

The Aftermath of Gabriel's Rebellion: Jefferson and the Reaction of Virginia to the Slave Conspiracy of 1800

General

Grade Level

High School

Author Info

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Type of Lesson

Cooperative Learning

Duration

One 90 minute period

Objectives

Overview

In 1800 white Virginians discovered one of the largest slave conspiracies in the entire history of the slave-holding South. It was a consequence of a confluence of developments, including the loosening of the bonds of slavery after the American Revolution, slaves' knowledge of the successful slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue, and especially the super-heated political atmosphere of the late 1790s in which Republicans condemned their Federalist opponents for being enemies of the rights of man. The leader of the rebellion was a slave named Gabriel, a highly skilled blacksmith who was owned by a Richmond citizen named Thomas Henry Prosser. He devised a plot in which perhaps a thousand slaves,

including many living in Richmond but also recruits from as far away as Norfolk and Charlottesville, would arm themselves, capture Governor James Monroe, and bargain for their freedom. Gabriel's intended targets were the Federalist merchants he believed were responsible for the oppression of ordinary people, and he believed poor whites would join his rebellion. On the day appointed by Gabriel for the rebellion, a torrential rain storm, reported by James Callender in Richmond as "the most terrible thunder Storm... that I ever witnessed in this State," made roads and bridges impassible. The conspirators decided to postpone the rebellion until the next day, but that night two slaves in different locations told their masters about the plot. Governor Monroe was soon alerted, and white patrols, later joined by the state militia, began roaming the countryside searching for rebels. By September 9, almost 30 slaves were in jail awaiting trial in a special court in which slaves were tried without benefit of jury. Ultimately 65 slaves were arrested, 26 were executed, others were sent out of the state and a few were found not guilty or pardoned. Thomas Jefferson and Virginia was at the time engaged in a high-stakes showdown with the federal government over enforcement of the Alien and Sedition Acts, and Jefferson was about to challenge John Adams for the presidency in November of that year.

These documents capture the reaction of Thomas Jefferson and other Virginians to the huge slave conspiracy and how they considered its significance for the future of slavery in United States.

Prior Knowledge

This lesson will work best if students have an understanding of the history of slavery through the colonial and Revolutionary eras, and of Thomas Jefferson's views about slavery before he became president.

State Standards

Virginia Standards of Learning Connections:

VUS.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis and responsible citizenship, including the ability to:

- a) identify, analyze, and interpret primary and secondary source documents, records, and data, including artifacts, diaries, letters, photographs, journals, newspapers, historical accounts, and art, to increase understanding of events and life in the United States;
- b) evaluate the authenticity, authority, and credibility of sources;
- c) formulate historical questions and defend findings, based on inquiry and interpretation;
- d) develop perspectives of time and place, including the construction of maps and various timelines of

events, periods, and personalities in American history;

e) communicate findings orally and in analytical essays or comprehensive papers;

f) develop skills in discussion, debate, and persuasive writing with respect to enduring issues and determine how divergent viewpoints have been addressed and reconciled;

VUS.6 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the major events from the last decade of the eighteenth century through the first half of the nineteenth century by

e) describing the cultural, economic, and political issues that divided the nation, including tariffs, slavery, the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements, and the role of the states in the Union.

Objectives/Learning Outcomes

- Students will identify the causes, details and results of Gabriel's Rebellion.
- Students will articulate how Gabriel's Rebellion shaped the debate in Virginia about the future of slavery.
- Students will interpret how Thomas Jefferson's views about Gabriel's Rebellion and slavery changed in the years following the conspiracy.
- Students will identify the specific steps Thomas Jefferson took as president that affected the institution of slavery.

Procedures

1. Procedures:

Time required for activity: One homework assignment, one 60 to 90 minute class. If the students read and analyze the documents in class instead of for homework, plan on adding about 20-30 minutes to the activity. For a shorter alternative, any one of the document sets could be used independently of the others, though that might limit student's ability to write their newspaper editorials.

2. On the day before the activity:

Have the students count off one through four, and tell the students to read the Document Set that corresponds to their number for homework. Emphasize that students should cite specific evidence from the texts in answer to their questions, and bring copies of their answers to class.

Gabriel's Rebellion Document Reading Sets:

[Document Set #1](#)

[Document Set #2](#)

[Document Set #3](#)

[Document Set #4](#)

3. *Up to 90 minutes*

On the Day of the Activity:

1. Time needed: 20-25 minutes. Have students assigned to each document set describe their document(s) and report to class the answers to their questions. Have students illustrate their answers with specific evidence from the documents. Alternatively, students could meet in groups by document set and discuss answers first, but not doing that (and asking specific students for their conclusions) is more likely to generate a variety of interpretations of the documents.
2. Time needed: 30-45 minutes. Put the students in groups of 3 or 4, and have them imagine they are the editor of a newspaper assigned to write an editorial evaluating Jefferson and Virginia for their responses to Gabriel's Rebellion. Do you praise or condemn their reaction, or some combination of both? Make sure the students cite specific evidence in their editorial to justify their conclusions.

Extending the Lesson:

1. Time permitting, teachers could ask a student for each group to read their editorial, followed by class discussion of the merits of their differing interpretations.
2. Students could then discuss this larger question, "Given his actions as president, did Thomas Jefferson weaken the institution of slavery in his years in office?"

Assessment

1. Informal: Teachers could collect the editorials and check them for student understanding of the issues raised in the documents.

2. Teachers could ask students to treat their class editorial as a rough draft (all students in a group would need a copy) and to submit a polished, formal version (edited independently by each student for homework) the next day. The editorials could then be graded as a formal writing prompt, based on some or all of the following factors:

- Strength of thesis
- Logical organization
- Quality of analysis to support thesis and main ideas
- Use of evidence to support arguments
- Accuracy
- Clarity of expression