

We the People: A New Nation



THE
CHOICES
PROGRAM
BROWN UNIVERSITY

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Contents

Introduction: “We the People”?	1
Part I: The New Nation	3
Borders and the Struggle for Sovereignty	3
Designing and Debating the Law of the Land	8
Change and Resistance.....	14
Foreign Policy and Security.....	20
Part II: An Expanding Nation	25
Political Change and Republicanism	26
Social Transformations.....	27
Economic Transformations	28
Westward Expansion	31
The United States and Europe.....	37
Part III: A Changing Nation.	44
Slavery, Industrialization, and Economic Change	44
“Era of Good Feelings”?.....	45
The Jackson Administration	54
Supplementary Resources.	58
Videos	<i>Online</i>

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Introduction: “We the People”?

The American Revolution was a global struggle involving the imperial powers of Europe and Britain’s North American colonies. In the United States, it resulted in the loss of many lives and created a great deal of uncertainty about the future of the new country. In the years immediately following the war, the U.S. Congress began the work of crafting a new, more centralized government and gathered to formalize its plans in writing in 1787 in Philadelphia. Elite men from twelve of the thirteen states were there. The delegates to the Philadelphia Convention faced complicated questions about the future of the new nation:

- How much power should each of the thirteen states have?
- What should be the role of a national government?
- How will the government pay for its needs and the needs of its people?
- What does it mean to be “American,” and who should be included as a citizen?
- Should each citizen be able to influence the government? How much democratic participation should be allowed for people from different classes?
- What, if anything, should be done about the institution of slavery?

In Philadelphia, the founders debated these questions and wrote a new constitution. The Con-

Introduction Definitions

Founders—The term founders, or founding fathers, is frequently used to describe a small group of wealthy, influential, white men who played leading roles in the creation of the United States. The names are familiar; George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John and Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton are commonly thought of as the founders. Their contributions were vitally important. But, they were not the only contributors to the creation of the United States, and not all of their decisions were beneficial to all people. To more fully and accurately understand early U.S. history, historians also call attention to the contributions and experiences of countless other groups and individuals.

Citizen—A citizen is a resident of a country who is entitled to all the rights and privileges provided by the laws of that country.

stitution’s opening words highlight aspirational ideas of justice, security, liberty, and prosperity for the people of the United States.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union,



The opening phrase of the U.S. Constitution.

We the People: A New Nation

Teacher Resource Book

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Contents

Note to Teachers	2
Part I: The New Nation	
Study Guides and Graphic Organizer	3
The Geography of Expansion and Dispossession	6
Slavery and the Constitution	16
Ideals in U.S. Founding Documents	<i>Online</i>
Part II: An Expanding Nation	
Study Guides and Graphic Organizer	27
The Expansion of Slavery and the Cotton Economy	30
The Options Role Play	
Organization and Preparation	38
Options in Brief	44
Options	45
Debate and Discussion	59
Part III: A Changing Nation	
Study Guides and Graphic Organizer	60
“Invisible” Churches	63
Synthesis	
Demands for Rights	70
Assessment Using Documents: The Haitian Revolution	<i>Online</i>
Supplemental Materials and Videos	<i>Online</i>

"Invisible" Churches

Objectives:

Students will: Examine excerpts from slave narratives.

Make an evidence-based argument about the significance of "invisible" churches.

Consider the value and limitations of slave narratives as sources for historical understanding.

Required Reading:

Students should have read Part III and completed "Study Guide—Part III" (TRB-60) or "Advanced Study Guide—Part III" (TRB-61).

Note:

Colored pencils will be helpful in this lesson.

Videos and Online Resources:

"How did enslaved people challenge the institution of slavery?" (Christy Clark-Pujara)

"How did enslaved people respond to and resist slavery?" (Emily Owens)

Videos and "Prefaces to Slave Narratives" (optional) are available at <www/choices.edu/newnation>.

Handouts:

"Overview: 'Invisible' Churches" (TRB-65)

"Excerpts from Slave Narratives" (TRB 66-68)

"Examining Narratives" (TRB-69)

In the Classroom:

1. Background Knowledge—Distribute "Overview: 'Invisible' Churches." Have students follow the instructions. Invite students to share facts that they learned from the handout and the question they wrote.

Prompt students to consider the meaning of the word "invisible." Why would historians use it to describe this type of gathering among enslaved people? In what ways, and to whom, were these gatherings invisible? Why was that important?

2. Slave Narratives as Sources—Tell students that historians call the primary sources students

will examine "slave narratives." Explain that these are accounts from formerly enslaved people about their lives and experiences. In some cases, formerly enslaved people wrote their own narratives; in others, they told their stories to individuals who then recorded them.

Explain that many historians use slave narratives as a valuable source of information about enslaved people's experiences. But, historians also recognize the limitations of slave narratives. Distribute "Excerpts from Slave Narratives." Read the list of limitations at the top of the handout as a class. Remind students that all primary sources have limitations. Tell students to keep these limitations in mind while also considering the useful information the slave narratives provide.

3. Examine Slave Narratives—Distribute "Examining Narratives." Have students follow the instructions on "Excerpts from Slave Narratives," followed by the instructions on "Examining Narratives."

4. Share Findings—Invite students to share patterns they noticed across narratives. Ask them to share their arguments about the significance of invisible churches. Prompt the class to find evidence in the narratives to support claims historians make about why invisible churches were important:

- they were a community-building practice among enslaved people;
- they provided a source of hope and resilience;
- they challenged the power of enslavers;
- they were a way to maintain connections to some African traditions.

5. Discussion—Ask students to reconsider the value and limitations of slave narratives as historical sources. What information and perspectives did students gather from the narrative excerpts that are not available in other sources? Why did students think they were reliable? Were there reasons students found the excerpts unreliable?

Watch the Choices videos "How did enslaved people challenge the institution of slavery?" with Christy Clark-Pujara and "How did enslaved

people respond to and resist slavery?" with Emily Owens. Revisit overt and covert (or, "extraordinary" and "everyday") resistance. In what ways were invisible churches a form of resistance? How did enslaved people experience invisible churches, according to the narratives students examined? Why do students think enslavers tried to restrict gatherings like invisible churches?

Extra Challenge:

Invite students to read one or more examples of a preface to a slave narrative (from the optional online handout). After students read one or more prefaces, have them write or discuss responses to the following questions: What are the main ideas in this preface? Who seems to be the intended audience of this narrative? What seems to be the purpose of publishing the narrative? Does the preface change your understanding of who was in control of the ideas expressed? Does this shape how you view slave narratives as historical sources?

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Overview: "Invisible" Churches

Instructions: Read the following text. As you read, underline at least two facts you learn. Then, below the text, write a question about something more you would like to know about invisible churches.

Enslaved people in the United States found different ways within their daily lives to survive slavery. Some methods of survival were individual, and some involved community and collaboration. Many enslaved communities in the South developed religious practices that historians have called an "invisible institution." Enslaved people created "invisible" churches—spiritual gatherings that usually took place in secret, away from white people.

“[T]he religious experience of the slaves was by no means fully contained in the visible structures of the institutional church. From the abundant testimony of fugitive and freed slaves it is clear that the slave community had an extensive religious life of its own, hidden from the eyes of the master. In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors ('hush harbors') the slaves made Christianity truly their own....”

—Albert Raboteau, author of *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, 2004

Most enslavers, and some state laws, prohibited enslaved people from gathering for religious purposes without white people present. Enslaved people sometimes attended church or religious gatherings with enslavers, and there were some churches led by free black people with enslaved members. But these religious spaces were usually supervised by white people and followed forms of Christianity that white people practiced.

Enslaved people also met secretly for their own religious gatherings. They used signals and codewords to call each other to the woods, ravines, swamps, or slave quarters on the edge of a plantation—locations that were sometimes called "hush harbors." Enslaved people mixed Christianity with indigenous African traditions involving singing, dancing, clapping, drumming, and spirit worship. In addition to creating a spiritual refuge for themselves, enslaved people sometimes used these gatherings to plan acts of resistance.

Not many written sources exist today about the secret gatherings among enslaved people. Historians rely largely on slave narratives written in the nineteenth century and interviews conducted with formerly enslaved people in the early twentieth century for written information about enslaved people's religious practices.

Excerpts from Slave Narratives

Instructions: Read the following excerpts from narratives written or told by former slaves. All excerpts come from Documenting the American South. Read through all of the excerpts two times. On the **first read**, put a star by at least two details that stand out to you. On the **second read**, look for patterns across different narratives. When you notice an idea or detail about invisible churches that comes up in more than one narrative, use a colored pencil to underline each time a source mentions this idea or detail. Use a different color for the next pattern you notice.

Limitations of Slave Narratives

Many historians look to slave narratives as a valuable source of information about the experiences of enslaved people. At the same time, historians recognize the limitations of slave narratives as historical sources. Some limitations and questions related to slave narratives are listed below.

- About half of slave narratives were written down by someone other than the formerly enslaved person telling the story. The people who recorded, previewed, edited, and published the narratives often were white and did not have direct experiences with slavery.
- Historians wonder whether formerly enslaved people limited how they told their stories—what they chose to say and how they expressed it—based on the writer to whom they told their story or the audience who would read the narrative.
- While historians believe that most narratives were told by formerly enslaved people, they have also found some fictional narratives.
- For some narratives, the enslaved person's age and major dates in their life are not known, so the exact years in which events took place can be unclear.
- The vast majority of published slave narratives are about men who escaped or were freed from slavery, and many describe experiences in states in the Upper South of the United States. This means that the experiences of some groups of enslaved people—including women, children, people who died while enslaved, and enslaved people from states in the Lower South—are underrepresented in these sources.

Slave Narrative Excerpts

Peter Randolph, *Slave Cabin to the Pulpit, The Autobiography of Reverend Peter Randolph: The Southern Question Illustrated and Sketches of Slave Life*, 1855.

Peter Randolph was born in Virginia.

Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamps, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot. Arrangements are then made for conducting the exercises. They first ask each other how they feel, the state of their minds, etc. The male members then select a certain space, in separate groups, for their division of the meeting. Preaching in order, by the brethren; then praying and singing all round, until they generally feel quite happy. The speaker usually commences by calling himself unworthy, and talks very slowly, until, feeling the spirit, he grows excited, and in a short time, there fall to the ground twenty or thirty men and women under its influence....

The slave forgets all his sufferings, except to remind others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming: "Thank God, I shall not live here always!" Then they pass from one to another, shaking hands, and bidding each other farewell, promising, should they meet no more on earth, to strive and meet in heaven, where all is joy, happiness and liberty. As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise.

Name: _____

Sometimes the slaves meet in an old log-cabin, when they find it necessary to keep a watch. If discovered, they escape, if possible; but those who are caught often get whipped. Some are willing to be punished thus for Jesus' sake. Most of the songs used in worship are composed by the slaves themselves, and describe their own sufferings....

Some of the slaves sing—

“No more rain, no more snow,
 No more cowskin on my back!”

Then they change it by singing—

“Glory be to God that rules on high.”

Aunt Sally: or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan, American Reform Tract and Book Society, author unknown/anonymous (contributions by George Wevill), 1858.

Aunt Sally was born around 1796 in North Carolina.

[Narrated by an unknown writer; Aunt Sally's words are in quotations]

When they finished their work early enough on Saturday evenings, they sometimes had a prayer-meeting in a grove at a little distance from the house. Sally could not attend this, nor the meeting on Sunday morning, “But gen'ally,” said she, “I could get about half an hour to go down to de afternoon meetin, when de folks was at dinner. We didn't have any preacher dere who knew how to read, our deacon couldn't read a word, but 'peared like he allers know what to say. I know he talked right well, for I used to notice when I went to de church, an' 'peared like he talked just as de minister did. Den, after he'd exhorted, I'd have to go away, so they'd sing some far'well hymns, and den I'd go back to de house. Dis yer was one of de hymns I loved to sing:

I'll have a place in Paradise
 To praise the Lord in glory;
 O, sister! will you meet me there
 To praise the Lord in glory?
 By the grace of God I'll meet you there,
 To praise the Lord in glory.

“The blessed hour, it soon will come,
 To praise the Lord in glory;
 Oh, brother! will you meet me there
 To praise the Lord in glory?
 By the grace of God I'll meet you there
 To praise the Lord in glory.”

Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents In the Life of a Slave Girl: Written By Herself*, edited by Lydia Maria Child, 1861.

Harriet Jacobs was born in 1813 in North Carolina.

The slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it. It was built by the colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer. Their request was denied, and the church was demolished. They were permitted to attend the white churches, a certain portion of the galleries being appropriated to their use.

Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery*, 1838.

Moses Roper was born in 1815 in North Carolina.

On Sunday, the slaves can only go to church at the will of their master, when he gives them a pass for the time they are to be out. If they are found by the patrol after the time to which their pass extends, they are severely flogged.

On Sunday nights, a slave, named Allen, used to come to Mr. Gooch's estate for the purpose of exhorting and praying with his brother slaves, by whose instrumentality many of them had been converted. One evening Mr. Gooch caught them all in a room, turned Allen out, and threatened his slaves with a hundred lashes each, if they ever brought him there again....

Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia as a Slave*, recorded and published by John S. Taylor, 1837.

Charles Ball was born in the early 1780s and lived in slavery for forty years in Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia.

All over the south, the slaves are discouraged, as much as possible, and by all possible means, from going to any place of religious worship on Sunday. This is to prevent them from associating together, from different estates, and distant parts of the country; and plotting conspiracies and insurrections. On some estates, the overseers are required to prohibit the people from going to meeting off the plantation, at any time, under the severest penalties. While preachers cannot come upon the plantations, to preach to the people, without first obtaining permission of the master, and afterwards procuring the sanction of the overseer....

There has always been a strong repugnance, amongst the planters, against their slaves becoming members of any religious society, Not, as I believe, because they are so maliciously disposed towards their people as to wish to deprive them of the comforts of religion...but they fear that the slaves, by attending meetings, and listening to the preachers, may imbibe with the morality they teach, the notions of equality and liberty, contained in the gospel....

Name: _____

Examining Narratives

Instructions: Respond to the following questions based on the narratives on the handout, "Excerpts from Slave Narratives."

1. What patterns did you notice across the different narrative excerpts you read? Name an idea or detail that came up in more than one narrative. Then record a quotation from each source that shows this idea.

Pattern 1: _____

Name of author or speaker:

Quotation:

Name of author or speaker:

Quotation:

Pattern 2: _____

Name of author or speaker:

Quotation:

Name of author or speaker:

Quotation:

2. Based on the sources you read, complete the following statement and justify your claim with evidence from the narratives.

a. "Invisible" churches were important because:

b. Find evidence from two different accounts that supports this claim. Quote each source directly.

Name of author or speaker:

Quotation:

Name of author or speaker:

Quotation:

3. Write a paragraph (4-6 sentences) in which you state your claim and then explain how the evidence you collected supports this claim. Your paragraph might begin: "*Invisible*" churches were important because.... For example, in _____'s narrative.... Additionally, in _____'s narrative....