TEACHER'S GUIDE
Mission 2: "Flight to Freedom"

Full Historical Background

"The Atlantic Slave System foreshadowed many features of our modern global economy. We see international investment of capital in distant colonial regions, where low-cost, highly productive gang labor by slaves produced commodities for an international market. Slave-produced products like sugar, tobacco, coffee and chocolate actually altered the European and American diet." --David Eltis and David Richardson, Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Gang Labor: Enslaved African Americans working lock step with a group for multiple hours on end under harsh conditions, with one overseer supervising work with brutal authority.

I. Industrialization Impacts North and South

During the years prior to the Civil War from 1830 to 1860, known as the antebellum period, the U.S. experienced significant changes in technology that led to major gains in productivity in both agriculture and industry. Industrialization of the textile industry in England and the U.S. dramatically increased the demand for cotton and transformed the lives of workers both in the North and South. New power-driven machines—reapers, looms, sewing machines, lathes, and steam boilers—fueled this soaring productivity.

The changing world of northern workers was accompanied and in part created by the arrival of large numbers of immigrants. The influx of hundreds of thousands of new residents from Ireland and Germany in the 1830s to 1850s assured a steady and often inexpensive supply of labor. The great majority of these wage earners worked in the free-labor North, which grew increasingly distinct from the slave-labor South and included significant numbers of free African Americans and women.

Another important transformation wrought by these economic and technological changes was the emergence of a new category of professionals and managers, many of whom were willing to forego the ownership of land or businesses for the relative security of a salary. The members of this emerging middle class played an important role as consumers, purchasing a growing number of mass-produced products—clothing, furniture, silverware, and carriages—to show off their newfound wealth and status.

In the growing urban centers of the North, new forms of leisure activity offered respite from hard work, although these activities both accompanied and fueled increases in noise, crime, drink, and disorder in urban areas. Responses to perceived urban disorder took various forms; in addition to the establishment of paid police forces in major cities, native-born

members of both the middle and working classes engaged in a range of moral reform campaigns, such as the temperance movement that sought to end the sale of alcohol.

Women were active in many of the reform movements of the 1830s and 1840s and it gave them increased presence and influence in the public and political sphere. In this period, most women lacked the right to vote, keep their wages, retain custody over their children, or protect their bodies from assault. Free black and immigrant women were especially limited in their occupational options, yet many had to support their families and face harassment and assaults by white employers. For these women, the most important issues involved rights to good jobs and fair wages.

In the South, the removal of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes of Indians in the 1830s from land that could be profitably cultivated in cotton and sugar opened the door to an expanded plantation economy based on slave labor. Although cotton was considered the king of southern agricultural products by 1830, several other crops competed with cotton for labor and profits. Tobacco, rice, and sugar, and cotton, were highly profitable in those sections where the climate and soil were favorable. These crops demanded different growing seasons and cycles, which contributed to the distinctly different experiences of enslaved African Americans on rice, tobacco, cotton and sugar plantations. Rice plantations along the coast required highly skilled but backbreaking labor that was usually organized on the task system. This system allowed many of the enslaved African American workers more time to take care of their own needs, but working in the hot, wet rice fields also involved special perils such as malaria, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. Tobacco, sugar, and cotton plantations relied primarily on gangs of enslaved African Americans performing largely unskilled labor. Under the gang system, planters benefited from having entire families working in the fields.

II. Southern Enslaved African Americans Experiences
On large plantations, the demand on laborers differed from place to place, from crop to crop, and from job to job. For instance, enslaved African Americans who worked in the house lived under quite different conditions from those of field hands. "House slaves," as these individuals were called, were subject to their masters' demands at all hours of the day or night and their close proximity to whites made them more vulnerable to surveillance, sexual exploitation, and abuse. Fieldwork varied depending on the crop and season, but most field hands worked from dawn to dusk and some tasks, such as grinding the sugar harvest, often extended far into the night. Punishment was used more often than reward to induce enslaved African Americans to work harder. Whipping was the most common means of punishment, but some enslaved African Americans were beaten, chained, imprisoned, maimed, or shot by their masters or overseers.

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Although some enslaved African Americans accommodated themselves to their owners' demands in order to avoid sale, brutal beatings or other forms of punishment, many others demonstrated their opposition to bondage through everyday acts of resistance. Using whites' own prejudices about the laziness and irresponsibility of Black labor, enslaved African Americans broke tools, worked at a slow pace, damaged property, feigned illness or pregnancy, and engaged in other acts of sabotage. Enslaved African American cooks might spoil meals or spit in the soup before serving it. A few even poisoned their owners. Suspicious fires were common on plantations. Enslaved African Americans might use them to distract masters from other crimes, such as the theft of meat or other goods. Many enslaved men and women also ran away, hiding out for days or weeks at a time. Some of them, mostly young men, found their way to freedom in the North. Despite nearly impossible odds, a small number of the enslaved chose open revolt over daily resistance. These revolts revealed the deep feelings and aspirations that enslaved African Americans normally had to conceal from their masters. Although such open revolts were rare, they were greatly feared by white southerners of all classes, and their outbreak often resonated across the region and intensified the suppression of enslaved African Americans and free African Americans / Blacks no matter how limited the actual event was.

III. Free Blacks in the South

In addition to enslaved African Americans, free African Americans or Blacks threatened planters' authority. The mere existence of free Blacks in the South challenged any simple connection between race and enslavement. Fearing the influence that free blacks exerted on enslaved African Americans, the Virginia General Assembly in 1837 reaffirmed an 1806 statute that allowed county courts to determine whether free blacks would be allowed to remain in residence permanently. To stay in Virginia, the petitioner had to demonstrate that he or she was "of good character, peaceable, orderly and industrious, and not addicted to drunkenness, gaming or other vice." African American men had a more difficult time than women persuading courts to let them remain in the state as free persons. It was hard for them to be industrious without being viewed as competitors with white workingmen, and they were more likely to be considered disorderly by their mere presence in the population.

The number of free African Americans/Blacks in the South remained small throughout the mid-nineteenth century, and most lived in towns and cities rather than plantation areas. Yet their presence still created considerable anxiety among whites. By 1840 the state of Mississippi passed laws expressly prohibiting free blacks from testifying against whites, serving in the militia, voting, or holding office.

IV. Southern Planters Try to Maintain Power

During the 1830s and 1840s, revolts and escapes by enslaved African Americans, the growth of the free black community, demands by non-slaveholding whites, and the rise of an anti-slavery reform movement all challenged the power of planters. The British abolition of West Indian slavery in 1833, the Panic of 1837, and the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the French West Indies in 1848 intensified slave owners' concerns over the future of the South's increasingly peculiar institution. Attacks from northern opponents—a growing abolitionist movement, fugitive enslaved African Americans, the condemnation of church leaders, and massive petition campaigns—heightened slave owners' concerns as well.

The defenders of slavery did not retreat, however. Believing that expansion into western lands presaged a new day for planters, they developed an aggressive defense of their way of life and further restricted possibilities for change. Previously referred to apologetically as a necessary but temporary evil, black bondage was now described as the natural order of things. In the words of South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, slavery was "a positive good," an institution beneficial alike to planters, enslaved African Americans, and all other social groups.

The growing importance of slavery to southern agriculture, along with the 1808 prohibition of the importation of enslaved Africans, increased the prices for enslaved African Americans and encouraged an expanding internal slave trade. The internal slave trade was one of the cruelest aspects of the system. Although enslaved African Americans had always been subject to sale, the possibility of being sold to a plantation hundreds of miles from one's family increased dramatically in the 1840s with the extension of slavery into Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. Because enslaved African Americans in greatest demand were between the ages of twenty and fifty, a high percentage of those sold left spouses and children behind. As slavery's heartland moved southwestward, the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of enslaved African Americans caused the massive destruction of families.

V. Extending Slavery to the West

The dreams of westward expansion fueled political conflicts within and between the North and the South. The Lone Star Republic of Texas generated intensive debates in the 1830s and 1840s. It had sought U.S. statehood from the moment it achieved independence in 1836, but northern hostility to admitting this immense slaveholding territory into the Union postponed action for several years. In 1844, however, the Democratic Party platform tied support for Texas statehood to the demand—popular among northern farmers—for the annexation of all of Oregon (a region claimed by both England and the United States). Farmers from the Old Northwest had been eyeing Oregon's Willamette Valley for years. By 1843, thousands of

wagons were already following the Oregon Trail west from Missouri. Southern planters and politicians began to believe that the North's appetite for new lands might at last provide the basis for Texas statehood. The election the following year turned on the issue of admitting Texas and annexing Oregon.

President Polk had even grander plans for expansion. Polk presided over the settlement of the disputed Oregon Territory and then turned his attention to wresting more land from Mexico. Knowing that this plan would necessitate war, he promptly provoked one. In January 1846, Polk sent U.S. troops across the Nueces River in Texas and into territory claimed by Mexico. News that Mexican troops had crossed the Rio Grande River in April and attacked American soldiers led Polk to demand war with Mexico.

Most slaveholders eagerly looked forward to creating new slave states from these hoped-for territories. For proslavery forces, the chance to acquire additional lands in the Southwest offered numerous benefits. The spread of slavery would aid planters in the upper South by creating an even greater demand and higher prices for their excess enslaved African Americans. Small farmers who owned no enslaved African Americans (a group that would constitute three-fourths of southern white families by 1860) could hope for a better chance on the new western lands, thereby alleviating the pressures on the planter class to respond to their needs by redistributing existing wealth. And finally, the rapid growth of a non-slaveholding and increasingly antislavery North endangered the political autonomy of the slaveholding South. Geographical expansion would help ensure planters increased representation in the Senate through the admission of new slave states. This would prevent the North from using the federal government to block the interests of slaveholders.

As it turned out, winning the war against Mexico greatly sharpened the internal conflict in the United States. The debate over what to do with the new land—specifically, whether to permit slavery there—aroused emotions that ultimately exploded in the Civil War.

VI. The Abolitionist Movement

For many reform-minded women and men in the North, the eradication of slavery was the most important movement of the day. Led by advocates of immediate emancipation such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Abby Kelley, radical abolitionists argued that other forms of bondage—wage slavery and prostitution, for instance—paled in comparison with the millions held in servitude by southern planters. Seeking to create a movement that reflected democratic and egalitarian ideals, radical abolitionists demanded that antislavery groups, including the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), be open to women as well as to men and to free African Americans as well as to whites.

The commitment of radical abolitionists to principles of both racial and sexual equality ensured that some who agreed with the abolition of slavery would disagree over the means to achieve emancipation. By the late 1830s and 1840s the result was factionalism and infighting among abolitionists. But such disagreements also multiplied the number and range of antislavery movements, forcing more and more of those who lived in the free-labor North to confront their complicity with slavery in the South.

VII. The Compromise of 1850

After the discovery of gold in California, the number of U.S. residents there had grown so rapidly that in 1849, political leaders sought statehood without having ever applied for territorial status. This made California the focal point of debates over slave labor and free labor that continued to dominate eastern political life. Just before California applied for statehood, northerners who wanted the West left open for settlement by free men founded the Free Soil Party. Free Soilers advocated a non-slave West, but they did not advocate abolition. They were willing to leave slavery alone where it already existed, thereby hoping to assuage the concerns of southerners.

Ultimately, the Compromise of 1850 consisted of a series of separate bills passed by different, and sometimes competing, coalitions. Northeasterners and midwesterners, for instance, nearly all supported the admission of California as a free state and the abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia. Southerners, on the other hand, voted overwhelmingly for the new Fugitive Slave Law, which denied jury trials to accused runaway enslaved African Americans and empowered any marshal pursuing them to force local citizens to join the hunt. On each issue, just enough party loyalists crossed sectional lines to assure passage. In addition, the sudden death of President Taylor in July 1850, who despite his support for California's admission had threatened to veto the larger compromise of which it was a part, paved the way for the bill's passage. The new president, Millard Fillmore, not only supported the compromise but used his powers as president to convince northern Whigs to support it as well.

VIII. The Fugitive Slave Law

One of the Fugitive Slave Law's major targets was the "underground railroad," a network of thousands of free blacks and white sympathizers who concealed, sheltered, clothed, and guided runaway enslaved African Americans in the course of their northward flight. The best known of the "conductors" who served this railroad was Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1849. Over the next decade, Tubman returned to the South nineteen times, repeatedly risking capture and death in order to liberate more than three hundred others. In the North, local vigilance committees—composed largely of free African Americans/Blacks and white Quakers—kept the railroad going. Free African

Americans/Blacks provided most of the labor and funds required by the cause despite their long hours of work and limited economic opportunities.

During the 1840s, slave owners grew more anxious about the underground railroad, even though the number of successful enslaved African American escapes may not have increased. Escapes affected far more than the few thousand who actually fled. News traveled through the enslaved African Americans' "grapevine telegraph," emboldening many still in bondage. At the same time, successful fugitives such as Frederick Douglass and William and Ellen Craft, who had escaped from Georgia in December 1848, became powerful and effective antislavery speakers in the United States and Britain. The Fugitive Slave Law, its proponents hoped, would not only reduce the number of escapees, but also drive earlier runaways such as Tubman, Douglass, and the Crafts back into hiding. Instead, the new law had the opposite effect, re-invigorating protests against slavery and against slave owners who were viewed as abusing federal power. A law that forced them to assist slave owners in returning fugitives to bondage enraged long-time abolitionists and their new allies. They held mass meetings throughout the North and Midwest.

The 1852 publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin, a sentimental and tragic tale of slavery and slave-hunters, enhanced popular opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law. Harriet Beecher Stowe first published the story in serial form in the National Era, an abolitionist newspaper. When published in book form, it sold three hundred thousand copies in one year, electrified northern readers, and infused opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law with a powerful emotional appeal.

Contrary to the hopes of its sponsors, then, the Compromise of 1850 inflamed antislavery feelings in the North. As long as slavery seemed geographically contained and remote, free-state residents could try to ignore it, considering it someone else's worry and someone else's sin. But by refusing to outlaw slavery in the West and then welcoming slave hunters into the free states and requiring all citizens to aid them, the new law put an end to those illusions. Like the Mexican War, the Fugitive Slave Law seemed to bear out the abolitionist claim that chattel slavery endangered freedom everywhere, not merely in the South.

IX. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and Bleeding Kansas
Before the battles over the Fugitive Slave Law could ebb, struggles over slavery erupted in the Great Plains. The focal point of this battle was the Kansas-Nebraska Act, submitted to Congress in January 1854 by Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. Douglas had speculated heavily in western lands and hoped that by attracting settlers to the region he could persuade Congress to route a planned transcontinental railroad through the area. Since many southern Senators preferred a more southern route, Douglas offered them an incentive

to vote for his bill. He included a clause that allowed residents of the territory to decide by popular vote whether or not they would permit slavery. Since the Nebraska Territory lay north of the 36° 30' line set by the Missouri Compromise, allowing residents there to vote on whether to become a slave state or a free state would effectively remove all federal barriers to the spread of slavery throughout the West. Despite these strong objections, the Senate passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act on March 3, 1854.

During the next two years, political passions burned fiercely in Kansas. Pro-slavery Missourians poured across the border, hoping to claim the Kansas Territory for themselves. But even more settlers arrived from the free states. Thousands were aided by abolitionists back east who formed the Kansas Emigrant Aid Society to assure the territory would remain a haven for free labor. Confronted by a free soil majority, the pro-slavery forces quickly resorted to armed intimidation and violence. When anti-slavery forces responded, undeclared guerrilla war followed. Despite the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its support by pro-slavery Democrats, residents of Kansas finally established a free state government in mid-1858.

The Republican Party coalesced out of the large but amorphous opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska bill of 1854. In their first party platform, drafted in 1856, Republicans denounced slavery as immoral and insisted on halting its further westward expansion. The new party attracted support from many formerly competing interests, including antislavery Whigs, Democrats, former Free Soilers, and Know-Nothings.

X. The Deepening Rift Becomes a Chasm
The Republican victory in 1860 grew out of the social, economic, cultural, and political changes that had taken place in the United States during the preceding half-century. By preserving slave labor, the first American Revolution stopped far short of the Declaration of Independence's stated goal—a society based on the principle that "all men are created equal." For a number of decades, national leaders worked long, hard, and successfully to hold together a nation increasingly divided by two distinct labor systems. But as the slave-labor South and the free-labor North matured, they developed needs, interests, and values that each region found to be ultimately unacceptable in the other. Slave owners and their supporters became more and more committed to chattel slavery, viewing it as the essential prop to their own independence, while to them the North's vaunted "free society" became an object of fear and loathing. And although northerners hotly disagreed among themselves about the meaning of "free labor," most came to view the expansion of slavery as a direct threat to northerners' own rights, freedoms, and aspirations. The ongoing resistance to slavery and the response it evoked from slaveholders kept the issue alive and the stakes high.

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Disputes over the future of the West manifested and exacerbated the growing sectional clash, destroyed the old two-party system, and gave life to Republicanism. "Bleeding Kansas" and John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry revealed how sharp the conflict had become and anticipated the way in which it would at last be resolved.