

How Did Slavery Shape My State? Using Inquiry to Explore Kentucky History

Carly Muetterties and Jess Haney

A small group of fourth-grade students huddle around a table, reading a woman’s account of a trip through Kentucky in the late 1800s. This woman had been enslaved when she was young, before the Civil War. One student perked up when her home city, Lexington, was mentioned, and others joined the conversation.

“Wait, why didn’t she like Lexington?”

“Because she was sold away from her family.”

“Yeah, she tried to escape to find her mom, but her new owner wouldn’t let her. Lexington is where he caught her.”

“So she can’t ever see her mom again?”

“Was she sold at Cheapside?”

“We were there on Thursday!”

As this exchange shows, social studies piques elementary students’ interest when they feel connections to the individuals, events, and places they study. Communities are rich with evidence of the past, providing opportunities to both see and interact with local history. However, as recent violent events in Charlottesville, Virginia, revealed to the world, Americans’ relationship with their own history continues to be contentious, especially concerning slavery and the Civil War. At that August 2017 event, a young woman supporting racial reconciliation was run over and killed during demonstrations organized by white supremacists.

When history and current events intersect, social studies teachers often bear the responsibility of providing context and meaning to their young students. These intersections have been particularly relevant in Kentucky. The influence of the “peculiar institution” is woven throughout the state’s history,¹ but that history is often narrowly presented in the landscape of historical markers and memorials—and in lessons for school children. This gap led us to write an inquiry lesson unit of study and implement it in Jess Haney’s fourth-grade classroom in Lexington, Kentucky. We think that many aspects of this inquiry could be replicated by teachers in other states.

Kentucky’s elementary social studies curriculum includes introductory knowledge in state and national history, providing an opportunity for teachers to include instruction on the influ-

ence of slavery on our society before and after the Civil War, and sometimes on current events. For example, following the violent events of August 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, the City of Lexington, Kentucky (with the mayor and city council in unanimous agreement) removed the city’s Confederate statues from civic spaces that October.² Prior to those local events, our students engaged with questions that are now being asked in broader political discourse. This showed us the timeliness of assessing history’s enduring impact on the present, and it demonstrated to our students how they could (and did) contribute to the conversation.

Slavery in the Kentucky Curriculum

While slavery is a fundamental historical topic, addressing it can be difficult and uncomfortable. According to historian James Loewen, however, avoiding the topic would be overlooking the most “pervasive single issue” in U.S. history.³ One place where slavery is not treated sufficiently is in some state content standards documents. Though standards are not meant to be a comprehensive list of all important topics, they nonetheless speak to the extent of the subject’s emphasis. Omission or tangential treatment of slavery in content standards thus may deemphasize its importance. The Core Content Standards,⁴ on which Kentucky students are currently assessed, make no mention of the word “slave” or “slavery” for the elementary grades.⁵ The fourth grade social studies curriculum focuses on state history, and it speaks generally of investigating Kentucky’s settlement and development.⁶ The lack of explicit inclusion suggests a curricular gap, but also provided space for our inquiry.

When slavery is taught, it often reflects a dominant, uncomplicated narrative: slavery is depicted as a strictly southern phenomenon of large Cotton Belt plantations.⁷ This simplification is disconnected from Kentucky’s past. Kentucky had a strong agricultural economy, particularly in tobacco, but was not dominated by the large plantations, as exemplified by “King Cotton” in the Deep South. Thus, Kentucky slavery took many forms, as it was in urban and rural areas, primarily in central and western Kentucky on small and large farms. Slaves could be found performing both skilled and unskilled

labor.⁸ We aimed to deepen students' understandings of the complexities of slavery, to better connect slavery's history to these Kentucky particulars, enriching this area of the fourth grade curriculum.

Evidence of Slavery in Lexington, Kentucky

Additionally, we wanted this inquiry to deconstruct “the legacy of the past in our present,”⁹ thereby facilitating a critical historical and geographical mindset in our students. The focus on Kentucky history allowed students to consider the ways in which history intersects with familiar places, contextualizing the local within larger national narratives. By engaging in an investigation of the meanings embedded in places—how they came about, why they came about, who they serve, and what implications they produce¹⁰—students analyzed the messages in their community's landscape, informing their conceptualizations of state identity.

Our city's current debate concerning memorializing the Confederacy and slavery presented an opportunity to consider the intersections of history and its evidence in the community. Cheapside Park in downtown Lexington houses the town's former courthouse and is a central area for public activities. It was also the site of the state's major slave auction, where mothers, fathers, and children were separated, sold, and transported to the South. The name “Cheapside” is possibly in reference to the selling of cheaper slaves there.¹¹ Cheapside has been a locus of controversy, as it had two statues of Confederate generals and slave owners, John C. Breckinridge and John Hunt Morgan. In recent years, Take Back Cheapside¹² and other civic groups have campaigned for the statues' removal, and in their place would be a public memorial about the history of slavery there. Erected in 1887 and 1911 respectively, the statues reflect the post-Reconstruction historical revisionism that heralded the “Lost Cause” of the Civil War.¹³ One manifestation of this movement was the construction of Confederate memorials throughout the South. Despite Kentucky's being a border state and remaining in the Union during the Civil War, the National Register of Historic Places reports that memorials to the Union account for roughly only ten percent of Civil War memorials in the state.¹⁴ Only one quarter of Kentuckians who fought in the Civil War did so on behalf of the Confederacy.¹⁵

Inquiry Overview: How did Slavery Shape My State?

Our fourth graders attend a magnet school with partial-Spanish language immersion in central Kentucky. Over the course of the year, social studies instruction covered exploration and settlement of Kentucky, the region's role in the American Revolution, ascension to statehood, the contributions of notable Kentuckians (e.g., Daniel Boone; Henry Clay), and cultural identifiers, such as the state song and flag. All of these topics were further informed by the inquiry about slavery. Reflecting the principles of the College, Career, And Civic Life (C3) Framework, we used the Inquiry Design Model (IDM)¹⁶ to structure a series of

formative performance tasks, showing slavery's role in Kentucky's history.¹⁷ Teachers outside of Kentucky may wish to also refer to a generalized version of this inquiry slated to be posted online by the Teaching Tolerance program of the Southern Poverty Law Center.¹⁸

We (the coauthors) collaborated in gathering sources and writing tasks to reflect how we could best engage students and develop disciplinary skills, while maintaining the integrity of our curricular purposes. First, students could establish a geographic understanding by assessing the growth and development of slavery in different Kentucky regions. Then, with a sense of slavery's relative concentrations, students could compare and contrast the ways in which the slave system differed from place to place. We included the voices of Kentucky's enslaved people throughout the inquiry, which exposed the inhumanity of the slave system. Connecting this history to the present, we wanted students to consider in what ways this history might still be visible.

Staging the Inquiry

Before this inquiry, some students had very little to no instruction on slavery beyond exposure to individuals, such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, during Black History Month. Many students understood the concept of racial inequality, but knowledge was generally inconsistent. With this in mind, we staged the inquiry using the K-W-L Method,¹⁹ whereby students wrote what they already knew, what they wanted to know more about, and what they learned after being shown several images depicting slavery and reading a brief excerpt on its origins from Howard Zinn's *A Young People's History of the United States*, which provides a succinct overview of the development of race-based slavery in the colonies and factors facilitating slavery's longevity.²⁰ Most students knew that slaves in the United States were African-Americans and were not paid for their labor (except in rare circumstances such as the “self-hire” of skilled artisans). Several students wanted to know more details about the treatment of slaves. They also asked questions about why owners thought “it was fair to make black people slaves?” This exercise propelled a class discussion about slavery's origins and the possible consequences to individuals— including slave owners, the enslaved, and free blacks. The discussion provided an opportunity to review the causes of slavery's development.

Supporting Question 1: Making Inferences Using Geographic Reasoning

In the first supporting question of this inquiry—“Where did slave populations grow?”—we asked students to apply geographic thinking to consider possible factors impacting slavery's growth (or decline) in the United States based on regional differences. Using a graphic organizer, students made inferences using geographic and economic data concerning slavery over 70 years. (Sidebar, p. 22).

lincolnmullen.com/projects.slavery



The Spread of Slavery, 1790-1860: An Interactive Map

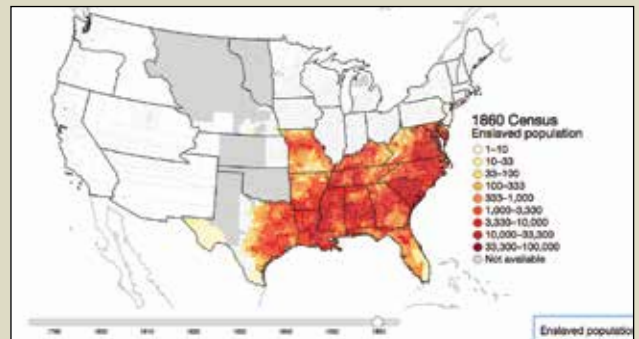
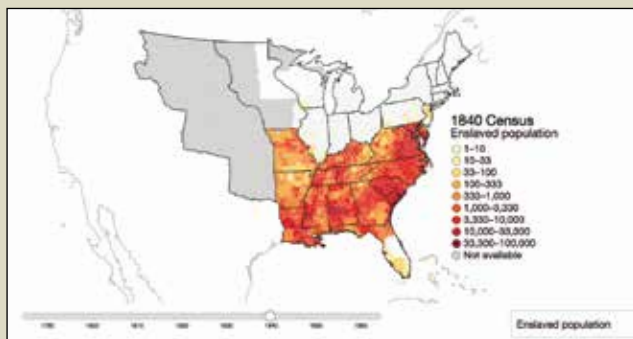
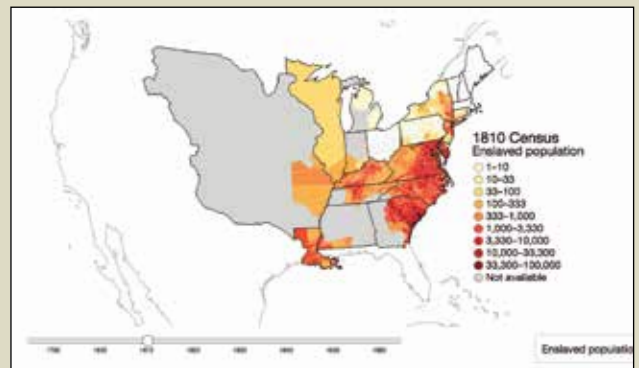
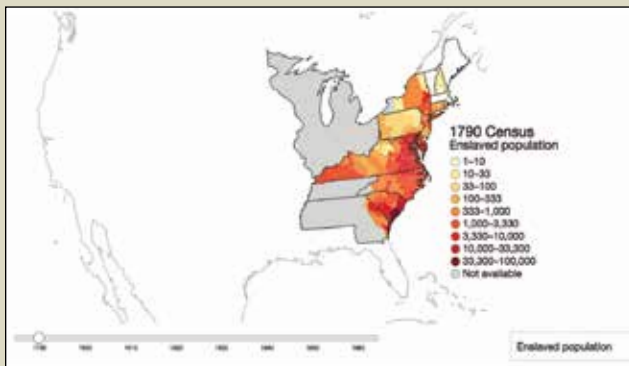
Here is an interactive online map^(a) that students can manipulate. Slide your finger along the timeline at the bottom and watch the institution of slavery grow in this color-coded map of the United States. Zoom to any county by clicking on it and view the original U.S. Census data behind the illustration.^(b) You can also view data on free African Americans, total population, and other groupings by choosing from options in a box in the lower right.

The maps' creator, Lincoln A. Mullen, is an assistant professor in the Department of History and Art History at George Mason University. He is also affiliated faculty at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media.

Notes

(a) Lincoln Mullen, "The Spread of U.S. Slavery, 1790–1860," interactive map, <http://lincolnmullen.com/projects/slavery/>, doi: 10.5281/zenodo.9825.

(b) Minnesota Population Center, *National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 2.0* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2011), <http://www.nhgis.org>.



Students could see that slavery existed beyond the South, but became concentrated in particular regions due to geographic variance in economies and politics. In addition to assessing national trends, students made inferences within individual states. For Kentucky specifically, comparing physical maps to slavery maps showed the concentration of slave populations in more central and western regions, with significantly fewer slaves in eastern Kentucky's Appalachia, as there were fewer farms and fewer urban centers in the mountains.

After modeling this task, students quickly became self-directed. Although the supporting question and graphic organizer provided an initial framework, students soon did not need this structure to stay engaged as they asked their own questions and explored the resources. They were excited about the connections they made, including recognizing how Kentucky counties compared to other parts of the South. For example, they identified where slave population density increased dramatically, and they considered how agricultural areas connected to waterways. Several students considered the similarities and differences between Lexington, Kentucky and Charleston, South Carolina. Their exploration and subsequent geographic inferences created a more complex understanding of regional variance than we anticipated, setting the stage for the next component.

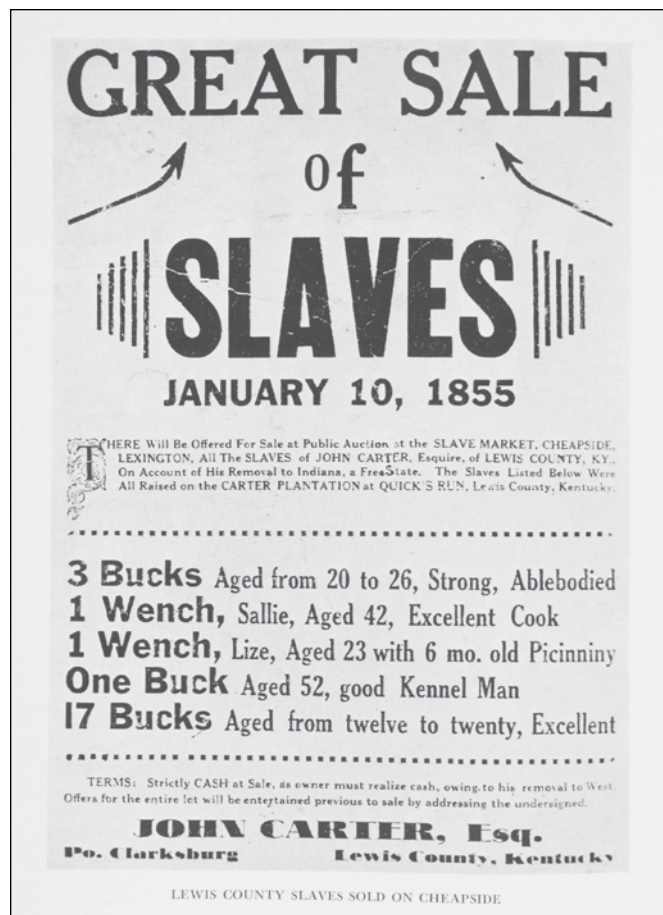
Supporting Question 2: Compare and Contrast Systems of Slavery

After they established geographic knowledge, students built on these understandings to investigate differences in the system's particulars. The second supporting question—"How did the slavery system differ from place to place?"—asked students to consider a location's impact on the practice of slavery, including comparisons of rural versus urban settings, plantations versus small-farms, skilled versus unskilled labor, and border states versus the Deep South. As this task's sources were all text-based, we intentionally integrated the English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core skills. Students compared and contrasted how slavery differed from place to place using a graphic organizer. We designed this portion of the inquiry to challenge any simpler portrayals of the slave system. Thus, the sources describe slavery within the scope of plantations, as well as small farms and urban areas. Building on the previous task, this question allowed students to consider how Kentucky geography intersected with different manifestations of slavery, while also showing how embedded slavery was in Kentucky life.

Though this step of the inquiry was important to establish the multifaceted nature of slavery in both the United States and Kentucky, the sources lacked the other materials' dynamism. The texts were rather difficult, leaving many discouraged and frustrated, further exacerbated by the inevitable difficulties in keeping students focused near the end of the school year. With classes in the future, to make this task as engaging as the others, we would use more images and perhaps find ways to scaffold the students' reading of the more complicated texts.

Supporting Question 3: Point-of-View Analysis

We were able to reengage students with the third supporting question—"How did your state's former slaves describe their treatment?" This question provided a voice to the enslaved people in order to better humanize their experiences. For this task, students created open-minded portraits,²¹ where they filled portrait outlines with a summary reflecting what they believed to be the individuals' thoughts and feelings. This technique allowed for student creativity as they summarized the enslaved people's discussions in multiple ways – through descriptions, listing of key phrases, and drawings.



"Lewis county slaves sold on Cheapside" (New York Public Library), digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-9fa9-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99

We chose excerpts from the Works Progress Administration's (WPA's) Slave Narratives, which are interviews with elderly former slaves, collected in the 1930s.²² We chose excerpts specifically from the Kentucky collection, as they explicitly mention Lexington and surrounding areas. We described for students the limitations of this oral history collection. In particular, the dynamic between interviewer and interviewee could certainly have shaped responses, most interviewers being white Southerners.²³ To supplement the WPA Slave Narratives, we used slave auction advertisements that mention locations in Kentucky

which are also mentioned in the slave narratives, further linking the narratives to students' communities.

Student energy was reinvigorated as they connected the previous tasks' content to the personal stories. Students instigated conversations with fellow classmates, sometimes reflecting on their own racial identity. They considered how people treat others based on race, as well as engaged in larger conversations about the slave system's inhumanity and ways in which enslaved people found humanity through the bonds of family.

Supporting Question 4: Claims-Based Argumentation on Memorialization

For the fourth supporting question—"How is the legacy of slavery visible in your community?"—students connected what they learned about Kentucky history to consider how history can become visible, facilitating deliberations over appropriate ways to depict and, thus, remember the past. The formative performance task asked students to write a claim supported by evidence concerning how slavery's legacy is visible in their community. The discussions around Lexington's Cheapside Park provided students the opportunity to directly situate the historical analysis within the familiar, Cheapside being a short distance from their school.

History is visible in the broader Kentucky community in the form of preserved historical sites, memorials/markers to slavery, and statues/memorials to slave owners. The evidence of history does not need to be limited to physical landmarks. Kentucky's state song, "My Old Kentucky Home," is about an enslaved person lamenting leaving Kentucky after being sold to a sugar cane farm.²⁴

Taking Informed Action

Reflecting the C3 Framework's call to active citizenry,²⁵ we included an opportunity for students to apply their knowledge beyond the classroom. The blueprint's Taking Informed Action (TIA) piece has three main components: understand, assess, and act.²⁶ We embedded the first TIA component in the fourth supporting question's task, meaning students built their understanding of the issue within the formative task, rather than as a separate exercise.

Students examined the extent to which the memory of slavery is visible in their community—in this case, by reading resources concerning current discussions of Cheapside Park. To assess the issue, students deliberated over how slavery's history is and should be reflected in their community. To act, students wrote letters to the mayor, suggesting how to memorialize this history. This portion of the inquiry served as the summative performance task, as student suggestions for depicting Kentucky's slavery history required that they answer the compelling question by constructing an evidence-based argument.

In their suggestions to Lexington's mayor, several students proposed public commemoration of Kentucky's interracial history, desiring a more deliberate consideration of African-American

contributions to Kentucky and, thus, a more inclusive future for the site. Many suggested "a statue of a black man and white man shaking hands to show that they are equal now." Others suggested leaving the statues, but adding additional markers that recognized Cheapside's important slave history, as "these markers actually explain events in history." Their arguments in the letters varied, but all students used evidence gathered during the inquiry to justify their opinions concerning making this important history more visible in Kentucky.

Extending the Inquiry

During and after the inquiry unit's conclusion, students displayed an intellectual curiosity in unwrapping the ways slavery impacts local and national histories. Inquiry can "complicate students' ideas, develop their curiosity, and motivate them to engage in further study of the questions that interest them."²⁷ Our students' reactions reflected the active, self-propelled learning we wanted to encourage. One student started reading the American Girl series book focused on Addie, a fictionalized young slave girl. This student shared with the class how Addie was separated from her parents at a slave auction, similar to those at Cheapside Park. Several other students began talking about visits to Cheapside. They discussed initiating conversations with their families regarding the auctions that once took place there. While researching the African-American inventor Garrett Morgan, who recently had a Lexington elementary school named for him, one student found that Morgan (1877–1963) was the son of a slave once owned by John Hunt Morgan. This sparked a conversation about how slaves often took the owner's last name as their own family name on emancipation. It also presented students with an example of the mark slavery's legacy has left on Lexington's landscape and how their community has acknowledged, or failed to acknowledge, different human experiences in its history.

By integrating local history into the larger national narrative and current discourse, our students addressed an issue in social studies, making history instruction "an important staging ground for engaged citizenship."²⁸ Rather than present slavery in a monolithic fashion, this inquiry emphasized its complexities and historical influence, providing students with an exploration that fostered a critical perspective. History in the elementary classroom, therefore, became the foundation to embolden students to be informed agents of change. 🌍

Notes

1. "Peculiar institution" was a common euphemism used for slavery, notably by slavery advocate John C. Calhoun, who in 1837 was a senator from South Carolina. "Speech on the Reception of Abolition Petitions," February, 1837, archive.org/stream/speechesofjohncc00incalh/page/222/mode/2up.
2. At the time of this writing, the statues were placed in storage after Kentucky Attorney General Beshear stated the city did not need the Kentucky Military Heritage Commission's permission to take such actions, as was recently believed. The Lexington Cemetery Board has conditionally agreed to take them. See Morgan Eads, Karla Ward, and Beth Musgrave, "In a Surprise Move, Lexington Removes Controversial Confederate Statues," *Lexington Herald Leader* (October 17, 2017).
3. James W. Loewen, "Methods for Teaching Slavery to High School Students and Undergraduates in the United States," in B. Jay and C. L. Lyerly, eds., *Understanding*

- and *Teaching American Slavery* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 10.
- Kentucky Department of Education, "Core Content for Social Studies Assessment: Elementary, Version 4.1, 2006."
 - In the draft of the Kentucky Academic Standards (2015), there is only one reference to slavery in its 745 pages. Listed under "Skills and Concepts" for eighth grade, it reads: "compare the political, social, economic and cultural differences (e.g., slavery, tariffs, industrialism vs. agrarianism, federal vs. states' rights) between and among regions of the U.S. and explain how these differences contributed to the American Civil War" (p. 466). In contrast, "voting" is mentioned four times, "taxes" six, "colonization" nine, and "freedom" twenty five.
 - Kentucky Department of Education, p. 248-51.
 - Ira Berlin, "Forward: The Short Course for Bringing Slavery into the Classroom in Ten Not-So-Easy Pieces," in B. Jay and C. L. Lyerly, eds., *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 10.
 - For more discussion of slavery in Kentucky, see: James C. Klotter, J. C. and Freda C. Klotter, *A Concise History of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008); KET Education, "Kentucky's Underground Railroad: Passage to Freedom," www.ket.org/education/resources/kentuckys-underground-railroad-passage-freedom/#kentucky-and-the-question-of-slavery.
 - Avner Segall, "Critical History: Implications for History/Social Studies Education," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 27, no. 3 (1999): 366.
 - Robert J. Helfenbein, "Space, Place, and Identity in the Teaching of History: Using Critical Geography to Teach Teachers in the American South," *Counterpoints* 272 (2006): 111-124; Sandra J. Schmidt, "Making Space for the Citizen in Geographic Education," *Journal of Geography* 110, no. 3 (2011): 107-119.
 - Richard H. Schein, "A Methodological Framework for Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes: Lexington, Kentucky's Courthouse Square," *Geographical Review* 99, no. 3 (2009): 377-402. The name "Cheapside" may also be in reference to the Cheapside market area in London, England.
 - Take Back Cheapside, www.takebackcheapside.com
 - Schein, 2009.
 - Joseph E. Brent, "National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Submission: Civil War Monuments in Kentucky, 1865-1935," (National Park Service. January 8, 1997).
 - Ibid.
 - S.G. Grant, John Lee, and Kathy Swan, "The Inquiry Design Model" (2015), www.C3teachers.org/IDM.
 - The full inquiry blueprint narrative can be accessed on the C3Teachers.org website, www.c3teachers.org/inquiries/slavery-shape-state/.
 - Carly Muetterties, "How did Slavery Shape My State?" (*Teaching Tolerance*), in preparation. As part of C.M.'s research fellowship with the Southern Poverty Law Center's project to improve the teaching of slavery in K-12 schools (titled "Teaching Hard History: White Supremacy and American Slavery"), this article in *SSYL* (with a Kentucky-focused inquiry) is being expanded to include suggestions for state-specific adaptations. This larger resource is slated to be posted on the Teaching Tolerance website, www.tolerance.org, as of February 2018.
 - Donna M. Ogle, "K-W-L: A Teaching Model That Develops Active Reading of Expository Text." *The Reading Teacher* 39, no. 6 (1986): 564-70.
 - Howard Zinn, *A Young People's History of the United States* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), p. 23-32.
 - Gail E Tompkins, *Language Arts: Patterns of Practice*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2008). Teachers can access blank silhouettes and profiles on several websites.
 - Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narratives: Volume VII: Kentucky, Bogie-Woods with combined interviews of others (Library of Congress; Works Progress Administration, 1936), www.loc.gov/item/mesn070.
 - The Library of Congress' overview of the project provides context to assist in source analysis. See www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection.
 - Schein, 2009.
 - National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
 - Swan, Lee, & Grant, 2015.
 - Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2009), 201.
 - S.G. Grant, John Lee, and Kathy Swan, *Inquiry-Based Practice in Social Studies Education: Understanding the Inquiry Design Model* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 113.

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