



Economics of Slavery

Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionists before him attached a moral question to slavery. For many southerners, slavery was strictly an economic way of life. Had the Civil War not taken place, would slavery have continued? Is there a segment of our society that still suffers under the legacy of human bondage?

PURPOSE

The purpose of this lesson is to help students understand the economics behind antebellum slavery and the push by abolitionists to turn slavery into a moral issue.

GOALS

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Discuss the economics of slavery in relation to cotton and slave prices.
- Compare and contrast three different types of abolitionists.
- Discuss the reasons for President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.
- Choose a historical African-American subject for a circulating coin.
- Debate the issue of modern day reparations to slave descendants.

BACKGROUND

Even though the 13th Amendment was adopted almost 150 years ago, the issue of slavery, its demise and the progression of Civil Rights lead to emotional arguments. While it is impossible to discount the human element, the purpose of this lesson is to explore the economics behind slavery. Could slavery have remained viable to the Southern economy into the 20th Century?

MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Internet access

Economics of Slavery *(continued)*

INTRODUCTION

Ask students to give examples of items that have been phased out in our society because they are no longer economically or technologically viable. The instructor is encouraged to recall items that were used and then discontinued before the students' point of reference.

Possible student examples:

- VHS Tapes – DVD's
- Curved Screen – Flat Screen Televisions
- CD's – MP3's
- Gas Fueled Autos – Hybrids
- Newspapers – Internet

Possible teacher examples:

- Black & White – Color Television
- Records – CD's
- Bias-Ply Tires – Radial Tires
- Typewriters – Laptop Computers

Students will be asked why the above items are no longer a part of our culture.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Students will complete the worksheet on slave and cotton prices.
2. Students will read primary documents from three abolitionists. Students will consider the methods to end slavery that each abolitionist espoused and decide which method is the most effective.
3. Four African-Americans have appeared on U.S. commemorative coins:
 - Booker T. Washington
 - George Washington Carver
 - Crispus Attucks
 - Jackie Robinson

Students will research an African-American from the Civil War period and defend why that individual should be the first African-American subject on a circulating coin.

CONCLUSION

Lead a discussion with students about the idea of reparations for descendents of slaves. Have students complete research on the idea of reparations and then stage a debate. As a homework assignment, have students research a civilization in which part of their population was enslaved. Have students find locations where slavery exists today.

INTERNET RESOURCE

Websites: http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/slav_fact.cfm
<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/usl6.cfm>
<http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/wahl.slavery.us>
http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_es_cotton.htm
<http://www.melanet.com/nat/nat.html>
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2928t.html>
<http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=772>
http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display_printable.cfm?HHID=653

Cotton Production and the Relationship to Slavery

Historians debate the continued economic viability of slavery in relation to cotton cultivation. We know that growing is cotton labor intensive and extremely harsh on soil. Without crop rotation, cotton will extract nutrients from the soil, leaving it exhausted. During the antebellum period, plantation owners had to enlarge their land holdings and move further West to keep their cotton production at profitable levels. If the Civil War had not been fought, would slavery have ended due to too low a return on slave investment?

DIRECTIONS: Please review the tables below and answer the following questions.

U.S. PRODUCTION OF ALL TYPES OF RAW COTTON, 1790 - 1860

| Year | Pounds |
|-------------|---------------|
| 1790 | 1,567,000 |
| 1800 | 36,572,500 |
| 1810 | 88,819,000 |
| 1820 | 167,189,000 |
| 1830 | 365,726,000 |
| 1840 | 673,116,000 |
| 1850 | 1,066,925,500 |
| 1860 | 1,918,701,000 |

Source: Adapted from Table 2 in William H. Phillips, Cotton Gin, EH. Net Encyclopedia

PRICE OF COTTON BETWEEN 1800-1857

| Year | Price Per Pound of Cotton |
|-------------|----------------------------------|
| 1800 | \$0.37 |
| 1801 | \$0.44 |
| 1802 | \$0.19 |
| 1805 | \$0.15 |
| 1818 | \$0.32 |
| 1819 | \$0.14 |
| 1837-1848 | Under \$0.10 |
| 1857 | \$0.15 |

Source: http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_es_cotton.htm

SLAVE PRICES

| Period | Price |
|---------------|----------------|
| 1830-1835 | \$948 |
| 1836-1840 | No Information |
| 1840-1845 | \$722 |
| 1846-1850 | \$926 |
| 1851-1855 | \$1,240 |
| 1856-1860 | \$1,658 |

Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery
by Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman

Cotton Production and Slavery *(continued)*

1. Based on the first table, what can we say about the production of cotton as we get closer to the Civil War?
2. The price for cotton is not as consistent as production. What reasons might there be for the fluctuation of cotton prices?
3. After 1845, the price of slaves increases significantly. Explain how the price of slaves coupled with the price of cotton affects cotton grower profitability.
4. What could growers do to manipulate cotton prices? Can you think of an important modern commodity whose price is often manipulated today?
5. Based on the information from the charts alone, and assuming that the trends in the charts would continue, what conclusion can be made about the economic viability of slavery?
6. Most southerners did not own slaves. The majority of slave owners were small farmers who owned less than five slaves and did not grow cotton as their main crop. Do you think slavery could have continued under this circumstance? Why or why not?
7. Since slaves were so expensive, why did it not make good economic sense to treat slaves harshly and provide little health care? Try to find examples of slaves who were better cared for and find the reason for the difference in treatment.

Emancipation Proclamation

President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on the 1st of January, 1863. The document called for the freedom of slaves in states that were in rebellion with the United States. At the outset, this order looks naïve and desperate. Let's examine President Lincoln's motives further to decide whether the proclamation was put forth out of desperation or through genius.

DIRECTIONS: After reading the Emancipation Proclamation, please consider and answer the following questions.

1. Which slaves were freed under the Emancipation Proclamation?
2. Were all slaves freed? If not, which slaves were not provided for in the Emancipation Proclamation?
3. Did President Lincoln believe that the Confederate states would really listen to him and free their slaves due to his executive order? If not, why did the president bother to write the Proclamation?
4. Did the Proclamation in effect free any slaves? Provide examples for your answer.
5. What do you think was President Lincoln's main reason for writing the Emancipation Proclamation? In your answer give two added benefits to the Proclamation.

Comparing and Contrasting Abolitionists

The campaign to end slavery in the United States began many years before the Civil War. Legislatures in Northern states passed acts of emancipation as early as 1780. One of the first organizations that addressed slavery in the United States was the American Colonization Society, organized in 1816. The society looked to send slaves to Liberia on the coast of West Africa.

While abolitionists all agreed that slavery was abhorrent and must end, the means to ending the “peculiar institution” was up for debate. Please locate the websites on the Internet for the following three abolitionists. Read their primary documents and answer the following questions for discussion in class.

NAT TURNER: <http://www.melanet.com/nat/nat.html>

WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2928t.html>

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: <http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=772>

1. Which abolitionist believed that slavery could only end through peaceful and legal means? Provide a quote from the document that supports your answer.
2. Which abolitionist wanted to see slavery end peaceably but was willing to support violence if necessary? Provide a quote that supports your answer.
3. Which abolitionist believed that the use of violence was the chosen way to end slavery? Provide a quote to support your answer.

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