

We Will Be Heard: Abolition in Connecticut

Program Overview:

We Will Be Heard: Abolition in Connecticut is a wonderful way for students to actively participate in history! The program is 1 ½ hours, including a 35-minute rotation through the historic Noah Webster House, a 35-minute assembly on the topic of slavery, and a 20-minute assembly vote and follow-up session. The class(es) will be divided into groups of at least 5 and no more than 10 students, with a maximum capacity of 60 students total.

The program is set in the year 1835. At this time in America, tensions are stirring between those who favor slavery and those who oppose it. Even in the North, in places such as Connecticut, people are divided on the issue of slavery. The capital city of Hartford has become a hotbed for abolitionist activity, and societies have formed and mobs rallied in protest. Hartford quickly gained for itself a reputation for violence and mayhem. In August of 1835, a “Great Meeting” is held in Bushnell Park for the public to express their sentiments on the subject of slavery. It is in this setting that our program takes place.

During the program, the students will be split into six groups. Three of the groups will begin by rotating through the downstairs rooms of the Noah Webster House. The students will meet Rebecca Greenleaf Webster, Noah’s wife, and learn about the abolition movement in Connecticut. They will learn about the Colonization movement with Mrs. Bacon, the wife of a New Haven minister, and finally, talk with Mrs. Whitman, a West Hartford native with ties to slavery, about the anti-abolitionists in Connecticut. Meanwhile, the other three groups will be attending an Assembly where they will be assigned characters and discuss the various perspectives on the topic of slavery. The groups will then switch locations.

During the last ½ hour of the program, the whole class will meet back in our gallery space for an Assembly vote on the topic of slavery. Afterward, there will be a wrap-up to discuss how slavery was finally ended and the legacy it still has in Connecticut today.

Learning Points:

Through first-person interpretation and a role-playing experience, students will better understand the complexities of the issue of abolition in nineteenth-century Connecticut.

Objectives:

- To relate to students that the issue of slavery was present in Connecticut.
- To show students the steps taken to both deter and promote abolition in Connecticut
- To explore different viewpoints and ideas regarding freedom and human rights
- To help students understand the legacy of slavery in our country

Time: 90 minutes (35 min. in house, 35 min. “assembly” in gallery, 20 min. wrap-up)

Interpretive Technique

Museum Teachers will use first-person interpretation for their characters. Students will use first-person interpretation for their characters during the Assembly portion. During the wrap-up, teachers will come out of character.

Getting Started

After set up, meet in costume in the hallway to discuss your characters. Escort your group to the place where you will start. You must know how many students and adults are in your group.

Introducing Yourself

Start out in role. Explain who you are and say something about your position on the issue of slavery. Full descriptions of the Museum Teacher characters (as well as student characters) are provided after the lesson plan.

House Rotation (35 minutes)

Best Room – “Mrs. Webster & the Anti-Abolitionists” (12 minutes)

Museum Teacher Character: Mrs. Rebecca Greenleaf Webster (wife of Noah Webster)

Props: *Sketches of American Policy*, “Franklin’s Petition Against Slavery,” “Society For the Promotion of Freedom,” “An Essay Concerning the Effects of Slavery on Morals and Industry,” “Antislavery Hymn.”

Theme for Best Room: Mrs. Webster relates the progression of the Abolitionist movement, including information about her husband’s involvement in the cause.

Format: While you sit in the round chair with the materials on the gate-leg table, have students sit on the floor. Tell students about the early Abolition movement and its progression, detailing Noah Webster’s role. Give the reasoning behind the abolitionists’ position. Encourage the students to join in the abolitionist cause by having them join you in song.

Discussion points:

- You are Rebecca Greenleaf Webster, the daughter of a Boston merchant and the wife of Noah Webster. Often times, people associate your husband only with the American dictionary, but he actually played an important role in the early abolition movement.
- From an early age, your husband was a proponent of abolition for slaves. In 1785, he published a pamphlet called *Sketches of American Policy*. This was read by virtually every educated man of the time and the framers of the Constitution incorporated almost all of its principals in the framework they created for the new American government. The one they didn’t incorporate was the point calling for the end of slavery.
- Read to students the portion of *Sketches* that outlines abolition of slavery.
- Noah was also intimately associated with and greatly influenced by Benjamin Franklin, who started the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1787. Show students “Franklin’s Petition.”
- Noah helped start a society for abolition in Connecticut in 1791, called the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom. Show students “Society” newspaper ad.

- In 1792, your husband wrote another pamphlet, this one dedicated to the topic of slavery, called *An Essay Concerning the Effects of Slavery*. Pass out copies to students and have them read selected passages.
- Explain that these early societies for abolition were for the promotion of gradual emancipation. People believed that slavery was wrong, but they were afraid that immediate abolition would be more than American society could handle. These early societies also tried to keep good relations with Southern slave-owners. The nation was very new at the time, and many early abolitionists were afraid the federal system would fail.
- The Connecticut Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1838 and we are still looking for members. Ask the students if they would like to join the society. Perhaps singing this Anti-Slavery Hymn will help inspire them? Pass out the lyrics and sing together.

Old Kitchen – “Mrs. Bacon & the Colonizationists (12 minutes)

Museum Teacher Character: Mrs. Bacon (wife of Leonard Bacon)

Props: “Hampden County Colonization Society Circular,” “Substance for an Address Delivered Before the Middletown Colonization Society,” “The Anti-Slavery Alphabet.”

Theme for Old Kitchen: Mrs. Bacon describes her husband’s work with the American Colonization Society, an anti-slavery group that is a proponent for black migration to Africa.

Format: Have the students gather around the kitchen table, where you have placed the three props. Introduce yourself and explain the sentiments of the American Colonization Society. Show and read excerpts from the “Circular” and “Address” to the students. Finally, ask students if they will help educate blacks, so that they might move to Africa and spread Christianity. Have students each read out loud, part of the “Alphabet” book.

Discussion points:

- Your husband, Leonard Bacon has been a Congregationalist minister at the First Church in New Haven since 1825. He is a moderate opponent of slavery, considering it to be a moral evil, but advocating gradual rather than immediate abolition.
- For some years now, Mr. Bacon has supported the American Colonization Society (ACS), which sought to settle freed African-American slaves in Liberia, a privately owned colony in Africa. This was seen as a humanitarian and missionary endeavor, which would facilitate the gradual abolition of slavery.
- Give some reasons why people supported colonization. For instance, some people thought the abolitionists had good ideas, but colonization was a better *active* way to free black persons. Others simply wanted to ensure that the “black population” never “amalgamated with the white.” Many members of the ACS made the implicitly racist assumption that free blacks could never flourish in the predominantly white United States.
- Read excerpts from the “Circular” and “Address” to make these points.
- Another goal of the ACS was to help to Christianize and civilize Africa in the process of colonization. Ask students if they will join the cause and volunteer their time to educate African-Americans in the ways of God. Pass out copies of “The Anti-Slavery Alphabet” and have students read portions of it aloud.

Lean-to – “Mrs. Whitman & the Anti-Abolitionists” (12 minutes)

Museum Teacher Character: Mrs. Whitman (wife of John Whitman, Jr.)

Props: “A Declaration of the Sentiments of the People of Hartford,” “The Boston Riot of 1835,” “Bondage: A Moral Institution.”

Theme for Lean-to: Mrs. Whitman describes the sentiments of those with lenient views regarding slavery and staunch opposition to the work of abolitionists.

Format: Sit by the table where you have placed the three props, with students sitting on benches. Introduce yourself and explain the sentiments of those opposing the abolitionists. Show students how some people in the North agree with “Bondage.” Read excerpts from the “Declaration” and “Riot” to the students, explaining why people are angry with the abolitionists.

Discussion points:

- Your husband, John Whitman, Jr. grew up the son of merchant and slave owner. When his father died, your husband inherited the slaves. Your family no longer has slaves, but they are also not in total opposition to slavery.
- Many people in Connecticut feel the same way. They don’t actually own slaves, but the fact that it’s going on in the South doesn’t bother them. Some specifically want to pacify the Southerners, because their livelihood depends on their economic support.
- Some people in the North agree with Southerners, that slavery is a natural part of life (show students “Bondage.”)
- Others, rather than having strong feelings regarding *slavery*, harbor great anger towards the anti-abolitionists, who they think are reeking havoc on their community and threatening the Constitution, state rights, and the very country as a whole.
- Read excerpts from the “Declaration” to make these points.
- Have students read portions of “Riots.”

Gallery – “Assembly” (35 minutes)

Museum Teacher Character: Reporter

Props: “Great Meeting in the Park,” character cards for each student, top hats and bonnets for the “historical” characters

Theme for Assembly: On August 31, 1835 there was a public assembly held in Hartford’s Bushnell Park to discuss the issue of slavery, with some 5,000 attendees. We will recreate this meeting by having each student share their position with the group. The “Reporter” will serve as mediator.

Format: To recreate this “Great Meeting,” each student will be asked to share their position on slavery with the group (based on their assigned “character”). The “Reporter” will serve as mediator. Begin by giving each student a character card to wear around the necks. Pass out top hats and bonnets for the “historical” characters. Then commence with the discussion.

Characters:

There will be 30 character cards total: 15 will be pro-slavery/ anti-abolitionist, 10 will be anti-slavery/ abolitionist, and 5 will be neutral. Of these 30 character cards, 15 will be “general” characters, while the other 15 will be “historical” characters from the time. These “historical” characters will include:

Noah Webster, Andrew Judson, Hosea Easton, Prudence Crandall, Lemuel Haynes, Lydia Marie Child, William Lloyd Garrison, Jonathan Edwards Jr., Angelina Grimke, James Mars, Sojourner Truth, Martin Delaney, Maria Stewart, John Brown, and Frederick Douglas.

Assembly Vote and Follow-up Discussion (20 minutes)

The Museum Teacher playing the Reporter character in the Gallery will be responsible for organizing the Assembly vote and follow-up discussion.

All of the students will meet back in the gallery space. A motion will be called for the nomination of proposals regarding slavery. If no students respond, the Reporter will need to prompt them. For instance, the Reporter might ask: Frederick Douglas, do you propose that Hartford immediately abolish slavery by any means necessary? Ask for a second motion. Ask all in favor to say “aye” or raise their hands. Tally the vote. Continue with additional motions. (10 minutes)

Use the last 10 minutes to follow-up discussion of the abolition movement in Connecticut (5 minutes). The abolition movement in Connecticut would eventually see success. The state of Connecticut officially abolished slavery in 1848. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 helped to garner support of the abolitionist cause. The Civil War started in 1860 and many of Connecticut’s men went to fight on the Union side. In 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves in America. Finally in 1865, the war ended with the North victorious. Have students think about the legacy of this fight for freedom:

- African-Americans were now legally American citizens. In what ways do you think their lives changed? For the good? For the worse?
- How do you think white people treated African-Americans after the war? In the North? In the South?
- Does the legacy of slavery still exist today in America? If so, in what way?
- What might we do to make a change?

Curriculum created by Noah Webster House

Museum Teacher Character Bios

Mrs. Rebecca Webster

Age: 80 years

Status: Abolitionist

Room: Best Room

Your story:

Your name is Rebecca Greenleaf Webster, born and raised in Boston's racially diverse climate. You marry Noah Webster, an early proponent of abolition.



Museum Teacher Character Bios

Mrs. Leonard Bacon

Age: ?? years

Status: Anti-Slavery, pro-Colonization

Room: Old Kitchen

Your story:

Your husband, Leonard Bacon (born February 19, 1802 in Detroit, Michigan; died in 1881) is Congregationalist minister at the First Church in New Haven from 1825-1881. He is also a newspaper columnist, social reformer, a moderate opponent of slavery and an advocate of African colonization. Bacon, like many white Northern clergy of his day, considered African slavery an evil, but advocated gradual, rather than immediate abolition of slavery. For many years he supported the American Colonization Society (ACS), which sought to settle freed African-American slaves in Liberia, a privately owned colony in Africa. The ACS saw itself as a humanitarian and missionary endeavor, which would facilitate the gradual abolition of slavery and help to Christianize and civilize Africa in the process. The ACS made the implicitly racist assumption that free blacks could never flourish in the predominantly white United States.

Bacon, as an advocate of colonization, was at odds with proslavery southerners, who objected to any interference with slavery. But he also clashed with immediate abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, who saw colonization as a cruel scheme to deport free blacks.

Museum Teacher Character Bios

Mrs. John Whitman Jr.

Age: ?? years

Status: Pro-Slavery/ Neutral

Room: Lean-to

Your story:

Your husband, John Whitman, Jr. is the son of a merchant and slave-owner from West Hartford, Connecticut. When his father died, your husband inherited the slaves.

