

Unit: Lowell and the Industrial Revolution

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Lesson Topic: Slavery and the Cotton Economy

Lesson Title: Life on a Cotton Plantation

Grade Level: Middle School

State Standards:

Class Time: 45-60 Minutes

Objectives: Develop an empathy for southern slaves by simulating the task of picking cotton
Identify cotton as a connection between the North and South

“Picking Cotton”

Procedure: Students enter class to a version of the slave spiritual “Cotton-Eyed Joe” or “Go Down Moses” playing. Explain to the class that today they will simulate one small aspect of slavery. Take some time to explain how their slave experience will in no way be anything like the real thing. Be sure to discuss how the main objective of the lesson is to develop empathy, not to recreate slavery. Explain to the class that they will experience no fear, no pain, no threats, nor any of the many others negatives of slavery. At the end of the class they will go free like most slaves never did.

Show the class a small amount of cotton (don't let them touch it yet and keep the rest hidden). Explain that since this is their first day as a slave, they will have to be tested. Explain that every slave was “tested” on their first day and that their “test” will involve picking and cleaning cotton. Proceed to have a discussion on the emotions one might feel during those first moments as a slave. Ask why a slave would need to be “tested”. After the discussion, distribute the reading “Picking Cotton” to the class.

Explain to the class how the words they are about to read were written by a real person who really experienced a “first day” as a slave (with older students use the term primary source). Explain that nothing about it is fake or made-up and that nothing is closer to the truth. Read “Picking Cotton” together as a class. Distribute the handout “The Cotton Gin – Eli Whitney's Patent Drawing”.

Hand to each student their individual portion of raw cotton. Instruct the class to work as fast as they can to clean the debris (leaves, cotton boll shell pieces) and seeds out of the cotton. Instruct them to make three piles on their desk: one pile for pure, clean cotton, a second pile of seeds (which would be used the next planting season and for animal feed), and a third pile of debris. Walk around the room and inspect the clean cotton piles for impurities and have the students rework the pile as necessary. Remind the students that there was no other method of cleaning cotton than by hand. Ask the class if they think there would be a “test” for cleaning cotton as there was for picking it. Conclude with a discussion on the affects of the cotton gin on slavery, the Industrial Revolution and American history.

Resources:

<http://www.cottonclassroom.com/index.html>

Hopkinson, Deborah. Up before Daybreak. New York: Scholastic, 2006.
Cotton bolls: www.cottonman.com
Copy of "Cotton Eye Joe" CD or itunes

Extended the lesson by having students listen to or read interviews with former slaves. Interviews can be found at the Library of Congress website -
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/vfssp.html>

Reading for Picking Cotton Lesson

Background: Solomon Northup was born a free man and was captured as an "escaped slave" and forced into slavery on a cotton plantation. He eventually gained his freedom and wrote about his experiences. Below is a selection adapted from his book titled Twelve Years a Slave. In 1850 more than 3 million enslaved African Americans lived in the United States. Seven out of eight worked on plantations. Most slaves performed basic labor as field hands. Picking and cleaning cotton was one activity that field hands had to do. Inventions like Eli Whitney's cotton gin made cotton farming more profitable than it had ever been before. The cotton gin also made the job of cleaning cotton much easier. As you read and experience the activity, think about the following about why an enslaved African American would want to pick just the right amount of cotton.

In the latter part of August begins the cotton picking season. At this time each slave is presented with a sack. A strap is fastened to it, which goes over the neck, holding the mouth of the sack [chest] high, while the bottom reaches nearly to the ground. Each one is also presented with a large basket that will hold about two barrels. This is to put the cotton in when the sack is filled. The baskets are carried to the field and placed at the beginning of the rows.

When a new hand, one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed, so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty.

An ordinary day's work is two hundred pounds. A slave who is accustomed to picking, is punished, if he or she brings in a less quantity than that. There is a great difference among them as regards this kind of labor. Some of them seem to have a natural knack, or quickness, which enables them to pick with great [quickness], and with both hands, while others, with whatever practice or industry, are utterly unable to come up to the ordinary standard... Patsey, [a friend of mine], was known as the most remarkable cotton picker.... She picked with both hands and with such surprising rapidity, that five hundred pounds a day was not unusual for her.

Each one is tasked, therefore, according to his picking abilities, none, however, to come short of two hundred weight. I, being unskillful always in that business, would have satisfied my master by bringing in the latter quantity, while on the other hand, Patsey would surely have been beaten if she

failed to produce twice as much.

The cotton grows from five to seven feet high, each stalk having a great many branches, shooting out in all directions, and lapping each other above the water furrow...It presents an appearance of purity, like an immaculate expanse of light, new-fallen snow...

The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be, until the order to halt is given by the driver.

The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted," or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be—no matter how much he longs for sleep and rest—a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight—if he has not performed the full task appointed him, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly. So, whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house is always with fear and trembling.

<http://www.cottonclassroom.com/primarysource.html>