

THE WORTH OF A SLAVE



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What is chattel slavery and how did it dehumanize Black people? What was the relationship between chattel slavery and economics in the U.S.?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explain the difference between slavery and chattel slavery.
- Create a graph showing the growth of chattel slavery in the U.S. between 1790 and 1860.
- Investigate the economics of slavery, specifically the relationship between slavery and the cotton industry.
- Analyze primary documents on slave auctions and the commodifying of Black people.
- Discuss and reflect on the dehumanization required for the practice of chattel slavery.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

60–90 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment to show a video
- *To the Highest Bidder* handout (one copy to project)
- *Chattel Slavery* handout (one copy per student)
- *Bought and Sold* handout (one copy per student)



VOCABULARY

auction

dehumanize

enslaver

The Weeping Time

chattel slavery

enslaved

transatlantic
slave trade

Procedures

NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

When discussing slavery with students, it is suggested the term “enslaved person” be used instead of “slave” to emphasize their humanity; that “enslaver” be used instead of “master” or “owner” to show that slavery was forced upon human beings; and that “freedom seeker” be used instead of “runaway” or “fugitive” to emphasize justice and avoid the connotation of lawbreaking.

PART I

Defining a Cruel Institution (20 minutes)

NOTE

New York artist Harry Herman Roseland (c.1867-1950) was known for his paintings depicting poor Black Americans. *To the Highest Bidder* portrays a pre-Civil War scene of a mother and daughter about to be separated by a slave auction. A post on the website *Jubilo! The Emancipation Century*, notes: “I am taken by the somber desperation in the eyes of the mother. Her gaze seems to both shame and challenge the viewer: how can you look at me, and know what is about to happen, and yet do nothing?” (<https://jubiloemancipationcentury.wordpress.com/tag/harry-herman-roseland>)

1

Project the handout depicting the painting *To the Highest Bidder*. Ask students to reflect on the image and the questions below as a “quick-write” or by discussing with a partner. Then provide context on the painting (see the NOTE) and allow students to share some of their reactions.

- Who are these people and what might be happening to them? How do you know?
- What is the meaning of the painting’s title?
- What might the people in the painting be feeling? How do they make you feel? Explain.

2

Comment that the type of slavery practiced in the United States was a particularly inhumane form called *chattel slavery*. Independently or as a class, have students review the two definitions on the handout, *Chattel Slavery*, and create a Venn diagram comparing them.

3

Share the following facts with students. Then ask what they think drove the investment of huge sums of money in slavery. What made this abhorrent practice a “big business” during the 1700s and 1800s?

- The average cost of an enslaved person at auction in the United States was about \$400 in the 1850s (approximately \$13,000 in today’s money).¹

¹ CPI Inflation calculator, <https://www.officialdata.org>; Williamson, Samuel H. and Cain, Louis P. “Measuring Slavery in 2016 Dollars.” MeasuringWorth.com. <https://www.measuringworth.com/slavery.php>.

- About a third of all Southerners enslaved Black people. Of the 46,300 plantations that existed in 1860, about half had 20 or fewer enslaved people; 45 percent had 20–30, five percent had 100–500, and a smaller number 500–1,000.²
- According to the 1860 census, 4 million enslaved people lived in the U.S. (This was 89 percent of all people of African descent in the U.S.) Their value was about \$3.5 billion at the time.³

PART II

The Economics of Slavery (30 minutes)

4

Tell students that Southern landowners knew they could make huge profits from crops like cotton and tobacco, but these crops required a lot of people to work the land. Enslaved labor provided a cheap (though morally costly) solution to their problem. As an example of this slavery-driven economy, show students the following PBS video and debrief using the questions below: "African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross—The Cotton Economy" (3:03)—<https://www.pbs.org/video/african-americans-many-rivers-cross-cotton-economy-and-slavery/>.

- What was the relationship between cotton and chattel slavery?
- How did the desire for cotton affect Native American people?
- How did all white Americans—not just Southerners—profit from slavery?
- What facts or images stood out to you most? How did they make you feel?

NOTE

In *The New York Times Magazine* article "What Is Owed," Nikole Hannah-Jones (drawing on Ta-Nehisi Coates) writes: "Racism is the child of economic profiteering, not the father." During this lesson, help students understand that economic systems and the desire for wealth drove slavery, and that racist ideology grew from this as a rationale for the brutal practice.

2 Pruitt, Sarah. "5 Myths About Slavery." *History.com*, May 3, 2016. <https://www.history.com/news/5-myths-about-slavery>; National Humanities Center. "Enslavement/Plantation." <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/enslavement/enslavement.htm>.

3 Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Slavery Made America." *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/slavery-made-america/373288>.

5

Project the interactive map, "The Spread of U.S. Slavery, 1790–1860": <https://lincolnmullen.com/projects/slavery>. Briefly click on each decade (1790, 1800, 1810, etc.) so students can observe the expansion of slavery over this 70-year period. Roll the cursor over any area to show students how the statistics for particular counties come into view. In small groups, have students create a graph comparing two counties, one Northern and one Southern (include your own county if possible). Direct them to plot the total number of enslaved people for each county at three points in time—1800, 1830 and 1860. Give students access to laptops or tablets to gather the data, or post the data on the board if this technology is not available.

PART III

Human Beings for Sale (30 minutes)

6

Play the following audio clip of Fountain Hughes, a former enslaved person, reflecting on the buying and selling of Black people: "1619," Episode 1: The Fight for a True Democracy (10:40–11:31): <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html>.

(A transcription of the clip is included in the handout *Bought and Sold*.) Discuss the following:

- How did it feel to hear about a human being treated like an animal or other possession (chattel)?
- What mindset or motivation do you think it took for white people to dehumanize Black individuals in this way?
- What is your reaction to Fountain's comment that he "doesn't like to talk about it, because it makes people feel bad"? Why is it important that we talk about slavery today, more than 150 years after it was abolished?

NOTE

"1619" is a *New York Times* audio series that examines the long shadow of American slavery. Fountain Hughes (1848–1957) was born into slavery in Virginia and remained enslaved until the end of the Civil War, in 1865. His interview is part of *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, which contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery collected in the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

7

Share that one of the largest auctions of enslaved people was held on a racetrack near Savannah, Georgia, in 1859. Due to the steady rain throughout the two-day sale and devastation to the 436 affected families, the event came to be known as “the weeping time” because it was said that the heavens were weeping over the inhumanity. Distribute the handout *Bought and Sold* to each student. In small groups, instruct them to read at least two of the narratives from enslaved people and to review the slave auction illustration and poster on the following pages. Have them discuss and record their response to the following prompts:

- Describe what you imagine a slave auction was like—the sights, the sounds, the people present and their thoughts and feelings.
- What details did you notice in the interviews and images that reveal the inhumanity of slave auctions?
- Enslaved people called the Georgia auction “the weeping time.” What name would you give to the time in history in which we allowed the buying and selling of human beings?

8

Conclude the lesson by returning to the painting *To the Highest Bidder*. Share the following post from an online commentator (see step 1 for attribution): “Her gaze seems to both shame and challenge the viewer: How can you look at me, and know what is about to happen, and yet do nothing?” Have students choose one of the following voices and write a brief reflection in that voice, exploring what might have motivated people’s actions in response to slavery in the 19th century:

- I look at you and see only property to be bought and sold...
- I look at you and it pains me, but there is nothing I can do...
- I look at you and feel a sense of personal responsibility to do something...

Discussion Questions

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Slavery Made America." *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/slavery-made-america/373288>.
- + Desmond, Matthew. "In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation." *NY Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html>.
- + Hannah-Jones, Nikole. "What Is Owed." *NY Times Magazine*, June 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/24/magazine/reparations-slavery.html>.
- + History.com. "Roots: A History Revealed—The Slave Auction." February 27, 2017. YouTube video, 3:02. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2lwAd0qrWo>.
- + USA Today. "Slavery's explosive growth, in charts: How '20 and odd' became millions." <https://www.usatoday.com/pages/interactives/1619-african-slavery-history-maps-routes-interactive-graphic>.

- 1 What are the beliefs behind chattel slavery that made it so terribly brutal?
- 2 What do you think were the primary motivations leading white individuals and the U.S. government to support slavery for over 200 years?
- 3 What does it mean to dehumanize a person or group? Why did chattel slavery *have to* dehumanize Black people?
- 4 How did enslaved and other Black people resist being dehumanized?
- 5 How did it feel to hear/read interviews in which former enslaved people share their experiences in their own words?
- 6 How do you think slavery might still affect our country more than 150 years after the Civil War? Is there anything ordinary people or the government can do to deal with these problems today?

Lesson Extensions

- ↗ Have students listen to the section of "1619," the New York Times audio series, that explores the cotton economy and its relationship to slavery: Episode 2—The Economy That Slavery Built (7:05-13:35): <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html>.
- ↗ Have students listen to additional audio clips from *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. The interview of Aunt Phoebe Boyd (Dunnaville, Virginia, 1935) includes a section on picking cotton: https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1984011_afs25752b.
- ↗ Have students research the ways in which the economics of the textile industry continue to encourage human rights violations in today's world. For example, see the PBS/POV film "Made in L.A." and accompanying lesson plan on "Labor Practices in the Garment Industry": <http://archive.pov.org/madeinla>.



To the Highest Bidder by Harry Herman Roseland (1906)



Oil on canvas, 60 x 32 in., Oprah Winfrey collection, picture source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/eoskins/27936673892>



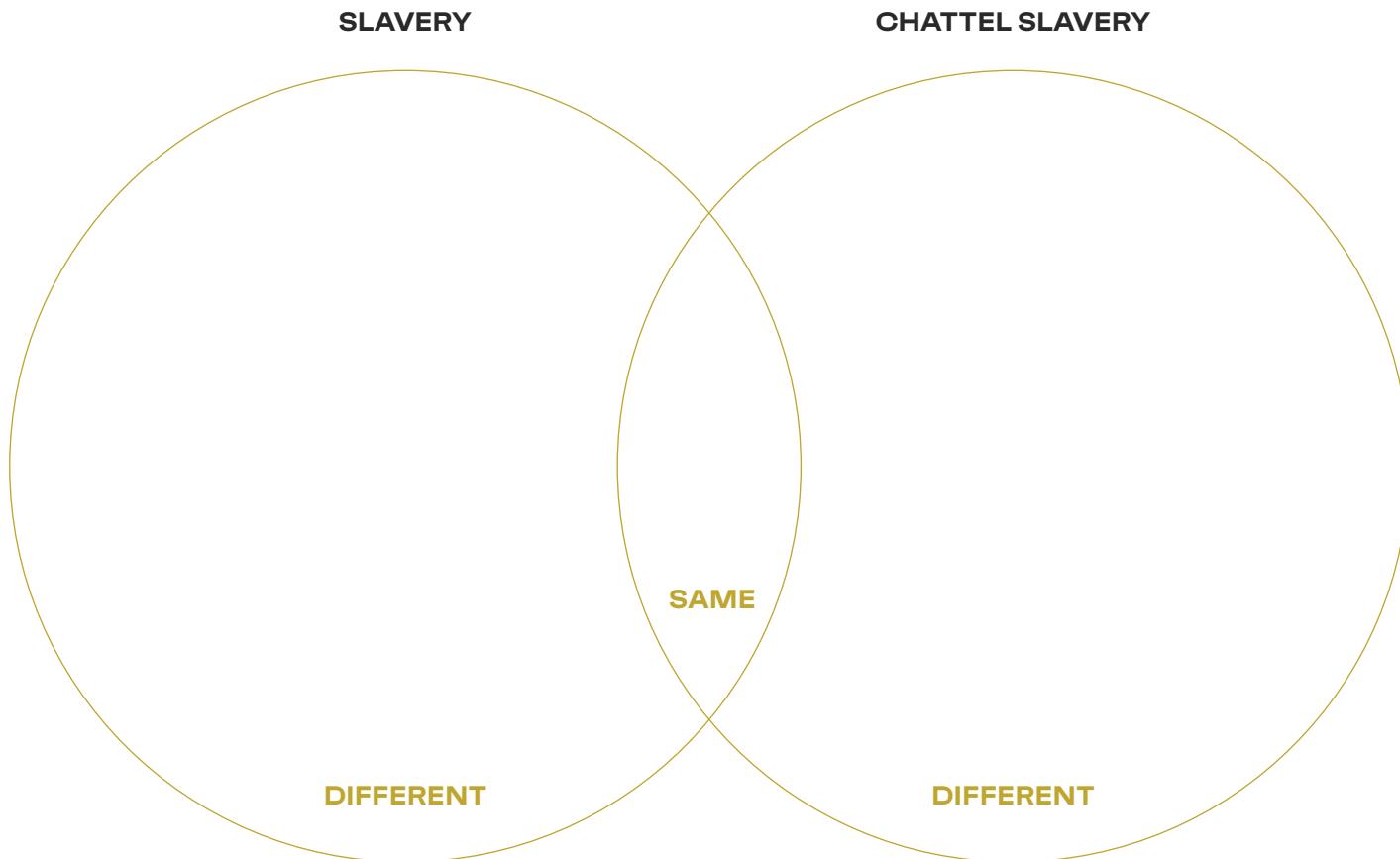
Chattel Slavery

NAME: _____

Read the definitions below. Then fill in the Venn diagram with examples of ways in which the types of slavery described are similar and different.

SLAVERY: Slavery is a condition in which a person is owned by another person. Slavery was historically practiced in the ancient world when conquerors would enslave the people they defeated. Very often, enslaved males were murdered and females worked for the conquerors. Enslaved people were owned, but had the ability to become a part of the community through marriage and/or owning property. This type of slavery was not primarily driven by profit. Enslaved people were seen as humans of a lower status.

CHATTEL SLAVERY: Chattel slavery is a condition in which enslaved Africans were viewed as personal possessions, the equivalent of livestock or furniture. These “possessions” had a monetary worth and generated wealth for enslavers and for white society. In this system, enslaved people had no rights or privileges and were unlikely to be freed. This form of slavery was practiced in the Americas and was a result of the transatlantic slave trade. The enslaved people were seen as less than human.





Bought and Sold

The excerpts below are from "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938." The collection contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 photographs of former enslaved people, and can be found at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection>.

Fountain Hughes, Baltimore, Maryland, Age 101 (at time of interview)

"My name is Fountain Hughes. I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia. My grandfather belonged to Thomas Jefferson. My grandfather was 115 years old when he died, and now I am 101 year old. Now in my boy days, we were slaves. We belonged to people. They'd sell us like they sell horses and cows and hogs and all like that, have an auction bench. Put you up on the bench and bid on you the same as you're bidding on cattle, you know. But still, I don't like to talk about it, because it makes people feel bad."



Hannah Travis, Little Rock, Arkansas, Age 73

"Didn't nobody have any rights then. They would just put 'em up on a block and auction them off. The one that give the most he would take 'em. Didn't nobody have no schooling only white folks. The white children would go to school but they didn't allow [Black children] to go."

Will Ann Rogers, Brinkley, Arkansas, Age 70

"When ma was a young woman, she said they put her on a block and sold her. They auctioned her off at Richmond, Virginia. When they sold her, her mother fainted or dropped dead, she never knew which. She wanted to go see her mother lying over there on the ground and the man what bought her wouldn't let her. He just took her on. Drove her off like cattle, I reckon. The man what bought her was Ephram Hester. That the last she ever knew of any of her folks. She say he mated 'em like stock so she had one boy. He livin' down here at Helena now. He is Mose Kent. He was born around Richmond, Virginia jes' lack dat she say."

Violet Shaw, West Memphis, Arkansas, Age 50

"I heard Grandma Katie Williams say she was put up on a high stump and auctioned off. She told how great-grandma cried and cried and never seen her no more. Grandma come from Oakland, Tennessee to Mississippi. Grandma took the two young children and left the other two with great-grandma. They took her from her husband. She never seen none of them again. After freedom she didn't know how to find them. She never could get trace of them. She tried. She never married no more."

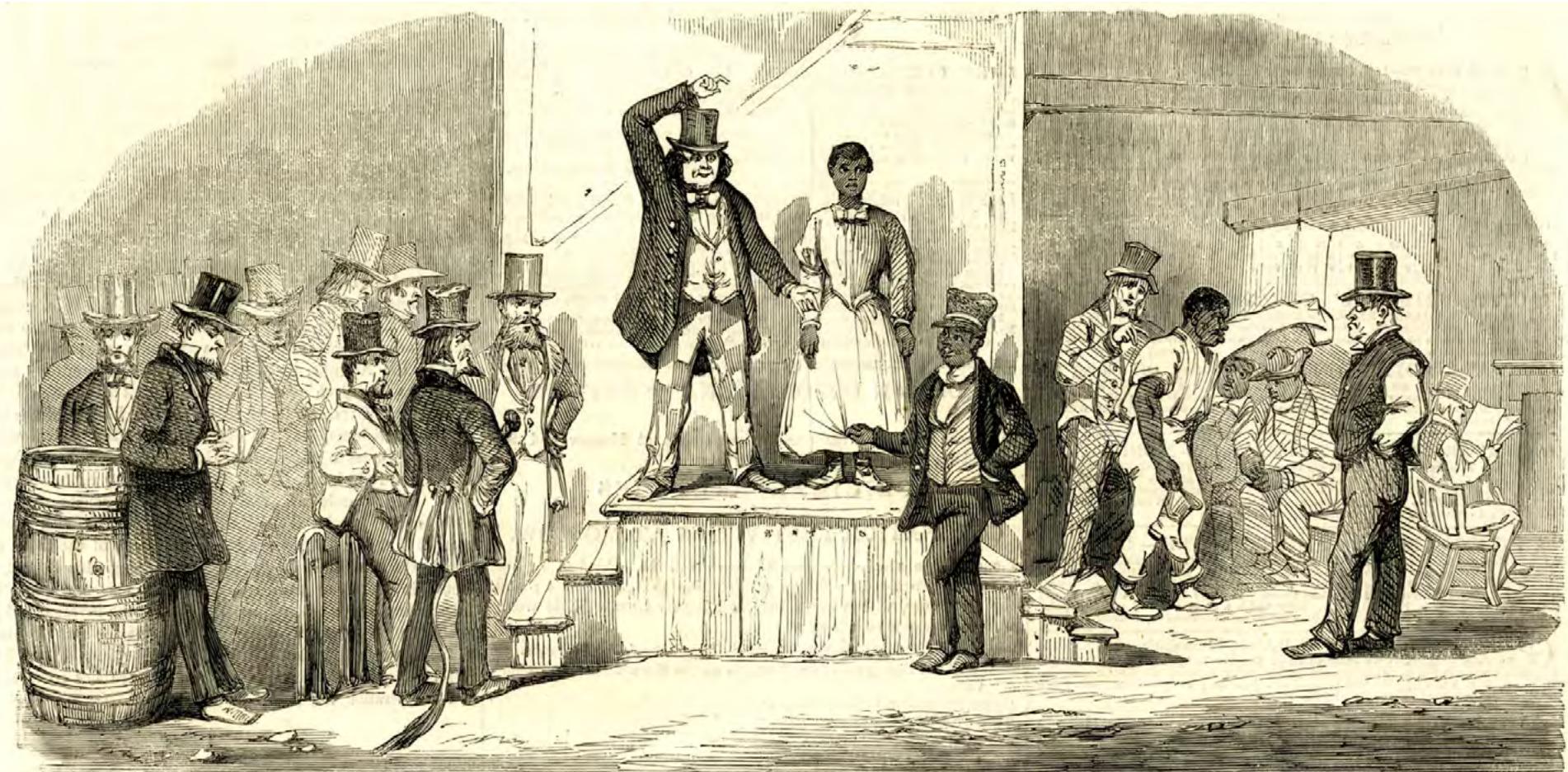
William Henry Rooks, Brinkley, Arkansas, Age 84

"Some of the white men had a hundred slaves and had plenty money. The war broke nearly all of them. The very worse thing I ever knewed about it was some white men raised hands to sell like they raise stock now. It was hard to have your child took off and never see or hear tell of it. Mean man buy it and beat it up. Some of them was drove off to be sold at auction at New Orleans. That was where some took them 'cause they could get big money for them."

Photograph of Fountain Hughes courtesy of The Jeffersonian newspaper, Towson, Maryland.
Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FountainHughes.jpg>



Bought and Sold: Slave Auction at Richmond, Virginia

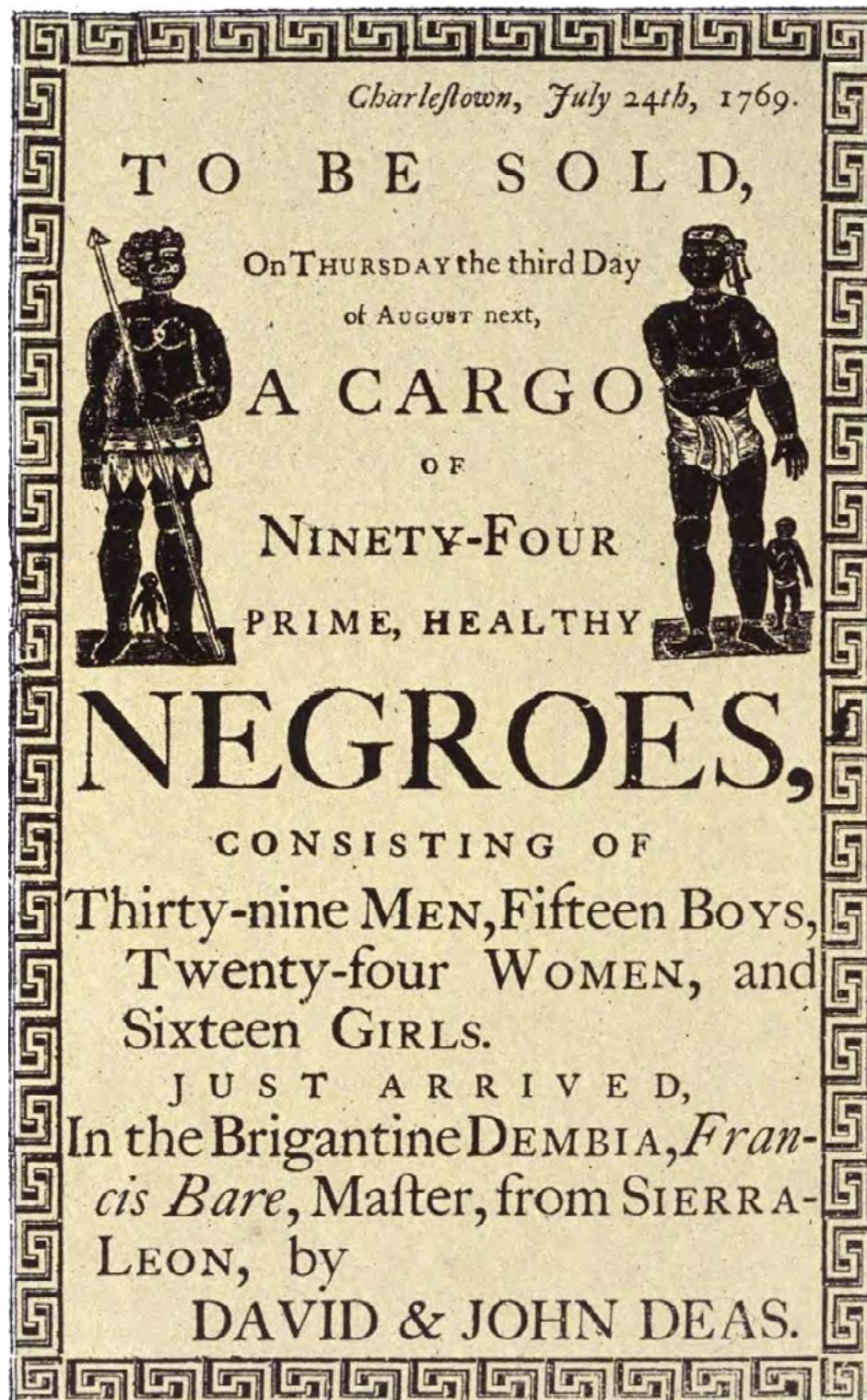


SLAVE AUCTION AT RICHMOND, VIRGINIA.

Author: VCU Libraries Commons; source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vcucommmons/17243519918>



Bought and Sold: Reproduction of a handbill advertising a slave auction in Charleston, South Carolina, 1769



SOURCE: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Slave_Auction_Ad.jpg