

Seeking a More Perfect Union

The Underground Railroad: Experiences of Freedom Seekers

Watkins Museum of History High School Lesson Plan



Kansas History, Government and Social Studies Educational Standards

1. Choices have consequences
 - Human choices cause change dependent upon conditions which the decision maker may not be able to control or anticipate.
 - Every choice comes with a cost.
2. Individuals have rights and responsibilities
 - Rights tell the bearer what they are at liberty to do but are not a requirement to exercise them.
3. Societies are shaped by the identities, beliefs, and practices of individuals and groups.
 - Beliefs are considered or accepted by individuals as true, and impact behaviors and reactions.
4. Societies experience continuity and change over time.
 - Change is generally continuous, not simply discrete events happening at their own pace, and are often determined by “turning or tipping” points.
5. Relationships among people, places, ideas, and environments are dynamic.
 - Dynamic relationships involve circumstances which often create shifts in priorities, leading to tension and adjustments toward progress.

Overview

The classroom teacher should review the information in the Overview prior to students completing discussions and activities.



This plan is designed to support classroom instruction in history, government, and social studies. It can be completed in 1-3 hours depending upon how many pre and post activities you choose to include. The specific theme of this lesson is *The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers*. Teachers should review the key vocabulary with the class prior to beginning the lesson. The Vocabulary Graphic Organizer Activity is listed as one suggestion of how to do that. As students share their statements connecting the key vocabulary to the main topic, it may help to focus the conversation on the guiding questions:

Why did the symbol of a railroad represent freedom?

When should individuals fight for the rights of others?

Key vocabulary to front load for students:

Plantation owners

Underground Railroad

Abolitionist

“The dead trees will show you the way”

Free people of color

Freedom seekers

Drinking Gourd

“Sound on the goose”

Vocabulary Graphic Organizer Activity

Before beginning this unit review the key vocabulary by providing each student with a copy of the graphic organizer found on slide 9. With the students working individually or in small groups ask that they enter a predicted meaning for each word or phrase.

Then have the group brainstorm and generate statements connecting the words or phrases to each other and their significance or impact on the main topic of *Seeking a More Perfect Union: The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers*.

Once they have predicated and generated their statements, they should share them with the group arriving at a historical meaning for each word.

Overview (continued)



Following the review of the key vocabulary review the foundation information with students. It may help to focus the conversation on the guiding questions:

Why did the people helping slaves escape form a secret network?

What characteristics or qualities did people who worked for the Underground Railroad possess?

Do you think the members of The Underground Railroad were justified in breaking laws to help enslaved people escape?

Other than capture, what were some of the dangers enslaved people faced by escaping?

Foundation Information:

In the early years of the Kansas Territory many came through Kansas on their way to freedom. The informal network that aided these formerly enslaved people in their escape attempts was dubbed the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a railroad. It was given that name because it consisted of networks of 'stations' kept by 'conductors' or 'station keepers' who provided food, shelter and wagon transportation from one station to another along the line of travel to freedom. Those who were members of the Underground Railroad put themselves and their families at great risk. It was a dangerous, clandestine undertaking. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made helping fugitive slaves a federal crime punishable by six months in prison and a \$1,000 fine. Five years later, the proslavery Kansas territorial government enacted legislation saying any person who spoke, wrote or printed materials for the purpose of assisting escaped slaves would be found guilty of a felony and sentenced to death.

When the Kansas-Nebraska Territories were opened for settlement, underground railroads had been in operation for decades and had helped tens of thousands of slaves escape to freedom. Whether highly organized or loosely planned, these men and women assisted slaves northward to escape slavery. When these territories opened, not only did they offer new opportunities for underground railroad operations, but they also created prospects for the expansion of slavery on the frontier.

Lawrence was founded in 1854 by the New England Emigrant Aid Company in an effort to keep the territory free from slavery. It is said that Lawrence is one of the few cities in the U.S. founded strictly for political reasons. Lawrence was an important stop on the Underground Railroad, the city played a central role in the state's anti-slavery struggle. It is estimated that as many as 900-1000 enslaved people were helped out of Kansas along underground railroad routes from 1856-1860.

Seeking a More Perfect Union

The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers



DISCUSSION

John Brown came to Kansas from his farm in New York in October 1855 after three of his sons, who had arrived earlier in the year, appealed to him for help against proslavery forces in the state. John Brown played a significant role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. An understanding of that role can be found by viewing the Watkins Museum of History's YouTube presentation entitled "[Encounter on The Underground Railroad](#)". Have students watch only the first 35 seconds of that video asking them to focus on the details they see and hear. You may choose to replay that small segment a second time. Follow that with a discussion of the Leading Questions below.

If time allows, have the students watch the remainder of the YouTube video focusing on how John Brown told the story of George Gill assisting a group of Freedom Seekers.



LEADING QUESTIONS

What item appears on the screen just prior to seeing the title *Encounter on the Underground Railroad*? Why do you think that item was included and why at that point in the video?

Following that item, images move across the screen – one before the title appears and more after. What do you think those images represent?

What sounds do you hear as you view the title of the presentation? How are those sounds connected to the Underground Railroad?

Student Support

Link to the YouTube video "Encounter on the Underground Railroad".

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSJljSbXp-s&list=PLcUsdBiQ3Rjs_dGUGC41LxYPX4Q2b5OGJ&index=1



BONUS ACTIVITY

Students will work in small groups for this activity.

Project the image of the historical letter found on slide 10.



LEADING QUESTIONS

How would you describe the physical condition of the letter to someone who can't see it?

Who wrote it and who was it written to?

When and where was it written?

Part 2: Now share the image on slide 11 so the students can clearly read the content of the letter.

What is one sentence that you can write which would summarize this letter?

What is a sentence from the letter that tells you why John Brown wrote the letter?

What did you find out from this document that you might not learn anywhere else?

Which told you the most about John Brown, the video or the letter? Why?

Student Support

As added support provide students/groups with a copies of the historic letter to Mrs. George Stevens as well as the text version.



Wrap Up Activity

Review with students what they learned about the Underground Railroad. Remind students that in the presentation *Encounter on the Underground Railroad*, the narrator portrays John Brown as a man who did not support violence as he assisted Freedom Seekers. The video shows that he was a fervent abolitionist who was accused of massacring pro-slavery settlers in Kansas while utilizing the Underground Railroad to assist Freedom-Seekers.

Then share the image of Chas. T. Webber's painting *The Underground Railroad* which was completed in 1893 – some 40 years after the Underground Railroad was no longer in existence. Webber created this painting after meeting Levi Coffin, known as the “President of the Underground Railroad”. This was Webber's tribute to Coffin and other “conductors” of the Underground Railroad.

After allowing students a few minutes to look at the image of the painting discuss the leading questions below with the class.



Leading Questions

Do you think that John Brown and his followers were justified in using violence to try and end slavery?

Briefly list who or what you see in Webber's painting.

What message do you think the artist is conveying about the Underground Railroad?

There are many historical documents, historical re-enactments, works of art, and sites available that detail the history and importance of the Underground Railroad. Based on what you learned in this unit, how did the Underground Railroad contribute to the goal of establishing a more perfect union?

What is something related to the Underground Railroad that you would like to learn more about?

Follow Up Activity

Discuss with the students that a primary source such as a letter, diary or book, or a painting tells a story based on how the composer, writer, or artist understands a situation or event.

- Divide students into groups. Provide each group with the text version of John Brown's letter to Mrs. George L Stearns. Assign each group the task of rewriting the letter as if it were being written today. Have each group share their finished version with the class allowing time for questions and discussion after each group shares.

Providing Scaffolding:

- Students who are challenged by the writing can create these entries by drawing.
- Allow the student to share their ideas with a scribe who writes it down for them.

Providing Enrichment:

- Advanced students can replace writing what they learned with creating journal entries for a slave traveling the Underground Railroad.

Teacher Tips

- Note: The standards connected to this unit were taken directly from the Kansas State Department of Education Standards for History, Government and Social Studies. The standards listed are applicable guiding standards for this lesson plan.
- Vocabulary words listed in the lesson plan are appropriate for high school students. If there are students who need scaffolding or enrichment words from the following list could be included at the teacher's discretion.
 - **Enslaved:** held in bondage; people seen not as people but as commodities to be bought, sold, and exploited.
 - **Bushwackers:** people who came into Kansas Territory to raid antislavery settlements to discourage people from settling there
 - **Irrepressible conflict:** a code name for the abolitionist cause to make Kansas a free state.
 - **Primary source:** something made or written by someone who was there at the time; an original record; examples are letters, diaries, photographs, newspaper articles of the time, artifacts used at the event or time.
- Social, Emotional Learning (SEL) skill development can be addressed with the following:
 - Writing and drawing can provide a method of reflection and allow students to express feelings regarding their educational experiences. The format can vary depending on the students' needs and the instructor's goals.
 - Ask each student to write or draw how what they learned about the Underground Railroad made them feel.
 - Include SEL skills by asking students to include words or images that show how they felt about the characters in this painting.
 - Discuss whether learning about this topic might change their treatment of others.

Prior to showing the John Brown video be sure to preview it. This will allow you to select just certain sections to show students if you are on a limited time schedule or if there is any material that you find inappropriate for your students. In addition, it might be helpful to pause the videos periodically to do a check for understanding. This will ensure that the students understand the content and are making a connection between the video and the theme of Seeking a More Perfect Union - *The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers*

- When viewing a YouTube video be sure to look for the option to "Skip Ads" as it may appear at the beginning of or between segments of a presentation. It is also helpful to view the video in full screen mode.

Seeking a More Perfect Union

The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers

Key vocabulary to front load for students:

Plantation owners – a person who owned an estate in the American South on which crops such as coffee, sugar and tobacco were generally cultivated by the exploitation of slave or indentured labor.

Underground Railroad – a network of routes, places and people that helped enslaved people in the American South escape to the North. The name was used metaphorically as it was not located underground nor was an actual railroad. Instead, it operated through “safe houses” and properties of anti-slavery sympathizers. Routes took freedom seekers in many directions and was often not a direct line to northern states. Between 1810 and 1850, it is estimated to have helped guide 100,000 enslaved persons to freedom.

Abolitionist – a person who sought to end the practice of slavery in the United States. A majority of early abolitionists were white, but some of the prominent leaders of the movement were escaped or freed black men and women.

Free people of color – people of Black heritage who were born free or escaped the bonds of slavery before its practice was abolished in 1865.

Freedom seekers – an enslaved person who took action to obtain freedom from slavery, either by attempting escape on their own or through the Underground Railroad.

Drinking Gourd — the Big Dipper and the North Star.

“Sound on the goose” – a phrase used during the 1850s in America to signify commitment to the proslavery cause in Kansas.

“The dead trees will show you the way” — a reminder that moss grows on the north side of dead trees, so if the North Star were not visible, they would know which way to walk.

Seeking a More Perfect Union

The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers

Vocabulary Word	Predict the meaning.	Explain the significance or impact of the listed word on the topic of <i>Seeking a More Perfect Union – The Underground Railroad: Experiences of freedom seekers.</i>
Plantation Owners		
Underground Railroad		
Abolitionist		
“The dead trees will show you the way”		
Free people of color		
Freedom seekers		
Drinking Gourd		
“Sound on the goose”		

Charlestown, Jefferson Co Va. 29th Nov. 1859.

Mr George L Stearns

Boston

Mass

My dear friend

No letter I have

received since my imprisonment here, has given ^{me} more satisfaction, or comfort; than yours of the 8th inst. I am quite perfect: I was never more happy. Have only time write you a word. May God forever reward you & all yours. My Love to All who love their Neighbours. I have asked to be spared from hav-

ing any mock; or hypocritical prayers made over me, when I am publicly murdered: & that my ^{only} religious attendants

be poor little, dirty, ragged, bare headed, & barefooted,

Slave Boys; & Girls; led by some old grey headed, Slave

Mother.

Horewell. Horewell.

Your Friend

John Brown

Letter written by John Brown in his jail cell a few days before his execution. The original letter was given to Mary Ann Brown at the time of her visit to her husband December 1, 1859. After his execution, Mrs. Brown sent the letter to Mrs. Stearns in a Bible.

The letter reads:

Charlestown, Jefferson Co., Va., 29th Nov. 1859.

Mrs George L Stearns, Boston, Mass.

My Dear friend,

No letter I have received since my imprisonment here, has given me more satisfaction, or comfort: than yours of the 8th inst. I am quite cheerful: & was never more happy. Have only time [to] write you a word. May God forever reward you & all yours. My love to All who love their neighbours. I have asked to be spared from having any mock; or hypocritical prayers made over me, when I am publicly murdered: & that my only religious attendants be poor little, dirty, ragged, bare headed & barefooted, Slave Boys; & Girls; Led by some old greyheaded, Slave Mother. Farewell. Farewell.

Your Friend, John Brown.



The Underground Railroad by Chas. T. Webber