralph Waldo Emerson to comment, “Cotton threads holds the union together...Patriotism for holidays and summer evenings with music and rockets, but cotton thread is the Union.” (quoted in Farrow, 2005 p.37)

On the surface, it would seem as though the South would have the most to lose with the abolition of the slave trade. After all, their economy and profits are most directly tied to slavery. The links found here are visible, whereas in the North and Britain, the links are harder to see, though no less strong. Yet, the South did not have to fill an immediate and overwhelming void as those slave traders in the North and Britain had. In fact, Southern states near the Chesapeake found that they would be able to capitalize on the end of the international slave trade. Planters in Virginia begin to sell their slaves to the cotton-growing states of the Deep South. (Troutman 1998) With the invention of the cotton gin, cotton becomes much more profitable than it had been and the need for slaves exploded. With the abolition of the international slave trade, the domestic slave trade is given a presumably unintended boost.

The end of the slave trade did not mean the end of slavery. Britain, New England and the South continued to prosper on the backs of the enslaved, though only one region is routinely denigrated for it. Students should be encouraged to delve into this complicated, murky subject. This topic, perhaps more than any other, would allow students to see that history is full of people, not merely heroes and villains.

3. **Annotated Bibliography -**

Farrow, A., Lang, J. and Frank, J. (2005). *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged and Profited from Slavery*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books. Journalists from *The Hartford Courant* weave a complex portrait of the North's ties to slavery. This is an eye-opening account of slavery's influence in the North, which is often ignored by most textbooks. Farrow et al do a great job connecting the slave trade and slavery to places and people with whom it is not usually associated. New York City suggested seceding in support of South Carolina, Rhode Island and its people made a fortune in the slave trade, a New York City slave revolt in the 18th century, John Winthrop's connections to slavery in the Caribbean and a Connecticut company's ties to the ivory trade in Africa all serve to remind teacher and student alike that no one's hands were clean as long as slavery was accepted in a country founded on democratic principles.

Lindsay, L.A. (2007). *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc. This book serves as an excellent starting point for understanding the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Lindsay lays the foundation for a greater study of the slave trade, including looking at the slave trade in Africa and the mechanics of the slave trade itself.

Morgan, K. (2000). *Slavery, Atlantic Trade and the British Economy, 1660-1800*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. This book serves as more of an economic history than the other books. It deals specifically with the growth of port cities, including Liverpool, and their dependence on the slave trade prior to 1800. This sets the stage for what happens as a result of the abolition of the slave trade and Liverpool's transition from major slave trading port to a major port for the cotton trade. When teaching slavery and its impact, teachers often overlook Britain's role in the slave trade during colonial America. This vital role sets the groundwork for how both countries interacted once the American Revolution was over. When teaching history to young students, we often overlook economic history. Morgan synthesizes recent scholarship on the subject and makes it easier for add this vital missing piece of the puzzle.

Mitchell, B. R. (1988). *British Historical Statistics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. A valuable tool for locating specific and detailed information on the cotton industry. This book contains a wide variety of historical data, including the amount of cotton imports and exports, the number of people employed by the cotton industry as well as the price of cotton. This book allows students and teachers to take a "numbers" approach to history, which may also serve to make history more accessible to a wider variety of students.

Sherwood, M. (2007). *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade Since 1807*. London, UK: I. B. Tauris & Co.

Much like *Complicity*, this book delves into the continuing influence of slavery on Britain after the abolition of the slave trade. It details Britain's often-ineffective attempts to thwart the illegal slave trade. Sherwood looks first at the rise of Liverpool and Manchester as purveyors of the slave trade. Once the slave trade has been outlawed, she then turns towards the importance of cotton in the continued development and profitability of both cities. The book also touches on the underground attempts to help the Confederacy during the Civil War.

Troutman, P. (1998). *Mapping Virginia's Slave Migration from 1790-1863*.

Retrieved from

<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/slavetrade/migrmaps.html>.

This website gives information on the number of slaves leaving the state of Virginia from 1790-1863. It also contains maps which graphically represent the data. This information can help students understand that planters in Virginia had more slaves than they needed and, as a result, were able to sell their slaves to the Deep South as another way of making money.