

# Thomas Jefferson's Attitudes Toward Slavery

## General

### Grade Level

Middle School

### Author Info

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Summer Creek Middle School

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### Type of Lesson

Document Analysis

### Duration

120 minutes

## Objectives

### Overview

This unit takes a look at Thomas Jefferson's writings on slavery throughout the course of his lifetime and places them on a timeline of major events of his life.

### Prior Knowledge

Students will need to have a basic knowledge of the events of Thomas Jefferson's life, i.e. the creation of the Declaration of Independence, Louisiana Purchase, etc. It is suggested that students complete the Thomas Jefferson Timeline project found on this site or that the teacher may simply want to create the timeline for the class prior to the lesson.

## State Standards

The following standards are a part of the Common Core Standards for Social Studies and can be found at the link below.

<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards/history-social-studies/grades-6-8/>

The student will:

**Interpret data presented in time lines and create time lines** by designating appropriate equidistant intervals of time and recording events according to the temporal order in which they occurred.

**Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas**, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions by identifying likenesses and differences.

**Consider multiple perspectives** of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.

**Analyze cause-and-effect relationships** bearing in mind **multiple causation** including (a) **the importance of the individual** in history; (b) **the influence of ideas**, human interests, and beliefs; and (c) the role of chance, the accidental and the irrational.

**Hypothesize the influence of the past**, including both the limitations and opportunities made possible by past decisions.

## Objectives/Learning Outcomes

Students will use primary source materials written by Thomas Jefferson from throughout his lifetime to make inferences about his attitudes toward slavery and possible solutions to the slavery question. A selection of various primary sources can be found at the bottom of this lesson under related materials.

## Essential Questions

What was Thomas Jefferson's attitude or position on slavery?

Did this attitude change throughout the course of his life?

If there was a change in attitude, could it be linked to any event, either public or private, that was happening in his life at that time?

# Procedures

## 1. 10 minutes

### Warm-up:

Display the italicized text on the overhead screen and read aloud. Ask students to work together in a think-pair-share and answer the questions below the excerpt of the quote.

The full text of the poem mentioned in the warm-up can be found at the <http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/robertfrost/12071>

*Robert Frost in his poem, "The Black Cottage", was speaking about Thomas Jefferson and equality when he wrote:*

*"That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.*

*What did he mean? Of course the easy way*

*Is to decide it simply isn't true.*

*It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.*

*But never mind, the Welshman got it planted*

*Where it will trouble us a thousand years.*

*Each age will have to reconsider it."*

1. *What is the hard mystery of Jefferson's relationship to equality?*
2. *Why will equality trouble us for a thousand years?*
3. *Describe how the age we live in is reconsidering the quest for equality.*

## 2. 45 minutes

### Activity 1:

a. Explain that today we will be working with the words of Thomas Jefferson and his feelings and attitudes toward slavery throughout his lifetime. Show them the timeline that has been created on butcher paper at the front of the room (you may either have students work on the timeline prior to the unit or you may create it yourself including major events in Thomas Jefferson's life, i.e. the Declaration of Independence, Presidency, etc.)

b. Divide the class into groups of four people. Hand out a SOAPStone graphic organizer to each student. You will find a copy of the SOAPStone worksheet under the "materials" tab under "hand-

outs and downloads". You may also find more information about doing a SOAPStone and other AP strategies at the College Board AP Central

([http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/preap/teachers\\_corner/45200.html](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/preap/teachers_corner/45200.html)).

c. Distribute the primary source materials that are provided in the materials section. It would be helpful to print them on cardstock. All of the primary source materials are excerpted from Thomas Jefferson's papers. The primary sources are numbered and each group should receive their own document to analyze.

d. Ask students to read their selection and reflect on it as a group. When they are done reading, they should begin to fill out their SOAPStone graphic organizer. Circulate around the room and check for comprehension.

### 3. 35 minutes

#### **Activity 2:**

a. Ask students to take out their SOAPStone graphic organizers from the previous class period.

b. Give a large Popsicle stick and a marker to each group. Ask each group to label the back of their Popsicle stick with their class period, group number and selection number.

c. Tell students that they are going to be coloring in the front of the Popsicle stick to represent a thermometer that is taking Thomas Jefferson's temperature on slavery at the time their primary source was written. The top of the Popsicle stick should be labeled "pro" and the bottom "anti".

d. Students will reflect and discuss their primary source passage and take Jefferson's temperature on slavery at that point in his life.

e. Give each group ticky-tack or tape so that they can affix their thermometer and primary source excerpt to the butcher paper timeline of Jefferson's life.

f. Ask each group to consider these questions before presenting their findings to the class:

*What three things surprised you about your primary source excerpt?*

*After looking at the events on the timeline, do you believe that these events had any influence on what Jefferson said in your primary source excerpt?*

*What was Jefferson's temperature on slavery in your quote? Justify your opinion.*

### 4. 30 minutes

#### **Activity 3:**

- a. Paste the primary source excerpts onto poster board, leaving the margins blank.
- b. Place the posters around the room or in the hall.
- c. Allow student groups to reflect on the primary documents by engaging in a gallery walk. You can find a description of a gallery walk at "Facing History and Ourselves"

(<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/strategies/gallery-walk-teaching-strateg>)

- d. Give each group a set of markers and have them rotate to each of the posters, writing down their reflections in the margin as they go.

## Related Assets

### Handouts and Downloads

- [Jefferson's Attitudes Toward Slavery Document Package](#)

## Materials

### Materials Needed

[Thomas Jefferson's Attitudes Toward Slavery Document Package](#), butcher paper timeline of Jefferson's life, tape or tack, large Popsiclesticks, markers

### Technology Needs

computer with internet access, projector and screen

## Assessment

### Homework

Ask students to do a frayer model for these words: proslavery, antislavery, abolitionist, emancipation and colonization. I have provided a frayer model template for you in the materials section of the lesson plan.

The following website, the Reading Educator, explains how to use the frayer model

(<http://www.readingeducator.com/strategies/frayer.htm>).

### Assessment

After the class discussion, have students create a journal or learning log entry for the same prompt, "Did Thomas Jefferson do enough to end slavery?"

# Accommodations

## Accommodations – Students with Special Needs

Design groups with ability levels in mind.

## Accommodations – Advanced Learners

Ask students to compare and contrast Thomas Jefferson's attitudes toward slavery with those of one of our other Founding Fathers, such as James Madison or John Adams.

# Resources

Selection 1— (from Notes on the State of Virginia, 1785)

“There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. . . . The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.”

Selection 2- (Draft of Declaration of Independence, **1776 June**)

"He [George III] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against lives of another."<sup>[4]</sup>

Selection 3- (the Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson to Edward Bancroft, January 26, 1789)

I have deferred answering your [letter](#) on the subject of slaves, because you permitted me to do it till a moment of leisure, and that moment rarely comes, and because too, I could not answer you with such a degree of certainty as to merit any notice. I do not recollect the conversation at Vincennes to which you allude, but can repeat still on the same ground, on which I must<sup>2</sup> have done then, that as far as I can judge from the experiments which have been made, to give liberty to, or rather, to abandon persons

whose habits have been formed in slavery is like abandoning children. Many quakers in Virginia seated their slaves on their lands as tenants. They were distant from me, and therefore I cannot be particular in the details, because I never had very particular information. I cannot say whether they were to pay a rent in money, or a share of the produce: but I remember that the landlord was obliged to plan their crops for them, to direct all their operations during every season and according to the weather, but, what is more afflicting, he was obliged to watch them daily and almost constantly to make them work, and even to whip them. A man's moral sense must be unusually strong, if slavery does not make him a thief. He who is permitted by law to have no property of his own, can with difficulty conceive that property is founded in any thing but force. These slaves chose to steal from their neighbors rather than work. They became public nuisances, and in most instances were reduced to slavery again.

Selection 4—(Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, January 23, 1801)

"I forgot to ask the favor of you to speak to Lilly as to the treatment of the nailers (young male slaves). it would destroy their value in my estimation to degrade them in their own eyes by the whip. this therefore must not be resorted to but in extremities. as they will be again under my government, I would chuse they should retain the stimulus of character."

Selection 5-( Thomas Jefferson to William A. Burwell, Washington, January 28, 1805)

"I have long since given up the expectation of any early provision for the extinguishment of slavery among us. There are many virtuous men who would make any sacrifices to affect it, many equally virtuous who persuade themselves either that the thing is not wrong, or that it cannot be remedied, and very many with whom interest is morality. The older we grow, the larger we are disposed to believe the last party to be. But interest is really going over to the side of morality. The value of the slave is every day lessening; his burden on his master daily increasing. Interest is therefore preparing the disposition to be just; and this will be goaded from time to time by the insurrectionary spirit of the slaves. This is easily quelled in it's first efforts; but from being local it will become general, and whenever it does it will rise more formidable after every defeat, until we shall be forced, after dreadful scenes and sufferings to release them in their own way, which, without such sufferings we might now model after our own convenience."

Selection 6—(Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820)

"But as it is, we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. Of one thing I am certain, that as the passage of slaves from one State to another, would not make a slave of a single human being who would not be so without it, so their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier, and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation"

Selection 7- (Thomas Jefferson to the Marquis de Lafayette, December 26, 1820)

"All know that permitting the slaves of the south to spread into the west will not add one being to that unfortunate condition, that it will increase the happiness of those existing, and by spreading them over a larger surface, will dilute the evil everywhere, and facilitate the means of getting finally rid of it, an event

more anxiously wished by those on whom it presses than by the noisy pretenders to exclusive humanity. In the mean time it is a ladder for rivals climbing to power."

Selection 8—(Thomas Jefferson to Jared Sparks, February 4, 1824)

"In the disposition of these unfortunate people, there are two rational objects to be distinctly kept in view. First. The establishment of a colony on the coast of Africa, which may introduce among the aborigines the arts of cultivated life, and the blessings of civilization and science. By doing this, we may make to them some retribution for the long course of injuries we have been committing on their population. And considering that these blessings will descend to the "nati natorum, et qui nascentur ab illis," we shall in the long run have rendered them perhaps more good than evil. To fulfil this object, the colony of Sierra Leone promises well, and that of Mesurado adds to our prospect of success. Under this view, the colonization society is to be considered as a missionary society, having in view, however, objects more humane, more justifiable, and less aggressive on the peace of other nations, than the others of that appellation.

The subject object, and the most interesting to us, as coming home to our physical and moral characters, to our happiness and safety, is to provide an asylum to which we can, by degrees, send the whole of that population from among us, and establish them under our patronage and protection, as a separate, free and independent people, in some country and climate friendly to human life and happiness. That any place on the coast of Africa should answer the latter purpose, I have ever deemed entirely impossible. And without repeating the other arguments which have been urged by others, I will appeal to figures only, which admit no controversy. I shall speak in round numbers, not absolutely accurate, yet not so wide from truth as to vary the result materially. There are in the United States a million and a half of people of color in slavery. To send off the whole of these at once, nobody conceives to be practicable for us, or expedient for them. Let us take twenty-five years for its accomplishment, within which time they will be doubled. Their estimated value as property, in the first place, (for actual property has been lawfully vested in that form, and who can lawfully take it from the possessors?) at an average of two hundred dollars each, young and old, would amount to six hundred millions of dollars, which must be paid or lost by somebody."

Selection 9-(Thomas Jefferson to Lydia Sigourney, **July 18, 1824**)

"I wish that [plight of Indians] was the only blot in our moral history, and that no other race had higher charges to bring against us. I am not apt to despair; yet I see not how we are to disengage ourselves from that deplorable entanglement, we have the wolf by the ears and feel the danger of either holding or letting him loose. I shall not live to see it but those who come after us will be wiser than we are, for light is spreading and man improving. to that advancement I look, and to the dispensations of an all-wise and all-powerful providence to devise the means of effecting what is right."

**Selection 10—(Thomas Jefferson to James Heaton, May 20,**

1826)

“The subject of your letter of April 20, is one on which I do not permit myself to express an opinion, but when time, place, and occasion may give it some favorable effect. A good cause is often injured more by ill-timed efforts of its friends than by the arguments of its enemies. Persuasion, perseverance, and patience are the best advocates on questions depending on the will of others. The revolution in public opinion which this cause requires, is not to be expected in a day, or perhaps in an age; but time, which outlives all things, will outlive this evil also. My sentiments have been forty years before the public. Had I repeated them forty times, they would only have become the more stale and threadbare. Although I shall not live to see them consummated, they will not die with me; but living or dying, they will ever be in my most fervent prayer. This is written for yourself and not for the public, in compliance with your request of two lines of sentiment on the subject.”



*Th. Jefferson*  
MONTICELLO