

Introduction and Reflection

- Slavery and Maine Grades 6-12-

Themes & Sources (for teacher use):

- Enslaved people lived and worked in Maine.
 - *Source 1:* Runaway Advertisements
 - *Source 2:* Portrait of Sir William Pepperell
 - *Source 3:* Leg and Wrist Shackles
- Maine's economy depended on slavery.
 - *Source 4:* Diagram of the slave decks of the ship "Brookes"
 - *Source 5:* Bates Mill Cotton Invoice
 - *Source 6:* Sugar Bowl and Tongs

Possible connections between the sources (for teacher use):

- **Source 1 and 2:** Students may find William Pepperell's name in both sources and make connections between the two (hint that there's a connection, if they don't see it on their own). Pepperell was the slaveowner that Peter ran from, and from the advertisement students learn that he lived in Kittery, Maine. Ask students "What do you think about this man based on his portrait? How does this other source change the way you see him?"
- **Source 3 and 4:** The shackles and diagram of the slave ship show ways that enslaved people were contained and transported and are evidence of the cruelty of the system.
- **Source 5 and 6:** Cotton and sugar are both products produced by enslaved people, and these sources are evidence of those products being used in Maine.
- **Source 4, 5, and 6:** These three sources show the shipment and trade of goods and people between different regions of the United States and world.

Note to teachers and students:

This is a difficult topic to teach, but it is critically important. This introduction can't begin to cover the history of slavery in Maine, let alone America, but we want to provide as much as we can to help get you started. It is a messy and hard history. It challenges us. We encourage you to dig deeper—[read the narratives of enslaved people](#), ask hard questions, search the news to see why this story matters today. We also encourage you to let us know if there are important things you feel we missed or got wrong in this introduction.

For a more thorough introduction to slavery in America, please see [Teaching Tolerance—a Framework for Teaching American Slavery](#).

Vocab:

Abolitionist—Someone who wanted to abolish slavery (make it illegal).

Plantation—Large farms that grow crops for sale. The plantations we talk about in this introduction used the labor of enslaved people.

West Indies— Most sugar plantations were in the West Indies on Caribbean islands such as Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, and Barbados. There were also some in Louisiana and Texas.

Summary

Maine was connected to slavery in different ways:

- **Enslaved people lived and worked in the District of Maine up until 1783.**
- **Maine supported slaveowners.** Maine's economy relied on shipbuilding—those ships participated in the trade of enslaved people and slave products. Maine products like lumber and salted fish were sold to plantations in the West Indies.
- **Slaveowners supported Maine.** Mainers consumed and profited from the sale of goods produced by enslaved people, such as cotton, sugar, and molasses.
- **Maine's statehood meant slavery expanded.** Maine became a state because of the Missouri Compromise, which allowed slavery to gain territory in the United States.

Introduction

The Big Picture—American Slavery

For 246 years, people were bought and sold in the United States. Enslaved people were treated as less than human and forced to do hard work in terrible conditions. They had legal status as “chattel,” meaning they were the personal property of their masters, in the same category as furniture or horses. Slavery was perhaps the greatest shame of our country, and it continues to impact life in America today.

People were captured in Africa and sold in America through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which began as early as the 1400s. Around 12.5 million men, women, and children of African descent were forced to migrate to America. They and their children were legally considered commodities—property to be bought and sold. Their labor and the wealth it produced made it possible for America to grow. They suffered and survived unthinkable cruelty.

What was it like to be enslaved? The experience of slavery was different for different people, depending on where you were, what work you had to do, your gender, and other factors. We encourage you to read first-hand accounts of slavery to hear directly from enslaved men and women. People actively resisted enslavement in both small everyday ways and with revolutionary action.

How could slavery have ever been considered acceptable in the United States? The American Revolution was fought in the name of freedom, but many of the founding fathers—such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson—were slaveowners. When they wrote the new country’s constitution, they broke their own promise: “All men are created equal.”

There were many Americans at the time who knew slavery was wrong—they were abolitionists. Former slaves such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman were activists who used their voices to bring about social reform. Black and white

abolitionists fought against slavery for years and years. They may seem like heroes now, but in their lifetime, they were ignored, made fun of, and even attacked. Eventually their ideas became more common—especially in northern states—but only about 2% of Americans considered themselves abolitionists. Even when northerners did oppose slavery, it was usually because they wanted to keep slaveholders from gaining more political power and not because of human rights.

The fight over slavery divided the new country, North vs. South. In the American Civil War (1861-1865), southern states seceded from the Union to protect their political power and their “right” to own enslaved people. After years of bloody fighting and destruction, the Union won. The 13th Amendment officially ended slavery in 1865.

Note on the numbers:

In 1860:

- 4.5 million people of African descent lived in the United States.
- Of these, 4.0 million were enslaved (89%), held by 385,000 slaveowners.
- Of these, 3.6 million lived on farms and plantations (half in the Deep South).
- Of these, 1.0 million lived on plantations with 50 or more enslaved people

Local Story—Maine Slavery

Today, some people assume that slavery existed in the American South, not in the North—or that slavery in the North was “not as bad.” Before the Revolutionary War, slavery was legal in every American colony—including Massachusetts’ District of Maine. Maine had a colonial slave market as early as 1650. Enslaved people were brought by ship to York, Maine for the local market. By the 1754 census, there were approximately 154 enslaved men and women (about two men for every woman), in the District of Maine. Maine did not have the large plantations associated with slavery in the South, but enslaved people were used for manual labor, work in the shipping industry, and service in homes. The fact that so many ran away, risking violent punishment and death, shows the cruelty of their lives in Maine.

Maine also supplied slaveowners in other places. Some slave ships were owned by Maine merchants. For example, Thomas Robinson of Portland owned *The Eagle*, a slave-carrying ship. Records from 1791 show his son-in-law and agent John Hodges selling enslaved people he had brought from Africa to plantation owners in Haiti. With the proceeds, he purchased coffee to be sold in Portland.

As the abolition movement grew, laws started to turn against slavery. Massachusetts was the first state to outlaw slavery in 1783 (when Maine was still part of Massachusetts). In 1808, the United States Congress outlawed the international importation of slaves. Some American ships continued the slave trade illegally. Many also continued to contribute to the trade by providing ships and lumber to slave plantations abroad.

Maine shipbuilders and shipmasters were part of the “triangle trade” that carried products and enslaved people between the Americas (including the West Indies), Europe, and Africa. After British and American sea captains sold shiploads of enslaved people to plantation owners in the West Indies and the eastern coast of America, they often arrived in Maine to unload sugar, cotton, molasses, and other slave-made and grown products. They then took on shiploads of Maine lumber and supplies to sell in England, Africa, or the West Indies. Maine lumber was vital to the Atlantic trade because by 1700 most trees in the West Indies had been cleared to make way for sugar fields. Maine trees kept the fires hot in sugar mills. They were also used to build the ships that carried enslaved people.

Mainers—even those who opposed slavery—relied on products made by enslaved people. Cotton was the primary slave-grown crop grown on plantations in southern states. Maine led the northern states in the production of cotton fabric in 1810. Maine traders purchased cotton to be made into fabric—first by home weavers and later in mills and factories. Maine mill towns like Lewiston and Biddeford grew on the profits of slavery. Maine merchants and shop owners made money buying and selling sugar, molasses, and rum. The growth of

northern manufacturing made the growth of the southern economy possible. It was a mutually beneficial system for white Americans in the North and South.

It's a complicated story, though—many Mainers realized that slavery was morally wrong and worked to stop it. Delegates to Maine's state constitutional convention in 1819 agreed that free men of African descent could vote in the new state, even though this was a time when many other states were changing their constitutions to ban black voters. There were free African Americans living and working in Maine, and leaving an impact on Maine history.

What about the Missouri Compromise?

America grew more divided over slavery in the 1800s. In 1819, there was an equal number of Northern free states and Southern slave states. That meant both sides had equal representation in the United States Senate. Missouri and Maine both wanted to become states. New states meant there was a risk of tipping the power balance.

The Missouri Compromise kept the balance. Missouri would be a slave state, and Maine would be a free state. The Compromise also stated that slavery could not expand north of Missouri's southern boundary – the 36-30' parallel in new territories. This Compromise was the first national-level agreement to keep the United States from breaking apart under the weight of slavery. Not everyone agreed it was the right choice, though.

On a federal level, there was so much political fighting that Maine almost didn't become a state at all. Mainers had been trying to separate from Massachusetts for decades by the time they were caught up in this national argument. The Missouri Compromise did at least give Maine a clear path to statehood. Were Mainers happy about this? Not all of them. A vote for the Missouri Compromise was a vote for the expansion of slavery. A vote against Missouri Compromise was a vote against Maine's statehood. Mainers had to decide what was more important to them.

It was a very hard choice for the U. S. Representatives from the District of Maine. They had been working for statehood for years. In the end, only two of the seven Representatives from the District of Maine voted in favor of the Missouri Compromise. The other five could not bear to vote in favor of expanding slavery, even if it meant giving up statehood.

Maine's impact on the nation

The crisis over slavery in 1819-20 captured national attention. Americans closely watched the vote. The decision would not just impact those two states, but the entire country. The legislation ended up passing the House of Representatives by a vote of just 90 (in favor of the Compromise) to 87 (against the Compromise).

If all of Maine's Congressmen had voted against the Compromise, it would have failed. The two Representatives who supported the Compromise came home to Maine and had to defend themselves from vicious attacks from voters and the media. Despite the conflict, the Missouri Compromise was passed. Maine became a state in 1820, and it had to turn its focus to building a new state government.

Please remember

Slavery is a monstrous, shameful, and critically important part of our nation's history. Our government was founded at a time when part of the population was enslaved. They were intentionally denied basic human rights so that they could be exploited, or used for other people's profit.

Even after slavery was abolished, the descendants of enslaved people continued to be exploited and held down by prejudice, violence, and unfair laws. They had to fight decade after decade for basic rights—education, jobs, homes, voting, even being allowed in public spaces. They had to fight to be recognized as humans and as equal citizens. Slavery had long-lasting effects, and Black Americans today still carry this weight.

After the topic has been introduced to students, hand out the primary sources and complete the worksheet activity

Class Reflection Questions:

- Were there enslaved people in Maine?
- How did sugar and cotton connect Maine to slavery?
- How did Mainers in 1820 benefit from slavery?
- Why is the legacy of slavery important to Maine today?
- What are some products we use today that some people see as unethical?
- Can you think of some ways that politicians, businesses, and regular people today balance moral decisions with making a profit?

Recommended Resources for Further Learning:

More on this era

- [Teaching Tolerance—a Framework for Teaching American Slavery](#)
 - Videos, text, and teacher tools for grades K-5 and 6-12.
- [Library of Congress--Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938](#)
 - More than 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves collected as part of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration.
- [Slavery—Crash Course US History](#)
 - 15 minute video. John Green talks about what life was like for a slave in the 19th century United States, and how slaves resisted oppression, to the degree that was possible. Ages 11-18.

What happens after abolition?

- [Library of Congress—The Civil War: The Nation Moves Towards War, 1850-61](#)

- Conflict between abolition and slavery marked the 1850s, preceding the election of 1860 and the attack on Fort Sumter. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, Dred Scott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, John Brown, and secession in maps, newspapers, political cartoons and song sheets.
- [Library of Congress—Jim Crow and Segregation Teacher’s Guide](#)
 - After the Civil War, most Southern states limited the economic and physical freedom of former slaves by enacting laws that came to be called Jim Crow laws. This primary source set presents popular views on, and the causes and effects of, these laws