

Harpers Ferry / Teacher Pages

Rationale / Questions / Prior Knowledge for Students

Rationale

Through this curriculum students learn that there was spirited debate in reaction to John Brown's raid. Opinions varied on the legitimacy of the invasion and its implications among northerners and southerners. Students will begin to appreciate that:

- African Americans, white abolitionists, and others in the North had differing opinions, beliefs, and tactics on how best to end enslavement. Some advocated violence, while others sought more peaceful answers.
- The legal, social, and economic position of black Americans had become a crucial issue on the eve of the Civil War. Many white southerners and their supporters in the North thought blacks were inherently incapable of exercising freedom responsibly. Many white northerners had come to support the end of slavery and many forms of legal inequality for free black people. Most opposed the social equality of blacks and whites. A few whites like John Brown, joined blacks in embracing egalitarian ideas.
- The John Brown raid was, and still is, a controversial event in American history. Questions about its justification and its influence on the events leading to civil war continue to spark disputes among scholars and the general public.

Through the narration, learning activities, and resources, students will understand some of the economic, social, and cultural differences between the North and South and some of the causes of the Civil War.

Students will use primary documents to research and write about these topics from the point of view of an African American community member in pre-Civil War Harpers Ferry. This objective is designed to enhance student abilities to recognize, analyze, and critique primary sources.

Questions

1. What was it like to be an African American in Harpers Ferry in 1859?
2. How do ordinary people understand the importance of large historic events in relation to their lives and beliefs?
3. What are the implications of choosing violence to achieve a goal?

Prior Knowledge and Understanding

Students need to understand and know the following in order to have a context for the activity. Some of the highlights of the following should be included in the introduction.

- By the 1850s, slavery had already existed in North America for nearly 250 years.
- Slavery in America was race-based. In addition to the basic premise that it was permissible for one human being to regard another as property, the treatment of enslaved Africans and the conditions under which they lived were often, but not always, cruel and inhumane.
- There was a great diversity of experiences among slaves.
- Slaves tried to navigate enslavement to make it as tolerable as possible. Some enslaved people managed to forge work and social relationships that allowed them to live and work within the system with a relative amount of independence. Enslavement had become a common way of life and a dominant system. Slaves were aware of the life-threatening consequences that failed resistance to the system possessed.
- An awareness of the conditions of slavery grew among the white population because of uprisings, travelers to the south, books, publications, newspaper accounts, trials, and reports from the Underground Railroad and escaped slaves.

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- While many in the North profited from the trade in cotton and in the manufacturing of textiles derived from slave labor, slavery itself had been abolished in northern states by 1830. A rapidly increasing population of free laborers on farms, in mills, and in urban workshops feared the competition of the slave system.
- The United States was expanding westward. As each new western state formed, debate arose as to whether or not enslavement would be legal there. With each debate new resolutions, compromises, or ideas were proposed to settle the enslavement question to the satisfaction of both sides.
- Southern slaveholding interests feared that northerners would meddle with what they believed was the constitutionally protected institution of human slavery. Northerners came to fear the “Slave Power Conspiracy” and the expansion of slavery into the new territories. This sectionalism became fiercer as the century progressed.
- As part of an attempt to keep the sides even, Congress decided that the people of Kansas would decide for themselves by vote whether that state should be slave or free (an idea called popular sovereignty). Pro- and anti-slavery forces each supported emigration to Kansas to try to ensure that their side won. Confrontations between pro- and anti-slavery groups were contentious and often violent.
- Among those who went to Kansas was John Brown. He was an abolitionist, and a man who felt it was his duty as a Christian to oppose slavery and to interfere with its expansion into Kansas by using extreme measures.