

## The Transatlantic Slave Trade: Document Based Questions

### Overview & Background to Activity

This worksheet is meant to supplement existing textbooks and curriculum related to Colonial America, the transatlantic slave trade, and the Declaration of Independence. The contradictions between the talk of liberty and the pervasiveness of slavery in revolutionary America is widely documented. This activity will give students deeper insight into the transatlantic slave trade and its connection to early America. One of the primary goals of this activity is to infuse large amounts of data and figures with a personal and human-scaled perspective through the incorporation of Olaudah Equiano, a former enslaved person.

The forced migration from Africa to the Americas was known as “the Middle Passage.” It lasted from 1520 until 1866. In that time period, more than 12.5 million Africans were kidnapped from their homes and forcibly taken across the Atlantic Ocean in overcrowded, unsanitary, and dangerous slave ships. These enslaved people were brought to South America, the Caribbean, and North America against their will, and forced to work in brutal and inhumane conditions. In North America, slavery was particularly brutal. It took a form known as “chattel slavery,” meaning enslaved people were defined by law as movable property, no different than tools or beasts of burden, and denied legal protection or recognition for their families or even their own bodies.

In the midst of the transatlantic slave trade, the American Revolutionary War took place. The founding fathers made the cause of liberty and equality a cornerstone of the new nation. Freedom from tyranny and the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were the most prominent themes in the Declaration of Independence, one of the nation’s founding documents. Despite this talk of freedom and rejection of tyranny, many of these founding fathers actively participated in the enslavement of Africans, showing that the notion of liberty and equality for all had its limits.

In order to bring the slave trade to a more human scale, this worksheet focuses on Olaudah Equiano. A formerly enslaved person, Equiano wrote an autobiography entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Charting his life from his kidnapping in Africa and forced migration across the Atlantic to purchasing his freedom in England, the book is widely read in high school and college classrooms. His life is subject to some scholarly debate however. According to Vincent Carretta, professor emeritus of English at the University of Maryland and the author of a biography of Equiano, a baptismal certificate and a ship manifest from Equiano's later life as a free man in England both list his place of birth as "Carolina," casting doubt on his autobiography's description of origins in Igbo country (in what is now Nigeria). There is also some doubt as to whether or not the famous portrait that is often used to depict Equiano in modern publications is actually of Equiano, or if it is another former slave, Charles Ignatius Sancho. This should be explained to students, as it gets to one of the major difficulties in the field of history, the verification of artifacts from the past where little documentation exists.

Data and maps related to the slave trade were taken from the Slave Voyages project, an online database documenting the movement and records for over 50,000 transatlantic and intra-American slaving expeditions and the transporting of millions of

enslaved people. The website is free to use and hosts the open database, charts, maps, and additional lesson plans for K-12 classrooms.

### **Objectives:**

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Interpret graphs and draw conclusions from data regarding the transatlantic slave trade.
- Analyze and think critically with regards to ideas of liberty/freedom and enslavement
- Connect the story of one individual, Olaudah Equiano, to the wider Transatlantic Slave Trade

### **Suggested Grade & Course:**

This assignment is designed for a middle school (6th-7th grade) social studies classroom focused on US History. It is meant to supplement and enrich existing curriculum to deepen students understanding of the transatlantic slave trade. This Document Based Question should be assigned when teaching about the Declaration of Independence.

### **Standards:**

#### **Common Core:**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.3: Identify key steps in a text's description of a process related to history/social studies (e.g., how a bill becomes law, how interest rates are raised or lowered).

#### **NCHS**

- **Era 2**
  - Standard 3C: The student understands African life under slavery. Therefore the student is able to analyze the forced relocation of Africans to the English colonies in North America and the Caribbean.
- **Era 3**
  - Standard 1B: The student understands the principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Therefore the student is able to demonstrate the fundamental contradictions between the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the realities of chattel slavery.

### **Activities/Procedures:**

This DBQ is meant to supplement existing lessons on the transatlantic slave trade. It can be used as an in-class activity or assigned as homework. If used as an in-class activity, working in partners is recommended. Learning about the slave trade and discussing the ideal of liberty between two students will help to draw out clearer

conclusions and develop a stronger understanding of the contradictions of the subject of slavery.

Separating each section and incorporating them into station work is also an option. This would create space for larger discussions by students as they work their way through the content. It would also give the teacher a chance to contextualize each portion more effectively and ensure students are engaging with the content in a meaningful way.

An interesting way to engage and introduce students to this topic is through the Marvel movie *Black Panther*. At the end of the movie, the antagonist, Erik Killmonger, says he would prefer death to captivity. His last words were “bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from ships, 'cause they knew death was better than bondage.” As students are likely very familiar with most Marvel movies, they have probably seen this movie and heard this line. They may not have understood the reference, but using this clip in the lesson could help them to make that connection.