

Colonial Slave Resistance

Overview

“Slaves brought to America during colonial years were *active*, not passive, beings who in the face of terrible circumstances struggled to maintain their dignity, their African heritage, and even their lives, from the violent and brutalizing aspects of slavery obtained in North Carolina as elsewhere.” In this lesson, students will work to see beyond the stereotypical image of slaves as docile archetypes and examine the various ways slaves, as rational men and women, resisted their unjust circumstances to the best of their ability.

Grade

8

North Carolina Essential Standards for 8th Grade Social Studies

- 8.H.1.3 - Use primary and secondary sources to interpret various historical perspectives.
- 8.H.1.5 - Analyze the relationship between historical context and decision-making.
- 8.H.2.1 - Explain the impact of economic, political, social, and military conflicts (e.g. war, slavery, states’ rights and citizenship and immigration policies) on the development of North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.H.3.1 - Explain how migration and immigration contributed to the development of North Carolina and the United States from colonization to contemporary times (e.g. westward movement, African slavery, Trail of Tears, the Great Migration and Ellis and Angel Island)
- 8.C.1.1 - Explain how influences from Africa, Europe, and the Americas impacted North Carolina and the United States (e.g. Columbian exchange, slavery and the decline of the American Indian populations).
- 8.C.1.3 - Summarize the contributions of particular groups to the development of North Carolina and the United States (e.g. women, religious groups, and ethnic minorities such as American Indians, African Americans, and European immigrants).
- 8.C&G.1.4 - Analyze access to democratic rights and freedoms among various groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. enslaved people, women, wage earners, landless farmers, American Indians, African Americans and other ethnic groups).

Materials

- Warm-Up Image, attached
- Resistance to Slavery, handout attached
- Character Descriptions for Family Meeting Role Play, attached
- Optional teacher reference: *A History of African Americans in North Carolina*, by Jeffrey Crow, Paul Escott, & Flora Hatley. (All quotations from this lesson are taken from this book.)

Essential Questions:

- What is resistance?
- What were the various ways that those enslaved resisted their enslavement?
- What were the risks and benefits associated with various types of resistance?
- Why is it important to examine colonial slaves as active rather than passive beings?

Duration

90 minutes

Student Preparation

Students should have a basic knowledge of the institution of slavery.

Procedure

Introduction to Types of Slave Resistance

1. As a warm-up, project the attached “Warm-Up Image” and ask students to write down initial impressions. Facilitate thinking by asking:
 - What do you see here? What details do you notice first about this image?
 - What do you think might be happening in this image?
 - When might this scene be occurring?
 - What evidence leads you to these conclusions?
 - What questions do you have about this image?
 - If you were to give this image a title, what would it be?
2. Once students have had several minutes of written brainstorm time, allow them to share their thoughts out loud. As students discuss, ensure they have an understanding of the actual event pictured, which is a marriage ceremony among slaves. Explain to students that there was no official marriage process for those enslaved prior to the Civil War. Thus, to symbolize their commitment to one another in front of the slave community, it is believed slaves would perform the pictured ritual of “jumping over the broom.” The origination of this custom is debated among historians, but is largely believed to have roots in West Africa.
3. Next, write the word “RESISTANCE” on the board and ask students to comment on what this word means to them. List student thoughts under the word. As a class, come to a consensus on a definition, such as:
 - **Resistance:** the act of resisting, opposing, or withstanding; a survival mechanism
4. Ask the class to infer how the image they just viewed relates to the word resistance. Lead students to the understanding that while slave masters constantly attempted to strip slaves of their humanity, slaves managed to maintain their identities as human beings by holding on to their culture and building a sense of community, often through shared rituals or ceremonies such as “jumping over the broom.” While this type of resistance might not be as obvious as a slave rebellion, it was none the less just as important.

Explain to students that when studying slavery, we often make the mistake of assuming slaves were passive beings who simply accepted all that was dealt to them, from harsh punishment to cruel restrictions. This view is incorrect. In truth, those enslaved were truly resilient in the ways they carved out areas of freedom in their lives, even in the midst of such danger and oppression. Tell students that this lesson is about exploring all the ways slaves resisted the wretched conditions handed to them.

5. Next, tell students that they will be working in groups to brainstorm all of the ways slaves may have resisted their circumstances, their masters/overseers, and slave-owning society as a whole. Students will take approximately 5 minutes to consider all of the ways slaves may have gotten back at their oppressors or worked to maintain a sense of the very identity and humanity slave owners tried to strip from them. To encourage creative thinking, tell students to ponder some of the ways they themselves react when they want to “get even” with someone, or ways they may retaliate without being so obvious that they put themselves at risk (perhaps even with the adults who have power over them.) Once brainstorming instructions are clear, number students off into groups of 5, tell them where in the room to meet, and instruct them to quietly move to their group’s location. Give each group a piece of chart paper and a marker and instruct them to elect a spokesperson who at the end of the brainstorming session will report their answers to the remainder of the class.

Discussion & Notes: Forms of Resistance to Slavery

6. Once groups have had ample time to work, have each spokesperson share with the whole class. Compile a master list at the front of the room as groups report back. Facilitate discussion around what students share, asking clarifying questions that will spawn additional ideas where possible. Below are various forms of resistance to highlight and discuss with students as they reflect on the class list. Hand out the attached note sheet for students to fill in as you discuss:

Forms of Resistance – Teacher Notes:

- **Culture:** Slaves strove to hold on to their original cultures and integrate their own customs into the new communities they formed in the colonies. In the 1770s approximately one-third of the slaves in North Carolina were of African origin. This was evident in their language, religion, work patterns, and names they chose for their children. By maintaining these cultural traits, slaves were holding on to a piece of their identity. They refused to let their masters strip them of their identities. Specific examples include:
 - “John Koonering”: “North Carolina slaves of the 19th Century engaged in a colorful Christmas time celebration know as Jonkonnu, or ‘John Koonering.’ The custom is believed to have originated in the Caribbean island of Jamaica and to have spread to North Carolina sometime prior to 1824...A slave leader, dressed in a costume of rags, animal skins, horns, and bells and accompanied by other slaves playing musical instruments or ‘gumba boxes,’ performed songs and dances...”
 - Belief in conjurers or obeah men: “Conjurers or obeah men held great influence within the slave community. Skilled in the use of roots and herbs for medicinal purposes, obeah men could also make various poisons or manufacture antidotes. In the slave quarters, obeah men healed the sick, comforted the sad, interpreted the unknown, and avenged the wronged.” Beyond holding on to such traditions as a form of resistance, the herbal medicines themselves could also be used as a more obvious form of rebellion, particularly when crafted to be poisonous. For example, “In 1780 the Johnston County court tried the slave Jenny for poisoning her master, Needham Bryan.” Another slave conjurer, Will, was brought before a Dobbs County court in 1769. Will was accused of making “some Liquid thing to drink” by which he was then said to be able to control people.
- **Behavior:** Slaves also used their behavior as a means of resistance. “Malingering, insolence, carelessness, and dilatory behavior all artfully disguised patterns of slave discontent. Through such methods slaves could define the limits of their work, the hours they labored, and when and how they conducted their assigned duties.”
 - “The task system, in the low country almost certainly grew out of tensions between masters’ expectations and slaves’ unwillingness to perform merciless labor. Under the task system, slaves could quit work after completing so many assignments, for example, hoeing a specific number of rows. Thereafter slaves were free to tend their own gardens and livestock, fish, hunt, rest, or take care of their own families and homes.”
 - “Perhaps the most prevalent form of resistance to slavery was theft...Slaves stole to keep alive and supplement the inadequate provisions supplied by masters.”
- **Community:** Though slave owners constantly attempted to dehumanize slaves, they made every effort to build a community among themselves when possible. This was particularly true on plantations where multiple slaves worked. “Blacks had few ways to defend the integrity of familial institutions, improve living conditions, or resist the cruelties of an arbitrary master. Yet, blacks were not passive beings who stoically accepted punishment and benevolence with equanimity. Instead, they sought to carve out larger areas of freedom in their lives, undermine slaveholders’ discipline, and develop a community life within the slave quarters.”
- **Revolt:** While acts of aggression and revolts were rare due to the consequences slaves faced if caught, they still did occasionally occur.

- Stono Rebellion, SC: On September 9, 1739, twenty African American Carolinians led by a literate slave named Jemmy, met near the Stono River, twenty miles southwest of Charleston with the plan to rebel for their freedom. Marching with a banner that read "Liberty," they chanted the same word in unison. They seized weapons and ammunition from a store at the Stono River Bridge and killed two storekeepers. Their plan was to head for Spanish Florida, a well known destination for escaped slaves. As they marched, their numbers rose to 80. They managed to burn 7 plantations and kill 20 whites before the militia caught up and suppressed the rebellion. The captured slaves were decapitated and their heads displayed on spikes. Two more uprisings flared over the next two years in both Georgia and South Carolina, perhaps inspired--colonial officials believed--by the Stono Rebellion. As a result, a 10-year moratorium on slave importation through Charleston was enacted, as well as a harsher slave code, which banned earning money and education for slaves. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stono_Rebellion)
- Other examples of slaves acting aggressively resulted in similar gruesome punishments. "The Halifax County court in 1785 found the slave Peter guilty of murdering John Miller and Sarah Gold. He was hanged, his head cut off and placed on a pole, and his body burned. A Granville County slave charged with murder was burned at the stake in 1773. Five of Henry Ormond's slaves conspired to kill him in 1770. The slaves were tried, two were executed, and one was burned at the stake."
- **Religion:** Religion has always been a complicated area when discussing slavery. Throughout the history of slavery, it was first debated in the white community whether slaves should be baptized and allowed to practice Christianity at all. Later, Christianity was used by slave owners as an attempt to control slaves as well as justify the institution of slavery itself. Regardless, many slaves used religion as a form of resistance by either holding on to remnants of their own religious traditions, or taking it upon themselves to accept and practice Christianity as they so pleased.
 - "In 1709 James Adams, an Anglican cleric, complained that planters would not permit the baptism of their slaves because of the 'false notion that a Christian slave is by law free.' Another Anglican minister in 1719 declared that Negroes in North Carolina were 'sensible and civic and...inclined to Christianity and...would be converted, baptized, and saved, if their masters were not so wicked as they are, and did not oppose their conversion, baptism, and salvation, so much as they do.' In 1730, the crown finally instructed royal governor George Burrington 'to find out the best means to facilitate & encourage the conversion of Negroes and Indians to the Christian religion.'"
 - "The Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s occasioned the first burst of religious enthusiasm that brought many slaves to Christianity. Evangelists such as George Whitefield exhorted blacks as well as whites to accept Christ....[This] disconcerted many whites who feared that conversion of slaves would lead to insurrection."
 - "Baptists and Methodists...conducted services in a democratic atmosphere. Members called each other brothers and sisters, emphasized fellowship, and shunned the rank and deference of the Anglican church. In its fledgling years the Methodists even espoused abolitionism. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, denounced slavery as an evil institution, and Methodist preachers were instructed to approach Negroes and whites on a basis of religious equality. Between 1782 and 1790 the number of Methodists in North Carolina grew to more than 8,000 whites and nearly 1,800 blacks. In 1785 Tar Heel Methodists even considered forcing slaveholders to manumit their slaves as a condition of membership."
- **Education:** Slaves took great measures to educate themselves, learning to read and write even when it became illegal. Missionaries (particularly Quakers & Presbyterians) made great efforts to provide religious instruction for blacks as well as teach them to read and write.

- **Purchase freedom:** Free labor provided possibilities for emancipation for some enslaved people. The most industrious and the most skilled of the enslaved could take greater advantage of these opportunities by earning the money to buy themselves from their owners. One such example was Venture Smith, born into slavery in the 1720s. After spending his early life enslaved on Long Island and eastern Connecticut, he was able to purchase his freedom by his labors at the age of 31. Those labors, along with his entrepreneurial activities such as fishing, working on a whaler, and agricultural activities, made possible the purchase of his son, daughter, and wife's liberty.
- **Running away:** While escaping slavery was incredibly risky, many blacks determined their best chance for freedom to be running away. In fact, during the 18th century North Carolina had a reputation as a haven for slave fugitives.
 - "Fugitive slaves from Virginia & North Carolina turned the Great Dismal Swamp into a sanctuary. The swamp was an ideal hideout. According to a 1780s traveler, runaways were 'perfectly safe, and with the greatest facility elude the most diligent search of their pursuers.' Blacks had lived there 'for twelve, twenty, or thirty years and upwards, subsisting themselves...upon corn, hogs, and fowls...' The runaways cultivated small plots of land that were not subject to flooding but 'perfectly impenetrable to any of the inhabitants of the country around...'
 - "Runaway slaves, more than most species of black discontent, alarmed white Carolinians because runaways imperiled whites' security and portended the possibility of revolt. As early as the 1690s blacks fled south to St. Augustine, Florida."

Role Play: Family Meeting

7. After discussing the various ways slaves resisted their unjust circumstances, tell students they are going to further explore the individual choices slaves made in terms of their resistance, as well as what led them to make the particular choices they made. Tell students that again in their groups of 5, they are going to simulate a family meeting of a family of slaves living in North Carolina in the year 1774. The goal of the meeting is to share how each of them are currently feeling about their status as slaves and their ideas regarding resistance. Give students the following specific instructions:
 - In your groups of 5, each of you will receive a piece of paper describing a person from the year 1774 that you will be assuming the character of.
 - Your character will be one of the five members of a family who is enslaved in North Carolina in 1774. Each of you has differing opinions regarding what to do about your status as a slave. Thus, the head of the family, "Mother," has called a family meeting tonight for you all to discuss your current feelings and ideas regarding resistance.
 - Once you receive your individual role, you will take 5-8 minutes to silently read about your character and jot down notes about your personality, life situation, and ultimate goals regarding your family and freedom.
 - When I give the signal, each student playing the "Mother" will begin your family's meeting. "Mother" will ensure each of you will have up to 2 uninterrupted minutes to share how you are currently feeling regarding your status as a slave and what you feel your family should do about it. You should not read from the role provided to you; rather you should summarize your feelings and thoughts to your family. Remember, at this point you will no longer be students living in modern times; rather you are to become the person assigned to you.
 - After everyone has had their uninterrupted time to share, as a family you must try and come to a consensus regarding whether to enact any of the ideas posed or not.
 - Remember that you should stick to the attitudes you think your assigned character would have, but you should also be willing to compromise in character if compelled to do so.
 - At the end of 10 minutes of discussion and debate among each family, those of you playing the role of "Uncle" will inform the remainder of class what occurred at your family meeting.

- Before having students begin their work on the activity, teachers should give directions that deter stereotypical behavior. For example, it is important students not use accents or colloquial language during this activity; speaking with their own voice is fine.
8. Once all students have read their roles and planned for the meeting, allow each student playing the role of “Mother” to call the meeting to order. Teachers should closely monitor groups as they assume their roles and simulate the family meeting. Once each group has had ample open dialogue and debate time, ask the students assigned the role of “Uncle” to share what happened in their group, whether their family made any unanimous decisions, or whether the family remained divided. Further discuss:
 - What were the various resistance options members of the family considered?
 - What were the pros and cons to each?
 - What is difficult about deciding to act on resistance ideas or not?
 - Regardless of the role you played, who in the family do you feel had the most logical idea regarding resistance? Why?
 - What do you imagine would have been most difficult about being enslaved?
 - Why is it important to recognize all of the ways (from as small of a choice as working slow to as great a choice as revolt) that slaves practiced resistance?
 9. As a reflection to the lesson or as a homework assignment, have students interpret the quote located at the bottom of their “Resistance to Slavery” handout.

Warm Up Image



Name: _____

Resistance to Slavery

Resistance:

Category of Resistance	Description, examples, notes, etc.

“...Afro-Americans were **active, not passive**, beings who in the face of...[terrible circumstances]...struggled to maintain their dignity, their African heritage, and even their lives, from the violent and brutalizing aspects of slavery obtained in North Carolina as elsewhere. They were...**rational** men and women who from necessity had to weigh the impact of each and every action they made. The slightest misstep in racial etiquette and expected behavior could bring whipping or mutilation.” ~Jeffrey Crow, writer & historian

Summarize your interpretation of the above quote as it pertains to our discussion of slave resistance:

Mother – “To stay safest, we must stay put.”

You were born into slavery in South Carolina in 1745. When your owner decided to start cultivating rice in North Carolina during 1755, he sent you to work on his new plantation in the Cape Fear region. You were only 10 and you tragically had to leave your family behind. The year is now 1775 and while life as a slave has been hard, you are happy to have started

