In the United States, slavery is often thought of as a Southern institution. Many people today are unaware of the extent of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century North, particularly New England. Long thought of as the birthplace of the anti-slavery movement, New England has a more complex history of slavery and slave trading than many realize.

In the 400 years after Columbus first sailed to the New World, some 12 million Africans were brought to the Americas as slaves. About 500,000 of these people came to mainland North America, what is now the United States. The first Africans to arrive in the colonies came in 1619, when a Dutch ship sold 20 slaves to people living in the Virginian colony of Jamestown. But slavery was not confined to the South. It existed in all 13 American colonies and for a time in all 13 of the first states.

The transatlantic slave trade was history’s first great global industry. Ships from Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, Holland, and Denmark traveled to the African coast to load their holds with people. The risks of such trade were many—storms, pirates, disease, and rebellions were common—but the profits were great. Much of the wealth of modern Western nations flows, either directly or indirectly, from the trade in human cargo: slaves.

Colonial North American ships began to participate in the slave trade as early as the 1640s. Almost all of colonial America’s slave ships originated in New England. Confronted with a landscape and climate unsuitable for large-scale commercial farming, New Englanders looked to the sea for their livelihood.

As a result, in the eighteenth century, New Englanders developed what came to be known as the Triangular Trade. Ships carried sugar and molasses from the plantation colonies of the Caribbean to New England where colonists distilled it into rum. Merchants then shipped this rum to Africa where it was exchanged for slaves, who were carried back to the Caribbean to produce more sugar.

Some Africans were brought back to New England. Because paid employees were often unavailable or too expensive to use profitably, many New Englanders chose to purchase enslaved Africans. Though the vast majority of the slaves...
were carried to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and South America, by 1755, more than 13,000 enslaved people were working in New England.

The first recorded New England slave voyage sailed from the city of Boston, Massachusetts, in 1644. By the 1670s, Massachusetts traders were regularly carrying slaves between Africa and the Caribbean. Rhode Islanders entered the trade in about 1700. By the middle of the eighteenth century, upwards of 20 ships per year sailed for Africa from the tiny colony, most of them from the city of Newport. Two-thirds of Rhode Island’s fleet was engaged in the slave trade. Over the next century, more than 60 percent of the North American ships involved in the African slave trade were based in Rhode Island.

As a proportion of the transatlantic trade as a whole, the Rhode Island slave trade was quite modest. In all, perhaps 100,000 Africans were carried to the New World in Rhode Island ships. However, in a small colony like Rhode Island, the slave trade became a crucial economic engine. The trade brought great wealth to some merchants and investors and created jobs for thousands of others. In addition to the sailors employed in the trade, many people worked in industries dependent on the slave trade, from rope making to iron forging, from candle manufacturing to carpentry. Distilling provides perhaps the best example. By the 1760s, the Rhode Island city of Newport alone boasted nearly two dozen distilleries, transforming Caribbean molasses into rum.
Lesson Plan

Slavery Connects the North and the South

Objective—Students will:
• Trace the route of a Newport slave ship.
• Examine connections the slave trade created between the North and the South.

Reading:
• New England and the African Slave Trade

Handouts:
• Triangular Trade (map)
• The Voyage of the Hare

In the Classroom:

1. “The Wall”—Begin the class by writing the term “slave trade” on the center of the blackboard. Give students 5-10 minutes to approach the board and write whatever comes to mind when they think of the slave trade—statements, words, questions, etc. Instruct the class to do the exercise in silence. Encourage students to add to each other’s postings as well as to write their own independent postings.

2. Exploring Preconceptions—In the large group setting, ask students to comment on the wall they developed. Can the entries be categorized? What do they know about the slave trade? Next, ask students what it was like to construct the wall. Did they have any fears about what the effect of their postings might be? Finally, ask students about their experiences learning about the slave trade. Why do we rarely hear about the North’s involvement in slavery? How is slavery usually taught in schools?

3. Investigating Primary Sources—Divide students into groups of three or four and distribute Triangular Trade map/The Voyage of the Hare (handout). Ask students to follow the directions on the handout. They will be tracing the Hare’s journey from Rhode Island to South Carolina.

4. Making Connections—Return to the large group setting. Review the students’ findings. Ask students why they think history is sometimes forgotten, and how we remember history. How is our understanding of history affected by the time period in which we live? As a final question, ask students whether their new understanding of New England’s involvement in the slave trade changes their view of history or of the United States.

Extra Challenge:
Ask students to investigate missing pieces of their local history. Are there stories about their towns and cities that are not told? Why might these stories have been overlooked? How could students rectify those and fill in those holes? Is it helpful or hurtful to do so?

Note: The voyage of the Hare sold 71 slaves in Charleston, South Carolina. One slave, age 10, was named Priscilla by her new owner, Elias Ball. One of the men who owned the ship that brought Priscilla to America, William Vernon, was a Northern merchant who later played a leading role in establishing the Continental Navy. The man who sold Priscilla into slavery in South Carolina, Henry Laurens, was a Southern merchant who later became president of the Continental Congress and was one of the four U.S. Peace Commissioners who negotiated American Independence under the Treaty of Paris. Teachers and students can find out more about Priscilla, her descendants, and the connections among Newport, Charleston, and Sierra Leone at www.yale.edu/j6/priscilla.
The Voyage of the Hare

Instructions: You and your group will use the documents below to trace the route of a slave ship. Look at the documents, and read their transcriptions (they have been transcribed with modern spelling and punctuation to make them easier to read). You may need an atlas to complete this exercise. On the Triangular Trade map, do the following:

1. Mark the location from which the ship left the United States. Indicate who was the owner of the ship.

2. Mark the location on the map from which the captain of the ship wrote his letter to the owners. Indicate the name of the captain.

3. Mark the location on the map where the slaves were sold. Indicate how many were sold, and who the selling agent was.

Above: Plan of “Bense Island.” Now called Bunce Island, this island housed a slave fortress owned by the British. It is in the country of Sierra Leone. It was one of the stops the Hare made on her journey. This drawing was originally published in 1726.
The Vernons’ letter of instructions to Captain Godfrey

Newport, November 8th, 1755

Capt. Caleb Godfrey—
The Sloop Hare of which you are Master being loaded and ready to sail, Our Orders are that you improve the first favorable Wind and Weather and proceed directly to the Coast of Africa, where being arrived you are at Liberty to trade at Liberty to trade at such Places as you think most for our Interest.... Don’t purchase any small or old Slaves or as far as possible—Young Men Slaves answer better than Women—Keep a watchful Eye over ‘em and give them no Opportunity of making an Insurrection, and let them have a Sufficiency of good Diet, as you are Sensible your Voyage depends upon their Health. Use your utmost Endeavors to make all the Dispatch possible, as your Vessel is small and your Expenses great, and proceed from the Coast to—Charles-Town in South Carolina, where we shall lodge Letters for you containing Instructions for your farther Proceedings. We recommend to you the utmost Frugality in your Expenses on the Vessel. We also entreat you to use your utmost Endeavors to promote Peace—Harmony and good Order on Board both with your Officers and others, especially the Officers.... Don’t omit writing us by all Opportunities we wish you Health and a prosperous Voyage who are your Friends,

Sam. & Wm Vernon

Handout

The Vernons’ letter of instructions to Captain Godfrey

Newport, November 8th, 1755

Capt. Caleb Godfrey—
The Sloop Hare of which you are Master being loaded and ready to sail, Our Orders are that you improve the first favorable Wind and Weather and proceed directly to the Coast of Africa, where being arrived you are at Liberty to trade at Liberty to trade at such Places as you think most for our Interest.... Don’t purchase any small or old Slaves or as far as possible—Young Men Slaves answer better than Women—Keep a watchful Eye over ‘em and give them no Opportunity of making an Insurrection, and let them have a Sufficiency of good Diet, as you are Sensible your Voyage depends upon their Health. Use your utmost Endeavors to make all the Dispatch possible, as your Vessel is small and your Expenses great, and proceed from the Coast to—Charles-Town in South Carolina, where we shall lodge Letters for you containing Instructions for your farther Proceedings. We recommend to you the utmost Frugality in your Expenses on the Vessel. We also entreat you to use your utmost Endeavors to promote Peace—Harmony and good Order on Board both with your Officers and others, especially the Officers.... Don’t omit writing us by all Opportunities we wish you Health and a prosperous Voyage who are your Friends,

Sam. & Wm Vernon

Captain Godfrey’s letter to the Vernons, Sierra Leone

Serelion, April 8th, 1756

Gentlemen

I have now Eighty Slaves aboard and Expect to Sail for Carolina tomorrow. My Vessel is in Good order, Clean, tallowed down to the Keel. I have turned your Confidant, my Chief mate, out of his office and made Lion Martindal my Chief mate. Capt. Clark is here and Designs to leeward all at present.

From your Humble Servant,
Caleb Godfrey
Henry Laurens’ record of the sale of slaves from the *Hare*, June 29 to July 9, 1756.

Advertisement for slaves from the *Hare*, *South-Carolina Gazette*, June 17, 1756.