

# African American Slavery in New England

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**Grade level:** Grades 10-12

**Essential Questions:** What was it like to be an African American slave? How did slaves effect the politics, economy, society and culture of New England?

## **Lesson**

*Subtopic questions:* How did the New England slave codes effect the lives of slaves in New England? What do these codes reveal concerning white racial attitudes in seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century New England?

## **Instructional Objectives**

- Students will critically analyze several examples of colonial New England slave codes.
- Students will evaluate and draw conclusions about the impact of the New England slave codes on the lives of the slaves.
- Students will consider the rationale for the enactment of the New England slave codes.
- Students will evaluate the racial attitudes of white New Englanders based on the language and tone of the slave codes.

## **Overview of Lesson**

The management and control of slaves compelled colonial American legislators to enact repressive legislation. African Americans in all the colonies resisted their enslavement, even in New England, where the treatment of slaves was considered mild. In this lesson, students will learn that the New England slave codes severely restricted the movement, activity and conduct of African American slaves and were part of the machinery of control to keep Blacks in a subordinate position in New England society. Students will also see that racial attitudes in New England were not too dissimilar to those held by Southerners. This lesson requires two, 90 minute block periods. Prior to beginning the lesson, students will read "New England Slavery," Chapter 1, of Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860, by Joanne Pope Melish and be prepared to discuss the New England slave experience. Students will also receive copies of a list of selected New England slave codes that will be used as the main focus of this lesson.

## **Daily Lessons**

**Day One:** What was the impact of the New England slave codes on the lives of New England slaves?

**Materials needed:** Disowning Slavery, Chapter 1  
List of selected New England slave codes

### **Procedure**

- Divide the class into groups of five to six students.
- 1. Distribute copies of the New England slave codes.
- 2. Instruct students to read the codes to become familiar with them.
- 3. After reading the codes, students will engage in a class discussion using the SOAPSTONE analysis strategy for primary source documents to analyze the selected New England slave codes.
- 4. Instruct students to list specific ways the slave codes affected the lives of African American slaves in New England. Students will complete this task using a graphic organizer supplied by the teacher. Completed charts will be submitted to the teacher.

**Day Two:** What do the slave codes reveal about white New Englanders' attitudes toward African Americans?

**Materials needed:** Same as Day One.

### **Procedure**

- Divide the class into the same groups as the previous day.
- 1. Instruct students to list words or phrases which describe their views of the racial attitudes of white New Englanders as presented in the slave codes.
- 2. The teacher will place on the blackboard a list of the words and phrases generated by the students.
- 3. Using this list as a guide, ask students to express their opinions about the racial attitudes of whites in New England toward Blacks.
- 4. Using information from the primary and secondary sources and the class discussions, students will be required to write a three to four page essay which must reflect an understanding of the slave codes and their impact on Black life in New England. The

essay topic: Assume the role of a New England slave and write a letter to the Governor of a New England colony about your feelings regarding the slave codes.

**Assessment:**

Students will demonstrate their comprehension of the unit objectives by:

1. Actively participating in the class discussions and group activities.
2. Completing a graphic organizer chart with information about the impact of the slave codes on the lives of the slaves and what the codes reveal about white New Englanders' racial attitudes toward Blacks.
3. Writing a three to four page essay that takes a position on the New England slave codes from the viewpoint of the slave.

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# SOURCES

## Colonial New England Slave Statutes

- 1637 **Connecticut An Act for the recapture of runaway servants.**  
It is also ordered that when any Servants shall run from their Masters, or any other inhabitants shall privately go away with the suspicion of ill intentions, It shall be lawful for the next Magistrate, or the Constable and two of the chiefest inhabitants, where no Magistrate is, to press men and boats or pinnaces, at the public charge, to pursue such persons by sea or land, and bring them back by force of arms." (*Public Records, 1636-63, p. 530*)
- 1641 **Massachusetts The Body of Liberties**  
There shall never be any bond slaverie, villinage or Captivitie amongst us, unles it be lawfull Captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us... this exempts none from servitude who shall be Judged thereto by Authoritie.
- 1644 **Connecticut An Act Prohibiting the sale or gift of items by servants or slaves.**  
". ..no servant either man or maid, shall either give, sell or truck, any commodity whatsoever, without license from their master, during the time of their service, under pain of fine or corporal punishments at the discretion of the Court, as the offense shall deserve." (*Public Records, 1636-63, p. 539*)
- 1646 **Connecticut An Act authorizing the exchange of imprisoned Indians for Negroes.**  
Regarding Indians that are imprisoned: "if they should escape they are like to prove more insolent and dangerous after, It (sic) was thought fit that upon such seizure, the delinquent or satisfaction be again demanded of the Sagamore or plantation of Indians guilty or accessory as before; and if it be denied, that then the Magistrates of the Jurisdiction deliver up the Indian seized to the party or parties endammaged, either to serve or to be shipped out and **exchanged for neagers (sic)**, as the case will bear." (*Public Records, 1636-63, p. 532*)
- 1652 **Rhode Island** Whereas, there is a common course practised amongst Englishmen to buy negers, to the end that they have them for service or slaves forever; for the preventing of such practises among us, let it be ordered, that no blacke mankind or white being forced by covenant blood or otherwise, to serve any man or his assignes longer than ten yeares, or untill they come to bee twentie-four yeares of age, if they be taken in under fourteen, from the time of their cominge within the liberties of this collonie. And at the end or terme of ten yeares to set them free as the manner is with English servants. And that man that will not let them go free, or shall sell them away elsewhere, to the end that they may

bee enslaved to others for a long time, hee or they shall forfeit to the collonie forty pounds. *This was enacted by the Commissioners of the towns of Providence and Warwick, though it lacked the force of a general law.*

- 1660 **Connecticut An Act exempting Indian and Negro servants from training.**  
"It is ordered by this Court, that neither Indian nor negar(sic) servants shall be required to train, watch or ward in this Colony." (*Public Records of Connecticut 1636-63, p, 349*)
- 1664 **Connecticut An Act punishing runaway servants and apprentices.**  
"Whereas many stubborn, refractory and discontented servants and apprentices withdraw themselves from their masters services, to improve their time to their own advantage, it is ordered that whatsoever servant or apprentices shall hereafter offend in that kind, before their covenants or term of service are expired, shall serve their said Masters, as they shall be apprehended or retained the treble term, or threefold time of their absence in such kind." (*Public Records of Connecticut 1636-63, p. 105*)
- 1687 **Connecticut An Act punishing servants or slaves who provide Indians with strong drink.**  
'As an addition to the law prohibiting the supplying Indians with strong drink, this court orders that every servant or slave, male or female, that shall supply any Indian or Indians with any sort of strong drink contrary to law, they shall suffer corporal punishment for the same, according to the nature of their offence, at the discretion of the Court where they have their trial, unless the masters or governors of said servants or slaves will pay a fine for them according to foresaid law." (*Public Records, 1678-89, p. 228*)
- 1690 **Connecticut An Act requiring Negroes to carry passes.**  
"Whereas many persons of this Colony do for their necessary use purchase Negro (sic) servants, and often times the said servants run away to the great wrong, damage, and disappointment of their masters and owners, for the prevention of which for the future, as much as may be, it is ordered by this Court that whatever Negro or Negroes shall hereafter, at any time, be found wandering out of the town bounds or place to which they do belong, without a ticket or pass from the authority or their masters or owners, shall be stopped and secured by any of the inhabitants, or such as shall meet with them, and brought before the next authority to be examined and returned to their owners, who shall satisfy for the charge if any be and all ferrymen within this Colony ate hereby required not to suffer any Negro without such certificate, to pass over their ferry by assisting them therein, upon the penalty of twenty shillings, to be paid as a fine to the county treasury, and to be levied upon their estates for non-payments in way of distress by warrant from anyone Assistant or Commander. This order to be observed as to vagrant and suspected persons found wandering from town to town, having no passes; such to be seized for examination and farther (sic) dispose by the authority; and if any such Negroes are free and for themselves travelling without such ticket or certificate, they to bear the charge themselves of their taking up." (*Public Records, 1689-1706, p. 40*)
- 1702 **Connecticut An Act for Negro and Mulatto Servants to be maintained by their masters.**

"Whereas it is observed that some persons in the Colony having purchased Negro or Malta (sic) Servants or Slaves, after they have spent the principal part of their time and strength in their masters service, do set them at liberty, and the said slaves not being able to provide necessaries for themselves may become a charge and burden to the towns where they have served: for prevention whereof, It is ordered and enacted by this Court and the authority thereof: That every person in this Colony that now is or hereafter shall be owner of a Negro or mulatto servant or slave, and after some time of his or her being taken into employment in his or her service, shall set such servant or slave at liberty to provide for him or herself, if afterward such servant or slave shall come to want, every such servant shall be relieved at the only cost and whom set at liberty, or at the only cost and charge of his or her heirs, executors or administrators, any law, usage or customs to the contrary notwithstanding." (*Public Records, 1689-1706, pp. 375-76*)

1708 **Connecticut An Act punishing Negro and mulatto servants or slaves who disturb the peace or threaten harm to any white persons.**" And whereas Negro and mulatto servants or slaves are become numerous in some parts of this Colony and are very apt to be turbulent, and often quarrelling with white people to the great disturbance of the peace: It is therefore ordered. That if any Negro or mulatto servant or slave disturb the peace, or shall offer to strike any white person, and be thereof convicted, such Negro or mulatto servant or slave shall be punished by whipping, at the discretion of the courts, assistant, or justice of the peace that shall have cognizance thereof, not exceeding thirty stripes for one offense." (*Public Records, 1706-16, pp. 52-53*)

1723 **Connecticut An Act establishing a 9 o'clock p.m. curfew for Negro and Indian servants or slaves.**  
"...if any Negro or Indian servant or slave shall be found abroad from home in the night season, after nine of the clock" without special order from his or their master or mistress, it shall be lawful for any person or persons to apprehend and secure such Negro or Indian servant or slave so offending, and him or them bring before the next assistant or justice of peace; which assistant or justice of peace shall have full power to pass sentence upon such Negro or Indian servant or slave so offending, and order him or them to be publicly whipt on his or their naked body, not exceeding ten stripes" and pay cost of court, except his or their master or mistress shall redeem them by paying a fine not exceeding twenty shillings. (*Public Records, 1717-25, pp. 390-91*)

1730 **Connecticut An Act punishing slander by Negro, Indian or Mulatto slaves but permitting rights of legal defense.**  
"...that if any Negro, Indian or Mulatto slave shall utter, publish and speak such words of any person that would by law be actionable if the same were uttered, published or spoken by any free person of an other, such Negro, Indian or Mulatto slave, being thereof convicted before anyone assistant or justice of the peace...shall be punished by whipping, at the discretion of the assistant or judge before whom the trial is, (respect being had to the circumstances of the case,) not exceeding forty stripes. And the said slave, so convict, shall be sold to defray all charges arising thereby, unless the same be by his or their master or mistress paid and answered.  
*Provided nevertheless,* That such Negro, Indian, or Mulatto slave be not debarred from

making such pleas, and offering such evidences in his or their defense or justification on such trial, as any other person might make use of, being sued in an action of defamation, so far as relates to the trial before justice; anything above to the contrary notwithstanding." (*Public Records, 1726-35, p. 290*)

- 1774 ***Connecticut An Act prohibiting the importation of slaves to be left or sold...***  
"Whereas the increase of slaves in this Colony is injurious to the poor and inconvenient: *Be it enacted...* That no Indian, Negro or mulatto slave shall at any time hereafter be brought or imported into this Colony, by sea or land from any place or places whatsoever, to be disposed of, left or sold within this Colony.

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