

# Teaching American History Lesson Plan

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Title: The United States Constitution and Slavery

Subject Area: United States History  
African-American History  
Civics/American Government

Grade Level: 9 – 12

Overview: In this lesson, students will examine the position of the original United States Constitution on the slavery issue. Students will analyze the sections of the document which addressed specific aspects of slavery in late eighteenth century American society in order to determine if the Constitution was pro-slavery.

Essential Understanding: In spite of the natural rights ideology of the American Revolution, the framers of the Constitution created a conservative Constitution which preserved and defended the institution of slavery in the United States.

Essential Question: Was the United States Constitution a pro-slavery document?

Connecticut Standards: Grades 9 – 12  
Content Standard #1: Historical Thinking  
Content Standard #2: Historical Themes  
Content Standard #3: Applying History  
Content Standard #4: U. S. Constitution and Government

Objectives: Students will be able to:

- 1) Analyze and interpret the ways in which the Constitution addressed the slavery question.
- 2) Explain why the framers of the Constitution believed that compromise over the slavery issue was necessary.
- 3) Define the following terms: compromise, Three-fifths compromise, fugitive slave, slave trade, property rights, Human rights, civil rights.
- 4) Explain why the words “slave,” “slavery,” or “Negro” do not appear in the original text of the Constitution.

Materials Needed: The United States Constitution

### Suggested Activities / Procedures

Day 1:

*Group Work*

Divide the class into three groups. Each group will be assigned to read, analyze and discuss one of the three sections of the United States Constitution which addressed the practice of slavery:

- 1) The Three-fifths compromise (Article I, Section 2, Clause 3).
- 2) The importation of slaves (Article I, Section 9, Clause 1).
- 3) The fugitive slave provision (Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3).

Day 2:

*Group Presentations*

Each group will report to the class the results of their research and analysis of their assigned section of the Constitution.

The group presentations should address the following questions:

- 1) What specific restriction or provision regarding slavery is addressed in the section of the Constitution?
- 2) What was the framers' rationale for the provision? How was it a compromise?
- 3) What does the Constitutional provision reveal about the federal government's position on slavery in the United States?

Day 3:

*Class Debate*

Divide the class into two groups to debate the pros and cons of the following statement:

*William Lloyd Garrison, one of the most influential abolitionist leaders, and his followers were right when they argued that the United States Constitution was a pro-slavery document which was "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell."*

### Suggested Assessment / Evaluation

Students will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- 1) Each student must actively participate in the group discussions and debate.
- 2) Students must evaluate the primary source material critically and analytically.
- 3) Students must demonstrate an understanding of the historical context of the document and the slavery controversy.
- 4) Students must defend their point of view.

## Resources

Beeman, Richard. Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution (2009)

Berkin, Carol. A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution (2002)

Berlin, Ira and Ronald Hoffman. Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution (1983)

Davis, David Brion. The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution (1975)

Ellis, Joseph. American Creation: Triumph and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic (2008)

Goldstone, Lawrence. Dark Bargain: Slavery, Profits and the Struggle for the Constitution (2005)

Johnson, Charles and Patricia Smith. Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery (1998)

The United States Constitution

Waldstreichter, David. Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification (2009)