

## **Year 1:**

## **Unit 2**

# **The Africans Who Built Colonial America - The Origins of Slavery (1585 - 1750): Introduction**

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### **Unit Purpose: Why This Unit?**

Beginning the story of Africans in America with the American Revolution ignores nearly two centuries of African American history. In the years prior to the founding of the United States, more than 12 million enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to the Americas. Enslaved Africans throughout the American colonies not only resisted their inhuman condition in the spirit of American independence well before European colonists waged their own fight for freedom, but in doing so, also developed a distinct African American culture and, through their labor, laid the foundations of what would become the new United States.

Historian David Blight explains that “slavery is not an aberration in American history; it is at the heart of our history, a main event, a central foundational story.” While it did not begin in the Americas in the mid-15th century, the scope, scale, and features of slavery here — a condition that was held for life, heritable through one’s mother, and exclusively based on race — was indeed unique to this place and period. Thus, it is crucial in any study of the Americas that one grapples with the economic, political, and social factors that created this “peculiar institution.” The abundance of land and resources in the Americas, and the need for a massive labor force working under grueling conditions to monetize these resources, were the primary drivers of the explosive growth in enslaved labor throughout the colonial era. New York and other port cities became epicenters of this booming trade in goods and people, creating an economic system that all but ensured slavery as the new normal throughout the American colonies.

But the history of enslaved peoples is only rightly told as two stories, simultaneously: one of hardship, and another of hope. As historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries wrote, “... the saga of slavery is not exclusively a story of despair; hard history is not hopeless history. Finding the promise and possibility within this history requires us to consider the lives of the enslaved on their own terms. Trapped in an unimaginable hell, enslaved people forged unbreakable bonds with one another. Indeed, no one knew better the meaning and importance of family and community than the enslaved. They fought back, too, in the field and in the

house, pushing back against enslavers in ways that ranged from feigned ignorance to flight and armed rebellion. There is no greater hope to be found in American history than in African Americans' resistance to slavery."

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## Unit 2 Learning Goals

### Essential Question

If you are successful in this unit, your scholars will be able to answer the Unit 2 Essential Question: *How did enslaved Africans shape colonial America?*

### Big Ideas

The Big Ideas, outlined below, help answer the Unit 2 Essential Question and reflect the key ideas scholars must master by the end of this unit. As you teach Unit 2, connect every lesson back to the Big Idea(s) that the lesson helps illustrate. The Unit 2 Big Ideas were adapted from the UCLA National History Standards World History Era 6 and United States Era 2.

- **Big Idea 1: European colonial powers engaged in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and developed a system of lifelong, heritable, and racialized slavery in order to provide labor for a growing plantation economy.**
  - European nations used colonies in the Americas to supply raw materials and other commodities, like sugar and tobacco, to meet growing demand in their newly industrializing domestic economies.
  - Europeans orchestrated a new Transatlantic Slave Trade in order to supply labor for large-scale plantations in these new colonies, enslaving millions of Africans and bringing them to the Americas.
  - The free labor of European indentured servants and enslaved native labor all failed to provide labor at the scale needed to sustain the demands of plantation agriculture. As a result, the number of Africans forcibly brought to the Americas rapidly increased throughout the 18th century.
  - To combat the threat of organized resistance by coalitions of white indentured servants, enslaved Africans, and other laborers, colonial legislatures created an increasingly harsh and restrictive system of racial chattel slavery distinct from existing forms of slavery around the world.
  
- **Big Idea 2: Slave traders made increasingly brutal attempts to dehumanize enslaved Africans in the Americas in order to discourage rebellion, but enslaved people developed individual and collective means of resistance throughout colonies in the Americas.**
  - The Atlantic's Middle Passage was the second step in a three-part voyage along the triangular trade route, during which enslaved Africans were loaded as human cargo to the Americas. The conditions were so nightmarish that at least two million Africans are estimated to have died along the journey.
  - Despite the hardships endured along the Middle Passage and once they had arrived in the Americas, enslaved peoples preserved aspects of their own identities and African culture and community.

- Though slave traders and plantation overseers used violence and laws to ensure compliance, enslaved Africans found creative means of passive and, at times, even active resistance to plantation servitude.
- **Big Idea 3: Colonial New York’s African and African American community was foundational to the development of the city, and engaged in sustained acts of resistance despite increasingly restrictive slavery and legal racism under English rule in New York.**
  - The labor of enslaved and free Africans and African American was instrumental to the economic development of New York under Dutch and then English rule.
  - Though the experience of slavery and racism in New York differed from the American South, where plantation agriculture defined life and work, New York’s African and African American community also engaged in acts of organized resistance against increasingly restrictive white control over their lives.
  - While it is challenging to fully understand the lives of Africans and African Americans in colonial New York, the discovery of the African Burial Ground in downtown Manhattan has shed light on the customs, values, and lifestyles of the city’s distinctive African American culture.

### Key Terms

**The following people, places, and events are foundational to understanding the Big Ideas of this unit. As these words are introduced in each lesson, add them to your word wall and hold scholars accountable for using them in discussion and writing throughout the unit.**

- Triangular Trade
- Middle Passage
- Slave port
- West Indies
- Immigrant
- Indentured servant
- Plantation
- Sugar trade
- Chattel slavery
- Slave codes
- Hereditary (heritable)
- Slave ship
- Slaver
- Cultural resistance
- Passive (covert) resistance
- Active (overt) resistance
- New Amsterdam
- Archaeology
- Artifact
- African Burial Ground

### Geography

The following places are foundational to understanding the geographical context of the unit. As you teach Unit 2, continually refer to maps in class not only to build scholar fluency with geography, but also to develop scholars' geographic reasoning skills as they grapple with the Big Ideas of the unit.

- The major routes of the Triangle Trade and the Middle Passage
- The Caribbean Sea
- **Major African Nations:** Angola, the Congo, Ghana, and Senegal
- **Major North and South American slave ports:** Brazil, Cuba, Charleston, New Orleans, New York City, and Santo Domingo
- The area colonized by the Dutch known as New Amsterdam

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## Intellectual Preparation

**Class Materials** Once you have internalized the Big Ideas of the unit, to be successful you must study all scholar documents and materials before you teach the first lesson:

- All documents in the [Unit 2 Sourcebook](#)
- All scholar and teacher materials in the [Unit 2 Workbook](#)

**Additional Resources** The resources below provide additional historical background for the content covered in Unit 2:

- Read “Teaching Hard History” from the Southern Poverty Law Center’s [Teaching Tolerance](#) project.
- Review the timeline “Colonization and Settlement” on the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History\* website.
- Read the essay “The Origins of Slavery” on the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History\* website.
- Read the Narrative sections of “Part 1: The Terrible Transformation” from PBS’s [Africans in America](#).
- Explore New York Historical Society’s virtual tour of the gallery exhibit from “Slavery in New York.”
- Explore the National Park Service’s African Burial Ground website, and read the site’s History and Culture overview.

\*To access these readings and more free American History content and resources, create an account on the Gilder Lehrman Institute website.

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## Unit 2 Lesson Sequence

**Essential Question: How did enslaved Africans shape colonial America?**

The first five lessons develop scholars' understanding of the origins and consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its impact on the peoples of Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

Lesson 1 introduces scholars to the concept of a “triangular trade” and the vast scope and scale

of this economic system after 1450. Lessons 2 through 4 develop an understanding of the economic factors that drove this rapid expansion of the slave system, particularly the booming sugar trade between the Americas and Europe. Lesson 5 explains the economic, social, and political forces that transformed slavery in the Americas into a lifelong, heritable, and racialized institution. By the end of these lessons, scholars will be prepared to transition from investigating the large-scale forces that drove the slave trade to understanding the experiences and contributions of enslaved individuals under this system.

**Lesson 1:** The Transatlantic Slave Trade (Video Analysis and Map Study)

- **Central Question:** How did the Transatlantic Slave Trade affect the peoples of Africa, Europe, and the Americas?

**Lessons 2–4:** Expansion of the Slave Trade (DBQ Writing)

- **Central Question:** Why did the Transatlantic Slave Trade expand so rapidly in the Americas?

**Lesson 5:** The Terrible Transformation (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** Why did lifelong slavery based on race develop in colonial America?

**Lesson 6 and the DBQ that follows in Lessons 7 through 9 develop scholars' understanding of the experience of enslaved people around the Americas and how, despite almost unimaginable obstacles, enslaved Africans and African Americans continuously resisted enslavement and sustained a community in the New World. Lesson 6 draws from accounts from white passengers and enslaved individuals aboard slave ships to give insight into the nearly incomprehensible experience along the Atlantic's Middle Passage. In Lessons 7 through 9, scholars will learn about the various methods of resistance — cultural, covert, and overt; individual and collective — employed by enslaved peoples to resist their oppression. Scholars should end these lessons with a greater understanding of and empathy for the experience of enslaved people and will be prepared to better understand slavery in New York specifically.**

**Lesson 6:** The Middle Passage (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How did individuals experience the Middle Passage to the Americas?

**Lessons 7–9: Resistance** (DBQ Writing)

- **Central Question:** How did Africans and African Americans resist slavery throughout the Americas?

The final series of lessons in this unit bring the study of slavery closer to home, focusing on the development of the institution and experience of individuals specifically in colonial New York. These lessons dispel the myth that American slavery was a uniquely Southern phenomenon. Lesson 10 introduces scholars to the discovery of the African Burial Ground in downtown Manhattan and challenges scholars to draw inferences about the lives of New York's enslaved people using artifacts unearthed at this site. Lessons 11 and 12 develop a deeper understanding of the contributions Africans and African Americans, enslaved and free, made to colonial New York and the experience of enslaved individuals in the city. And finally, scholars apply their knowledge of slavery and resistance from throughout this unit to create their own piece of memorial artwork in Lessons 13 through 15 to celebrate the lives and legacy of New York's enslaved Africans.

**Lesson 10: Africans in Colonial New York (Video Analysis)**

- **Central Question:** How did Africans and African Americans shape colonial New York?

**Lesson 11: Slavery and Resistance in New York (Jigsaw)**

- **Central Question:** How did Africans and African Americans respond to the conditions of slavery in New York?

**Lessons 12–14: African Burial Ground Memorial Artwork (PBL)**

- **Central Question:** How should the legacy of the enslaved Africans of New York be memorialized?