

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 3: Accounts of Former Slaveholders

Background information for teachers:

Slavery is most often studied from the point-of-view of the slaveholder, since written records are numerous. This lesson studies slavery from the view of slaveholders. James A. Tait was a wealthy slaveholder in Wilcox County, Alabama. He recorded notes about his slaves, including births and family relationships, in a memorandum book. He also recorded his thoughts and advice to his children on the management of slaves and his plantation.

We can also learn about slavery from the point-of-view of slaveholders through interviews done in the twentieth century. In 1912 Herman Clarence Nixon sent questionnaires to former slaveholders and their children as he was preparing a study on slavery in Alabama. The questionnaire solicited information on slaves' housing, clothing, food, employment, family life, education, entertainment, religion, morality, treatment by their owners, escapes, punishment, emancipation, and relationships and attitudes toward free Negroes and non-slaveholding whites. Nixon was born in 1886 in Calhoun County, Alabama and he died in 1967. Nixon was an author, educator and sociologist, who is best remembered as a member of the Vanderbilt (or Nashville) Agrarians and for his active role in Southern social politics of the 1930s and 1940s.

For more information on Nixon see:

Sarah Newman Shouse, *Hillbilly Realist: Herman Clarence Nixon of Possum Trot*. The University of Alabama Press, 1986.

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. Describe the housing and living conditions of slaves.
2. Describe the concerns of slaveholders in regard to health and well-being of their slaves.
3. Describe the type of clothes slaves wore and food they ate.
4. Explain the difference in the types of work performed and the status of each.
5. Describe the treatment of slaves by their masters.
6. Analyze the importance of religion in the lives of slaves.
7. Analyze and explain the differences of treatment of slaves from one plantation to another.

Suggested Activities:

1. Make copies of Documents 1, 2, 3, and 4.
2. Distribute copies of Document 1 to each student and ask them to read the questions.
3. Divide the class into three groups and assign a different document to each group. Instruct each group to read their document and answer the following questions:
 - a. Was the correspondent conscientious in answering the questions?
 - b. Consider the time period when the questions were answered.
 - c. How old was the correspondent at the beginning of the Civil War?
 - d. Compare the answers with the descriptions of slavery given in Lesson 2.
 - e. Compare the answers with the descriptions of slavery in your textbook.
 - f. Locate DeKalb County, Wilcox County, East Lake, on an Alabama map.
 - g. Compare the treatment of slaves on large plantations with those on smaller farms.

4. (In the 1850 U.S. Census a person who owned more than 50 slaves was identified as a planter; persons owning fewer than 50 slaves were identified as farmers.)
 - a. Discuss possible reasons that former slaves might return to the plantation after they were emancipated.
5. Ask the students to write a story from the point of view of a former slave making the decision to return to the plantation or to make a new life away from the plantation.
6. Make copies of Documents 5 and 6. What do these notes tell us about 19th century views on health, medicine, and sanitation?

Primary Sources:

[Document 1](#): "Slavery Questionnaire," H.C. Nixon Responses to Questionnaire on Slavery, LPR91, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 2](#): "O.J. McCann letter," H.C. Nixon Responses to Questionnaire on Slavery, LPR91, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 3](#): "J.W. Winston letter," H.C. Nixon Responses to Questionnaire on Slavery, LPR91, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 4](#): "D.W. McIntosh letter," H.C. Nixon Responses to Questionnaire on Slavery, LPR91, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 5](#): "Regulations for the sickly season," James A. Tait Memorandum Book, Tait Family Papers, LPR35, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. (2 of 7, page 21)

[Document 6](#): "Negro houses," James A. Tait Memorandum Book, Tait Family Papers, LPR35, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama (4 of 7, page 21)