AIM: What was New York State’s role on the Underground Railroad?
Lesson developed by Stephanie Sienkiewicz, East Meadow High School

BACKGROUND: New York State offered a safe haven to many Africans who escaped from slavery and a place where free African Americans could organize politically with White allies to challenge the slave system and achieve full citizenship. New Yorkers, both Black and White, were active participants and national leaders in political campaigns to end slavery and to resist the oppression of Black people. Because of their proximity to Canada, work opportunities, and religious and other social movements, regions of New York State and cities located along the route of the Erie Canal played major roles on the underground railroad and in anti-slavery agitation. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, the availability of land in the North country made it a safe haven for free Blacks and escaped slaves who sought a place where they could build families and communities. Abolitionists and those involved in the Underground Railroad felt the injustice of slavery was so great that they were willing to risk their lives. Materials include maps used to identify major centers of resistance and routes on the Underground Railroad and excerpts from the memoirs of Reverend Thomas James and Samuel Ringgold Ward.

DO NOW: Play the song, “Follow the Drinking Gourd” while students read lyrics. What is the “drinking gourd”?
What do you think the song is about?

MOTIVATION: How do we navigate to our destinations today? What are the various methods and technologies available to us when we need to find our way from point A to point B?

ACTIVITIES: Discuss student ideas on the meaning of “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” Read and discuss the document explaining the meaning of the song. Working with a partner, students look at maps of Underground Railroad routes and answer the questions. Working in teams, answer the questions below and prepare to report on participants in the Underground Railroad.
1. What do these stories have in common? How are they different?
2. In your opinion, who had the most difficult experience? Explain.

SUMMARY: What was the purpose of the Underground Railroad? How did it function? What were some of the routes in New York State? What was New York State’s role in the anti-slavery struggle?

HOMEWORK / APPLICATION:
1. Read about the code terminology used to communicate on the Underground Railroad. Imagine you were alive in those times and working with the Underground Railroad. Construct a letter to another Underground Railroad worker in the North.
2. New York State was an important route on the Underground Railroad. Write additional verses to “Follow the Drinking Gourd” explaining how escaped Africans could safely travel across New York State until they reached Canada.
A. Underground Railroad Routes

1. From which states could escaped slaves cross the border into Canada?

2. What river did Underground Railroad travelers follow on their route from New York City to Albany?

3. If an escaped slave on the Underground Railroad traveled from Springfield, Illinois, to Chicago, Illinois, how many route options would he/she have to continue north from Chicago?

4. Follow the Underground Railroad from Albany to Niagara. What are the stops along the way?

5. How many exit routes from Pennsylvania does Map C depict?

6. How many possible routes were there from Binghamton, N.Y., to Kingston, Ontario? Describe the two different routes one could take.

7. How many shipping routes transported escaped slaves along the east coast?

8. Describe a route that a traveler on the Underground Railroad could follow to get from Elmira, N.Y., to Ogdensburg, N.Y.

9. Judging by Map B, what are two Canadian cities that an escaped slave on the Underground Railroad coming from Baltimore would likely end up in?
B. Follow the Drinking Gourd

This song is supposed to contain an oral map of the Underground Railroad. The “drinking gourd” is the star constellation known as the Big Dipper.

When the sun comes up and the first quail calls, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.
Chorus- Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.
The river bank will make a mighty good road, the dead trees will show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot, travelin’ on, follow the drinking gourd.
Chorus- Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.
The river ends between two hills, follow the drinking gourd,
There’s another river on the other side, follow the drinking gourd.
Chorus- Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.

Questions
1. Why does the song tell passengers on the Underground Railroad to follow the “drinking gourd”?
2. Why would runaway slaves prefer an oral map to a written map?
3. What does this song tell us about the experience of enslaved Africans?

C. Underground Railroad Lingo

Information about the movement of escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad needed to be kept in extreme secrecy. For this reason, the transportation methods, routes, stops along the way, and anything else involved were given code names. Since the transport worked much like a railroad, people used a lot of railroad terminology. When a slave escaped, he/she tried to contact people who were willing to help. The escaped slave then became a part of the Underground Railroad and would hopefully make it north to freedom.

The average distance a newly escaped slave traveled to a “station” was from 10 to 15 miles, but the distance from “station” to “station” was shorter in the north. At the “stations,” the tired, weary slaves could eat, rest, and change their clothing. The distance escaped slaves traveled from southern states like Maryland to New York state is over 200 miles.

Packages/freight - Fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad
Lines - Routes from safe-house to safe-house (houses where fugitive slaves could stay)
Stations - Stopping places, places of safety and temporary refuge, safe-houses (houses or churches for example)
Station Master - A keeper of a safe-house
Conductors - Those who aided fugitive slaves
Shepherds - People escorting slaves
Agent - A coordinator, plotting course of escape, making contacts
Preachers - Leaders, speakers on the Underground Railroad
Drinking gourd - Big Dipper and the North Star
Freedom train or Gospel train - Code name for the Underground Railroad
Heaven or Promised land - Canada
Stockholder - A donor of money, clothing, or food to the Underground Railroad
D. Life of Reverend Thomas James, By Himself (1887)

Thomas James was born a slave in Canajoharie, New York, in the year 1804. When he was eight years old he was separated from his mother, brother and sister who were sold away to another owner. **Source**: “North American Slave Narratives, Beginnings to 1920” at the “Documenting the American South” website of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, docsouth.unc.edu.

“While I was still in the seventeenth year of my age, Master Kimball was killed in a runaway accident; and at the administrator’s sale I was sold with the rest of the property, my new master being Cromwell Bartlett, of the same neighborhood. As I remember, my first master was a well-to-do but rough farmer, a skeptic in religious matters, but of better heart than address; for he treated me well. He owned several farms, and my work was that of a farm hand.

My new master had owned me but a few months when he sold me, or rather traded me, to George H. Hess, a wealthy farmer of the vicinity of Fort Plain. I was bartered in exchange for a yoke of steers, a colt and some additional property. I remained with Master Hess from March until June of the same year, when I ran away. My master had worked me hard, and at last undertook to whip me. This led me to seek escape from slavery. I arose in the night, and taking the newly staked line of the Erie canal for my route, traveled along it westward until, about a week later, I reached the village of Lockport. No one had stopped me in my flight. Men were at work digging the new canal at many points, but they never troubled themselves even to question me. I slept in barns at night and begged food at farmers’ houses along my route. At Lockport a colored man showed me the way to the Canadian border. I crossed the Niagara at Youngstown on the ferry-boat, and was free!

Once on free soil, I began to look about for work, and found it at a point called Deep Cut on the Welland Canal, which they were then digging. I found the laborers a rough lot, and soon had a mind to leave them. After three months had passed, I supposed it safe to return to the American side, and acting on the idea I recrossed the river. A farmer named Rich, residing near Youngstown, engaged me as a wood chopper.”

E. Samuel Ringgold Ward, Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro (1855)

**Source**: “North American Slave Narratives, Beginnings to 1920” at the “Documenting the American South” website of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, docsouth.unc.edu.

“I was born on the 17th October, 1817, in that part of the State of Maryland, commonly called the Eastern Shore. My parents were slaves. I was born a slave. They escaped, and took their then only child with them. . . . I grew up, in the State of New Jersey, where my parents lived till I was nine years old, and in the State of New York, where we lived for many years. My parents were always in danger of being arrested and re-enslaved. To avoid this, among their measures of caution, was the keeping of their children quite ignorant of their birthplace, and of their condition, whether free or slave, when born. . . .

At the time of my parents’ escape it was not always necessary to go to Canada; they therefore did as the few who then escaped mostly did, aim for a Free State, and settle among Quakers. This honored sect, unlike any other in the world, in this respect, was regarded as the slave’s friend. This peculiarity of their religion they not only held, but so practiced that it impressed itself on the ready mind of the poor victim of American tyranny. To reach a Free State, and to live among Quakers, were among the highest ideas of these fugitives; accordingly, obtaining the best directions they could, they set out for Cumberland County, in the State of New Jersey, where they had learned slavery did not exist, Quakers lived in numbers, who would afford the escaped any and every protection consistent with their peculiar tenets, and where a number of blacks lived, who in cases of emergency could and would make common cause with and for each other. . . .

We lived several years at Waldron’s Landing. However, in the spring and summer of 1826, so numerous and alarming were the depredations of kidnapping and slave-catching in the neighborhood, that my parents, after keeping the house armed night after night, determined to remove to a place of greater distance and greater safety. Being accommodated with horses and a wagon by kind friends, they set out with my brother in their arms for New York City, where they arrived on the 3rd day of August, 1826, and lodged the first night with relations, the parents of the Rev. H. H. Garnett. Here we found some 20,000 colored people. The State had just emancipated all its slaves on the fourth day of the preceding month and it was deemed safer to live in such a city than in a more open country place, such as we had just left.”
Lesson developed by Ron Widelec, Kennedy High School, Bellmore, NY

http://libwww.syr.edu/digital/exhibits/g/GerritSmith/harpers.htm;

BACKGROUND: John Brown, one of the most controversial figures in United States history, had strong ties to New York State. In 1859, Brown led an armed attack on a federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His goal was to launch a slave rebellion in the United States. Brown and his followers were defeated, tried and executed. While the insurrection failed, it helped precipitate the Civil War and the end of slavery in the United States. John Brown was born into a deeply religious family in Torrington, Connecticut, in 1800. His father was vehemently opposed to slavery. The family moved to northern Ohio when John was five. As an adult, John Brown repeatedly moved his large family (he had twenty children) around the country. Brown worked as a farmer, wool merchant, tanner, and land speculator, but was never an economic success. Despite this, he helped to finance abolitionist publications, gave land to fugitive slaves and raised a black youth as part of his family. He also participated in the Underground Railroad and helped establish an organization that worked to protect escaped slaves from slave catchers. John Brown and his family moved to the Black community of North Elba in the Adirondack region of New York, in 1849. The community had been established by Gerrit Smith, a New York abolitionist, who gave land to 3,000 Black families who were willing to clear and farm the land. Their farm in North Elba remained Brown’s home until his death in 1859. John Brown emerged as a leading figure in the anti-slavery cause in 1855 when he and five of his sons organized a band of antislavery guerilla fighters in the Kansas territory. On October 16, 1859, John Brown and 21 other men, including 5 Blacks and 16 Whites, attacked the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Brown was wounded and captured. He was taken to Charlestown, Virginia, where he was put on trial and convicted of treason. Although Northerners were initially shocked by Brown’s actions, many prominent abolitionists soon began to speak favorably of his exploits. John Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859. His body was sent to North Elba for burial. During the Civil War, a song commemorating his efforts to end slavery became a battle cry of the Northern forces. Since his failed attack on Harpers Ferry, political activists and historians have debated whether John Brown was a martyr to the cause of freedom or a religious fanatic who thought he was the agent of God? They have argued over whether he should be considered a freedom fighter or a traitor and terrorist? An examination of John Brown’s life raises fundamental issues for discussion. Do his ends or goals, the liberation of 6 million enslaved Africans, justify his means, revolutionary violence against the government of the United States? Can violence by an enslaved human being or his or her supporters against an individual master or a system that denies their humanity be labeled as a form of terrorism or is the terrorist the person or oppressive system that denies liberty to others?

DO NOW: Read introduction to the document package.

MOTIVATION: When, if ever, is violence or revolution justified? List some hypothetical scenarios in which violence may be justified. If, in your opinion, such a scenario does not exist, explain why that is the case.

ACTIVITY: Student teams should examine the package of documents and prepare arguments for a class debate on whether John Brown and his followers should have been convicted, condemned and executed. In their debate they must take a position and use support from the documents to back up their claims.

KEY QUESTIONS: Is violence ever justified? Do the ends justify the means? Was John Brown justified in his actions? Was he a traitor or a freedom-fighter? Was John Brown a martyr and religious fanatic, or both?

HOMEWORK / APPLICATION: After the debate, individual students will use the documents from the package to write a eulogy (funeral speech) where they express their personal views on John Brown and his challenge to slavery and the federal government. In their essays, students should address the questions: Did John Brown’s goal, the liberation of four million enslaved Africans, justify revolutionary violence against the government of the United States? Is violence in opposition to slavery a form of terrorism or is the terrorist the person or oppressive system that denies liberty to others?
AIM: What was NYC’s role in the illegal 19th century Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade?
Lesson developed by Hanae Okita, East Meadow (NY) High School

BACKGROUND: New York City merchants and bankers profited directly by financing and participating in the illegal Atlantic Slave trade. They were generally able to avoid arrest and prosecution under laws defining slave trading as piracy (punishable by death) through a legal technicality that limited the jurisdiction of American courts to United States citizens. The New York Times (November, 1854), explained in detail the workings of the illegal slave trade and the extent of involvement by the City’s merchants and bankers.

Slave trading was a capital offense in the United States after 1820. Between 1837 and 1860, 74 cases were tried but there were few convictions and punishment tended to be minimal. In 1856, a New York City deputy Marshall declared that the business of outfitting slavers had never been pursued “with greater energy than at the present... It is seldom that one or more vessels cannot be designated at the wharves, respecting which there is evidence that she is either in or has been concerned in the traffic [to Cuba].” The men who smuggled enslaved Africans referred to themselves as “blackbirders” and their illegal human cargo as “black ivory.” Their favorite New York City meeting place was Sweet’s Restaurant at the corner of Fulton and South streets.

The British counsel claimed that out of 170 known slave trading expeditions for the Cuba slave market between 1859 and 1862, 74 were believed to have sailed from New York City. In the summer of 1859, the bark Emily set off from New York stocked as a slaver with a cargo of lumber, fresh water, barrels of rice, codfish, pork and bread, boxes of herring, dozens of pails, and two cases of medicines. It was returned to port under naval guard, but the case against its captain and owners was dismissed. Federal officials in New York were so ineffective in prosecuting slave trading cases that in 1861, The New York Times urged President Lincoln to replace the marshal and district attorney assigned to these cases.

In 1854, Captain James Smith was arrested and tried for transporting enslaved Africans from Africa to the Americas. A captain could outfit a ship for thousands of dollars, but make a profit of close to a quarter million. The risk of getting caught or even prosecuted was worth the risk if one looked at how much one can profit off of it. The slave bark the Wildfire was also outfitted to transport slaves from Africa to Cuba. The owner of the ship was from New York.

In this lesson, students will get a brief history of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The students will then examine two examples of illegal transportation of enslaved Africans. Students will look at a picture of the bark Wildfire and be able to interpret the picture. Then the students will read excerpts from statements by Captain James Smith explaining why transporting Africans was so profitable.

DO NOW: Examine the drawing of “Wildfire” and complete the activity sheet.

MOTIVATION: In 1808 outlaw slave trade. In 1820, participation in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was made a capital offense punishable by death. Do you agree with this penalty? Explain.

ACTIVITIES:
1. Read and discuss articles from The New York Times about Captain James Smith, the first person tried and convicted of illegal slave trading.
2. Read and discuss the interview with Captain James Smith on New York City’s role in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.
3. Read about and discuss conditions on the slave bark “Wildfire” for enslaved Africans.

HOMEWORK: Write an essay using information from the activity sheets that answers the following question:
What was New York City’s role in the Atlantic Slave Trade?
A. “The Slave Bark Wildfire”
Source: www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h300.html

Left. The deck of the Wildfire, a New York City vessel seized off of the coast of the Congo.

Activity: Examine the drawing. List five points about the image. Use your list to write a paragraph describing the deck of the Wildfire.

B. Trial and Conviction of the Master of an African Slaver


1. In the United States Circuit Court sitting in the City, one Captain James Smith has been convicted of having been engaged in the Slave Trade between the Coast of Africa and the Island of Cuba. The sentence of the law, which is death, was suspended in order that his counsel might take the necessary steps to move for a new trial. The facts which were proved in this case were substantially these: In January last Capt. Smith went to Boston, where he purchased the brig Julia Moulton, cleared her in ballast for Newport, and on the 2nd of February brought her to this port. Here he engaged one James Willis as mate, telling him that he was going on a Slave-trading voyage, agreeing to pay him $40 a month on the outward voyage, and from $1,200 to $2,000 for the passage back. A crew was shipped of about fifteen persons, mostly young men, and a large quantity of provisions, water, &c., with lumber, was taken on board.

2. On the 11th of February the brig cleared this port. And on leaving the dock, Capt. Smith pointed out to the mate a Portuguese named Lemos as the real owner of the vessel, and told him that the Secretary of the Portuguese Consel at this port had accompanied him to Boston and aided him in the purchase of the vessel. The ship was cleared by Capt. Smith and had regular papers for the Cape of Good Hope. After she had been out about forty days, the timber on board was used to make a temporary deck or floor in the hold of the vessel, and all the other preparations necessary to receive cargo of slaves were made.

3. At the end of sixty days, they made land on the coast of Africa at a place called Cobra, where they were boarded by a boat which brought instructions, in accordance with which they cruised the sea for ten days longer, and then put in a port further south called Ambrozzetta, well known as a depot for the Slave trade. Here in the course of two or three hours six hundred and sixty-four Negroes, including forty women, were brought on board and stowed away as cargo in the hold of the brig. They were placed on their sides, one lying in the lap of another—were taken out occasionally to be fed and aired, and after a voyage of sixty-five days were land on the South coast of Cuba.

4. They were sent on shore in lighters, under the orders of a person who said he was a consignee, and the American consul at the port. The furniture of the ship was then taken on shore and the ship herself burned. Willis the mate came to this city in the brig Mercellus, where he again met Captain Smith, who refused to pay Willis the balance due him on the contract, amounting to about $440, whereupon Willis imparted the nature of the voyage to a Mr. Donahue, by whom it was laid before the authorities. The result was the arrest, trial, and conviction of Captain Smith.

5. We believe this is the first time in which a conviction of being engaged in the African Slave Trade has ever
been had in this City- and this is due entirely to a disagreement between the captain and his mate about the payment of a trifling sum of money. Yet, as we have repeated stated in the Times, scarcely a month passes in which there are not one or more vessels cleared at this port, which embark at once in the slave trade and land their cargoes on the coast of Cuba. The facts given in evidence on this trial show how easily this is done, and with what impunity, so long as all the parties engaged in it are satisfactorily paid for keeping silent. In order to a conviction, the vessel concerned must be, at the time, owned either in whole or part by an American citizen, or else the party accused must himself be a citizen. The first provision is usually evaded by a sham-sale-the last by procuring a foreigner, usually a Portuguese, as a commander. The only defence attempted in this case turned upon this point. It was claimed that Mr. Smith was an unnaturalized German, and it was also asserted and partly proved that the ship was paid for by the Secretary of the Portuguese Consul at this port.

Questions
1. How did Captain James Smith acquire the brig Julia Moulton?
2. What was the punishment for engaging in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade?
3. Why was timber brought on board the ship?
4. How many enslaved African were loaded on the brig?
5. What happened to the ship after its arrival in Cuba?
6. How did the authorities find out that Captain Smith was slave trading?
7. How effective was the conviction of Captain Smith as a means of stopping slave trading?

C. Captain James Smith Describes the Atlantic Slave Trade


In 1859, eighty-five slave ships, capable of carrying between thirty and sixty thousand slaves, were outfitted in New York to serve the slave market of Cuba. Captain James Smith was one of the few slave traders convicted of violating U.S. and international laws. Even though participation in the slave trade was considered piracy and a capital offense, he was sentenced to only two years in prison and a $1000 fine.

“New York is the chief port in the world for the Slave Trade. It is the greatest place in the universe for it. Neither in Cuba nor in the Brazils is it carried on so extensively. Ships that convey Slaves to the West Indies and South America are fitted out in New York. Now and then one sails from Boston and Philadelphia; but in New York is our headquarters. My vessel was the brig ‘Julia Moulton.’ I got her in Boston, and brought her here, and sailed from this port direct for the coast of Africa.”

“But do you mean to say that this business is going on now?” “Yes. Not so many vessels have been sent out this year, perhaps not over twenty-five. But last year there were thirty-five. I can down to South Street, and go into a number of houses that help fit out ships for the business. I don’t know how far they own the vessels, or receive the profits of the cargoes. But these houses know all about it.”

“But when you reach the African coast, are you not in great danger from British Ships-of-War?” “Oh, no, we don’t care a button for an English squadron. We run up the American flag, and if they come aboard, all we have to do is show our American papers, and they have no right to search us.”

“How many Slaves could you carry on your vessel?” “We took on board 644. She would have carry 750 with ease. The boys and women we kept on the upper deck. But all the strong men-those giant Africans that might make us trouble-we put below on the Slave deck.”

“Did you chain them or put on handcuffs?” “No, never; they would die. We let them move about.”

“Are you very severe with them?” “We have to be very strict at first—for a week or so—to make them feel that we are the masters. Then we lighten up for the rest of the voyage.”

“How do you pack them at night?” “They lie down upon the deck, on their sides, body to body. There would not be room enough for all to lie on their backs.”

“Did many die on the passage?” “Yes, I lost a good many on the last cruise—more than ever before. Sometimes we find them dead when we go below in the morning. Then we throw them overboard.”

“Are the profits of the trade very large?” “Yes, sir, very large. My brig cost $13,000 to fit her out completely. My last cargo to Cuba was worth $220,000.”
Questions
1. How many enslaved Africans did Smith transport on this voyage?
2. Smith says “New York is the chief port in the world for the Slave Trade.” According to Smith, what role does New York play in this trade?
3. When Smith was convicted of illegal slave trading, he was sentenced to two years in prison and a $1,000 fine. In your opinion, was this a fair punishment? Explain.

D. An article about the “Slave Bark Wildfire” appeared on June 2, 1860 in Harper’s Weekly magazine.
1. On the morning of the 30th of April last, the United States steamer Mohawk, Lieutenant Craven commanding, came to anchor in the harbor of this place, having in tow a bark of the burden of about three hundred and thirty tons, supposed to be the bark Wildfire, lately owned in the city of New York. The bark had on board five hundred and ten natives Africans, taken on board the River Congo, on the west side of the continent of Africa. She had been captured a few days previously by Lieutenant Craven within sight of the northern coast of Cuba, as an American vessel employed in violating our laws against the slave trade. She had left the Congo River thirty-six days before her capture.
2. We confess that we have been struck, as many have been, with the expression of intelligence displayed in their faces, the beauty of their physical conformation, and the beauty of their teeth. We have been accustomed to think that the civilized Negroes of our own country were superior, in point of intelligence and physical development, to the native Africans; but judging only by the eye, we think it would be difficult to find, any where in our country, four hundred finer and handsomer-looking boys and girls than these are.
3. I would suggest that Congress might authorize the President to enter into a general agreement with the Colonization Society, binding them to receive, on the coast of Africa from our agent there, all the captured Africans which may be delivered to him, and to maintain them for a limited period, upon such terms and conditions as may combine humanity toward these unfortunates with a just economy. This would avoid expense in the disposition of the captured. The law might then provide that, in all cases where this may be practicable, the captor should carry the Negroes directly to Africa, and deliver them to the American agent there, afterward bringing the captured vessel to the United States for adjudication.

Questions
1. Who owned the bark Wildfire? How many Africans were on board?
2. What suggestions were made to help the Africans after capture? Do you think this is a good idea? Explain.

E. The Execution Of Gordon, The Slave-Trader
Source: Harper’s Weekly, March 8, 1862

Not the least important among the changes which are taking place in the current of national policy and public opinion is evidenced by the fact that on Friday, 21st February, in this city, Nathaniel Gordon was hung for being engaged in the slave-trade. For forty years the slave-trade has been pronounced piracy by law, and to engage in it has been a capital offense. But the sympathy of the Government and its officials has been so often on the side of the criminal, and it seemed so absurd to hang a man for doing at sea that which, in half the Union, is done daily without censure on land, that no one has ever been punished under the Act. The Administration of Mr. Lincoln has turned over a new leaf in this respect. Henceforth the slave-trade will be abandoned to the British and their friends. The hanging of Gordon is an event in the history of our country.

Question: The conviction and execution of Nathaniel Gordon was described as “an event in the history of our country.” Do you agree with this statement? Explain.
AIM: How did New York City’s economic and political elite respond to the threat of Southern Secession?
Lesson developed by Hane Okita, East Meadow (NY) High School

BACKGROUND: As tension increased between the North and South during the 1850s, the New York City merchant elite felt pressured to reassure Southern allies that they could depend on them for political support. In October 1859, a mass meeting was held at Cooper Union to organize a Democratic Vigilant Association to counter growing Republican and anti-slavery sentiment. Among the prominent founders of the committee were August Belmont, William Astor, Moses Taylor, William Havemeyer and Samuel Tilden. Belmont headed a major Wall Street brokerage and was the American Agent for European banking interests. William Astor managed his family’s Manhattan-based real estate empire. Moses Taylor was a leading industrialist and financier involved in the Cuban sugar trade. William Havemeyer was elected mayor of New York City three times and owned sugar refineries. Samuel Tilden was a corporate lawyer, Governor of New York, and the Democratic Party candidate for president in 1876.

DO NOW: Examine “Causes of the Civil War” time line
1850. Congress passes a new Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850.
1852. Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes Uncle Tom’s Cabin.
1854. Passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act leads to open fighting between pro and anti-slavery forces in Kansas.
1857, March. By a 7-2 vote, the Supreme Court declares in the Dred Scott decision that slavery can not be barred from the territories.
1857. Defeat of the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution in Kansas.
1858. Stephen Douglas defeats Abraham Lincoln in campaign for Senate from Illinois after a series of debates that attract national attention to the issue of slavery in the territories.
1859. John Brown and his supporters seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in Virginia hoping to start a slave rebellion.
1860, November. Abraham Lincoln is elected President of the United States with 60% of the electoral vote but under 40% of the popular vote.
1860, December. South Carolina votes to secede from the union.
1861, February. Seven southern states meet in Alabama to establish the Confederacy. Four other states later join.
1861, March. Abraham Lincoln is inaugurated as President of the United States.
1861, April. South Carolina opens fire on Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor.

MOTIVATION: Was compromise between the North and South over slavery possible?
If you had to choose one point in time in this chronology, when do you think Civil War became inevitable? Why?

ACTIVITIES: Students work in groups to evaluate the primary source documents. After answering questions, individual students write essays that explain: How northern merchants were connected to the slave system; What northern merchants did in response to the possibility of secession; How northern business was affected by the possibility of secession; and, What life was like for enslaved Africans in Cuba. In your conclusion, explain how your views about slavery as a “Southern institution” was affected by reading the documents.

SUMMARY QUESTION: Was the effort to compromise with the South sound political leadership or a betrayal of principles and the north?
A. Horace Greeley Criticizes New York City’s Merchant Elite


Horace Greeley was the founder of the *New York Tribune* and edited the newspaper for over thirty years. In this editorial, Greeley sharply criticized New York City’s leading merchants for supporting the Lecompton Constitution that would permit Kansas to enter the union as a slave state. He accused them of endorsing “cheating and swindling.”

“They fully adopt and approve the results of years of frauds, violence, outrage, and crime. They sustain the fruits of a political conspiracy conducted and perfected by loaferish, drunken, armed vagabonds, whose presence in their counting rooms or their offices, their halls, or their ante-chambers, they would not for an instance tolerate. They put themselves before the world, the confederates and accomplices after the fact, of the most scandalous frauds ever perpetrated in our history. . . . We wish to ask gentlemen of probity, of character, . . . who are opposed to forgery in private, why they desire to sustain it in public affairs? Is cheating and swindling any better in Kansas than it is on South Street, that they should countenance and approve it there while they would denounce it here? . . . We say, then, that for what you are doing you have not a shadow of an excuse, and that your volunteered approval of the plan of admitting Kansas under the Lecompton Constitution makes you sharers and participators in the guilt of crimes which should make the nation blush. . . . By your public acts you are undermining public and private virtue - you are shaking the pillars of national integrity. How do you appear before the country? Why, as substantial citizens, honorable citizens, high-minded citizens claiming consideration for those moral qualities that adorn private life; yet, under no pressure of party or personal exigency, deliberately coming out, and under your own signature, voluntarily endorsing and approving the crimes of lying, fraud and forgery.”

Questions
1. What was the Lecompton Constitution?
2. Why did Greeley accuse New York’s merchant elite of supporting “cheating and swindling”?
3. Greeley believed that their actions endanger the nation. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

B. Correspondence between a New York Merchant and a Southern Customer (1860)


“We notice your order and especially your remarks in relation to the Presidential election. We regret extremely the tone of our southern correspondence, and the threatened consequences in case Mr. Lincoln should be the choice of the majority of the people in the United States, which now seems hardly doubtful. The state of feeling in your section is unfortunate, not only from patriotic and fraternal considerations, but from commercial ones as well. We must, of course, decline to fill your order, and indeed to sell to your section, except for cash, even to customers to whom we have long done business with the greatest confidence and pleasure as well as profit. . . . We are, therefore, compelled to give more attention to extending our trade westward and northward, where the avenues of trade will be safer and its rewards surer than where the cause of an election is considered the cause of war.”

Questions
1. The Northern merchant is responding to a letter from a Southern customer. Based on this response, what do you think the Southern customer wrote?
2. What is the Northern merchants response?
3. In your opinion, why has he made this decision?
C. Volunteer Democratic Association of New York (1860)


“The ‘Volunteer Democratic Association of New York’ made the following appeal to the Breckenridge and Lane, Bell and Everett, and Douglas and Johnson State Central Committees of the State of New York (Journal of Commerce, August 21, 1860). Gentlemen - When the interests of the common country are at stake, all good citizens should concur in promoting the unity of action without which the best intentions are as nothing, and the most energetic movements serve only to disorganize. We, an association of the Union-loving, practical men, brought together by a sense of common danger, are anxious to impress upon our fellow citizens through you, their representatives, the fact that “in union there is strength,” a great truth, on a conviction of which our national prosperity is based, and of which the wisest of our statesmen seem, for the past year, to have entirely lost sight.”

Questions
1. According to this brief article, who are the members of the Volunteer Democratic Association of New York and what are their goals?
2. Breckenridge, Bell and Douglas are members of the Democratic Party who are all running for President against Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 election. What appeal is the Volunteer Democratic Association of New York making to them?

D. Hiram Ketchum on the Secession Crisis (1860)


“We should not talk as though all was gone because a president has been chosen contrary to our wishes. We have still a legislature and a judiciary that are opposed to him. Why should we despair? . . . . Give us time to organize and combine [he went on], and we will put down any party that should attempt to do what the South fears the Republican Party will do. To our fellow citizens, then, at the South, we say, we do not want you to place us in a false position. We have given 300,000 votes for the Union and the Constitution, and we want you to stand by us in the Union. We can right the wrong in the Union-only we require time. Give us time and we will show you that it is not true that the majority of the people of the North hate your institutions. . . . We have stood by you in the political contest through which we have just passed. We have asserted your rights as earnestly as though they had been our own. You cannot refuse, therefore, to listen to us, and to weigh with becoming deliberation the reasons we have for believing that the wrongs which have led to the existing alienation between the two great sections of the country, may, with your cooperation, especially redressed. . . . It is a mistake [the address declared] to imagine that the whole Republican party, or even the great bulk of it, is really at heart animated by any spirit hostile to the rights or menacing to the interests of the South. Anti-slaveryism has constituted but one of various political elements combined in that “Republicanism” which has elected Mr. Lincoln. We pledge ourselves to you, that whenever a fair opportunity shall be presented a district and simple vote of the north upon full recognition of all your constitutional rights, a very large majority will be found true to the Constitution, and true to the fraternal relations established by it between you and us.”

Questions
1. What historic event is Ketchum responding to in this statement?
2. Why does Ketchum believe it is a mistake to “despair”?
3. What does Ketchum say to the South?
E. Message of New York City Mayor Fernando Wood

As a Congressman in the 1840s, Fernando Wood was a strong supporter of slavery and the South. He continued his support of the South when he became Mayor of New York City in the 1850s. On January 8, 1861, The New York Times published Mayor Wood’s annual report to the city’s Common Council. In this message, Wood spoke about the city’s options as the United States federal union appeared to be dissolving.

It would seem that a dissolution of the Federal Union is inevitable. . . . With our aggrieved brethren of the Slave States we have friendly relations and a common sympathy. We have not participated in the warfare upon their constitutional rights or their domestic institutions. While other portions of our State have unfortunately been imbued with the fanatical spirit, the City of New York has unflaggingly preserved the integrity of its principles in adherence to the compromises of the Constitution. Our ships have penetrated to every clime, and so have New York capital, energy and enterprise found their way to every State. New York should endeavor to preserve a continuance of uninterrupted intercourse with every section. . . . When disunion has become a fixed and certain fact, why may not New York disrupt the bonds which bind her to a corrupt and venal master. New York, as a Free City, may shed the only light and hope for a future reconstruction of our once blessed Confederacy.

Questions
1. What crisis is facing New York City and the United States in January, 1861?
2. What path does Mayor Wood recommend for New York City? Why does he make this recommendation?
3. In your opinion, what would have happened to New York City and the United States if the city had tried to follow this course of action? Explain.

F. New York City Merchants Demand Compromise with the South (1861)


William Dodge claimed to represent the merchants of New York City whom he described as a “body of men . . . who have a deep and abiding interest in the happiness and prosperity of the country and in the preservation of the Union.” According to the Journal of Commerce, February 21, 1861, Dodge’s appeal was acclaimed by businessmen throughout the North.

“I speak to you now as a business man, as a merchant of New York, the commercial metropolis of the nation. I am no politician. I have no interest except such as is common to the people. But let me assure you that even I can scarcely realize, much less describe the stagnation which has now settled upon the business and commerce of that great city, caused solely by the unsettled and uncertain conditions of the questions which we are endeavoring to arrange and settle here . . . . All alike, employers and employed, with all dependent upon them, are looking anxiously and I wish I could say hopefully, to the Congress of the United State, or to this conference, as the only sources from which help may come . . . . I am not here to argue or discuss constitutional questions. That duty belongs to gentlemen of the legal profession. I have lived under the Constitution. I venerate it and its authors as highly as any man here. But I do not venerate it so highly as to induce me to witness the destruction of the Government rather than see the Constitution amended or improved. I regret that the gentlemen composing the committee did not approach these questions more in the manner of merchants or commercial men. . . . We would have left open as few questions as possible. Those we would have arranged by mutual concessions. Mr. President, I speak as a merchant. I have a deep and abiding interest in my country and sorrow as I witness the dangers by which it is surrounded. But I am here for peace.”

Questions
1. When is this statement reported in the newspapers?
2. What is happening in the United States at this time?
3. Dodge wishes the conflicts in the nation had been addressed “in the manner of merchants or commercial men.” He supports “mutual concessions” and says “I am here for peace.” In your opinion, what concessions are Dodge and his supporters proposing? Why do you think this is the case?
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