Lesson Plan: An Overview of American Slavery

Primary Sources:

Three Slaves Steering a Bateau, 1798, Watercolor
An Advertisement for the Sale of Eleven Slaves, February 17, 1812
Slave Cabin, Built ca. 1830, Photograph
Written Permission for Amy, an Enslaved Woman, to Join a Church, August 13, 1838
Song About Henry Box Brown's Escape from Slavery, 1849
Bill of Sale for Two Slaves, January 25, 1854
Dred Scott and His Family, June 27, 1857
Carte-de-Visite of Waiting for the Hour, 1863
Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863
Emancipation, Lithograph, 1865
Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, 1865

Africans on Board the Slave Bark Wildfire, 1860*
Humans for Sale, 1774*
Victorious Soldiers Return, 1865*

*Use the links below to locate more information on these items at the Library of Congress's Web site:
African American Odyssey, Slavery—The Peculiar Institution: The Atlantic Slave Trade
African American Odyssey Exhibition, Slavery—The Peculiar Institution: Flights to Freedom

Understanding Goal:
Slavery was legal in the United States for two hundred years and ended with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment.

Investigative Question:
How did slavery in the United States change over time?

Overview:
In this lesson students will examine documents and artwork that explore the historical events and their effects on the American slavery timeline.
Background information:
Slavery in the United States was a form of forced labor. It was a dehumanizing institution which made legal the ownership of one man by another. The slave was considered the property of his master, was forced to work for little if any compensation, and had few if any legal rights. Slavery was abolished in the United States by the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

Length of Activity:
1 class period

Standards Addressed:
Virginia Standards of Learning:

VS.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis and responsible citizenship, including the ability to
   a) identify and interpret artifacts and primary and secondary source documents to understand events in history;
   b) determine cause-and-effect relationships;
   c) compare and contrast historical events;
   d) draw conclusions and make generalizations;
   e) make connections between past and present;
   f) sequence events in Virginia history;
   g) interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives;
   h) evaluate and discuss issues orally and in writing

VS.4 The student will demonstrate knowledge of life in the Virginia colony by
   a) explaining the importance of agriculture and its influence on the institution of slavery;

VUS.3 The student will describe how the values and institutions of European economic and political life took root in the colonies and how slavery reshaped European and African life in the Americas.

VUS.6 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the major events from the last decade of the eighteenth century through the first half of the nineteenth century by
   e) describing the cultural, economic, and political issues that divided the nation, including tariffs, slavery, the abolitionist and women’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.

Materials Needed:
• Printouts of the timeline documents/art found in the PowerPoint section of the lesson plan and on the Shaping the Constitution Web site (one for each student)
• 2 sets of enlarged timeline pictures and dates (to be mounted to the classroom wall)
• 2 rolls of tape (one roll for each group used to affix timeline to classroom wall)
• Timer
• Historical Source Analysis Worksheets (one for each student). Download a worksheet from the Virginia Memory Online Classroom Lesson Plans page
Pre-Activity Exploration:
Students should be familiar with key dates and events on the American Slavery History Timeline. Post dates (with no explanations beside them) on the board beginning with 1619; continue through 1865. Briefly discuss what students remember about the dates. Record their correct responses and leave them on display throughout the lesson so that they may refer back to them when completing the timeline challenge exercise.

- First slavery in America (1619): First black laborers arrive in Virginia
- Missouri Compromise (1820)
- Fugitive Slave Bill; Underground Railroad (1850)
- Emancipation Proclamation (1863)
- Thirteenth Amendment (1865)

Teacher Actions:
The teacher should read the background information on the primary sources at the Library of Virginia’s Shaping the Constitution Web site.

1. Break the class out into pairs or threes and give each group a single historical document to examine. Have them complete a Historical Source Analysis worksheet. (You may want to write the questions on the board from the analysis worksheets.)

2. Have a member of each group present their findings about their historical slavery document.

3. As a class, discuss the historical perspectives of the creators of the documents.

4. Next, divide the class into two groups. Have students in each group work together on opposite sides of the classroom to arrange all of the enlarged posters on the wall in chronological order while being timed. After the allotted time (determined by the teacher), allow a member of the group to explain the work of the group. After both groups have had a chance to present, discuss with the class the results and lead the class with some of the following discussion points:

   - What does each document/artwork tell us about life in the United States at the time it was created?
   - For which audience was the source created?
   - What questions does the document/art raise in your mind?
   - Based on observation, what can be inferred from the art?
   - What kind of information is shared in the legal documents?

Be sure that the full class discussion addresses the following questions as well:

- When did the first slaves come to America, and what was life like for them?
- What do you think was the cruelest part of the slave system? Why?
- Explain how conditions of slavery varied widely according to the slave’s age, sex, and type of service.
- Even decent treatment by most slave owners could not change the main fact of slavery—that one human, the master, had near total power over another human, the slave. What was one quote by President Lincoln about this fact?
- Some slaves accepted their tragic lot, others resisted. How did slaves show they were unhappy with their existence?
• Do you think the South’s economy could have existed without the slave system? Why or why not?
• How are the following dates/events important in the history of the American Slavery timeline: 1619, 1861, 1850 Fugitive Slave Bill, 1863, Thirteenth Amendment, 1865

5. Finally, check the work of each group to determine a “Timeline Challenge” winner. Assist students in correcting any errors on the timeline. Consider allowing the timeline to remain on display.

Analysis:
Now that students have an understanding of the events on the slavery timeline and have examined historical sources, have them compare and contrast any two documents studied. They should use the Internet to research the documents further and locate related documents. Have students re-examine the documents from the Library of Virginia site and prepare either a written or oral report on the two sources selected.