Shaping the Constitution
RESOURCES FROM THE LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Lesson Plan: Life as an Enslaved People

Primary Sources:

Advertisement for the Sale of Eleven Slaves, February 17, 1812
Charles Doe Wrote to His Family, February 22, 1850 (excerpt I)
Charles Doe Wrote to His Family, February 22, 1850 (excerpt II)
Bill of Sale for Two Slaves, January 25, 1854

Understanding Goal:

Slavery was an economic institution in which the worth of a slave was based on the benefit the slave provided to the slave owner, not on the human value of the person. As slaves, they were unable to reap any financial benefit from their service (with a few exceptions) and had little or no control over their lives. As property their lives were determined by their owner(s).

Investigative Question:

How was the value of a slave determined?
How did the value of a slave influence treatment of that slave by the slave owner?
What concerns did slaves have about being sold?
What effect could slavery and the slave trade have on families?
How did other businesses benefit from the slave trade?

Standards Addressed:

Virginia Standards of Learning:

USI.9 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the causes, major events, and effects of the Civil War by
c) describing the effects of war from the perspectives of Union and Confederate soldiers (including black soldiers), women, and slaves.

CE.1 The student will develop the social studies skills citizenship requires, including the ability to
a) examine and interpret primary and secondary source documents;

VUS.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis and responsible citizenship, including the ability to
h) interpret the significance of excerpts from famous speeches and other documents.

VUS.6 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the major events during the first half of the nineteenth century by
a) describing the cultural, economic, and political issues that divided the nation, including slavery, the abolitionist and woman's suffrage movements, and the role of the states in the Union.

National History Standards
Era 4 - 2D The student understands the rapid growth of "the peculiar institution" after 1800 and the varied experiences of African Americans under slavery.

Overview:

In this lesson students will examine documents that explore the economics of the institution of slavery and how the life of a slave was determined by others.

Length of Activity:

One class, or 45–50 minutes of a block class

Materials Needed:

- Advertisement for the Sale of Eleven Slaves, February 17, 1812 (enough copies for each member of Group 1)
- Charles Doe Wrote to His Family, February 22, 1850 (excerpt I) (enough copies for each member of Group 2)
- Charles Doe Wrote to His Family, February 22, 1850 (excerpt II) (enough copies for each member of Group 3)
- Bill of Sale for Two Slaves, January 25, 1854 (enough copies for each member of Group 4)
- Document Analysis copies for each student

Teacher Actions:

The teacher will want to read the background information on the primary sources at the Library of Virginia's Shaping the Constitution Web site.

1. Preactivity bell ringer: Select an item that students will be familiar with, but not one they know well–you want their answers to vary. For example, a small household appliance or an electric tool. Place the item in a location where all the students can see it. Perhaps even allow them to get a closer look. On the board write the question: How much is this item worth? How did you determine its value? Once they have answered the questions ask them to share their responses with the class. Did everyone select the same or a similar value? Why would one person place a higher value on the item than another? Does it have to do with need, or rarity, or desirability? After the discussion, ask the students if they can think of a person who might put a higher value on the item. If so, who and why? Next brainstorm a list of characteristics that can determine value of an object (it is rare, many people desire it, it makes life easier, etc). Now ask the question, how would you determine the value of a human being? Tell them that you want them to think about this question as they complete the activity.
2. Divide the class into 4 groups. These initial groups may be large so you may want to have two groups Ones, two group Twos, etc. Give everyone a copy of the Document Analysis sheet. Then give each group enough copies of their document for each member. In this first group students are to complete the questions for THEIR document. They will be responsible for explaining their document in the next phase. As they work through their documents' questions, walk around the room and facilitate the discussion. Did they notice that the Bill of Sale is a preprinted document created by a bookseller. What does this tell them about the practice of buying and selling slaves? What about the image on the advertisement? This is a woodcut print, and would cost some money to produce. What does that tell them about how often the printer may have made similar posters? Why would Charles Doe spend so much of his letter home to Massachusetts discussing the lives of slaves? How might his interpretation of what he saw be different from that of a southerner? How might it be different from that of a slave?
3. Once each group has completed the portion of the chart for their document, regroup students into groups of 4 – with one student from each of the original groups, you may have them count off within

their groups (one through ten or whatever number is in the group) – and then have all the Ones form group, all the twos, all the fours, etc. Within these new groups of 4, each person is responsible for sharing the information he or she has with the rest of the group. Next within that group members answer the questions on the back of their Document Analysis sheets. The members should share their documents with the rest of the group to help explain their answers for the chart.

4. As a class discuss each group's conclusions.

Analysis:

For older students: Sadly, the trafficking of people did not end with the American Civil War and the 13th Amendment. According to the United Nation's International Labor Organization Estimate, 12.3 million adults and children were forced into labor or sexual servitude in 2008. More than 170 countries were involved. The onset of the global financial crisis has brought about an increase in global trafficking. For more information you can check out this Web site, http://www.humantrafficking.org/ . Organize a classroom debate over how much the United States should be involved in stopping human trafficking. Use the Internet to research the history of American involvement and the arguments for and against U.S. participation in the prevention of forced labor. Have students research why some countries would allow this to happen within their borders.

For younger students: Reading stories of slavery can be very upsetting for adults, even more so for school-age children. Discussing humans as an economic variable removes the humanity from an already inhumane topic. Allow students an opportunity to discuss how these documents have made them feel. Have a discussion about the human element of slavery. How does Doe's description of the slave auction make you feel? How would it feel to have someone inspect you for your worth? Can you do the work they want you to do? What if you have a family where you currently work and are now being sold to another slave owner? How would you maintain your family? Have the students write a poem, song, or diary entry reflecting these feelings. They should use the information they have gathered from the documents to add a feeling of truth to their piece.

EXCERPT

Charles Doe Wrote to His Family, February 22, 1850

In a letter dated February 22nd, 1850, Charles Doe writes to his family in Massachusetts of his visit to his brother Thomas's family in Danville, Virginia. In the letter he comments on the musical abilities of his brother's family, in particular the daughters, and on the birth of a new niece. Doe also makes several observations of the slaves in his brother's household and about other slaves he sees in his travels in Danville.

I. The following excerpt describes the events surrounding the illness and death of a valued slave.

"A black, belonging to one of the doctors, staying two or three nights with Thomas' negroes, was taken sick, & died here a fortnight ago. I had opportunity to see how slaves are treated in sickness & death. This one was a valuable one, Worth $800 or $900, aged 30, engaged to be married soon, attached to his master & beloved by his master, & all the negroes. He was sick but 5 days, was attended by his master & two other doctors & watched by 2 negroes constantly. He was laid decently in a plain black coffin, carried to the grave in a wagon & followed by 60 negroes on foot in the road, his master on sidewalk before the corpse. The blacks had a prayer meeting at the house before starting, & again at the grave, conducting it wholly themselves. The ministers attend at their funerals when requested, but they are not generally requested. The whole ceremony was as solemn silent & impressive as I have witnessed anywhere. The graveyard is divided by a fence, one part being for whites, & the other for blacks. This separation in death would probably suggest to an abolitionist, or any searching for unpleasant things connected with slavery, that the fence might not be so hereafter. There are but a very few monumental stones in the part of the whites, & none in the other, but the grass grows as green in one as in the other."
(Further in the letter, Doe describes a slave auction he attended.)
"Have attended an Auction, at which 3 negroes, mother, child & a man were sold. All sales of negroes are attended by many traders, whose business is to cary them to the south, mostly to S. Carolina & Georgia & Alabama. They generally have a great aversion to going South, & consequently are in great fear at the sales, of being bought by a Trader. Those, whose sale I attended, were bought to live in the neighborhood and were satisfied, but it is far from a pleasant sight at first to see negroes sold, as most of them <u>are</u>, in this way. Knowing not what their fate may be, liable to be bought by a hard master, or sent South, their fear of the worst, & anxious suspense while about to be sold, tormenting them naturally timid, they form a scene on the block, which is hard to be understood without being seen."

II. Doe concludes his letter with a description of a slave church service and a comparison of black and white church music.

"There are generally services in 2 or 3 of the 4 churches, in the morning, at which very few blacks attend. In the afternoon, there are services in 1 or 2 of the churches only, & no whites are present at them, unless from curiosity. I went to the Methodist last Sabbath afternoon. There were three or four hundred blacks there, observing the custom of the whites, The women being on one side and in the front and middle and the men occupying the back seats & one side. There were 6 whites in the gallery– The minister preached a good sermon, with a few ideas peculiarly adapted and addressed to the special condition and duties of the congregation. Their advantages were contra[sted] with those of heathen millions in a very good manner. If he had gone into particulars, & shown how much better morally, mentally, & physically, they are than the free blacks in Africa at this day, & also shown how much superior their prospects are, supposing they remain slaves forever, to any natural expectations that can be formed of their native brothers in Africa, he would have done no more than his duty. The greatest difference between this & a meeting of whites, is the singing. The music of the whites is shocking, but of the blacks, the best I ever heard without instruments. The contrast of music in forenoon & afternoon, is greater than the difference of color in the singers. The black have almost universally good voices, quick ears, & great love for music. Not one of them knows a note. Their national instrument is the Banjo; some of them play on the violin. The whites play the Banjo a great deal, at least as much as the northerners do the flute. But the flute is hardly known here."

Document Analysis Sheet

	Advertisement for the Sale of Eleven Slaves, February 17, 1812	**Charles Doe Wrote to His Family, February 22, 1850 (excerpt I)**	**Charles Doe Wrote to His Family, February 22, 1850 (excerpt II)**	**Bill of Sale for Two Slaves, January 25, 1854**
Who created this source?				
Who (or what) is featured in it?				
Who is the intended audience for this piece? For whom is it written?				
Why was the document written? What is its purpose?				
Are there illustrations on the document? If so, what do they tell you?				
List two things the document tells you about slave life.				

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List two things the document tells you about life of slave owners.				
What evidence in the document illustrates the economic importance of slaves for the slave owner?				

Use the evidence in your completed table to answer the following questions.

1. What do these documents tell us about the economics of slavery?

2. What makes one slave more valuable than another? What types of things make a slave less valuable?

3. How do the buyers at a slave auction decide whom to buy? What fears might a slave have at an auction?

4. PREDICT – How will the elimination of slavery affect the economics of the South?