

# Learning About Slavery With Primary Sources

[nytimes.com/2020/02/13/learning/learning-about-slavery-with-primary-sources.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/learning/learning-about-slavery-with-primary-sources.html)

Nicole Daniels

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Carte de visite silver gelatin portrait of Sgt. Jacob Johns from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Credit...Erica Deeman for The New York Times.

## Lesson Overview

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*Featured Article: "[A Brief History of Slavery That You Didn't Learn in School](#)"*

In August 2019, The New York Times Magazine published [The 1619 Project](#), an ongoing initiative that aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.

In this lesson, you will read an essay that uses primary sources as a point of entry to making sense of the history of slavery in the United States. The primary sources were selected by Mary Elliott, a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. The featured article was written by both Ms. Elliott and Jazmine Hughes, a New York Times writer and editor.

**Note:** If you are looking for more teaching resources related to The 1619 Project, The New York Times Magazine partnered with the Pulitzer Center to create a free [curriculum](#) that includes a reading guide, extension activities and other curricular resources.

## Warm Up

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### Part I

The article uses primary sources to tell the story of slavery from 1619 to 1865. To begin thinking critically about primary sources, look at the cover image for the article, which uses [this broadside from the museum's collection](#). As you look closely at the image, make some observations about what you notice, wonder and feel. You can share in small groups or in a larger class discussion, "I notice...," "I wonder ...," and "I feel ...". Or, you can create a chart with three columns to record your observations and reactions.

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Then, if you would like to further investigate the broadside from a historical lens, you can use a document analysis worksheet from the National Archives. There are two worksheet options for written documents: one for [secondary students](#) and one for [younger students and English-language learners](#).

### Part II

If you would like more background, take some time to read the two-paragraph introduction to the article, either to yourself or aloud as a class.

- Why do you think Ms. Elliott and Ms. Hughes chose to start their exploration of primary sources with these words? What drew you into the text? How did their use of language and imagery affect your reading experience?
- According to the authors, why was the moment in August 1619 significant? How was the arrival of “20 and odd Negroes” different from the earlier presence of people of African descent in North America?

## Questions for Writing and Discussion

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*Note to Teachers:* Given the length and structure of [the featured article](#), we have created questions for each of its three sections. Depending on how much time you are able to dedicate to this lesson, it may be most effective to have students work in small groups, with each group focusing on one section and then sharing their findings with the class.

### **No. 1: Slavery, Power and the Human Cost, 1455-1775**

- What is the connection between the Roman Catholic Church, colonialism and slavery?
- How does the painting “Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam” illustrate the relationship between the slave trade and wealth and power? Use both the authors’ text and the image to explain the connection.
- In what ways was race encoded into law? Use historical examples from the text to support your answer.
- What acts of resistance did you find most powerful to read about? What role did memory play in the lives of enslaved people? Do you think the act of preserving memories was a form of resistance? Explain.

### **No. 2: The Limits of Freedom, 1776-1808**

The text of this section begins with the following lines:

**We hold these truths** to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” So begins the Declaration of Independence, the document that eventually led to the creation of the United States. But the words point to the paradox the nation was built on.

- How would you describe that paradox in your own words, citing laws and beliefs from that period?
- In what ways did enslaved people fight for their freedom?

- What role did religion and churches have in resistance, advocacy and community?
- What was the connection between westward expansion and the trans-Atlantic slave trade? How did the country respond to the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, which took effect in 1808?

### **No. 3: A Slave Nation Fights for Freedom, 1809-1865**

- Why do you think Ms. Elliott chose to feature the portraits of Rhoda Phillips and Sgt. Jacob Johns? What do their stories illustrate about emancipation and the fight for freedom?
- How were enslaved women and their children central to slavery? The article states, “there was no alliance of sisterhood among slave mistresses and the black mothers and daughters they claimed as property.” Why do you think the authors chose to emphasize that point?
- In the wake of slave revolts, such as Nat Turner’s rebellion, white people became more fearful of slave uprisings and resistance. What new forms of surveillance did fearful white people instill? What was the Fugitive Slave Act? How did it expand the surveillance of slaves?
- What does Joseph Trammell’s method for storing his freedom papers illustrate about the nature of freedom for free black people?

## Going Further

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### **Part I**

In the featured article, Ms. Elliott selected 13 artifacts from the museum’s collection to tell the story of slavery. Based on what you have read and heard presented by your classmates, what artifacts would you choose to tell the story of slavery?

Take on the role of curator and choose three artifacts from the article that you believe are key to telling the story of slavery in the United States.

- If you were to summarize slavery in the United States, what would be the three most important points for someone to walk away with? Do any objects from the article correspond to those points?
- What objects do you find most visually compelling in the article? Are there objects that you think relate to one another naturally or that help to weave a narrative together?

Once you have selected three artifacts, decide how to present them — for example, digitally,

on paper or as a gallery exhibit. Can you enhance your narrative by arranging your artifacts in a specific way? What happens if certain artifacts are placed close to one another or far apart? What about lower or higher on a wall?

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Then, write a paragraph of no more than 200 words to accompany your three images. Use the text from the article as inspiration and try to find ways to draw the reader in by making meaningful links between your selected artifacts.

If you are in classroom, take a gallery walk to see your classmates' work. What is similar or different in your interpretations and curatorial choices?

## **Part II**

If you have additional time, browse the museum's digital slavery collection and choose one additional source to add to your curation. You may want to pick an image that enhances one of the artifacts you already selected. Or you may want to select something that sheds light on a different element of slavery discussed in the article.