



Urmston Grammar Sixth Form – Transition Work

History Department

A Level History Transition Work – Module 2

America: A Nation Divided, c1845–1877

This option provides for the study of a period of major change in American history, which saw the disintegration of the country into Civil War, demanding a subsequent reconstruction. It explores concepts such as political authority, abolitionism and social justice. It also encourages students to consider what creates social tension and harmony, the idea of nationhood and the issues surrounding political compromise.

TASK 1: The US Political System

Watch the following clip, now try to construct a summary diagram on what powers the US Congress has.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9defOwVWS8&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtOfse2ncvffeelTrqvhrz8H&index=2->

Watch the following clip, now try to construct a diagram about what the separation of powers is in the US political system.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bf3CwYCxXw&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtOfse2ncvffeelTrqvhrz8H&index=3->

Watch the following clip, now to try to construct a diagram about what federalism is in the US political system.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0gosGXSgsI&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtOfse2ncvffeelTrqvhrz8H&index=4->

Task 2: Slavery

Read the following info about slavery – use different colour highlighters to annotate: Working conditions, living conditions, punishments and other hardships and resistance.

What was slavery like?

The standard image of Southern slavery is that of a large plantation with hundreds of slaves. In fact, such situations were rare. 3/4 of Southern whites did not even own slaves. Practically speaking, the institution of slavery did not help these people. And yet most non-slaveholding white Southerners identified with and defended the institution of slavery. Though many resented the wealth and power of the large slaveholders, they aspired to own slaves themselves and to join the privileged ranks. In addition, slavery gave the farmers a group of people to feel superior to. They may have been poor, but they were not slaves, and they were not black. They gained a sense of power simply by being white. In the lower South the majority of slaves lived and worked on cotton plantations. Most of these plantations had fifty or fewer slaves, although the largest plantations have several hundred. Cotton was by far the leading cash crop, but slaves also raised rice, corn, sugarcane, and tobacco. Many plantations raised several different kinds of crops.

Besides planting and harvesting, there were numerous other types of labour required on plantations and farms. Enslaved people had to clear new land, dig ditches, cut and haul wood, slaughter livestock, and make repairs to buildings and tools. In many instances, they worked as mechanics, blacksmiths, drivers,



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carpenters, and in other skilled trades. Black women carried the additional burden of caring for their families by cooking and taking care of the children, as well as spinning, weaving, and sewing.

Some slaves worked as domestics, providing services for the master's or overseer's families. These people were designated as "house servants," and though their work appeared to be easier than that of the "field slaves," in some ways it was not. They were constantly under the scrutiny of their masters and mistresses, and could be called on for service at any time. They had far less privacy than those who worked the fields.

The diets of enslaved people were inadequate or barely adequate to meet the demands of their heavy workload. They lived in crude quarters that left them vulnerable to bad weather and disease. Their clothing and bedding were minimal as well. Slaves who worked as domestics sometimes fared better, getting the cast-off clothing of their masters or having easier access to food stores.

The heat and humidity of the South created health problems for everyone living there. However, the health of plantation slaves was far worse than that of whites. Unsanitary conditions, inadequate nutrition and unrelenting hard labour made slaves highly susceptible to disease. Illnesses were generally not treated adequately, and slaves were often forced to work even when sick. The rice plantations were the most deadly. Black people had to stand in water for hours at a time in the sweltering sun. Malaria was rampant. Child mortality was extremely high on these plantations, generally around 66% -- on one rice plantation it was as high as 90%.

One of the worst conditions that enslaved people had to live under was the constant threat of sale. Even if their master was "benevolent," slaves knew that a financial loss or another personal crisis could lead them to the auction block. Also, slaves were sometimes sold as a form of punishment. And although popular sentiment (as well as the economic self-interest on the part of the owners) encouraged keeping mothers and children and sometimes fathers together, these norms were not always followed. Immediate families were often separated. If they were kept together, they were almost always sold away from their extended families. Grandparents, sisters, brothers, and cousins could all find themselves forcibly scattered, never to see each other again. Even if they or their loved ones were never sold, slaves had to live with the constant threat that they could be. African American women had to endure the threat and the practice of sexual exploitation. There were no safeguards to protect them from being sexually stalked, harassed, or raped, or to be used as long-term concubines by masters and overseers. The abuse was widespread, as the men with authority took advantage of their situation. Even if a woman seemed agreeable to the situation, in reality she had no choice. Slave men, for their part, were often powerless to protect the women they loved.

The drivers, overseers, and masters were responsible for plantation discipline. Slaves were punished for not working fast enough, for being late getting to the fields, for defying authority, for running away, and for a number of other reasons. The punishments took many forms, including whippings, torture, mutilation, imprisonment, and being sold away from the plantation. Slaves were even sometimes murdered. Some masters were more "benevolent" than others, and punished less often or severely. But with rare exceptions, the authoritarian relationship remained firm even in those circumstances.

In addition to the authority practiced on individual plantations, slaves throughout the South had to live under a set of laws called the Slave Codes. The codes varied slightly from state to state, but the basic idea was the same: the slaves were considered property, not people, and were treated as such. Slaves could not testify in court against a white, make contracts, leave the plantation without permission, strike a white (even in self-defence), buy and sell goods, own firearms, gather without a white present, possess any anti-slavery literature, or visit the homes of whites or free blacks. The killing of a slave was almost never regarded as murder, and the rape of slave women was treated as a form of trespassing.



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Whenever there was a slave insurrection, or even the rumour of one, the laws became even tighter. At all times, patrols were set up to enforce the codes. These patrols were similar to militias and were made up of white men who were obligated to serve for a set period. The patrols apprehended slaves outside of plantations, and they raided homes and any type of gathering, searching for anything that might lead to insurrection. During times of insurrection -- either real or rumoured -- enraged whites formed vigilance committees that terrorized, tortured, and killed blacks.

While most slaves were concentrated on the plantations, there were many slaves living in urban areas or working in rural industry. Although over 90% of American slaves lived in rural areas, slaves made up at least 20% of the populations of most Southern cities. In Charleston, South Carolina, slaves and free blacks outnumbered whites. Many slaves living in cities worked as domestics, but others worked as blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, bakers, or other trades people. Often, slaves were hired out by their masters, for a day or up to several years. Sometimes slaves were allowed to hire themselves out. Urban slaves had more freedom of movement than plantation slaves and generally had greater opportunities for learning. They also had increased contact with free black people, who often expanded their ways of thinking about slavery.

Slaves resisted their treatment in innumerable ways. They slowed down their work pace, disabled machinery, feigned sickness, destroyed crops. They argued and fought with their masters and overseers. Many stole livestock, other food, or valuables. Some learned to read and write, a practice forbidden by law. Some burned forests and buildings. Others killed their masters outright -- some by using weapons, others by putting poison in their food. Some slaves committed suicide or mutilated themselves to ruin their property value. Subtly or overtly, enslaved African Americans found ways to sabotage the system in which they lived.

Thousands of slaves ran away. Some left the plantation for days or weeks at a time and lived in hiding.. Many escaped to the North. There were also numerous instances of slave revolts throughout the history of the institution. Even when slaves acted in a subservient manner, they were often practicing a type of resistance. By fooling the master or overseer with their behaviour, they resisted additional ill treatment.

Enslaved African Americans also resisted by forming community within the plantation setting. This was a tremendous undertaking for people whose lives were ruled by domination and forced labour. Slaves married, had children, and worked hard to keep their families together. In their quarters they were able to let down the masks they had to wear for whites. There, black men, women, and children developed an underground culture through which they affirmed their humanity. They gathered in the evenings to tell stories, sing, and make secret plans. House servants would come down from the "big house" and give news of the master and mistress, or keep people laughing with their imitations of the whites. It was in their quarters that many enslaved people developed and passed down skills which allowed them to supplement their poor diet and inadequate medical care with hunting, fishing, gathering wild food, and herbal medicines.

Many slaves turned to religion for inspiration and solace. Some practiced African religions, including Islam, others practiced Christianity. Many practiced a brand of Christianity which included strong African elements. Most rejected the Christianity of their masters, which justified slavery. The slaves held their own meetings in secret, where they spoke of the New Testament promises of the day of reckoning and of justice and a better life after death, as well as the Old Testament story of Moses leading his people out of slavery in Egypt. The religion of enslaved African Americans helped them resist the degradation of bondage.