

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Mission 2: "Flight to Freedom"

Slavery & the Underground Railroad: Myths and Misinformation

1. Slavery was the same everywhere in the United States.

The conditions and experiences of enslaved African Americans differed across the South depending on the place, the crops, the size of the farm, and the type of work. In the period before the Civil War, most enslaved African Americans worked in gangs on cotton plantations that stretched across the Carolinas and Deep South states of Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and were expanding westward into Missouri and Texas. Planters made the entire family work—men, women, and children—but divided most jobs by age and sex. In general, men plowed and women hoed, but during harvest season, all able-bodied enslaved African Americans picked cotton at an unrelenting pace. Enslaved African Americans were closely supervised and those who did not pick their share were whipped.

On rice plantations in the Carolinas and Georgia, enslaved African Americans were highly valued for their knowledge of rice cultivation. They worked on the task system, which gave them more control over their time and work process. But conditions were harsh in the swampy, disease-prone areas where rice grew, and enslaved African Americans faced severe punishment if they did not complete tasks satisfactorily.

Enslaved African Americans on sugar plantations in Louisiana and Florida faced the most physically dangerous work, and also the most industrialized because the process of refining sugar cane into sugar required heavy machinery. Enslaved African Americans here also worked in a gang system - meaning working in lockstep with a group for multiple hours on end under harsh conditions, with one overseer supervising work with brutal authority.

Enslaved African Americans in the border states of Maryland, Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee tended to grow a mixture of hemp, corn, and tobacco crops. Work conditions were not as brutal, and enslaved African Americans had a greater chance of escaping north to the free states. But because slave owners in border states were the leading exporters of enslaved African Americans to the Deep South, enslaved African Americans there were often sold away from their families and communities.

Enslaved African Americans also worked on small farms throughout the South. Many worked alongside their owners. They were often treated better than enslaved African Americans on larger plantations, but did not have access to an African American community, had little chance of marriage, and were socially and culturally isolated.

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Finally, not all enslaved African Americans worked in agriculture. In 1860, about 140,000 enslaved African Americans lived in towns and cities throughout the South. Urban enslaved African Americans performed comparatively less demanding physical labor -- in shipyards, brickyards, cotton presses and warehouses. Many were apprentices to tailors, saddle makers, butchers and masons, and were housed in the same lodgings as their owners, usually in an attic or back room. The practice of "hiring out" was one feature of urban slavery that encompassed slave owners "renting" enslaved African Americans to others. Enslaved people could, by arrangement with their owners, also hire themselves out. They then resided in or near the renter, who was officially, if not in practice, required to refrain from mistreating the hired enslaved African American as they were considered leased property. Money earned from hiring out went into the owners' pockets, but occasionally the laborer could keep some of the earnings. In this way, an enslaved African American might save enough money to buy his or her own freedom.

2. All African Americans were enslaved and all Southern Whites were slave owners.

In 1860, 89 percent of the nation's African Americans/Blacks were enslaved. The remaining 11 percent were free African Americans/Blacks, mostly in the north but with significant free Black communities in the South. Some free Blacks purchased their freedom, while some were manumitted (given freedom) by their owners. Others were descended from Blacks who had been free during the Colonial era. Most Southern whites did not own enslaved African Americans. Less than 25 percent of southerners were slave owners, and half of all masters owned 5 or fewer enslaved African Americans. While most small slaveholders were farmers, many were artisans, shopkeepers, and public officials.

3. Most enslaved African Americans lived on large plantations.

This is true, but a significant number, 47 percent, did not live on large plantations. These enslaved African Americans were spread out across many small holdings. By 1860, as wealth became more concentrated in the southern cotton belt, 53 percent of the enslaved lived on plantations of 20 or more enslaved African Americans, and approximately one third lived on plantations with 50 or more enslaved people.

4. Enslaved African Americans who worked in the house or "house slaves" were a privileged group who often aligned themselves more with masters than with enslaved African Americans who worked in the fields or "field slaves."

The assumption that enslaved African Americans who worked in the house were a distinct and privileged group is not validated by nineteenth century accounts of slavery. Very few plantations had enslaved African Americans who exclusively worked in the house. In general, very young or very old enslaved African American women did household tasks, but worked the fields in the years in-between. Many times enslaved African Americans who did

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household work also worked in the fields, especially during harvest times. Tensions between enslaved African Americans who worked in either the house or field are rarely mentioned in first-person accounts of slavery. On the contrary, enslaved African Americans who worked in the house often helped the larger community by passing along information they overheard.

5. Enslaved African Americans did little or nothing to free themselves.

Resistance to slavery took many forms, and included sabotage, work slow-downs, disobedience, stealing, escaping, economic bargaining, and organized rebellions. It is hard to quantify the many ways enslaved African Americans resisted, how many ran away, or even how many rebellions took place. There were a number of large-scale rebellions, including the Stono Rebellion (1739), the New York Slave Insurrection (1741), the Gabriel Prosser Uprising (1800), the Denmark Vesey Uprising (1822), the Nat Turner Rebellion (1831), and the Amistad Revolt (1839). Slave owners and local governments established elaborate systems of laws and law enforcement to limit enslaved African American mobility, education, and communication. Enslaved African Americans who rebelled faced harsh punishment or death. The fact that resistance continued despite this repressive legal system indicated the depth of opposition among enslaved African Americans.

6. Everyone in the North was opposed to slavery.

Slavery existed in the North until the 1820s, with significant numbers of enslaved African Americans in New York and New Jersey. Even after slave labor was outlawed, many northerners with economic interests in the cotton or sugar industry continued to support the use of slave labor in the South. In the 1830s and 1840s, white and black abolitionists were frequently attacked by mobs of northern whites. Most of the anti-abolitionist mobs were not made up of young rowdies from lower-class neighborhoods. They were well-organized groups of respectable, middle-class citizens who believed abolitionism threatened their communities and businesses.

7. All abolitionists had the same goals and strategies.

Abolitionism was not a unified movement. As opposition to slavery increased in the 1840s, abolitionists disagreed on methods, racial attitudes, and the role of women in the movement. The radical, or Garrisonian, abolitionists favored immediate emancipation based on moral and religious grounds, refused to negotiate political solutions, included women equally in their organizations, and supported women's rights. A more moderate group of political abolitionists also sought immediate emancipation, but believed that working through the political system to elect antislavery candidates would be most effective. They held more traditional views about the role of women in public life and argued that addressing "the woman question" frightened off many people who would otherwise support antislavery.



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Free Soil Party members accepted slavery in the southern states, but opposed the spread of slavery to the western territories, and believed that if expansion was prevented slavery would come to a natural end throughout the South. Supporters of colonization believed that the voluntary or forced migration of enslaved African Americans who were freed to Africa was the best solution to the issue.

8. Most enslaved African Americans who escaped did so via the Underground Railroad. Most enslaved African Americans escaped on their own, and often had no help or guidance from anyone for the majority of their journey. When they did receive assistance, it was likely to be an individual act of compassion; to provide food or a resting spot by a fellow enslaved African American, free African American/Black, or a white resident along the way.

9. The Underground Railroad was composed of white abolitionists and Quakers. The majority of conductors on the Underground Railroad in both the South and the North were black. In the South, many conductors were enslaved African Americans themselves.

10. Enslaved African Americans learned about the Underground Railroad through songs and quilts.

Current scholarship does not support the claim that songs such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Wade in the Water," "Steal Away," and "Follow the Drinking Gourd" aided enslaved African Americans in escape. Some people believe quilts were hung from roofs, barns, and fences to signal to fugitives that the location was a station, or safe house, on the Underground Railroad. This is also not supported by historical evidence. There are no references in the many narratives written by enslaved African Americans in the nineteenth century, period accounts by runaways, or in the 1930s Works Progress Administration oral histories to suggest that songs or quilts transmitted information about Underground Railroad routes, safe places, or code words to enslaved African Americans.