

Unit 4, Lesson 6: Resistance to Enslavement

Lesson Overview

In this lesson students will learn about the varied forms of resistance that enslaved people used in response to the efforts to oppress them. The resistance offers compelling evidence to challenge suggestions that enslaved people accepted or satisfied with their lives under enslavement.

IMPORTANT: This lesson includes images and statements that recommend careful pre-planning and implementation. Resource 1 shows images from recently published children’s literature that suggest a “happy slave” narrative. The lesson includes procedures designed to challenge the “happy slave” narrative as absurd and raise students’ awareness of misleading representations about enslavement in popular culture. The “happy slave” myth must not be presented as a credible, alternative historical interpretation for students to consider. It lacks any evidentiary support and has been discredited by historians for decades. It is extremely important that it does not “stick” in students’ minds, so emphasizing its absurdity in the context of a relentlessly cruel institution.

Resource 3 contains an excerpt from Solomon Northrup’s “Twelve Years a Slave” that includes references to whipping.

The “Resource 6: Resistance by Enslaved People” reading includes sections that describe what historians have called “silent sabotage” as a form of resistance that included people hurting or killing themselves. Another section explains how silent sabotage sometimes led enslavers to draw flawed conclusions about Africans being inherently lazy, unintelligent, sneaky, or thieving. These flawed conclusions, and others like the “happy slave”, were then used to prop up racist beliefs about the inferiority of Black people and white supremacy.

This lesson connects, specifically, with HB 198’s requirement that districts and charter schools include: “the relationship between white supremacy, racism, and American slavery.” Teachers should consult with their administration and their district or charter school’s HB 198 implementation plan for guidance.

Delaware Standard(s)

- **History Standard 1a, 4-5 [Chronology]:** Students will study historical events and persons within a given time frame in order to create a chronology and identify related cause-effect factors.
- **History Standard 2a, 4-5 [Analysis]:** Students will draw historical conclusions and construct historical accounts from primary and secondary source materials
- **History Standard 2b, 4-5 [Analysis]:** Students will examine historical materials relating to a particular region, society, or theme; chronologically arrange them; and analyze change over time.

- **History Standard 3a, 4-5 [Interpretation]:** Students will explain why historical accounts of the same event sometimes differ and relate this explanation to the evidence presented or the point-of-view of the author.

Big Ideas

- resistance, change, causes and effects, reasons for different accounts

Essential Questions

- How did enslaved people resist enslavement?

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that enslaved people hated and resisted slavery in big and small ways, in ways that were possible, and in ways that made sense for circumstances in which they found themselves.

Resources

- [Resource 1: Images of Enslaved People in Children’s Books](#)
- [Resource 2: Developing a Counter Narrative](#)
- [Resource 3: Reinforcing the Counter Narrative](#)
- [Resource 4: Frayer Model - Resistance](#)
- [Resource 5: Drawing Conclusions from Data](#)
- [Resource 6: Resistance by Enslaved People](#)

Procedures

1. **Warm up** - Distribute or project copies of [Resource 1: Images of Enslaved People in Children’s Books](#). Have students analyze the image(s) and address the question - what conclusions are people who view these images likely to draw?
 - a. These images come from children’s literature books that have been widely criticized and even pulled from publication for suggesting that people were “happy” during their time under enslavement. **Use your judgment here.** As designed, this warm-up introduces students to texts that should be challenged but suspends any critique until students have been equipped with sufficient content and critical consciousness via the rest of the lesson to challenge the “happy slave” narrative on their own.
 - b. Invite volunteers to share their conclusions. An assumption here is that one conclusion will be that enslaved people were happy under enslavement.
 - c. Tell them that they are going to engage in several activities during this lesson to corroborate/refute the conclusions suggested by the images that they analyzed during the warm-up.
2. **Developing a Counter Narrative:** Set a purpose for the reading. Tell students that they are now going to engage in a reading of a children’s book about enslavement.
 - a. Distribute copies of [Resource 2: Developing a Counter Narrative](#) . Guide students through the tasks that they will be asked to complete after the reading of *Freedom In Congo Square*.

- b. Reading Options: Show students the YouTube reading of *Freedom In Congo Square* [here](#). Or, if you have a copy, read it to the students. Give students time to complete the tasks on Resource 2.
 - c. Go over Resource 2 and offer feedback. Highlight the intention here i.e., to help students understand that the images they analyzed during the warm-up now appear to misrepresent the attitudes of enslaved people toward enslavement and their enslavers.
3. **Reinforcing the Counter Narrative:** Tell students that they are now going to read short passages in which a former enslaved person and two Black historians will help us better understand how enslaved people felt about enslavement, and how their words can help us better understand problems with the warm-up images.
- a. Distribute copies of [Resource 3: Reinforcing the Counter Narrative](#). Guide students through the questions and go over responses after students have had time to write their answer. Source 1 is a primary source modified for 4th grade students (original wording appears below) while Source 2 is a secondary source. Recall that History standard 2a establishes the expectation that students will be able to draw credible conclusions from primary and secondary sources.

Source 1 [modified]

"They are deceived who flatter themselves that the ignorant and debased slave has no conception of the magnitude of his wrongs. They are deceived who imagine that he arises from his knees with back lacerated and bleeding, cherishing only a spirit of meekness and forgiveness. A day may come - it will come, if his prayer is heard - a terrible day of vengeance, when the master in his turn will cry in vain for mercy."

Solomon Northrup, an enslaved man
from his book *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), p. 129

- b. You might pause at Questions 1 and 2 and ask students if the children's books that they analyzed earlier were primary or secondary sources. The timeline contains clues.
 - c. Ask them - at this point, which conclusion is the evidence supporting - that enslaved people were happy or otherwise with their lives under slavery? Which word might capture the more credible attitude of people who were enslaved?
4. **Concept Development:** An important part of learning about enslavement involves helping students understand that enslaved people understood the wrongs that were being done to them and engaged in a wide range of strategies aimed at resisting their oppression. [Resource 4: Frayer Model - Resistance](#) contains a Frayer Model that will allow students to build an understanding of the concept of "Resistance" and ways that the resistance manifested itself.
- a. Offer students a definition of resistance such as: "doing things to stop or prevent something from happening"
 - i. Offer an example of someone resisting e.g., a doctor tried to give a child foul tasting medicine, so she refused to open her mouth.
 - ii. Offer an example of someone not resisting e.g., a babysitter tells a young boy that it is bedtime, so the boy goes to bed.

- b. Distribute copies of [Resource 4: Frayer Model - Resistance](#). Have students work with a partner or in small groups to complete the “Resistance” Frayer Model.
- c. Review information that students write on their Frayer Models.

IMPORTANT: Tell students that now that they have a very basic understanding of the term “resistance,” we are going to shift to exploring forms of “resistance” that had much higher stakes for enslaved people. Explaining this transition is important.

Considering that this lesson is about not consenting to the violent, systematic domination of an entire race of people, the definition and examples of “resistance” in the Frayer Model activity may appear limited or offensive. The intent is not to draw comparisons between refusing bad medicine or not listening to your babysitter to the bravery required to resist the dehumanizing violence of enslavement. The Frayer Model activity is an attempt to step outside of the historical context in order to ensure that students understand the term “resistance,” critical to understanding the subsequent activities in this lesson.

5. **Drawing Conclusions from Data:** tell students that many people think either that rebellions by enslaved people were common, or they wonder why they were not. The next few activities address these matters.
 - a. Distribute copies of [Resource 5: Drawing Conclusions from Data](#). Tell them that they are now going to learn about slave rebellions during the Colonial Period by analyzing statistics on slave uprisings. Walk them through the information in the chart. Then, have students work independently to go over the data and answer the questions, then review responses in the whole group.
 - b. Key Point to emphasize - Resistance and rebellion happened in a multitude of ways, from everyday resistance to large scale rebellions. However, large rebellions were uncommon.
 - c. But two questions remain:
 - i. Does the small number of large rebellions mean that enslaved people accepted enslavement? [\[absolutely not\]](#)
 - ii. Does it mean that they did not resist? [\[absolutely not\]](#)
6. **Reading - Resistance to Enslavement:** tell students that they are now going to find out the answer to those two questions.
 - a. Distribute copies of [Resource 6: Resistance by Enslaved People](#). Have students highlight or underline any forms of resistance carried out by enslaved people.

Debrief

1. The images from the warm-up suggest enslaved people were happy. What have you learned from this lesson to argue against this false suggestion?
2. It was common for enslaved people to resist the unfair life that enslavement dealt them. What are some examples of the ways that enslaved people resisted, other than big rebellions?
3. Why didn't more enslaved people participate in large rebellions and run away?