

MISSOURI – NARRATIVE COMPARISON - PRIMARY DOCUMENT ACTIVITY

MAIN IDEA

The slave experience in Missouri was complex and varied, and illustrates the reality of the cause of the Civil War.

TIME

25–30 minutes

GRADE LEVEL

8th grade–high school

BACKGROUND

The nature of slavery in the United States varied depending on where one lived. Even within Missouri the slave experience varied between urban and rural environments. Regardless of location or master, all enslaved people suffered greatly as their natural human liberty was denied them by a government that falsely proclaimed universal freedom.

The legacy of slavery in the United States has been preserved in a variety of ways. This activity will explore two of those. The first document the students will explore is an excerpt from an autobiography written by William Wells Brown. Born enslaved in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1827, Brown was taken by his master to St. Louis where he was hired out to several business owners, including abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy. Brown eventually escaped

to Canada. In 1847 the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society published his *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave*.

The second document comes from a completely different kind of record. In the 1930s during the height of the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt commissioned a project as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to document the slave experience. The result is a collection of slave narratives recorded all over the country from interviews with a generation of former slaves before they passed away. The narrative the students will read is by a 97-year-old former slave living in the tiny town of Nelson in Saline County, Missouri. This man, Richard Bruner, talks about his experience as a rural slave during the Civil War.

Bruner's story differs greatly from that of William Wells Brown but the two are similar in how the institution of slavery made them feel, and the way that it affected every aspect of their lives.

OBJECTIVES

Students will...

1. Increase their familiarity with primary documents and how they are used.
2. Explore the slave experience in Missouri.
3. Compare and contrast rural and urban slavery.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Bellamy, Donnie. *Slavery, Emancipation, and Racism in Missouri, 1850–1865*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1975.
- Federal Writers' Project, ed. *Missouri Slave Narratives*. Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2006.
- Frazier, Harriet C. *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and*

Those Who Helped Them, 1763–1865. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004.

- Fleischner, Jennifer. *Nobody's Boy.* St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2006.
- Trexler, Harrison Anthony. *Slavery in Missouri, 1804–1865.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1914.

MATERIALS

Excerpt from William Wells Brown (one per group)
Richard Bruner's WPA slave narrative (one per group)
Slave experience chart (two per student or group)
Pencils
Paper
Chalkboard or overhead

GRADE LEVEL EXPECTATIONS

GLE	Content
SOCIAL STUDIES	
SS7.A Identify, select, use, and create appropriate resources for social science inquiry	Students will use and interpret primary documents.
SS2a.H Understanding the causes and consequences of the Civil War	Students will see how slavery was the main cause of the Civil War, and that its elimination was the main consequence.
SS7.A Using primary and secondary sources	Students will analyze three primary documents and contextualize them.

COMMUNICATION ARTS	
Information Literacy 1B	Students will use primary sources to acquire relevant information.
Information Literacy 1C	Students will record information in an organized fashion.

PROCEDURE

Phase	Description
Introduction	<p>Step 1: Ask students to raise their hands and tell you what they know about slavery in Missouri. Ask them, “What kind of work did slaves do?” and “Where did they live?” and more.</p> <p>Write the answers they give you on a chalkboard or overhead.</p>

Main	<p>Step 2: Tell students that depending on where they lived in the state, slaves had a diversity of experiences, and they will look at two today: one who lived in urban St. Louis and the other who lived in rural Saline County.</p> <p>Step 3: Split class into groups of two or three.</p> <p>Step 4: Have students read each account and fill in the slave experience chart for each.</p>
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<p>Conclusion</p>	<p>Step 5: Once students have completed the slave experience chart for both documents, come back together as a class. Draw a Venn diagram on the chalkboard or overhead, and ask students to raise their hands and share first how slavery in a rural environment was unique, then how slavery in an urban environment was unique, and finally how they were similar.</p> <p>Step 6: Review this activity by explaining the diversity of skills and experiences that slaves had. You can show images from the artifact gallery of objects made by enslaved people to reinforce this point. Conclude by reinforcing the point that the slave experience, while diverse, was equally oppressive whether rural or urban.</p>
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From the Library of Congress

A Note on the Language of the Narratives

The Slave Narrative Collection in the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress consists of narrative texts derived from oral interviews. The narratives usually involve some attempt by the interviewers to reproduce in writing the spoken language of the people they interviewed, in accordance with instructions from the project's headquarters,

the national office of the Federal Writers' Project in Washington, D.C.

The interviewers were writers, not professionals trained in the phonetic transcription of speech. And the instructions they received were not altogether clear. "I recommend that truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation secondary," wrote the project's editor, John Lomax, in one letter to interviewers in sixteen states. Yet he also urged that "words that definitely have a notably different pronunciation from the usual should be recorded as heard," evidently assuming that "the usual" was self-evident.*

In fact, the situation was far more problematic than the instructions from project leaders recognized. All the informants were of course black, most interviewers were white, and by the 1930s, when the interviews took place, white representations of black speech already had an ugly history of entrenched stereotype dating back at least to the early nineteenth century. What most interviewers assumed to be "the usual" patterns of their informants' speech was unavoidably influenced by preconceptions and stereotypes.

The result, as the historian Lawrence W. Levine has written, "is a mélange of accuracy and fantasy, of sensitivity and stereotype, of empathy and racism" that may sometimes be offensive to today's readers. Yet whatever else they may be, the representations of speech in the narratives are a pervasive and forceful reminder that these documents are not only a record of a time that was already history when they were created: they are themselves irreducibly historical, the products of a particular time and particular places in the long and troubled mediation of African-American culture by other Americans.

Excerpt from Richard Bruner WPA slave narrative

Missouri

Ex-Slave Story

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to take charge of this work, but the house and equipment is still in good repair.

This aged Negro has been for many years a highly respected preacher of the gospel. His own account of his life and adventures follows:

"Yes'm I remembers before de war, I remember being a water-boy to de field hands before I ware big enough to work in de fields. I hoed tobaccor when I was about so high, (measuring with his hands about three and one half feet from the floor).

"Yes'm dey thrashed me once, made me hug a tree and whip me, I had a terrible temper, I'm part Choctaw Indian. We went to de white folks church on Sundays, when we went to camp meeting we all went to de mourners' bench together. De mourners bench stretch clear across de front of de Arbor; de whites and de blacks, we all just fell down at de mourners' bench and got religion at de same place. Ole Marsa let us jine whichever church we wanted, either de Methodist or Baptist.

"No, I never went to no school, de colonel's daughter larnt me to write my name, that was after de wah. "No'm, dey didn't care if we had dances and frolics. We had de dances down at de quarters and de white folks would come down and look on. Whenever us niggas on one plantation got obstreperous, white folks hawns dey blowed. When de neighbors heard dat hawn here dey come to help make dat obstreperous nigga behave. Dey blowed de hawn to call de neighbors if anybody died or were sick."

Ex-Slave Story

In response to the question as to where he joined the Federal Army, Bruner replied:

"Well you see I was a runaway nigga; I run away when I was about grown and went to Kansas. When de war broke out I joined de 18th United States Colored Infantry, under Capt. Lucas. I fit three years in de army. My old Marsa's two boys just older than me fit for de south. Dey was mighty good boys, I liked dem fine." (B)

Bibliography: (B) Richard Bruner, Ex-Slave and Negro preacher, Nelson, Missouri.

William Wells Brown

William Wells Brown

ca. 1814-1884

William Wells Brown, born a slave in Lexington, Kentucky, was moved to St. Louis by his master, Dr. Young, in 1827. While in St. Louis, Brown was hired out to multiple businessmen, most notably the famed abolitionist Elijah P. Lovejoy and Mr. Walker, a slavetrader.

After several attempts, Brown escaped from slavery to work transporting fugitive slaves across Lake Erie to Canada. In 1847 the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society published the Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself. The society also

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"Ain't But a Place"

. . .

Soon afterwards, my master removed to the city of St. Louis, and purchased a farm four miles from there, which he placed under the charge of an overseer by the name of Friend Haskell. He was a regular Yankee from New England. The Yankees are noted for making the most cruel overseers.

My mother was hired out in the city, and I was also hired out there to Major Freeland, who kept a public house. He was formerly from Virginia, and was a horse-racer, cock-fighter, gambler, and withal an inveterate drunkard. There were ten or twelve servants in the house, and when he was present, it was cut and slash—knock down and drag out. In his fits of anger, he would take up a chair, and throw it at a servant; and in his more rational moments, when he wished to chastise one, he would tie them up in the smokehouse, and whip them; after which, he would cause a fire to be made of tobacco stems, and smoke them. This he called "*Virginia play*."

I complained to my master of the treatment which I received from Major Freeland; but it made no difference. He cared nothing about it, so long as he received the money for my labor. After living with Major Freeland five or six months, I ran away, and went into the woods back of the city; and when night came on, I made my way to my master's farm, but was afraid to be seen, knowing that if Mr. Haskell, the overseer, should discover me, I should be again carried back to Major Freeland; so I kept in the woods. One day, while in the woods, I heard the barking and howling of dogs, and in a short time they came so near, that I knew them to be the bloodhounds of Major Benjamin O'Fallon. He kept five or six, to hunt runaway slaves with.

As soon as I was convinced that it was them, I knew there was no chance of escape. I took refuge in the top of a tree, and the hounds were soon at its base, and there remained until the hunters came up in a half or three quarters of an hour afterwards. There were two men with the dogs, who, as soon as they came up, ordered me to descend. I came down, was tied, and taken to St. Louis jail. Major Freeland soon made his appearance, and took me out, and ordered me to follow him, which I did. After we returned home, I was tied up in the smokehouse, and was very severely whipped. After the Major had flogged me to his satisfaction, he sent out his son Robert, a young man eighteen or twenty years of age, to see that I was well smoked. He made a fire of tobacco stems, which soon set me to coughing and sneezing. This, Robert told me, was the way his father used to do to his slaves in Virginia. After giving me what they conceived to be a decent smoking, I was untied and again set to work

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Slave Experience Chart

Question	Answer
Name	
Age	
Gender	
Where did he work?	
To whom did he talk?	
How did he talk about his master?	
How did he interact with his master's family?	
How did he become free?	

What skills did he have?	
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