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Slave Narratives: Black Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century America

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Some of the most significant sources for the study of American Negro slavery in the antebellum South are the personal narratives written by former slaves. For many years, however, historians have relied almost entirely on the records and documents of the slave owners and others sympathetic to slavery. They regarded the slave narratives as unreliable for historical research. However, in order to begin to understand slavery from the slaves' viewpoint and to comprehend what it was like to have been a slave, the vast amount of slave narrative literature must be examined by historians. Fortunately, in the last ten to fifteen years, a great deal of attention has been given by scholars to the slave narrative literature in their research on slave life and culture in the United States.

This unit is an investigation of plantation slavery in the antebellum South based on the slaves' own recorded accounts of their lives and experiences in bondage. These narratives contain a great deal of information about the nature of slavery, the slave personality and consciousness, the slave family, cultural and religious life, and strategies used by slaves to escape. The object of this unit is to examine all of these issues by studying several slave narratives. Students will read selected nineteenth-century slave narratives and interviews of former slaves collected through the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s to obtain a more accurate and balanced account of slavery in American society .

This unit has been designed to be a research project based mainly on primary sources from which students will draw their own conclusions about American slavery. By reading the assigned narratives, students will be exposed to a variety of personal experiences of slaves. The unit will attempt to get into the mind of the slave to examine his thoughts, feelings, desires, and his reaction to his enslavement.

(Recommended for United States History to 1865 and African-American History classes, grades 10 through 12)

Key Words

Slavery Literature Autobiography Research Skills Application America

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