

This Question of Slavery: Perspectives From Primary Source Documents

Subject: **The Fugitive Slave Law and the Case of Anthony Burns**

Documents: **Six Primary Source Documents on the subject**

Developed for a 10th Grade Honors United States History course

FOCUS OF SUBJECT AREA

- The escalation of sectional strife generated by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850.
- The Case of Anthony Burns: Northern response to federal enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law in Boston, Massachusetts in 1854.
- The historical and political repercussions of the Burns incident.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

- Identify the major provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law
- Examine Northern and Southern views of the Fugitive Slave Law
- Analyze the facts of the Burns case based on various primary source documents
- Analyze the Northern public response to the Burns case and its impact on antebellum sectionalism

STRATEGIES

Students will accomplish the instructional objectives by:

- Reading the primary source documents and answering assigned questions
- Participating in group activities and class discussions
- Writing an analytical essay

OVERVIEW OF LESSON ACTIVITIES

This unit on Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave, and Fugitive Slave Law, requires four 45-minute class sessions. Prior to the classes, students will be instructed to read all of the primary source documents on the subject, answer any assigned questions, and be prepared for class discussion of the subject.

ASSESSMENT

Students will demonstrate their comprehension of the unit objectives by:

- 1) Actively participating in group activities and class discussion
- 2) Writing a letter to the editor of “The Liberator” expressing an opinion on the Fugitive Slave Law
- 3) Writing an essay analyzing the historic impact of the case of Anthony Burns

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

Begin the lesson by explaining to the students that they will be examining the controversial Fugitive Slave Law and the protests and trial involving a victim of that law, fugitive slave Anthony Burns to:

- Develop an understanding of the increasing sectional strife over the slavery issue confronting the United States during the 1850s
- Analyze a variety of primary sources to gain a sense of how several people responded to the escalating crisis in particular reference to the Burns incident

DAY ONE: THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW

PROCEDURE:

- Divide the class into four groups
- Instruct students to read “The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims,” pages 1-7
- Distribute the following questions to each group for group discussion:
 1. What was the Fugitive Slave Law?
 2. Why was it enacted?
 3. Would such compromise legislation be able to “keep the peace” between the North and South?
 4. Why was the Fugitive Slave Law so controversial and so extremely unpopular to many Northerners?
 5. Was the Fugitive Slave Law constitutional? Why did Southerners consider it to be constitutional?

DAY TWO: FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW

PROCEDURE:

- Reunite the class and facilitate a discussion of their impressions of the Fugitive Slave Law
- Divide the class into pro-slavery and anti-slavery advocates
- Students will write a two page letter to the editor of the “The Liberator” expressing their group’s view of this law
- Students will share the views expressed in their letters

DAY THREE: THE ANTHONY BURNS CASE: THE FACTS

PROCEDURE:

- Divide the class into four groups
- Assign each group one of the primary source documents written by one of the following:
Anthony Burns – Fugitive slave from Virginia. A victim of the Fugitive Slave Law
Theodore Parker – Boston Congregational minister, abolitionist

Thomas Wentworth Higginson – Boston Unitarian minister, led mob that broke into Court House to liberate Burns

Charlotte Forten – 16 year old Free Black woman from prominent Philadelphia family

- Instruct each group to analyze their document considering who wrote the document, their relationship to the historic event, their reason for writing, the point of view and tone of the writer, and the writer's intended audience.
- Representatives from each group will report to the class their writer's point of view of the incident
- Students will compare and contrast differences and similarities in the documents
- Students will create a chronology of the events of the Burns Case based on the information provided by all of the primary source documents

DAY FOUR: THE ANTHONY BURNS CASE: HISTORICAL ANALYSES

PROCEDURE:

Distribute the following questions for class discussion:

- 1) Why did the Bostonians react the way they did to Burns' arrest, trial and return to slavery?
- 2) Were the Bostonians who attempted to liberate Burns justified in breaking the law to help him remain free? Why or why not?
- 3) What drives people to take action for a cause in spite of great risk? Would you have attacked the Court House to rescue Burns?
- 4) Did the so-called "Boston Slave Riot" contribute to the coming of southern secession and civil war? Explain.
- 5) What ultimately happened to Anthony Burns?

ESSAY

Using information from the documents and class discussion, students will write a three-page essay on the following question:

Radical, militant, abolitionist, John Brown, observed that the Fugitive Slave Law made "more abolitionists than all the lectures we have had for years." Assess the validity of Brown's statement considering the political impact of the case of Anthony Burns on Northern attitudes toward slavery and abolition.

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Curriculum created by Robert A. Gibson New Haven, CT