

Using Primary Sources in the Classroom: Slavery Unit

This lesson was created by educators working with the Alabama Department of Archives as part of the “[Using Primary Sources in the Classroom](#)” project in 1996.

Lesson 2: Point of View of Former Slaves

Background information for teachers:

During the Great Depression of the 1930s interviewers for the Federal Writers' Project , the majority of whom were white, talked to many elderly African-Americans about their experiences as slaves. These interviews were unique since it was the first large-scale attempt to study slavery from the point-of-view of ex-slaves. The interviews were structured according to guidelines handed down by the Federal Writers' Project's national office. Workers were told that "The criteria to be observed are those of accuracy, human interest, social importance, literary excellence. It may not be possible to combine all these in any one story. However, accuracy and literary excellence should be present in all." (Brown & Owens, 59) The original interviews were written in folk language. Some interviewers transcribed the folk language, as best they could, with explanatory words in parenthesis; some wrote about what was told to them; others compiled a combination of both. While the narratives have inherent problems, such as the passage of time between the events and interview, and the racial and personal dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee, they remain important firsthand evidence of what slavery was like from the point-of-view of former slaves.

For additional Alabama slave narratives and other related published primary documents see:

Brown, Virginia Pounds and Laurella Owens. *Toting the Lead Row: Ruby Pickens Tartt, Alabama Folklorist*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1981.

Griffith, Lucille. *Alabama: A Documentary History to 1900*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1968, Chapter 5.

Pennington, James W. C., *A Narrative of Events in the Life of J. H. Banks, an Escaped Slave, from the Cotton State, Alabama, in America*. Liverpool, Eng.: M. Rourke, Printer, 1861.

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/penning/menu.html>

Content Standards:

Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies (2010)

- 4th Grade:
 - 6. Describe cultural, economic, and political aspects of the lifestyles of early nineteenth-century farmers, plantation owners, slaves, and townspeople.

- 7. Explain reasons for Alabama’s secession from the Union, including sectionalism, slavery, states’ rights, and economic disagreements.
- 5th Grade:
 - 11. Identify causes of the Civil War, including states’ rights and the issue of slavery.
- 10th Grade:
 - Compare major events in Alabama from 1781 to 1823, including statehood as part of the expanding nation, acquisition of land, settlement, and the Creek War, to those of the developing nation.

National Standards for History

- Era 4
 - Standard 2: How the industrial revolution, increasing immigration, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed the lives of Americans and led toward regional tensions

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- Standard 5 – Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions
- Standard 6 – Power, Authority, and Governance
 - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Discuss the legal status of slaves and free people of color.
2. Identify common concerns of slaves, i.e., work, food, family, etc.
3. Identify the roles (or status) of field hands, house servants, artisans, etc.
4. Analyze the importance of religion to slaves.
5. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of oral history.
6. Understand the importance of oral traditions in African American history.
7. Understand that each generation writes its own history and interprets it in relation to its own experiences.
- 8.

Suggested Activities:

1. Make copies of Documents 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.
2. Divide the class into three groups, distribute narrative to each group.
3. Ask students to read the narratives silently, or because of the dialect, you may need to read aloud and have students follow along.
4. Define "patrol."

5. Then, have students work together in their group to make a list of topics mentioned in narrative, i.e., work, clothing, shelter, punishment, family life, free time, etc.
6. Ask a reporter from each group to write their list on the chalkboard.
7. Discuss the similarities and differences.
8. Which of the topics are facts? Which are point of view?
 - a. What problems are inherent in first-hand accounts?
 - b. Are the persons being interviewed influenced by the interviewer?
 - c. Consider the time period (Great Depression) when the interviews were being recorded.

Primary Sources:

[Document 1](#): "From Carolina to Alabama," Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives - Colbert County #1, WPA Records, Box 5, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. (Part 3 page 29)

[Document 2](#): "Stephen Varner - Ex-Slave," Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives - Coosa County #3, WPA Records, Box 5, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 3](#): "Charlie Aarons, Ex-Slave," Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives - Mobile County #6, WPA Records, Box 6, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. (Part 1, page 20)

[Document 4](#): "Dolph Parham - Ex-Slave," Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives - Greene County, WPA Records, Box 5, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.(Page 3)

[Document 5](#): "Dem Days Wuz Hell," Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives - Mobile County #6, WPA Records, Box 6, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. (Page 5)