

SLAVERY'S ENDURING MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Why do the myths and misconceptions about slavery continue? How does the language we use to talk about difficult subjects perpetuate historical myths?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Analyze problematic language used to discuss slavery and formulate more appropriate alternatives.
- Explore persistent myths about slavery and how they perpetuate damaging beliefs and stereotypes.
- Interpret and explain arguments concerning misconceptions about slavery.
- Evaluate their own education with respect to slavery and enslaved people.



LEARNING STANDARDS

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



TIME NEEDED

60 minutes



MATERIALS

- *Slavery in the United States: Stubborn Myths in Brief* handout (one copy to read aloud)
- Copies of the following handouts, one set for each small group:
 - Myth: They Didn't Know Better*
 - Myth: They Were Powerless to Resist*
 - Myth: The Civil War was about States' Rights*



VOCABULARY

13 th Amendment	enslaved	manumission	states' rights
abolition	enslaver	plantation	Underground Railroad
chattel	fugitive	resistance/cultural and spiritual resistance	white supremacy
Confederate States of America	insurgency	secede/secession	
emancipation	Jim Crow		

Procedures

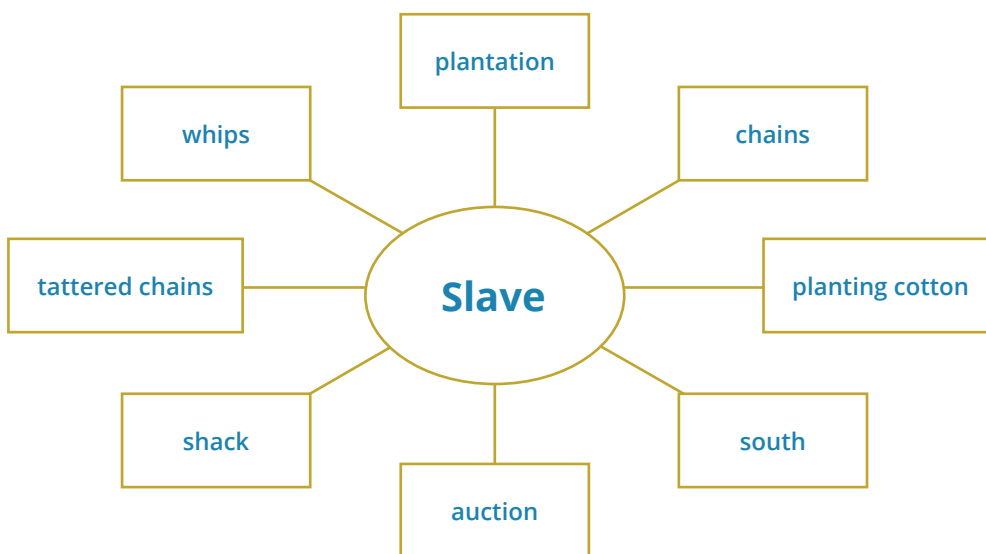
NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

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

What’s in a Word? (15 minutes)

- 1 Write “slave” on the board and ask students what words or phrases come to mind when they hear the term. Allow students to free associate and record their thoughts. Discuss patterns they notice and ask why the use of “slave” might be problematic. Comment that the term may (consciously or unconsciously) objectify and deny the humanity of enslaved individuals. Share that using “enslaved person” helps to emphasize that humanity.



NOTE

For more information on the evolution of language about slavery, see, for example, “A Proposal to Change the Words We Use When Talking About the Civil War” by Michael Landis in *Smithsonian Magazine*: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/proposal-change-vocabulary-we-use-when-talking-about-civil-war-180956547/#:~:text=I%20suggest%20that%20we%20drop,Confederate%20view%20of%20secession%20wherein.>

2

Post the additional slavery-related terms below and have students, in pairs or small groups, brainstorm why each might be problematic and generate possible alternatives. Gather the class and debrief using the information on the chart. Discuss the power of language and how shifting the ways in which we talk about slavery can disrupt damaging beliefs and prejudices. Make an agreement to use the most respectful terminology when discussing slavery, and post a chart with these terms in a prominent place in the classroom.

TERM	PROBLEM	ALTERNATIVE
Slave	Objectifies and dehumanizes the individual	Enslaved person
Slave master/owner/holder	Gives an air of authority and legality; conceals the cruelty	Enslaver
Runaway/fugitive/escapee	Emphasizes lawbreaking over claiming justice	Freedom seeker
Plantation	Calls to mind wealth, abundance, serene countryside	Labor camp

PART II

Myths and Knowledge Gaps (45 minutes)

3

Engage students in a “myth or fact” exercise on slavery. Select at least three statements from the handout *Slavery in the United States: Stubborn Myths in Brief*. Read each aloud, one at a time, and ask students to discuss whether they think it’s a myth or fact, and why. Choose one of the following methods to conduct this exercise:

- Designate one end of the room as “myth” and the other end as “fact.” Have students stand somewhere along this continuum in response to each statement. As a class, discuss their rationale for each response.
- In small groups of three, have students discuss each statement and try to come to a consensus on whether it is a myth or fact.

- 4 Reveal that all of the statements are myths, and clarify those that are surprising or confusing to students. Note that there are stubborn falsehoods and knowledge gaps about slavery that persist in our society due to the oversimplification of history and our country's difficulty in facing the legacy of white supremacy and racism.
- 5 Tell students they will read about one myth in more depth in order to "fill in" their own knowledge gaps. Have students choose one of the topics below and form small groups based on their choice. Distribute copies of the corresponding handouts to each group. Instruct groups to read the handout collaboratively and engage in a "roundtable discussion" using some of the questions that follow the reading. Students' answer to the first question should be recorded. They can then choose from among the remaining questions as they continue the discussion.
 - *Myth: They Didn't Know Better*
 - *Myth: They Were Powerless to Resist*
 - *Myth: The Civil War was about States' Rights*
- 6 Use the "jigsaw" method to create new groups in which there is a mix of students who have read different handouts. Have students share a summary of their topic and the personal response they constructed (question one).
- 7 Reconvene the class to debrief the activity, using the discussion questions on the next page.

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>.
- + Heim, Joe. "The missing pieces of America's education." *Washington Post*, August 28, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/08/28/historians-slavery-myths/?arc404=true>.
- + Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. New York: The New Press, 1995.
- + Southern Poverty Law Center. *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, February 2018. https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/tt_hard_history_american_slavery.pdf.
- + Stewart, Nikita. "We are committing educational malpractice: Why slavery is mistaught—and worse—in American schools," *New York Times*, August 19, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/19/magazine/slavery-american-schools.html>.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What did this lesson reveal about your own knowledge gaps related to slavery?
- 2 How do the issues presented in the handouts help to humanize enslaved people? Why is it important to do so?
- 3 Why do you think myths about slavery are so lasting? How do you think they affect our society?
- 4 How does the language we use to talk about slavery feed into those myths?
- 5 How are myths about slavery connected to racism today?
- 6 What other topics get left out or misrepresented in the school curriculum? What do you think can be done to change this?

Lesson Extensions

- Have students create their own "myths and facts" survey about slavery and conduct it (nonjudgmentally) with their peers, family and community members. After analyzing the results, have students write an article for the school website or newspaper about the findings and their recommendations for improving education about slavery at their school.
- Challenge students to examine the history textbooks used at their school and evaluate how well or how poorly they address the topic of slavery and enslaved people.
- Assign students to review the Southern Poverty Law Center report *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*: <https://www.splcenter.org/20180131/teaching-hard-history>. Direct them to focus on the "Executive Summary" or choose one part of the "How Slavery is Taught Today" section. Have them create a brief activity or presentation that responds to one of the problems discussed and present it to their classmates or peers in other classes.



Slavery in the United States: Stubborn Myths in Brief

1 Slavery was mainly a problem in the South.

MYTH: Slavery existed in the North as well. For example, New Jersey's enslaved population was more than 12,000 in 1800, and there were hundreds of enslaved people in New Jersey at the end of the Civil War.¹ Many of those who did not own enslaved people profited from business, banking and other economic activities centered on slavery. Slavery was a national problem.

2 Many supporters of slavery didn't know better—it was a different time.

MYTH: For centuries, many people understood and fought against the immorality of slavery. Many of those who participated in the enslavement of others acknowledged its evils, but did so anyway for convenience and financial gain. Thomas Jefferson, himself a slaveholder, wrote in the first draft of the Declaration of Independence that slavery was a "cruel war against nature itself." That passage was ultimately struck.

3 Though most enslaved people suffered, many were treated well and were content.

MYTH: The ownership of human beings as personal property is inherently an abuse. It is a fundamental contradiction to be enslaved and treated well. Do you think any enslaved person could have been truly happy about their situation?

4 Most enslaved people were powerless to resist slavery.

MYTH: Enslaved people rebelled in large and small ways every day—by escaping to freedom, learning to read, leading revolts, writing about their experiences, joining abolition movements, engaging in work slow-downs and other forms of sabotage, educating their children and more.

5 Technically, the Civil War was fought over issues including states' rights and taxation.

MYTH: Slavery was the core issue—every state that seceded from the Union notes slavery as the main reason in its secession documents.²

6 While slavery was horrible, Black people have had freedom for most of our country's history.

MYTH: Slavery existed in what is today the United States for more than 300 years;³ emancipation occurred a little more than 150 years ago. Since that time, structural racism has continued to severely limit opportunities for Black Americans.

7 In the United States, only Black people were enslaved.

MYTH: Native American people were also enslaved in the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁴

8 The Civil War and the 13th Amendment put an end to slavery in the United States.

MYTH: Today, hundreds of thousands of people are subjected to forced labor and other forms of "modern slavery" in the United States.⁵ Globally, human trafficking and slavery remain grave present-day problems.

1 Hennelly, Robert. "Secret history of a northern slave state: How slavery was written into New Jersey's DNA. *Salon*, JULY 29, 2015. https://www.salon.com/2015/07/29/secret_history_of_a_northern_slave_state_how_slavery_was_written_into_new_jerseys_dna.

2 Pierce, John. "The Reasons for Secession." American Battlefield Trust. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/reasons-secession>.

3 Ponti, Crystal. "America's History of Slavery Began Long Before Jamestown." History.com, August 26, 2019. <https://www.history.com/news/american-slavery-before-jamestown-1619>.

4 Onion, Rebecca. "America's Other Original Sin." *Slate*, January 18, 2016. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/2016/01/native_american_slavery_historians_uncover_a_chilling_chapter_in_u_s_history.html.

5 Helmore, Edward. "Over 400,000 people living in 'modern slavery' in US, report finds. *The Guardian*, July 19, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/19/us-modern-slavery-report-global-slavery-index>.



Myth: They Didn't Know Better

In 2019, South Bend, Indiana, mayor and presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg was criticized for the following comment, originally made on a children's television show in 2014: "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." Though his intentions may have been positive, Buttigieg was rightly called out for continuing the myth that people during the time of slavery didn't know better. The difficult truth is that people did know better, and 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 on the Caribbean islands in the 1490s, and so did protest against its cruelty. One Spanish missionary, Bartolomé de las Casas, gave up his land and the enslaved people he had been granted after about a decade of witnessing the brutality of enslaved labor. In 1514, he begged the Spanish Crown to end the abuses of slavery, later writing that the treatment of Taíno natives forced to mine gold and perform other labor amounted to atrocities "to which no chronicle could ever do justice."¹ 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 a new constitution,

they were very much aware of and involved in debates about this cruel and inhuman practice.

In his first draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote a 168-word passage about slavery in which he called it an "assemblage of horrors." Blaming slavery in the American colonies on the British king, he wrote: "He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred



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

rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither." The passage was debated and dropped by the Second Continental Congress, attended by John Hancock, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. The final declaration included the famous phrase, "all

men are created equal," but did not recognize the inequality of slavery. Jefferson himself enslaved over 600 human beings in his lifetime.

The Founding Fathers differed on the subject of slavery. Like Jefferson, James Madison felt the practice was "dishonorable to the National character," yet he enslaved over 100 people on his Virginia plantation and in the White House. Benjamin Franklin and John Jay also enslaved people, but freed them as their anti-slavery positions grew stronger. Franklin founded the Pennsylvania Abolition Society and Jay fought to outlaw the slave trade in New York. George Washington became a supporter of abolition later in his life, but only freed the enslaved people he owned in his will. John Adams, Samuel Adams, Thomas Paine and Alexander Hamilton were always against slavery and didn't own enslaved people (though Samuel Adams and Alexander Hamilton may have held title to enslaved people for a time). Hamilton was involved in efforts to abolish slavery and supported the African Free School, which educated the children of enslaved and free Black people.

Slavery was a hotly contested subject in the U.S. in the 18th and 19th centuries, and at the forefront of public discourse. Some people may have closed their eyes to its cruelty, explained it away or defended it out of greed or convenience; but it would have been impossible for them to not know better because of the times they lived in.

¹ Peter Nabokov, "Indians, Slaves, and Mass Murder: The Hidden History." *The New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2016, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/11/24/indians-slaves-and-mass-murder-the-hidden-history>.



Roundtable Discussion

MYTH: THEY DIDN'T KNOW BETTER

- 1 After reading about this myth in more depth, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who said, "Many supporters of slavery didn't know better—it was a different time?"

- 2 Do you know about people or groups, in addition to those in the reading, who fought against slavery? If so, who? If not, why do you think this is a knowledge gap?
- 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 acknowledged slavery was wrong?
- 4 Based on the Founding Fathers' behaviors, do you think it would have been possible for average people in those times to be *unaware* of arguments for and against slavery? Explain.
- 5 Are there activities we engage in today that may be looked at as immoral or wrong by people in the future?
- 6 How has this reading made you think about how you have been taught about slavery in the U.S.?

SOURCES:

Ambrose, Stephen E. "Founding Fathers and Slaveholders." *Smithsonian Magazine*. November 2002. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/founding-fathers-and-slaveholders-72262393>.

Dussel, Enrique. "Bartolomé de Las Casas." *Britannica*, June 27, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bartolome-de-Las-Casas>.

Williams, Yohuru. "Why Thomas Jefferson's Anti-Slavery Passage Was Removed from the Declaration of Independence." *History.com*. June 29, 2020. <https://www.history.com/news/declaration-of-independence-deleted-anti-slavery-clause-jefferson>.

IMAGE CITATION:

Ferris, Jean Leon Gerome, *Writing the Declaration of Independence*, 1776, oil on canvas, United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Writing_the_Declaration_of_Independence_1776_cph.3g09904.jpg.



Myth: 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.”¹ 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 comparatively rare, and overshadow the more important story of Black resistance—the smaller, everyday ways in which enslaved people refused to accept their



Jim Crow

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 of 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.”²



In Savannah, Georgia, enslaved people resisted by constructing their own church—the First African Baptist Church—and building a secret passage for run-aways beneath the floorboards. Air holes were drilled into the floor and disguised by forming them into an African prayer symbol.

1 Franklin W. Knight, “Slavery,” in Colin A. Palmer, ed., *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History* (New York: Thompson/Gale, 2006), 2066.

2 Heim, Joe. “The missing pieces of America’s education.” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/08/28/historians-slavery-myths/?arc404=true>.



Roundtable Discussion

MYTH: THEY WERE POWERLESS TO RESIST

- 1 After reading about this myth in more depth, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who said, “Most enslaved people were powerless to resist slavery”?

- 2 How does a focus on resistance remind us of enslaved people’s humanity?
- 3 Why is it limiting to focus mostly on escape and rebellion when talking about resistance?
- 4 What were more common forms of resistance?
- 5 How did enslaved people demonstrate *cultural* and *spiritual* resistance?
- 6 How has this reading made you think about how you have been taught about slavery in the U.S.?

SOURCES:

Gates, Henry Louis Jr. “Did African-American Slaves Rebel?” PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/did-african-american-slaves-rebel>.

Jeffries, Hasan Kwame. “Yes, there was rebellion. But smaller acts of resistance defined the daily lives of the enslaved.” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/08/28/historians-slavery-myths/?arc404=true>.

Jim Crow Museum. “Who was Jim Crow?” <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/who/index.htm>.

Sweet, James H. Slave “Resistance.” National Humanities Center. http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/slaveresist.htm#_ednref1.

IMAGE CITATION:

Jim Crow: Popular Graphic Arts, Jim Crow, etching and ink, United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ds.00886>.

Photo Credit, First African Baptist Church: Elissa Zylbershlag ©2016



Myth: The Civil War was about States' Rights

In a poll by the Pew Research Center¹ 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 chief cause. Even teachers regularly debate this issue. 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 exercised 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 those powers granted 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 undone. This was the only significant "state right" that was being debated at the time. They accused free states (in the north and west) of interfering with their rights on a number of 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 bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and 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 their economies. Mississippi went so far as to say that agricultural work in the hot South depended on slavery because "none



President Lincoln Entering Richmond, VA, with Emancipated Slaves (April 1865)

but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical 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 have attempted to reframe the main cause of the conflict by focusing on states' rights or other issues, such as taxes and tariffs. This may be because it's painful to accept the truth that millions fought to uphold a cruel and inhuman system. It may be because people want to believe the best about their state or region. Or it may be due to prejudice. The historical evidence makes it clear, however, that the Civil War was fought mainly over the issue of slavery, and that the Confederate cause was the continuation of white supremacy.

¹ Heimlich, Russell. "What Caused the Civil War?" Pew Research Center. May 18, 2011. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2011/05/18/what-caused-the-civil-war>.



Roundtable Discussion

MYTH: THE CIVIL WAR WAS ABOUT STATES' RIGHTS

- 1 After reading about this myth in more depth, how would you respond (in your own words) to someone who said, "Technically, the Civil War was fought over states' rights"?

- 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 unwilling to accept that slavery was the main cause of the Civil War?

- 5 How has this reading made you think about how you have been taught about slavery in the U.S.?

SOURCES:

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "What This Cruel War Was Over." *The Atlantic*. June 22, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/what-this-cruel-war-was-over/396482>.

Heimlich, Russell. "What Caused the Civil War?" Pew Research Center. May 18, 2011. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2011/05/18/what-caused-the-civil-war>.

Flanagin, Jake. "For the last time, the American Civil War was not about states' rights." Quartz. April 8, 2015. <https://qz.com/378533/for-the-last-time-the-american-civil-war-was-not-about-states-rights>.

Loewen, James. "Getting the Civil War Right." *Teaching Tolerance*, Issue 40. Fall 2011. <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2011/getting-the-civil-war-right>.

Pierce, John. "The Reasons for Secession." American Battlefields Trust. https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/reasons-secession?gclid=Cj0KCQjw7N-j5BRCZARIsABwxDKKIGMVLmGHatQFUtCx3Mh61Ri7G-2FPZXmP0O3bxMWvb2MhAkWVCwaAvDYEAALw_wcB

IMAGE CITATION:

Nast, Thomas, *President Lincoln Entering Richmond (April 1865)*, blue pencil, February 24, 1866, (Harper's Weekly), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Lincoln_Entering_Richmond_\(April_1865\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Lincoln_Entering_Richmond_(April_1865).jpg).

What was the significance of the Amistad rebellion for enslaved people and for all Americans?

In February 1839, Portuguese slave hunters captured hundreds of African people in Mendeland, in what is today Sierra Leone, and transported them across the Atlantic for sale at a Cuban slave market. Many nations had outlawed the international slave trade by this time, but it was a profitable industry that persisted illegally. In Havana, Spanish plantation owners Pedro Montes and Jose Ruiz purchased 53 of the captives—including four children—and forced them aboard the schooner *La Amistad*.

As the ship sailed toward the site of the enslavers' plantations in Puerto Principe, Cuba, the Africans feared for their lives. Led by Sengbe Pieh (also known as Joseph Cinqué), they organized a revolt. They broke free from their chains, killing the captain and ship's cook and demanding that the surviving crew members return them to Africa. Though initially sailing east, the Spanish crew attempted to deceive the Africans by reversing course. After 63 days, the ship ended up near the coast of Long Island, New York, where U.S. naval officers apprehended and escorted it to Connecticut. Charged with murder and piracy, the African captives were imprisoned in New Haven. The case—and the fate of the African prisoners—garnered immediate and worldwide interest.

Though the original charges were soon dropped, claims were filed by Montes and Ruiz, asserting the captives were their lawful property. President Martin Van Buren, under pressure from Spain, wished to extradite the Africans to Cuba. In response, abolitionist groups organized and mounted a vigorous defense on behalf of the Africans, contending that they were native-born, free Africans who had been illegally abducted and transported under the U.S. Act Prohibiting Importation

of Slaves of 1807. Former president John Quincy Adams would ultimately represent the Amistad captives before the U.S. Supreme Court.

During the 18 months that the case made its way through U.S. courts, the African people worked with a translator and studied English so they could tell their story in their own words. They became powerful advocates on their own behalf, testifying in court and writing letters demanding their freedom. In one letter to his lawyer, John Quincy Adams, 12-year-old Kale—the lone boy aboard the Amistad—wrote: “Dear friend Mr. Adams, you have children, you have friends, you love them, you feel very sorry if Mendi people come and take all to Africa... [Americans] say we make you free. If they make us free they tell truth, if they not make us free they tell lie. If America...no give us free we sorry...for America people great deal because God punish liars...Dear friend, we want you to know how we feel.”

On March 9, 1841, the U.S. Supreme Court found, in a 7-1 decision, that the Africans had been illegally captured, could not be considered slaves and should be returned to their homeland. The U.S., however, did not provide the funds for repatriation. The Africans and their abolitionist supporters spent the next eight months touring the U.S. to raise the necessary resources, and in November 1841, the 35 surviving Amistad captives set sail for Africa.

While the Amistad decision did not hold that slavery in its entirety was wrong, it spotlighted the humanity of African people and the inherent inhumanity of the slave trade, and of treating human beings as chattel. In this way, the 53 African captives played a critically important role in the battle against slavery in the U.S.