

The Underground Railroad, 1860

Teacher Pages

Overview

Adding a visual dimension to students' understanding of the topic, the map for this lesson shows free states, slave states, and Underground Railroad routes. The activity begins with a whole-class discussion, and then provides options for individual or group work and assessment. Students should already be familiar with slavery and the Underground Railroad. The activity is designed to reinforce and expand upon prior knowledge.

Time Required

30–50 minutes

National History Standards

Historical Thinking Standard 3: Historical analysis and interpretation

Content standard 2D: Identify the various ways in which African Americans resisted the conditions of their enslavement and analyze the consequences of violent uprisings

National Geography Standards

Standard 1: How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective

Standard 9: The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human population on Earth's surface

Standard 17: How to apply geography to interpret the past

Enduring Understanding

Slaves used many established routes to escape from Southern states.

Essential Question

What options did the Underground Railroad provide slaves in escaping?

Procedure

Note: The following directions are for doing this lesson as a whole-class activity. If you wish, you may instead use the student handout and have students work individually or in groups on the activity.

1. Read the “Historical Context” section to the class to set the stage for the activity. Make sure students understand the words and terms in bold.
2. Using a whiteboard, projector, or another display device, show the class the map, but with the “Free States,” “Slave States,” “Decision Left to Territory,” and “Escape routes” layers turned off.
3. Hand out an outline version of the map to students. Ask them (either individually or in groups) to outline the free states and the slave states as best as they can remember from their readings.
4. Turn on the “Free States,” “Slave States,” and “Decision Left to Territory” layers on the map. Briefly discuss what students got right and what they got wrong. If needed, refresh students’ memories of what they learned from their previous readings.
5. Pose the following question to the class: If you were a slave, where would you try to escape to and what route would you take if you lived in:
 - a. Missouri
 - b. South Carolina
 - c. Texas
 - d. Georgia
 - e. Louisiana

Have students either answer the questions individually, or take suggestions and discuss with the whole class.

6. Turn on the “Escape routes” layer. Ask the class the following questions:
 - a. How many students had slaves from Texas escaping to Mexico?
 - b. How many students thought of ocean passage as a way to escape?
 - c. How many students had slaves ending up in Canada? In the Caribbean?
 - d. How many students had slaves from Louisiana traveling up the Mississippi River?
 - e. Why do students think the map shows so few escape routes from states like Mississippi, Alabama, and South Carolina?

Historical Context

During the 19th century, prior to the Civil War, an informal network created by opponents of slavery helped slaves escape from Southern states. This network became known as the **“Underground Railroad.”** People would use their homes to provide shelter, food, and money for runaway slaves. Those who helped the slaves along this network were called **“conductors,”** and their houses were referred to as **“stations.”** Conductors also helped transport runaways from station to station. The whole system was called “underground” because it was a secret and a “railroad” because it transported escapees from one location to another, much like a train.

Assessment

Have students write a paragraph on the following question:

What options did slaves in the different Southern states have for escape routes?

Extensions

1. Have students re-create the map of the Underground Railroad from memory, drawing in as many details as they can on their blank outline map. You do not necessarily have to grade this; it can simply function as an exercise in geographic literacy and how well students were paying attention.
2. Have students write a paragraph on the following question: If you were an escaping slave, what items would you take with you? Would the area you were escaping from influence your choice of things to take? How might geography influence your choices?