Cotton Cleaning
Lesson

Raw cotton (cotton that hasn't been cleaned or ginned) is available for purchase at www.CottonClassroom.com.

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Cotton Cleaning
A Hands-on Learning Activity

This lesson is easily customized to your needs and objectives. Be sure to modify it to fit your classroom demographics and age group so the tone of the lesson is appropriate.

1. Students enter class to a modern version of the slave spiritual “Cotton-Eyed Joe” playing. It is playing loud and it is a version that they recognize from the radio and school dances. Students will instantly wonder why this song is playing; just deflect their questions to preserve the surprise. A version of this song can be obtained through iTunes for .99 cents.

2. Next, explain to the class that today they will simulate one small aspect of slavery. Take some time to explain how their slave experience will in no way be anything like the real thing. Be sure to discuss how the main objective of the lesson is to develop empathy, not to recreate slavery. Explain to the class that they will experience no fear, no pain, no threats, nor any of the many other negatives of slavery. At the end of the class they will go free like most slaves never did.

3. Show the class a small amount of cotton (don’t let them touch it yet and keep the rest hidden). Explain that since this is their first day as a slave, that they will have to be tested. Explain that every slave was “tested” on their first day and that their “test” will involve picking and cleaning cotton. Proceed to have a discussion on the emotions one might feel during those first moments as a slave. Ask why a slave would need to be “tested”.

4. After the discussion, distribute the reading “Picking Cotton” to the class. Explain to the class how the words they are about to read were written by a real person who really experienced a “first day” as a slave (with older students use the term primary source). Explain that nothing about it is fake or made-up and that nothing is closer to the truth.

5. Proceed to read “Picking Cotton” together as a class. The teacher’s edition contains specific prompts and details necessary for step five of the lesson.

6. Distribute the handout “The Cotton Gin – Eli Whitney’s Patent Drawing”. Hand to each student their individual portion of raw cotton. This handout can be either read before or after cleaning the cotton. At your chosen time, instruct the class to work as fast as they can to clean the debris (leaves, cotton boll shell pieces) and seeds out of the cotton. Instruct them to make three piles on their desk. One pile for pure, clean cotton, a second pile of seeds (which would be used the next planting season and for animal feed), and debris. Walk around the room and inspect the clean cotton piles for impurities and have the students rework the pile as necessary. Remind the students that their was no other method of cleaning cotton than by hand. Ask the class if they think there would be a “test” for cleaning cotton as there was for picking it.

7. Conclude with a discussion on the affects of the cotton gin on slavery, the Industrial Revolution and American history.

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Background: Solomon Northup was a slave who eventually gained his freedom and wrote about his experiences. Below is a selection adapted from his book titled *Twelve Years a Slave*. In 1850 more than 3 million enslaved African Americans lived in the United States. Seven out of eight worked on plantations. Most slaves performed basic labor as field hands. Picking and cleaning cotton was one activity that fields hands had to do. Inventions like Eli Whitney’s cotton gin made cotton farming more profitable than it had ever been before. The cotton gin also made the job of cleaning cotton much easier. As you read and experience the activity, think about why an enslaved African American would want to pick just the right amount of cotton.

Solomon Northup wrote the following:

In the latter part of August begins the cotton picking season. At this time each slave is presented with a sack. A strap is fastened to it, which goes over the neck, holding the mouth of the sack [chest] high, while the bottom reaches nearly to the ground. Each one is also presented with a large basket that will hold about two barrels. This is to put the cotton in when the sack is filled. The baskets are carried to the field and placed at the beginning of the rows.

Notes, Questions, Factoids, and Other Information in Italics:

1. A **barrel** is a volume unit of measure equal to roughly 37 gallons. Therefore, 2 barrels equals about 74 gallons.

When a new hand, one unaccustomed to the business, is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed, so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty.

2. **Stress that the slave is forced to pick as fast as they can. Have students simulate the motion of picking and putting cotton into an imaginary sack around their neck. You can even try having 5 or so students make a cone shape with their hands and fill that shape with cotton. Then a student attempts to pick the cotton out of the hands of another student. This works especially well with younger students.**

3. **Laggard means someone who wastes time (lazy)**

4. **Emphasize the violent aspect of this first slave experience. Contrast this experience with other first experiences students might have had so far in their young lives. Ask students about the emotions they might feel if they were to go through this experience.**
An ordinary day's work is two hundred pounds. A slave who is accustomed to picking, is punished, if he or she brings in a less quantity than that. There is a great difference among them as regards this kind of labor. Some of them seem to have a natural knack, or quickness, which enables them to pick with great [quickness], and with both hands, while others, with whatever practice or industry, are utterly unable to come up to the ordinary standard... Patsey, [a friend of mine], was known as the most remarkable cotton picker.... She picked with both hands and with such surprising rapidity, that five hundred pounds a day was not unusual for her.

5. An average cotton boll on the plant would be about \(\frac{1}{10}\)th of an ounce. Thus, a slave would have to pick 10 cotton bolls to harvest one ounce, 160 cotton bolls to harvest 1 lb, and 32,000 cotton bolls to harvest “an ordinary day’s work” (200lbs). This point is important for students to understand the magnitude of the work and provides an opportunity for a discussion on the physical ailments that might result from this repeated activity. Besides the violence of the overseer, these ailments include backaches, dry and cracked skin on the hands, splinters, heat exhaustion, and extreme fatigue.

6. Have students complete the same math problem to determine how many cotton bolls Patsey would have to harvest to reach her quota.

Each one is tasked, therefore, according to his picking abilities, none, however, to come short of two hundred weight. I, being unskilful always in that business, would have satisfied my master by bringing in the latter quantity, while on the other hand, Patsey would surely have been beaten if she failed to produce twice as much.

7. Ask the students if they think it is fair that Patsey might be beaten is she only picked twice as much as Solomon. This is a good place to point out the economics of slavery, especially how slavery’s purpose was to make the most profit at any cost.

8. Fact: A typical slave in 1860 was worth around $500 dollars. When adjusted for inflation, the average slave was worth about $37,500 in 2006. A strong and productive field hand might sell for 3 times the average while an elderly housekeeper might go for slightly less.

The cotton grows from five to seven feet high, each stalk having a great many branches, shooting out in all directions, and lapping each other above the water furrow...It presents an appearance of purity, like an immaculate expanse of light, new-fallen snow...

9. Remind students of the lyrics to “Cotton-Eyed Joe”. Ask them if there is a connection somehow to the song and this description of the cotton field.

The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with
the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be, until the order to halt is given by the driver.

10. Remind the students of the geographic location of cotton farming (mostly south of Tennessee) and that the days are longer the closer you are to the equator. A comparison to the hours school is in session or the hours their parents work helps demonstrate how long this workday really is. A reminder to the class before they leave at the end of the day that they would probably still be in the field before their head hits the pillow tonight helps make a powerful connection. Many students have reported that they thought about this fact later in the evening when they went to bed.

The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted," or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be—no matter how much he longs for sleep and rest—a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight—if he has not performed the full task appointed him, he knows that he must suffer.

11. This primary source was written after the invention of Eli Whitney's cotton gin (almost no slave narratives exist prior to this invention on the topic of cotton). It is important to point this fact out so the later connection of the significance of the cotton gin's invention can be made.

12. Ask the students how they might cope with the fear of approaching the gin house.

13. Ask the students what would happen if they bring in less (or more) cotton than the day before.

If he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly. So, whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house is always with fear and trembling.

14. Ask the students how they would make sure they pick justed the right amount of cotton each day. After some discussion, point out some of the obstacles to their ideas such as not knowing you are being tested on your first day of work, not knowing how to count because of no education, the differences between cotton plants, and the risk of your system failing and being labeled a laggard.

15. Finally, ask the students what the most fool-proof system to bring in the right amount of cotton and avoid being punished is. Lead them to the conclusion that working your hardest every day is the only true method. When students make this realization, there is often a sad silence.
Picking Cotton

Background: Solomon Northup was a slave who eventually gained his freedom and wrote about his experiences. Below is a selection adapted from his book titled Twelve Years a Slave. In 1850 more than 3 million enslaved African Americans lived in the United States. Seven out of eight worked on plantations. Most slaves performed basic labor as field hands. Picking and cleaning cotton was one activity that fields hands had to do. Inventions like Eli Whitney’s cotton gin made cotton farming more profitable than it had ever been before. The cotton gin also made the job of cleaning cotton much easier. As you read and experience the activity, think about why an enslaved African American would want to pick just the right amount of cotton.

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And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day’s task accordingly. So, whether he has too little or too much, his approach to the gin-house is always with fear and trembling.

1. If you were Solomon, how would you make sure you picked just the right amount of cotton each day?

2. Besides picking cotton, what are some other jobs that field hands might have to perform?

3. Do you think there were “tests” or measures for these other jobs to ensure that slaves were not being “laggards”. Why or why not?
The Cotton Gin – Eli Whitney’s Patent Drawing

Background: Prior to the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney, the process of cleaning cotton was very labor intensive (gin is short for engine which was the term used for a machine during the time period). A single person who worked a full 16 hour day might only produce one pound of clean cotton. As a result, cotton farming was not very profitable because the cost of owning a slave was greater than the value of the cotton produced. Therefore, the use of slaves to produce cotton was declining. The cotton gin changed all of this. This new machine could clean 1000 times the amount of cotton a single slave could and as a result, profits from cotton skyrocketed. Plantation owners now used their slaves to plant more acres of cotton than any other crop and the declining demand for slaves was radically reversed. Slavery once again began to grow and spread. Other industrial revolution inventions that turned cotton into thread and then into fabric increased the demand for cotton and as a result caused the demand for slaves to rise as well.

How the Cotton Gin Worked:

A slave would feed cotton into the gin while another slave would crank the wheel to provide power. A set of saw teeth would turn and grab the cotton and act like a comb. The teeth would pull the cotton fibers through a set of slots that were too small for the seeds to go through (they would fall to the bottom and be emptied frequently). After the cotton passed through the small slots, a set of brushes would wipe the cotton off the teeth.
Optional Pre-Cotton Cleaning Activity:
The Slave Ship “Brookes” Teacher’s Guide

This simple activity is a powerful discussion starter on the topic of slavery and the Middle Passage. It is great to complete several days, weeks, or even months before the Cotton Cleaning Lesson.

Time Required: 15 -30 minutes depending on prior knowledge and questions asked

Suggested Routine:
1. Distribute the student handout to each student and ask them to answer the two questions on their own. It is recommended that no talking is allowed so each student is forced to count and find their own answer. Most students will finish within 3-5 minutes.
2. Next, sample the class on their answers to question one without judgment. Simply record the various answers on the board. Ask students to describe the method they used to arrive at their answer as you go along. Invariably you will have students who ask questions along the way about the conditions on the ship.
3. Don’t reveal the answer to question one too quickly as holding it back helps keep the discussion going. After plenty of discussion, reveal the answer of 292 and discuss the oversights some students may have made. Relate this number to the size of your school.
4. Next, survey the class on their opinion as to the second question. Again, don’t reveal the answer too quickly. Students will want definitions to the term “loose pack” and “tight pack” but don’t reveal them. The final step will reveal these definitions in an unforgettable way.
5. Finally, ask for three student volunteers. At this point, you will have plenty of volunteers. It is recommended that you select 3 students of the same gender who are wearing clothes appropriate for lying on the ground. Ask the students to come to the front of the class and each lie on the ground shoulder to shoulder. There heads should be at the same end and their feet at the other end. Almost always you have to ask the students to move closer together several times until their shoulders are just about to touch.
6. Ask for any final thoughts about whether the ship design represents “loose pack” or “tight pack”. There is usually a strong consensus for “tight pack.” Have a class vote with students raising their hands. At this climax of curiosity, reveal that the “Slave Ship Brookes” in fact is displaying “loose pack.”
7. Sometimes there is a uproar but after you settle the class, ask the three students on the floor to each roll in the same direction and balance on their sides (shoulders). Have them balance this way for 10 or 15 seconds. Ask them how comfortable this might be for six to eight weeks? Also be sure to explain how if we were really going to demonstrate tight pack we would need two additional students to fill the empty space created. Explain how you won’t do this because of how uncomfortable it would make us all feel.
8. Conclude with any additional discussion on the Middle Passage.

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The Slave Ship “Brookes”

1. Estimate the number of slaves the slave ship “Brookes” would carry through the Middle Passage. _____

2. There were two philosophies slave traders used when packing their ships full of slaves: loose pack and tight pack. Which philosophy do you believe is used below. Please be ready to explain you reasoning.
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