

2. AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND MEDIA

Subject: **American History**

Grade level: **11**

- **Introduction**
- **Activity 1** - Comparing mainstream and abolitionist press coverage of Blacks in the news
- **Extension 1** - Producing alternative media
- **Activity 2** - Popular culture and justifications for slavery
- **Activity 3** - African American slaves and music
- **Extension 2** - Writing abolitionist rap music
- **Mainstream versus Abolitionist Press**
- **APPARTS** (adapted for Media Education)

● **Introduction**

Rationale or Purpose

This unit introduces students to some of the popular culture and media forms used by proponents and opponents of slavery and African American rights in the early part of the 19th century. Students will examine how racist and stereotypical images were used as justifications for slavery and how abolitionists used an alternative press to construct a different image of African Americans and slavery. Teachers can complete the activities included in this lesson plan separately or in combination.

Background

Unlike today's newspapers, 19th century newspapers were openly subjective when covering issues. They both reported and commented on issues and events. News and editorial were often closely entwined. Various newspapers, ranging in readerships from several hundred to tens of thousands, provided multiple perspectives on the same event, often filtered through the partisan lens of a particular publisher's political or social agenda.

The Abolitionist Movement began with a small faction of free Blacks and Whites who sought to have slavery abolished. Abolitionists promoted their cause and gained support in part through the effective use of print media. Further, abolitionist newspapers served as a type of alternative media in the 19th century. These papers challenged the status quo, aimed at empowering their readers to fight for abolition, and allowed abolitionists to communicate with each other and likeminded individuals. While Whites owned many abolitionist newspapers, such as William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, such papers' readership consisted largely of free Blacks. Some abolitionist papers were owned and operated by African Americans, such as Frederick Douglass' *The North Star*. Abolitionist newspapers often conveyed impassioned anti-slavery arguments. Abolitionist efforts helped pressure the U.S. Congress to pass the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

Slavery proponents also used the media to support their cause. In the first half of the 19th century, Southern slave holders continued to justify slavery by characterizing Black slaves as content with their condition and in need of White subjugation. Racist images found in art, lithographs, and printed ephemera of the era depicted slaves as happy simpletons or as lazy workers neglecting their duties. In addition, proponents of slavery sometimes misrepresented slaves singing in the fields as signs of their contentment and simplicity. Slave owners claimed that slaves sang because they were happy. In actuality, spirituals served a number of functions in slave culture, including the subtle articulation of resistance to their condition. Civil rights leaders of the 1960s would later use spirituals as part of their mobilization strategy. The continued use of songs for protest can be found in contemporary rap and hip-hop music.

Materials

- APPARTS Adapted for Media Education handout
- Internet access
- Mainstream versus Abolitionist Press worksheet
- Newspaper articles
- Paper
- Pen or pencil
- Printed copies of primary materials for students who lack classroom Internet access

TEKS Objectives

- US.7 A The student is expected to trace the historical development of the civil rights movement in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, including the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments.
- US.20 A The student is expected to describe how the characteristics and issues of various eras in U.S. history have been reflected in works of art, music, and literature such as the paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, rock and roll, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.
- US.24 C The student is expected to explain and apply different methods that historians use to interpret the past, including the use of primary and secondary sources, points of view, frames of reference, and historical context.

● **Activity 1** - Comparing mainstream and abolitionist press coverage of Blacks in the news: The Amistad case. (Estimated class time: 45 minutes)

Students will examine the different points of view and frames of reference contained within the 19th century mainstream and abolitionist press. Students will compare and contrast articles from mainstream and abolitionist newspapers, using multiple sources to analyze historical events and the subjective viewpoints of different historical actors.

Step 1

Assign students course reading on the Amistad incident (1839) before completing this activity. You may also ask students to undertake a Web search to find and bring in articles about the Amistad event. Note that the Amistad incident resulted in the Supreme Court case *United States v. Libellants and Claimants of The Schooner Amistad*, 40 US 218 (1841).

Step 2

Ask students to define fact and opinion and to discuss the pros and cons of a subjective news media, as existed in the 1800s. Describe the newspaper environment of the 1830s and note that the Amistad event was reported in both mainstream and abolitionist newspapers of the day. You may use the background information at the beginning of this lesson plan for background information.

Step 3

Divide students into groups and assign each group one of the following news articles: *The Richmond Enquirer* article entitled, "[Weird Ship](#)" ([August 30th, 1839](#)). The abolitionist newspaper, *New York Commercial Advertiser*, entitled, "[Funds Appeal](#)" ([September 5th, 1839](#)). *The Colored American* article entitled, "[Schooner Amistad](#)" ([September 7, 1839](#)).

Step 4

Distribute and review the "Mainstream versus Abolitionist Press" and "APPARTS Adapted for Media Education" worksheets. Students should then complete both the worksheets for their article.

Step 5

Have each group present their findings and create a chart of their composite findings on the blackboard.

Step 6

As a class, discuss the similarities and differences between how the newspapers covered the Amistad event. Ask the class to summarize the role of the mainstream and alternative press during the Abolitionist Era.

Assessment: "Mainstream versus Abolitionist Press" and "APPARTS Adapted for Media Education" worksheets.

● **Extension 1** - Producing alternative media

As homework, students will utilize an alternative point of view and frame of reference to create a newspaper article written from an abolitionist perspective.

Step 1

Students should read the *New York Times* article entitled "[From Washington Abolition of Slavery](#)" (January 31st, 1865) about the Emancipation Proclamation.

Step 2

Students should write a 1-page alternative version of the article for an abolitionist audience. Students may emphasize the African American role in the struggle, the impact this decision will have for African American communities, concerns over how to enforce legislation, or some other abolitionist angle.

Step 3

As a class, discuss some of the ways abolitionist newspapers might have reported on the Emancipation Proclamation and why their coverage might have differed from mainstream press coverage. Discuss the validity of abolitionist or mainstream newspapers as primary sources and what they suggest about the complexity of studying history.

Assessment: Written article

● **Activity 2** - Popular culture and justifications for slavery (Estimated class time: 40 minutes)

In this activity, students will analyze a newspaper article depicting the struggles of African slaves for freedom as written in the 19th century abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*. In addition, they will compare and contrast this article with dominant stereotypes supporting slavery.

Step 1

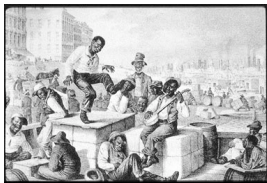
Assign students course reading on slavery prior to the Civil War and the Abolitionist Movement before completing this activity.

Step 2

Discuss the different perspectives and frames of reference held by proponents and opponents of slavery during this period.

Step 3

Have students examine the images entitled: "Cotton slavery" (circa 1840) and "Slavery. A religious service comparison" (circa 1840).



"Cotton slavery" (circa 1840)



"Slavery. A religious service comparison" (circa 1840)

Explain to students that these were lithographs supporting the continuation of slavery in the South and did not reflect the reality of actual slave existence. In addition, have students read an excerpt from "[Letter to Henry Clay - December 3, 1847,](#)" by Frederick Douglass, printed in Douglass' abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*.

Step 4

On a sheet of paper, students should complete the "APPARTS adapted for media education" handout for the images and the newspaper article.

Step 5

As a class, discuss the strategies used by these media to advocate or refute pro-slavery arguments.

Assessment: APPARTS answers

● Activity 3 - African American slaves and music (Estimated class time: 40 minutes)

This activity introduces students to the multifaceted uses of music in African American history and culture. Students will analyze, compare and contrast traditional and modern spirituals in order to assess the role of music in the struggle for civil and political rights.

Step 1

Assign students course reading on pre-Civil War slave culture and the Civil Rights Movement before undertaking this activity. You may use the background information provided at the beginning of this lesson plan or have students visit the Web site www.spiritualsproject.org to read about the many functions of spirituals in African slave culture.

Step 2

Divide students into groups. Distribute and have each group complete an "APPARTS Adapted for Media Education" handout for the following song lyrics: "[Free at Last](#)" (1800s), "[We Shall Overcome](#)" (1800s), "[We Shall Overcome](#)" sung by civil rights protesters (1960s), Public Enemy's "[Fight the Power](#)" (1989).

Step 3

Have each group present their findings.

Step 4

As a class, discuss the continuities and differences between these songs, and the role of music in communicating ideas, opinions and social protest.

Assessment: APPARTS answers

● **Extension 2** - Writing abolitionist rap music

In this extension activity, students will write rap lyrics in support of Abolitionist efforts to achieve emancipation for African slaves.

Step 1

Assign readings on the Abolitionist Movement.

Step 2

Ask students what role popular music plays in people's lives, including their own.

Step 3

Ask students to write a rap song protesting 19th century slavery or advocating for the Emancipation Proclamation.

Step 4

Have students volunteer to read their lyrics out loud.

Step 5

As a class, discuss similarities and differences between contemporary rap music and the lyrics students wrote about Black struggles for freedom in the 19th century.

Assessment: Lyrics

• **Mainstream versus Abolitionist Press**

Name:

Date:

Course:

Directions: Using the chart below, describe how the newspapers listed in the left column portray the people, places or events listed in the top column. Include words or phrases that express opinions and/or convey facts in the appropriate column below.

Newspaper	African slaves/ mutineers	Cinquez	Spanish slave owners/ captives	The mutiny	Conditions aboard the ship when boarded by U.S. seamen	Views expressed toward slavery
Richmond Enquirer						
New York Commercial Advertiser						
The Colored American						

• **APPARTS** (adapted for Media Education)

Name:

Date:

Course:

Directions: Use the following handout as a guide for analyzing media sources.

Author

Who constructed this media product? What do you know about who paid for, wrote, created, or commissioned it? What is the producer's point of view?

Place and Time

Where and when was this media product produced? How might this have affected the meaning of this media product? Where did audiences originally encounter it? What larger historical issues or debates does it address?

Prior Knowledge

What do you know from experience or history that would help you further understand this media product?

Audience

Who was the intended audience for this media product, and how does this affect its content and reliability? Who was likely to pay attention to, or be influenced by, this media product? How might different audiences react differently to this media product?

Reason

Why was this media product produced at the time it was produced? What political, economic or social need on the part of the producer(s) does it address? What information or argument does this media product convey? Does it contain any messages about values, ways of life, or how the world should work?

The Main Idea

What point is this media product trying to convey?

Significance

Why is this media product important? What are its social and/or political implications? What effect might this media product have had?

The Teaching Educators about Media (TEAM) Project, housed in UT's Radio-TV-Film Department, designed these lesson plans and resources. Project Director: Laura Stein, Ph.D. <http://utopia.utexas.edu/explore/team/>