

School _____ Teacher _____ Name _____

Documenting New York City's Complicity with Slavery

Part 1. Do Now: Read paragraphs A-C. Answer questions 1-3.

A. Slave trading was a capital offense punishable by death in the United States after 1820. Between 1837 and 1860, 74 cases were tried but there were few convictions and punishment tended to be minimal.

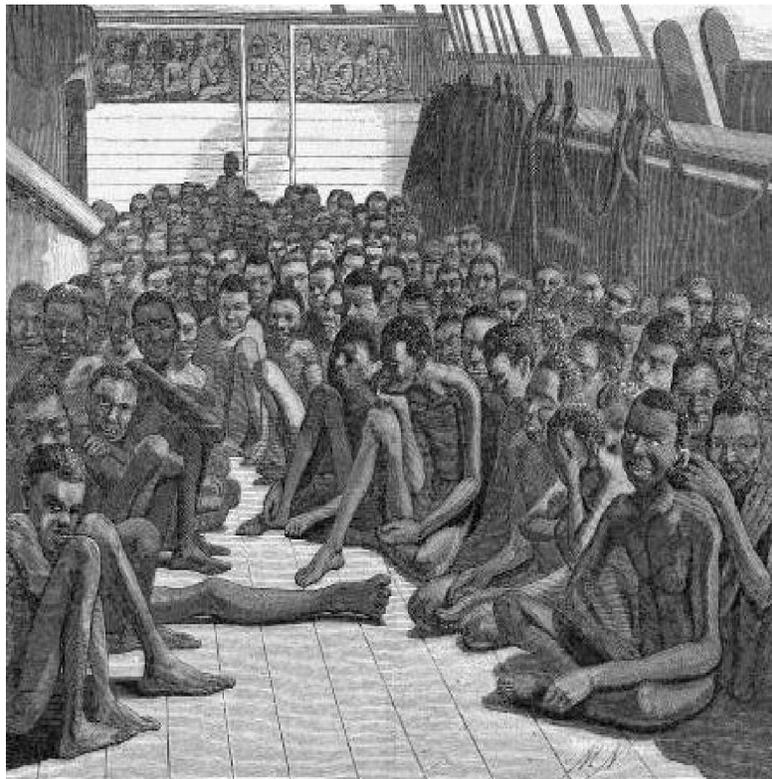
B. The British counsel claimed that out of 170 known slave trading expeditions for the Cuba slave market between 1859 and 1862, 74 were believed to have sailed from New York City. In the summer of 1859, the bark Emily set off from New York stocked as a slaver. It was returned to port under naval guard, but the case against its captain and owners was dismissed.

C. Federal officials in New York were so ineffective in prosecuting slave trading cases that in 1861, a *New York Times* editorial urged President Lincoln to replace the marshal and district attorney assigned to these cases. In 1862, Nathaniel Gordon of the slave ship Erie was the only North American ever executed for slave trading.

Questions

1. What does the statement that "Slave trading was a capital offense" mean?
2. What evidence is there that slave traders were not severely punished?
3. *The New York Times* demanded that President Lincoln replace federal officials responsible for prosecuting slave trading cases? Do you agree with this request? Explain your views.

Part 2. Examine the drawing below and answer question 1-3. The drawing accompanied an article, "The Africans of the Slave Bark Wildfire," *Harper's Weekly*, June 2, 1860.



Questions

1. Describe what you see in the drawing.
2. In your opinion, why did *Harper's Weekly* publish a drawing rather than a photograph?
3. The slave trade was outlawed by the U.S. in 1808. It was made punishable by death in 1820. In your opinion, why were American ships still involved in the slave trade in 1860?

Part 3. Group assignment Team A. Read the passage below. Discuss it in your team. Answer all questions. Select a representative to report your team's findings to the class. After team reports we will debate the question: **Why did some New Yorkers support the slave trade up until the start of the Civil War?**

The New York Times, Editorial, November 10, 1854, pg 4.

In the United States Circuit Court sitting in this City, one Captain James Smith has been convicted of having been engaged in the *Slave-Trade* between the Coast of Africa and the Island of Cuba. . . The facts which were proved in this case were substantially these: In January last Capt. Smith went to Boston, where he purchased the brig *Julia Moulton*, cleared her in ballast for Newport, and on the 2nd of February brought her to this port. . . . A crew was shipped of about fifteen persons, mostly young men, and a large quantity of provisions, water, with lumber. . . . On the 11th of February the brig cleared from this port. . . . After she had been out about forty days, the timber on board was used to make a temporary deck or floor in the hold of the vessel, and all the other preparations necessary to receive a cargo of slaves were made. At the end of sixty days, they made land on the coast of Africa. . . , where they were boarded by a boat which brought instructions, in accordance with which they cruised at sea for ten days longer, and then put in a port further south. . . . Here in the course of two or three hours, six hundred and sixty-four negroes, including forty women, were brought on board and stowed away as cargo in the hold of the brig. They were placed on their sides, one lying in the lap of another – were taken out occasionally to be fed and aired, and after a voyage of sixty-five days were land on the South coast of Cuba. . . . We believe this is the first time in which a conviction of being engaged in the African Slave Trade has ever been had in this City – and this is due entirely to a disagreement between the captain and his mate about the payment of a trifling sum of money. . . . Scarcely a month passes in which there are not one or more vessels cleared at this port, which embark at once in the Slave-trade and land their cargoes on the coast of Cuba. The facts given in evidence on this trial show how easily this is done . . . so long as all the parties engaged in it are satisfactorily paid for keeping silent.

Questions

1. What charge was Captain James Smith convicted of?
2. Why did Captain Smith load extra lumber on the ship?
3. How were people treated on the Atlantic voyage?
4. Why was the *New York Times* surprised by the conviction of James Smith?
5. In your opinion, should slave traders have been executed? Explain.

Part 3. Group assignment Team B. Read the passage below. Discuss it in your team. Answer all questions. Select a representative to report your team's findings to the class. After team reports we will debate the question: **Why did some New Yorkers support the slave trade up until the start of the Civil War?**

In 1859, eighty-five slave ships, capable of carrying between thirty and sixty thousand slaves, were outfitted in New York to serve the slave markets of Cuba. Captain James Smith was one of the few slave traders convicted of violating U.S. and international laws. Even though participation in the slave trade was considered piracy and a capital offense, he was sentenced to only two years in prison and a \$1,000 fine. The document that follows is an edited interview with Smith. It originally appeared in a book written in 1857 and published in 1864.

“New York is the chief port in the world for the Slave Trade. It is the greatest place in the universe for it. Neither in Cuba nor in the Brazils is it carried on so extensively. Ships that convey Slaves to the West Indies and South America are fitted out in New York. . . . Not so many vessels have been sent out this year, perhaps not over twenty-five. But last year there were thirty-five. I can go down to South Street, and go into a number of houses that help fit out ships for the business. I don't know how far they own the vessels, or receive the profits of the cargoes. But these houses know all about it.”

“We took on board 664. She would carry 750 with ease. The boys and women we kept on the upper deck. But all the strong men - those giant Africans that might make us trouble - we put below on the Slave deck. . . . We have to be very strict at first - for a week or so - to make them feel that we are the masters. Then we lighten up for the rest of the voyage. . . . They lie down upon the deck, on their sides, body to body. There would not be room enough for all to lie on their backs. . . . I lost a good many on the last cruise - more than ever before. Sometimes we find them dead when we go below in the morning. Then we throw them overboard. . . . My brig cost \$13,000 to fit her out completely. My last cargo to Cuba was worth \$220,000.”

Questions

1. How many enslaved Africans did Smith transport on this voyage?
2. How much money were these people sold for in Cuba?
3. Smith says “New York is the chief port in the world for the Slave Trade.” According to Smith, what role does New York play in this trade?
4. What happened to people who died during the trans-Atlantic voyage?
5. When Smith was convicted of illegal slave trading, he was sentenced to two years in prison and a \$1,000 fine. In your opinion, was this a fair punishment? Explain.

Part 3. Group assignment Team C. Read the passage below. Discuss it in your team. Answer all questions. Select a representative to report your team's findings to the class. After team reports we will debate the question: **Why did some New Yorkers support the slave trade up until the start of the Civil War?**

On November 15, 1852, *The New York Times* explained the workings of the Cuban sugar industry. Many New York City merchants and bankers loaned Cuban sugar planters money. The planters paid investors two and a half times the normal interest rate on loans and found it more profitable to smuggle in newly enslaved Africans than to allow for the internal reproduction of its work force.

“Great privileges have been secured to the sugar planter, such as exemption from all direct taxes except tithes, and immunity from the sale of their estates by any process to satisfy the claims of creditors. Very many of the planters are large borrowers of money, and I have been informed by capitalists that . . . the current rate of interest on their loans is not less than fifteen per cent. . . . There is no limit to the rate of interest established by law. A very large capital is required to “make a sugar estate.” But when the requisite money is at hand, the prices of land are so low that to begin from the foundation is the preferable way for a planter to establish himself. This accounts for the exorbitant usury they are willing to pay. . . . An estate . . . consists of land, negroes(*sic*), horses, mules cattle, hogs, machinery and everything appertaining to a complete establishment. I have heard of sales where the first crop would reimburse the first payment, and each successive crop provide for the current payment, and leave the purchaser from two to four times as much more for regular income. . . . When estates are sold, they are sold entire, as above described. The negroes (*sic*) and other stock are not valued separately unless they are separately sold. The rule as to treatment of negroes is said to be ‘plenty of feed and plenty of work.’

The slaves are driven to the field at dawn, after breakfasting before it is light enough to work; have rest and dinner at noon, work till dark, and then supper and locked up to sleep. Marriage is unknown among them – most of the planters pay no regard to breeding slaves, it is cheaper to buy “green” ones from Africa than to raise them, and intercourse between the sexes, when permitted at all, is promiscuous.”

Questions

1. What privileges did sugar planters receive from their government?
2. Why is a large amount of money needed to start a sugar estate?
3. Why are planters willing to spend all of this money?
4. How were enslaved Africans treated on these plantations?
5. In your opinion, should New York City merchants and bankers who loaned money to and traded with the Cuban sugar planters have been punished for supporting slavery? Explain.

Part 3. Group assignment Team D. Read the passage below. Discuss it in your team. Answer all questions. Select a representative to report your team’s findings to the class. After team reports we will debate the question: **Why did some New Yorkers support the slave trade up until the start of the Civil War?**

The financing and operation of the Southern cotton trade and its ties with New York City merchants was detailed in an 1852 report to Congress. New York City’s merchants and bankers, called southern commission merchants, loaned southern planters money so they could grow and ship their crops. They also owned many of the boats used to ship the cotton north and to Europe.

“Cotton employs upwards of 120,000 tons of steam tonnage. . . . Cotton affords employment and profit to the southern commission merchant, and to the many and various laborers engage in carting, storing it, in the southern port; and a second tribute is paid to the underwriter for insurance against fire whilst in store. The “compressing” and reloading it for shipment coastwise to eastern Atlantic cities, or to foreign ports, and insurance against the danger of the seas, give additional employment and cause additional charges. The transportation of that portion of the crop is sent along the gulf coast to the principal gulf ports, or coastwise to eastern cities, employs upwards of 1,100,000 tons of *American* shipping in the gulf and Atlantic coasting trade, and upwards of 55,000 American seamen engaged in such trade. As no foreign vessel can participate in the trade, the freights are highly profitable. They ordinarily average from the gulf ports to New York not less than five-eighths of a cent per pound of freight.

In the eastern Atlantic cities, the wharfinger, those who unlade the vessel, the drayman, the storekeeper, the commission merchant, the cotton-broker, the weigher, the packers who compress the bales by steam power or otherwise, the laborers, and those who charge for “mendage,” “cordage,” the fire insurer, and the shipper, the stevedore, and numerous other persons in those ports, find profitable avocations arising from cotton, whether destined for a home or for a foreign market....

More than 800,000 tons of the navigation of the United States engaged in the foreign trade are employed in carrying American cotton to Europe and elsewhere, and upwards of 40,000 American seamen are given employment in such vessels. It is estimated that the foreign tonnage and seamen employed in carrying American cotton to Europe and elsewhere to foreign countries amount to about one-sixth of that of the United States so employed.”

Questions

1. According to this report, what occupations of people profit from the cotton trade?
2. How many sailors were employed in the gulf and Atlantic coast cotton trade?
3. Why was the Atlantic coast cotton trade especially profitable?
4. What is the total tonnage of the ships carrying American cotton to Europe?
5. In your opinion, should New York City merchants and bankers who loaned money to and traded with the southern cotton planters have been punished for supporting slavery? Explain.

Part 3. Group assignment Team E. Read the passage below. Discuss it in your team. Answer all questions. Select a representative to report your team's findings to the class. After team reports we will debate the question: **Why did some New Yorkers support the slave trade up until the start of the Civil War?**

On January 8, 1861, *The New York Times* published the transcript of Mayor Fernando Wood's annual report to the city's Common Council. In this message, Wood spoke about the city's options as the United States federal union appeared to be dissolving.

"It would seem that a dissolution of the Federal Union is inevitable. Having been formed originally upon a basis of general and mutual protection, but separate local independence - each State reserving the entire and absolute control of its own domestic affairs, it is evidently impossible to keep them together longer than they deem themselves fairly treated by each other, or longer than the interests, honor and fraternity of the people of the several States are satisfied. It cannot be preserved by coercion or held together by force. A resort to this last dreadful alternative would of itself destroy not only the Government, but the lives and property of the people.

With our aggrieved brethren of the Slave States we have friendly relations and a common sympathy. We have not participated in the warfare upon their constitutional rights or their domestic institutions. While other portions of our State have unfortunately been imbued with the fanatical spirit, the City of New York has unfalteringly preserved the integrity of its principles in adherence to the compromises of the Constitution. Our ships have penetrated to every clime, and so have New York capital, energy and enterprise found their way to every State. New York should endeavor to preserve a continuance of uninterrupted intercourse with every section.

I claim for the City the distinction of a municipal corporation, self-existing and sustained by its own inherent and proper vigor. As a free City, with but a nominal duty on imports, her local government could be supported without taxation upon her people. In this she would have the whole and united support of the Southern States as well as of all other States to whose interests and rights under the Constitution she has always been true. If the Confederacy is broken up the Government is dissolved, and it behooves every distinct community as well as every individual to take care of themselves.

When disunion has become a fixed and certain fact, why may not New York disrupt the bands which bind her to a corrupt and venal master. New York, as a *Free City*, may shed the only light and hope for a future reconstruction of our once blessed Confederacy."

Questions

1. What crisis is facing New York City and the United States in January, 1861?
2. Why does Mayor Wood believe this crisis cannot be prevented?
3. What path does Mayor Wood recommend for New York City?
4. According to Wood, how would New York City profit from this plan?
5. In your opinion, what would have happened to New York City and the United States if the city had tried to follow this course of action? Explain.

Part 3. Group assignment Team F. Read the passage below. Discuss it in your team. Answer all questions. Select a representative to report your team's findings to the class. After team reports we will debate the question: **Why did some New Yorkers support the slave trade up until the start of the Civil War?**

The Africans of the Slave Bark Wildfire, Harper's Weekly June 2, 1860

On the morning of the 30th of April last, the United States steamer Mohawk, came to anchor in the harbor of this place, having in tow a bark of the burden of about three hundred and thirty tons, supposed to be the bark Wildfire, lately owned in the-city of New York. The bark had on board five hundred and ten native Africans, taken on board in the River Congo, on the west side of the continent of Africa. She had been captured a few days previously within sight of the northern coast of Cuba, as an American vessel employed in violating our laws against the slave-trade. She had left the Congo River thirty-six days before her capture.

Soon after the bark was anchored we repaired on board, and on passing over the side saw, on the deck of the vessel, about four hundred and fifty native Africans, in a state of entire nudity, in a sitting or squatting posture, the most of them having their knees elevated so as to form a resting place for their heads and arms. They sat very close together, mostly on either side of the vessel, forward and aft, leaving a narrow open space along the line of the centre for the crew of the vessel to pass to and fro. About fifty of them were full-grown young men, and about four hundred were boys aged from ten to sixteen years. It is said by persons acquainted with the slave-trade and who saw them, that they were generally in a very good condition of health and flesh, as compared with other similar cargoes, owing to the fact that they had not been so much crowded together on board as is common in slave voyages, and had been better fed than usual. . . . Ninety and upward had died on the voyage. But this is considered as comparatively a small loss, showing that they had been better cared for than usual. Ten more have died since their arrival, and there are about forty more sick in the hospital. We saw on board about six or seven boys and men greatly emaciated, and diseased past recovery, and about a hundred that showed decided evidences of suffering from inanition, exhaustion, and disease. Dysentery was the principal disease.

Questions

1. Why was the boat Wildfire and its "cargo" seized by the United States Navy?
2. What was the boat's connection with New York City?
3. Why does the author of the article believe the captured Africans were in "very good condition of health and flesh"?
4. What evidence is there in the article of inhuman treatment?
5. In your opinion, should New York City merchants and bankers who loaned money to planters to purchase slaves or owned ships like the Wildfire have been punished for supporting slavery? Explain.