

# Making Invisible Histories Visible

## The Underground Railroad

Lesson Title: MIHV Lesson 1: Intro/Review: Slavery Myths vs. Facts

Concept Based (Enduring Understanding, Essential Question, Key Concept):

Essential Question: What was the impact of slavery on the United States?

Key topics: Economic systems of the North and South, legal protections of slavery, narratives of enslaved people

Skills: examine sources, identify cause and effect, compare and contrast

Materials/Resources:

- Lesson slides
- Gallery walk posters. Write one topic per poster: people, laws/rules about enslavement, life in the South, life in the North, finding freedom/escaping enslavement
- Post-it notes
- Student work:
  - o Webquest document
  - o Mythbusters reading and questions

Accommodations for ELL students and students with an IEP or 504 Plan (specific to this lesson):

- Teachers should modify and adapt the readings about enslavement myths as needed for whole-class or individual student success

Learning Goal:

- SS 8.1.1.d Evaluate how various United States government decisions impact people, place, and history.
- SS 8.4.2.b Evaluate the relevancy, accuracy, and completeness of primary and secondary sources to better understand multiple perspectives of the same event.
- SS 8.4.3 Examine historical events from the perspectives of marginalized and underrepresented groups.

Learning Tasks:

- Introduce research project goals
- Introduce OR review laws, people, and major concepts related to enslavement in the United States
- Analyze secondary sources to separate myths from facts about enslavement in the United States

Success Criteria:

*You will know you have mastered this when you...*

- Can describe the topic and goals of the research project

- Can use evidence from the secondary source to disprove a myth about enslavement in the United States

**Procedures and Routines:**

- Gallery Walk
  - Collaborative group work

**Instructional Plan for a 90-minute Block:**

5 minutes	<b>Anticipatory Activity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overview of today's lesson</li> <li>- Overview of research project (slides 2-4)</li> </ul>	
15 minutes	<b>Modeled Instruction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- On projected screen, open <a href="#">website for Omaha Green Book</a> MIHV project (first site on the webquest; linked in student work via QR code or hyperlink)</li> <li>- Model using the website to use answer the questions</li> </ul>	<b>Guided Practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students work together to complete webquest using links/QR codes</li> <li>- As students work, teacher circulates to ensure students are accessing websites and have accurate information</li> <li>- <b>CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING:</b> Using post-it notes, an index card, or check-in tool of teacher's choosing, students respond to the following question: <b>What is one skill you think you might gain while doing this project, based on what you saw in previous projects?</b></li> </ul>
10 minutes	<b>Guided Practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher hangs pre-made gallery walk posters around the room</li> <li>- Students circulate silently around the room to write at least one connection to each topic on a post-it and add it to the poster</li> <li>- Teacher circulates to prompt students and help them make connections</li> </ul>	
15 minutes	<b>Shared Instruction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students stand in the middle of the room</li> <li>- Teacher reads each statement on slide 7, one at a time. Students move to one side of the room if they think the statement is a myth (not true/fully true) or a fact (true) about enslavement in the U.S.</li> <li>- After students have chosen a side, choose 1-2 students per side to explain their reasoning for their choice</li> </ul>	
30 minutes	<b>Independent Practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher hands out reading + questions to students</li> <li>- Students read independently OR in partners/groups and answer questions on the second page</li> <li>- Topics are: They Didn't Know Better, They Were Powerless to Resist, The Civil War Was About States' Rights</li> </ul>	
5-10 minutes	<b>Summary/Reflection</b> Exit ticket on a notecard, in a notebook, etc. (teacher's choice): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Name of student _____</li> <li>- Some people think this about enslavement: _____</li> <li>- That's a myth! The truth is: _____</li> </ul>	

# Making Invisible Histories Visible Project Webquest

## 2023 Project – [Green Book Omaha](#)

1. What was The Green Book?



2. Pick a Drug & Retail Store or Hotels & Tourist Home, Restaurants, Nightclubs & Taverns; Service Stations & Tailor and complete the following:

a. Location Name =

b. Fact #1 =

c. Primary Source Fact =

## 2022 Project – [OPS Elementary Schools](#)

3. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court landmark ruling

\_\_\_\_\_ v. \_\_\_\_\_

of Topeka, Kansas, unanimously ruled that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional and in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

4. What happened to OPS on August 10, 1973?

5. \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary School was the original King Elementary School located in Northeast Omaha.



## 2021 Project – [Historic Neighborhoods & Buildings](#)

6. Pick a neighborhood that is close to where you live, go to school, or know of and complete the following:

a. Neighborhood =

b. History Fact =

c. Project Site Fact =



## African American Histories

7. Athlete: \_\_\_\_\_ is a multi- sport athlete who went to North High, where he was the only Black wrestler on a state championship team. He later went to Omaha University (today called UNO) to become the first Black wrestling coach at a predominately white college.



8. Newspapers: What is the oldest Black-owned business in Omaha and who founded it?



## [Latino Histories](#)

9. Scroll through the photo gallery and complete the following:

a. Title =

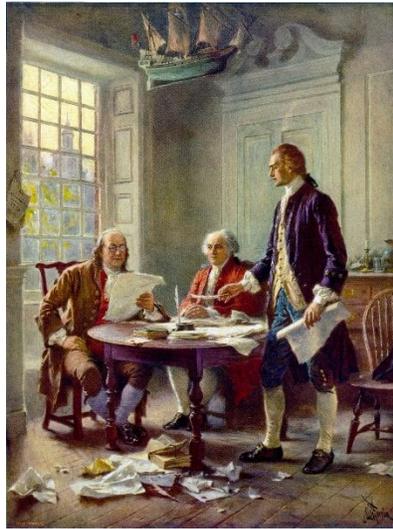
b. Fact =



## Myth #1: They Didn't Know Better

In 2019, presidential candidate and mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg was criticized for the following comment: "It's an embarrassing thing to admit, but the people who wrote the Constitution did not understand that slavery was a bad thing and did not respect civil rights." Even though his intentions might have been positive, Buttigieg was called out for continuing the myth that people who lived during the time of slavery didn't know better. The difficult truth is that people at the time did know slavery was wrong, but many participated in the enslavement of others anyway.

The enslavement of indigenous and black people in the Americas began almost from the moment Christopher Columbus and other colonizers set foot in the Caribbean in the 1490s, but protests against slavery started right away, too. One Spanish missionary, Bartolome de las Casas, gave up his land and the enslaved people he had been given after about a decade of witnessing the brutality of enslaved labor. In 1514, he begged the king and queen of Spain to end the abuses of slavery. Over the next 300 years, thousands of other priests, journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens would speak out against the evils of slavery. By the time the Founding Fathers envisioned a new country and constitution, they were aware of the debates about this cruel



*Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson review a draft of the Declaration of Independence.*

practice – and many were involved in these debates themselves.

In his first draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote a 168-word paragraph about slavery in which he called it an "assemblage of horrors." Blaming slavery in the American colonies on the British king, he wrote: "The king has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant land who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation." This passage was debated and ultimately not included in the Declaration of Independence. The final declaration included the famous phrase, "All men are created equal," but it never specifically recognized the inequality of slavery. In fact,

Jefferson himself enslaved more than 600 human beings in his lifetime.

The Founding Fathers had different opinions on slavery. Like Jefferson, James Madison felt slavery was "dishonorable" but he enslaved more than 100 people both at his personal home and in the White House. Benjamin Franklin enslaved people but freed them as his anti-slavery ideas grew stronger. He also founded the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. George Washington became a supporter of abolition later in his life, but only freed the people he enslaved once he died. Other founding fathers, like John Adams, Samuel Adams, Thomas Paine, and Alexander Hamilton, were always against slavery and didn't enslave people. Hamilton was involved in efforts to abolish slavery. He supported the African Free School, which educated the children of enslaved and free Black people.

Slavery was a highly debated subject in the U.S. from its founding. Some people might have looked away from its cruelty, and others might have defended it out of greed, but it would have been impossible for people to not know better because of the times.

*Adapted from the New Jersey State Bar Foundations' lesson plan, "Slavery's Enduring Myths and Misconceptions"*

## Myth #1: “They Didn’t Know Better” Questions

1. After reading about this myth in more depth, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who says, “Many supporters of slavery didn’t know better! It was a different time!”? Use at least one example you read about.
2. Do you know about people or groups who fought against slavery, in addition to the people in this reading? Who? What do you know about them?
3. Did it surprise you to learn that the first draft of the Declaration of Independence addressed slavery? Why do you think this passage was dropped, even though many of the Founding Fathers knew slavery was wrong?
4. Are there activities we engage in today that may be looked at as immoral or wrong by people in the future?

## Myth #2: They Were Powerless to Resist

The idea that Black people were powerless to resist their own enslavement is rooted in age-old and ugly stereotypes. In the 1830s, for example, a white actor invented the character Jim Crow, a lazy and dim-witted Black slave. Cartoonish and dehumanizing figures like this spread through American culture, allowing white people to justify slavery by casting Black people as inferior, and as contented servants. How could people like this be capable of standing up for themselves and demanding a different life?



In fact, resistance was a daily part of the lives of millions of enslaved people. As one historian wrote, “Slaves ‘naturally’ resisted their enslavement because slavery was fundamentally unnatural.” Most people know about Harriet Tubman, the heroic Underground Railroad conductor who made as many as 19 trips from South to North and rescued hundreds of enslaved people. Many have also heard about famous rebellions, such as the one organized by Nat Turner in 1831. Turner was a passionate preacher who, after killing his enslavers and securing weapons, enlisted 75 others in an uprising that led to the death of about 55 white people.

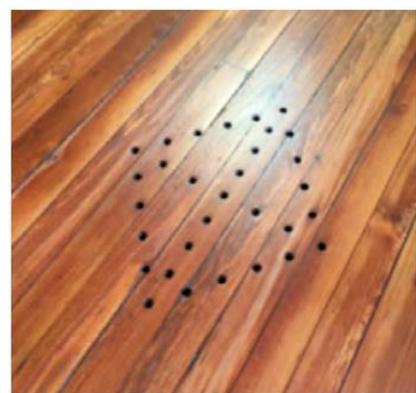
Accounts of escape and insurgency are an inspiring part of the history of enslaved people. However, they were rare, and overshadow the more important story of Black resistance—the smaller, everyday ways in which enslaved people refused to

accept their situation and imagined a better tomorrow.

Enslaved people participated in acts of defiance every day. They intentionally slowed their work and faked illness to reduce the profits of their enslavers. They broke tools, injured animals and damaged crops on plantations. They also took food, clothing and other supplies denied to them, which they used to care for their own needs and sold or traded with others. Enslaved people resisted culturally and spiritually as well. They married, formed families and educated their children. They taught each other to read and write and documented their experiences. They secretly kept African traditions and religious worship alive. They practiced and mastered important work skills—like sewing and metal work—so they would have a means of survival after being freed. We don’t often think of these behaviors as resistance but

consider the strength of mind and character it took for enslaved people to believe in themselves and their futures when the country they were forced to live in considered them chattel (property).

When we fail to see all the ways in which enslaved people fought back, we fail to see their humanity, and may even accept the idea that slavery “wasn’t that bad.” This couldn’t be further from the truth. As history professor and civil rights expert Hasan Kwame Jeffries reminds us: “Regardless of form or function, resistance was never-ending. As long as slavery existed, African Americans resisted.”



*In Savannah, Georgia, enslaved people resisted by building their own church and building a secret passage for freedom seekers under the floor. Air holes were drilled into the floor and disguised as an African symbol for prayer.*

*Adapted from the New Jersey State Bar Foundations’ lesson plan, “Slavery’s Enduring Myths and Misconceptions”*

## Myth #2: “They Were Powerless to Resist” Questions

1. After reading, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who says, “Most enslaved people had no power to resist slavery”? Use at least one example you read about.
2. How does a focus on resistance remind us that enslaved people were more than just objects, but real humans?
3. Why is focusing mostly on enslaved people escaping and rebelling not showing the full picture of the resistance of enslaved people?
4. What were some common forms of resistance?
5. How did enslaved people show *cultural* and *spiritual* resistance?

## Myth #3: The Civil War Was About States' Rights

In a poll by the Pew Research Center about the main causes of the Civil War, 48 percent of Americans said it was mostly about states' rights and just 38 percent said it was fought over slavery. Among people younger than 30, 60 percent believed states' rights was the main cause. So, what are "states' rights" and what do they have to do with the Civil War?

In the early days of the United States, leaders argued over whether there should be a strong central government or one that had less control over the states. The 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791, created a balance. It simply said the federal government has only the powers given to it in the Constitution, and all other decisions belong to the states. Examples of federal powers include declaring war and coining money. States' rights include managing elections, setting traffic laws and building roads and schools. Before the Civil War, states also had the right to decide if slavery would be legal or not.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, Southern states feared the system of slavery—which brought them tremendous wealth and power—would be taken away. This was the only "state right" that was being debated at the time. They accused free states (in the north and west) of interfering with their rights on many fronts: by banning enslavers from bringing enslaved people into their states for temporary stays; by refusing to cooperate in the capture and return of runaways; by allowing anti-slavery speeches and events; and by permitting Black men to vote in some places.

Southern states were enraged by what they perceived as a threat to their way of life and accused Northern and Western states of defying the Constitution. They called upon national law to limit the actions of free states, which was essentially at odds with a states' rights position.

When the 11 states seceded from the Union in 1860, they published statements with their reasons. The following quotes from the "Declaration of Causes of Seceding States" shows that slavery was a main concern:

**Mississippi:** "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world."

**Louisiana:** "The people of the slave-holding States are bound together by the same necessity and determination to preserve African slavery."

**Texas:** "The servitude of the African race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to both bound and free, and is abundantly justified by the experience of mankind."

Several states specifically mentioned the election of Abraham Lincoln and his support for abolition as a main reason for secession. Alabama claimed this was "nothing less than an open declaration of war." Others claimed that slave labor was essential to the economy. Mississippi even said that agricultural work in the hot South depended on slavery because "none but the black race can bear exposure to the sun." When the new Confederate States wrote



their constitution, it made slavery a national rather than a local concern: "No bill...or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed."

Since the Civil War, some people have tried to reframe the main cause of the war by focusing on states' rights or other issues, like taxes or the economy. Some people might use these explanations because it's painful to accept the truth that millions of people fought to keep up a cruel and inhuman system. It may be because people want to believe the best about their state, or it may be due to prejudice. The historical evidence makes it clear, though, that the Civil War was fought mainly over the issue of slavery, and that the main motivation of the Confederates was continuing white supremacy.

*Adapted from the New Jersey State Bar Foundations' lesson plan, "Slavery's Enduring Myths and Misconceptions"*

## Myth #3: “The Civil War Was About States’ Rights” Questions

1. After reading, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who says, “Technically, the Civil War was fought over states’ rights”? Use at least one example you read about.

2. How did some of the actions of Southern states actually conflict with a states’ rights approach?

3. What is your reaction to the language in the “Declaration of Causes of Seceding States”? Were you surprised that Southern states were so direct in talking about slavery? Explain.

4. Why do you think many Americans—even today—are not willing to accept that slavery was the main cause of the Civil War?