

The Countries of the Slave Trade

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND TO LESSON

This lesson is a comparative look at the number of enslaved people transported by each of the seven countries (or flags) listed on the database and also an examination of the ordeal of the Middle Passage. Students will gain an understanding of the immensity of the international slave trade but will also focus on the human experience of the Middle Passage.

OBJECTIVES

This lesson has several objectives. First, it will enlighten the students about the sheer volume of enslaved people transported to the European colonies. At the same time, gaining an understanding of the Middle Passage will help students relate to those enslaved as individuals and not simply as twelve million nameless people. The creation of a map tracing the routes of the slave ships will also bring an element of geography into the lesson.

SUGGESTED GRADE AND COURSE

This lesson is most appropriate for middle school students and could be taught in United States History or World History classes.

STANDARDS

This lesson aligns most closely with Era 2, Standard 1A of the NCHS US History Standards, which asks students to “trace the arrival of Africans in the European colonies in the 17th century and the rapid increase of slave importation in the 18th century.” It also relates to Era 6, Standard 4B of the NCHS World History Standards, which deals with European participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the conditions of the Middle Passage.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

This activity will use the “Summary Statistics” option under “Search the Database” in “The Database” section of the site, and also the “African Names Database” in the “Resources” section. Students will also need access to textbooks, atlases, and the internet, and will need blank outline maps of the region of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

ACTIVITIES/PROCEDURES

The first step is data gathering. There are two pieces of information students will need to obtain: 1) the total number of enslaved people transported by each flag, and 2) the rise and decline of the slave trade for each flag. First, have students select the “Search the Database” option. In “Summary Statistics,” students will click on the “Ship, nation, owners” tab and select “flag.” Then they will click on each option under “flag” one at a time, and click on “search.” When each record comes up, they will note the number of enslaved people embarked, until they have the information for each of the flag areas.

The next task is to trace the rise and decline of the slave trade for each flag. This can also be done in the “Search the Database” option, by clicking on the “Table” tab. In the drop down menu under rows, click on “50 year period.” Then select each flag one at a time as in the previous exercise. Have students note the totals for each period. In addition to providing information, this part of the lesson will improve students’ research skills.

Next, students will create two bar graphs reflecting the information gathered. The first bar graph will show each flag and the total number of enslaved people transported by each. The second graph will show the number of enslaved people transported by each flag at fifty-year increments, enabling students to see the rise and decline of the slave trade for each flag. Creating these graphs will improve student skills in accurately representing data graphically and will also be a clear visual way for them to compare and contrast the information they have collected.

The next phase of the lesson deals with the geography of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While still in “Summary statistics,” students will click on the “map” tab and bring up a map showing where each flag embarked and disembarked enslaved people. Students will then use a blank world map to show the principal routes of each flag. First, they will label the bodies of water and each of the flag countries. Next, students will use a method of their choosing (different colored lines, different kinds of lines, etc.) to plot the routes of each flag. This lesson will provide a geography review and will also improve students’ ability to use a map to accurately represent data.

Having acquired an overview of the massive numbers of enslaved Africans transported to the New World, students will now turn their attention to the Middle Passage. The goal of this part of the lesson is to help students understand the ordeal of the Middle Passage and try to relate to it in a personal way, to try to imagine themselves as “cargo” on a slave ship. Students will first gather information about the Middle Passage from the database. This information is also in the “Summary statistics” section of the database. Have students go to the “Ship, Nation, Owners” tab, click on flag, then click on the “select all” tab under “Country query” and then click on “search.” Students will note the average length of the Middle Passage, the percentage of slaves who died during the voyages, and the percentage of children on the voyages. In an attempt to personalize the Middle Passage further, students will then click on “Resources” and then “African Names Database.” (In the nineteenth century, courts were created to adjudicate vessels illegally engaged in the slave trade. The names database is a compilation of lists of liberated Africans from slave vessels captured by British cruisers between 1819 and 1845, and taken for trial in the courts established in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and in Havana, Cuba.) Under the “Search for slaves” option, each student will put in an age range that corresponds to middle school and tick either “boys” or “girls” and then click on “Search.” From the list that comes up, students will choose the name of an enslaved person and write down all of the data about that person. Students will then be provided with reading materials about the Middle Passage

(See Further Reading below), which will be followed by class discussion about what it would have been like to be on a slave ship.

Wrap-up Assignment

The wrap-up for this lesson consists of two writing assignments. The first is for students to take what they have learned from the information they gathered and the graphs and maps they created to write what they have learned about the countries involved in the slave trade and the places to which each country transported enslaved Africans. Students will be expected to synthesize this information with information from their textbooks into a brief, but cohesive, essay. The essay should include such information as: the years of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the countries that were involved, the approximate number carried by each country, and the total number of enslaved people transported.

The second half of the wrap-up assignment is to use the names students took from the African Names Database and what they have learned about the Middle Passage to write a fictional narrative on what the experience was like. The narrative will be written in the first person, using the name of the person they chose from the database. Information such as the name of the ship and country of origin (which can be found by clicking on the name they have chosen) and the hardships of the voyage should be included. Information about the length of the voyage, how many people died, and how many adults and children were on the voyage could also be included. Students should be encouraged to use their imaginations to try to picture themselves as a passenger on a slave ship.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION

Assessment should be based on both the graphs and maps students made and also on the essay and the narrative. The writing projects should be assessed more for substance than literary style, although both elements are obviously important. In the essay, is it evident that they have gained an understanding of the enormity of the slave trade? In the narrative, is it clear that they have gained an insight into what it would have been like to have endured the Middle Passage?

VOCABULARY

Embark
Disembark
Middle Passage

FURTHER READINGS & DISCUSSION

Bennett, Lerone, Jr. *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*. New York: Penguin Books, 1988. (Chapters 1 and 2)

Curtin, Philip D. *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*. Illinois: Waveland Press, 1997.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah, Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African*. New York: Random House, 2004.

Harms, Robert. *The Diligent: A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

Haskins, James. *Bound for America: The Forced Migration of Africans to the New World*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.

Klein, Herbert S. *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Northrup, David, ed. *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002.

Suggested Discussion Questions

The first group of questions relies on textbooks or other resources. The second and third groups are specific to the database.

After reading text, before beginning project:

1. Why were Africans chosen as potential slaves, rather than other groups, such as Native Americans or Europeans?
2. Why did some American colonists believe they needed an enslaved workforce?
3. What are some of the reasons that so many European countries became involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade?

After completing graphs and maps:

1. Which country transported the most enslaved Africans? Which country transported the fewest?
2. What patterns can you see in the routes taken by different countries? What does that tell you about languages spoken in New World countries today?
3. What country transported the most enslaved Africans in each century of the slave trade?

After reading text, before writing middle passage narrative:

1. What have you learned about the conditions on slave ships during the Middle Passage?
2. What percentage of Africans being transported died en route?
3. What do you think would be the most difficult aspect of the Middle Passage?