

Teaching about Slavery—Not Just a Southern Problem

- Sarah Kreckel

“Middle and high school students are learning about slavery in school, but often only about the staple crop or plantation system of the South. It’s just as important to understand the role of the North and the national and global implications of the “Notorious Trade” so that these students can come to a more complete understanding of the American society that was born out of this system.”

Morgan Grefe, Education Director
Rhode Island Historical Society

Slavery in the United States is often thought of as a “Southern problem.” Indeed, many students, and even teachers, are unaware of the role the North played in the history of American slavery or the extent of slavery in New England. Long thought of as the birthplace of abolitionism, New England has a more complex history of slavery and the trade in slaves than many realize.

Colonial North American ships began to participate in the slave trade as early as the 1640s. Almost all of colonial America’s slave ships originated in New England. Confronted with a landscape and climate unsuitable for large-scale commercial farming, New Englanders looked to the sea for their livelihood.

As a result, in the eighteenth century, New Englanders developed what came to be known as the triangular trade. Ships carried sugar and molasses from the plantation colonies of the Caribbean to New England where colonists distilled it into rum. Merchants then shipped this rum to Africa where it was exchanged for slaves, who were carried back to the Caribbean to produce more sugar.

Though the vast majority of the slaves were carried to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and South America, by 1755, more than thirteen thousand enslaved people were working in New England. The majority of enslaved people in New England, like slaves in the South, worked in agriculture or as domestic servants. Many slaves were highly skilled. Enslaved people worked in maritime trades as rope makers, sail makers, or sailors on whaling ships. They were also carpenters, rum distillers, chimneysweeps, locksmiths, cabinetmakers, butchers, and coopers.

The slave trade became especially important to Rhode Islanders. By the middle of the eighteenth century, upwards of twenty ships per year sailed for Africa from the tiny colony, most of them from the city of Newport. Two-thirds of Rhode Island’s fleet was engaged in the slave trade. The height of the colonial slave trade in Rhode Island spanned from 1725 to 1807, peaking in 1805, *after* the trading of slaves had been outlawed.

But New England, and Rhode Island in particular, was also a pillar of abolitionism. How did this schism—between those who fought against the ownership and trading of slaves and those who owned them—develop? What role did the Revolutionary ideals of freedom and democracy play in the construction of both abolitionist and ownership arguments? How did slaves and free blacks deal with this societal division?

While the history of the slave trade is often addressed briefly in history classes and textbooks, the history of slavery in New England is rarely approached. Historians comment

that New England has “forgotten” its slave-owning past, and that such a narrative—one that remembers abolition but not enslavement—has had far-reaching consequences for black-white relations and the nature of race in the United States. By learning about the North’s complex history of slavery and abolition, students will have a more complete understanding of the history of the United States.

—*Sarah Kreckel is a curriculum writer at the Choices Program at Brown University.*

Resources for teaching about the role of the North in slavery

A Forgotten History: The Slave Trade and Slavery in New England. Choices Program, Brown University

This one-week unit explores the nature of the triangular trade and the extent of slavery in colonial and antebellum New England, and examines the effects of the trade in slaves and of slavery itself for the new Americans of that period. This latest addition to Choices’ curricular library for secondary education was developed in partnership with Brown University’s nationally-recognized Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice.

Information on *A Forgotten History: The Slave Trade and Slavery in New England* is available at www.choices.edu. An optional lesson from this text links Sierra Leone, South Carolina, and Rhode Island. It is available online at www.choices.edu/documents/forgottenhistory.cfm.

National Park Service African-Americans in Boston site
<http://www.nps.gov/boaf/occupations.htm>

God’s Little Acre in Newport, Rhode Island
<http://colonialcemetery.com/>

Brown University Slavery and Justice Committee
http://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/

Yale University “Priscilla” site
<http://www.yale.edu/glc/priscilla/>

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