MARITIME MAINE & SLAVERY
INTERPRETING PRIMARY SOURCES

Grades 9-12
Language Arts, Social Studies, Economics
CONTENT AREAS & MAINE LEARNING RESULTS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

READING
Students use context clues to comprehend challenging text, interpret a primary source, and appreciate the complexity of historical documents.

RESEARCH and WRITING
Students build their understanding by complementing the primary source text with independent research, using an inquiry process to gather relevant, credible information from a variety of sources.

SOCIAL STUDIES
Students draw on major enduring themes such as Conflict and Compromise, Supply and Demand, and Continuity and Change Over Time.

GEOGRAPHY
Students conceptualize the global trade routes essential to Maine's historic industries and appreciate the economic relationships that connect geographic regions.

HISTORY
Using a primary source from the time period, students uncover the 1844-1877 era of US history, Regional Tensions and Civil War, appreciating the complexity of the times by engaging with real-world correspondence.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES

SELF AWARENESS
Students examine their beliefs and biases and link their feelings to their interpretation of history.

SOCIAL AWARENESS
Students build communication and cultural competency skills by appreciating perspective and identifying, evaluating, and reflecting on social issues.
OBJECTIVES
What is the overall goal of this lesson?

Students will explore the slavery-dependent economy of the pre-Civil War United States and will understand why this history matters today.

Students will develop critical reading and research skills to uncover difficult-to-find aspects of US history.

Students will identify historical bias and will examine how personal biases impact perspectives on history.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
What questions drive this lesson and guide students’ inquiry?

How and why did Maine’s economy support slavery in the United States before the Civil War?

What stories are missing from traditional histories of Maine? Why might this be the case?

How does bias, both historians’ and our own, impact society’s understanding of history?

VOCABULARY

Archive: Collection of historical documents, photographs, records, film, or audio

Bias: Preference for or against one thing, person, or idea over another

Freight: good carried on a ship; today the word also includes goods carried by train or plane

Inference: a conclusion reached based on evidence and reason

Interpret: to explain the meaning of

Transcription: a printed copy of a handwritten document
BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Maine was a leader in New England’s shipping industry in the 19th century. Maine-built ships moved cargo to domestic and international ports, bringing wealth and social prestige to successful captains, shipowners, and shipbuilders who relied on these growing trade networks. Cotton was one of the most important cargoes carried by Maine’s shipping industry. New England ships would travel to ports in the Southern United States (Baltimore, Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans) to load raw cotton and then transport the cargo to textile mills around the world. Before the US Civil War, cotton was grown on large plantations using enslaved people as a source of free labor. This lowered production costs while driving up production and profit. The international trade of enslaved people was banned in 1807, meaning it was illegal to transport enslaved people across international boundaries or the Atlantic Ocean. However, the domestic trade (or the transport of goods in US waters or between US ports) of enslaved people, who by the 19th century were primarily Black, continued until the end of the US Civil War.

In the 1840s and 1850s, Maine and Bath specifically saw many shipbuilding and shipowning families accrue great wealth directly from the Cotton Trade. The Sewall and Patten families in Bath, two of the wealthiest in the “City of Ships,” built their successful business reputation and family prestige off profits from the Cotton Trade. Maine shipbuilding contributed to the growing cotton trade through innovative ship design. The “Cotton Box” hull was developed in Bath by Clark & Sewall shipbuilders and was designed more efficiently to hold cotton bales below deck.

Maine was also a leader in textile manufacturing. Lewiston (Bates Mill) and Brunswick (Cabot Mill) both processed raw cotton from the South and supported a large factory labor force. These mills fueled economic growth in their respective towns but relied on shipments of cotton produced by slave labor.

NOTE: This activity examines a difficult aspect of American history. Check in with yourself throughout the lesson and take note of how you’re feeling.
INTRODUCTION TO THE CAPTAIN LOWELL LETTERS

Maine Maritime Museum Archive MS22.365.24

The following three letters were written by Captain John C. Lowell (1822-1867) to Clark & Sewall Co. in the year 1850, while Lowell was captain of the ship *John C. Calhoun* and sailing between ports throughout the North Atlantic to transport cotton and other cargo.

These letters were written 170 years ago, so the language and handwriting is challenging. Before reading the transcription, take a look at the document itself and see if you can make out any words. Reading difficult handwriting is an important skill when doing research in archives that house old documents.
New Orleans Feb 16th 1850

Messrs. Clark & Swall

Gentlemen,

I have found no

business for the B. & B. Bullnose yet. There is little

prospect for the present the most of the ships land

on for Liverpool & Harne are filled up & I hope when

they leave there will be something done in the way of

most of the ships are taking up Coastwise & the dock

83 ft. Rate = 4 dollars. I suppose the B. & B. would make

about $300 at the rates in New York. But knowing you

as about Coastwise business I have declined buying

ship one I have been hunting for & ever since

I arrived I all I could get offered was 3/4 of a 1000

bales that I refused. I have been expecting to hear

from you every day since I have been here but have not received a letter yet. I should be

pleased to hear from you & to know you views

about business some of the Masters had dispatches

from their owners ordering them not to ship

Mann & Capt. Cushins read one out that he had

not to take less than $4 I don’t believe freight will

be over $3 this season. I shall write you again

in a few days.

Yours Respectfully

J. C. Lowell.
LETTER 1: FEBRUARY 16, 1850

LEARNING TO READ SCRIPT

The previous page has an image of a letter dated February 16, 1850. Look at the image and see if you can recognize any words in this document. Search for things that look familiar, a word or phrase, number, or name. Once you know one word, you can identify specific letters, which will help you make out additional words.

START SMALL

1. To whom is the letter being sent?
2. Where is the letter written?
3. Can you read this word?

![freight]

4. What is its definition?

NOTE: Capt. Lowell does not use periods or commas in these letters. You must infer the ends of sentences based on context clues.

Use the guide below to decipher the handwriting.
LETTER 1: FEBRUARY 16, 1850  |  TRANSCRIPTION

INTERPRETING TEXT

CONTEXT: Captain John C. Lowell, the author of the letter, was born and resided in Bath, Maine. Clark & Sewall Co., owned by William D. Sewall and Freeman Clark, constructed ships and operated a fleet of merchant ships that carried cargo around the world between 1827-1854. One of their primary cargoes was cotton. At the time Lowell is writing these letters, he is the captain of the Clark & Sewall-owned ship, John C. Calhoun.

New Orleans Feb16th 1850

Mess[ers] Clark & Sewall
Gentlemen

I have found no business for the J.C. Calhoun yet & I see but little prospect for the present. The most of the Ships laid on for Liverpool & Havre are filled up & I hope when they leave there will be something done in the way of freights. Most of the Ships are taking up Coastwise at 65c per pick $2 per bale for Cotton. I suppose the J.C.C. would make about $5300 at the rates for N. York but knowing your views about Coastwise business I have declined laying [the] Ship on. I have been hunting for 3/8 ever since I arrived & all I could get offered was 5/16 for 1000 bales that I refused. I have been expecting to hear from you every day since I have been here but have not received a letter yet. I would be pleased to hear from you & to know your views about business. Some of the Masters have had despatches from their Owner ordering them not [to] take less than 5/8 Capt. Cushing read me one that he had not to take less than 1/2. I don’t believe freights will be over 7/18 this season. I shall write you again in a few days.

Yours Respectfully,
J.C. Lowell

NOTES

1 Liverpool, England and Le Havre, France. (See Appendix).

2 Coastwise: Traveling up and down the coast versus traveling across the ocean. Based on the letter, transatlantic trade was evidently more lucrative.

3 J.C.C.: John C. Calhoun, the ship

4 Shipping rates. “3/8” indicates that the ship would earn three eightths the value of the cargo. If the cargo of cotton was worth $8,000, the ship would earn $3,000. These profits would be dispersed to the shipowner, captain, and crew.

BE A DETECTIVE | CONDUCTING OUTSIDE RESEARCH

Shipowners and captains make money off the transportation of cargo on their ships; the more cargo they can transport, the more money they make.

1. Who is this ship named after? The answer will require outside research.

2. Why do you think Clark & Sewall Co. would name a ship after this man? How is he connected to a shipping fleet in Maine? Conduct outside research in the context of US history in the 1850s to find the answer.
Baltimore Oct 11th, 1850

Mr. H. Clark

Dear Sir,

I received your last writing yesterday and have sent a freight on board the 106 Baltimore, Mr. Henderson, and that he has engaged a large portion of it for the sale of

+150 cases of cream, as near as I can judge. I should think we have about 7500 freight engaged with what we have

on board. I engaged this morning some grain at $1.25 per bushel. I think the greatest good of a 40 acre

more at the same rate. The ship is the Mail or the

23rd without fail, and I am in hopes to make the freight

passage money, $25.00 if she fails, we may see about it. I have no choice but to write you. I will keep you

advised of all my proceedings while here I hope

write me.

Yours truly,

C. L. Lowell

I have taken the liberty to sign

May 20th.
LETTER 2: OCTOBER 11, 1850

LEARNING TO READ SCRIPT

Can you make sense of what’s being discussed here? The more time you spend getting acquainted with someone’s handwriting and word choices, the easier it becomes to read.

Use your alphabet guide (p.6) if you get stuck!

Or use context clues to guess words that you cannot read.

Remember that Capt. Lowell does not use commas or periods.

1. Where is this letter written?

2. Try transcribing the first sentence of the letter. **Hint!** Handwritten documents don’t always use proper grammar or spelling.

   ___ arrived ______ ______ ________, found ________ ________ on board _____ JC ____________.
LETTER 2: OCTOBER 11, 1850  |  TRANSCRIPTION

INTERPRETING TEXT

CONTEXT: In this letter, Lowell is writing to Clark & Sewall to inform them of the cargo he has secured to transport from Baltimore to New Orleans.

Baltimore Oct[ober] 11th 1850

Mr. F Clark
Dear Sir

I arrived here last Wednesday. Found some freight on board the JC Calhoun. Mr. Henderson says that he has engaged 100 tons of iron pipe at $4 per ton & 150 Casks of Coal. As near as I can judge I should think we had about $800 freight engaged with what we have on board. I engaged this morning 80 negroes at $12 per head & think the prospect good for 40 or 50 more at the same rate. The Ship is to sail on the 23rd without fail & I am in hopes to make freight [and] passage money 25.00, perhaps more. Please say nothing about my taking negroes. If you will let me know where to write you I will keep you advised of all my proceedings while here. Please see write me.

Yours truly
J C Lowell

[Endorsed in another hand]
14th Oct[ober] I have taken the liberty to open and find it all right

W[illiam]m D Sewall

BE A DETECTIVE | MAKING INFERENCES

1. What freight does Lowell report he is taking to New Orleans?

2. Slavery was outlawed in Maine in 1820, but was still legal in Southern states in 1850. Why would Lowell request that Clark and Sewall say nothing about his decision to transport enslaved people? What can we infer about their views on slavery?

PAUSE | REFLECT

1. What surprises you about Lowell’s letter? What confuses you?

2. Describe your emotions and/or reaction to this letter.
Baltimore Oct 16th 1850

My dear Mr. Sewall,

Gentlemen,

I received your favour of the 14th was pleased to hear that my proceedings were satisfactory to you. I have taken all on board 63 tons of cargo since I wrote last, & a few boxes of goods on board load of fish, & coming round I am assured they will raise the load so that we shall get through. I am in treaty with a negro steamer for 200 mules per ton, think there is no doubt but I shall get them. Have in mind Mrs. Hoadersons up a little, she don't understand very well, he says she is doing as she can for the ship & thinks we will make a fair freight of a long fast. I am rather doubtful if I think all that will save us will be the passengers. I write you & Beth the same day that I write the black, you write me back & you will all know very well I should think he would have a cool time of it but I hope she will have a good time. I shall write again in a few days & let you know all that is going on.

Yours Respectfully, J.C. Lowell
LETTER 3: OCTOBER 16, 1850

LEARNING TO READ SCRIPT

Has it become any easier to read Captain Lowell’s handwriting?

Try to transcribe the first sentence in the letter.

Baltimore Oct 16th 1850

Messrs. Clark & Sewall

Gentlemen

I received your favour of the 14th was pleased to hear that my proceeding are satisfactory to you. I have taken on on board 65 tons of iron pipe since I wrote you last. 4 a few boxes of goods on board. I hope you will arrive the boat so that we shall get the pipe I am now in treaty with a negro trader for. 20 minutes I think there is no doubt but I shall get them. I am hearing the Territory give up a little. She dot send a flag well he says he is doing all he can for the ship. I think we will make a fair freight of a very fair.
LETTER 3: OCTOBER 16, 1850 | TRANSCRIPTION

INTERPRETING TEXT

Baltimore Oct[ober] 16th 1850

Mess[ers] Clark & Sewall
Gentlemen

I have received your favour of the 14th & was pleased to hear that my proceedings were satisfactory to you. I have taken up on board 65 tons of iron pipe since I wrote you last & a few boxes of goods. A boat load of pipe sunk Coming round I am in hopes they will raise the boat so that we shall get the pipe.¹ I am in treaty with a negro trader for 20 man negroes. I think there is no doubt but I shall get them. I have been stirring Mr. Henderson² up a little. He don’t stand it very well. He says he is doing all he Can for the Ship. He thinks we will make a fair freight. For my part I am rather doubtful. I think all that will save us will be the passengers.² I wrote you to Bath the same day that I wrote Mr. Clark. You write Mr. Clark is married & gone to the Lakes. I should think he would have a Cool time of it but I hope he will have good time.³ I shall write again in a few days & let you know all that is going on.

Yours Respectfully

J C Lowell

NOTES

¹ A boat holding iron pipe for transport sank. Lowell is eager to transport the pipe as cargo on his ship.

² Likely a hired sales agent in New Orleans, the middleman between the shippers (Clark & Sewall Co.) and the distributors (plantation owners).

³ It was common for cargo ships to transport paying passengers.

⁴ Lowell expects Clark’s honeymoon in the Lake Region of Maine to be cold.

BE A DETECTIVE | MAKING INFERENCES

The existence of historical records depends on the chance of their survival. The response from Clark & Sewall Co. has been water damaged beyond legibility, but based on Lowell’s letters we can infer how they responded.

1. Considering the opening line to this letter, what has the company decided to do about transporting enslaved people? Why do you think they decided this?

2. The dates of a letter can be significant. How many days have passed between Letter 2 and Letter 3? Does it seem like Clark & Sewall Co. put a lot of consideration into transporting enslaved people or was it a quick decision?

PAUSE | REFLECT

1. Describe your emotions so far?
2. How do you feel about the way Capt. Lowell writes about enslaved people?
3. Does it surprise you to learn that Maine captains and shipowners participated in the slave trade? Why or why not?
ETHICS: THEN & NOW

1. Did it surprise you to learn there were paying passengers on this voyage?

Today it seems strange to travel on a cargo ship, but in the 19th century it was common for people traveling long distances to pay for passage on working merchant ships. These passengers likely would have been aware of the enslaved people stowed as cargo on the John C. Calhoun.

DISCUSS

2. If you were in a similar situation as a passenger, how would you feel? What would you do?

3. Why might the passengers have done nothing?

4. Does their inaction make them implicit in supporting slavery?

RESEARCH

5. What are some political or social reasons that prevented passengers from speaking out against slavery?

(Left) Illustration from The Graphic, March 12, 1870
(Right) Illustration from A History of the Arnistad Captives, 1840
PAUSE | REFLECT

1. How did it feel to learn that industries and communities in Maine profited off slavery in the 19th century?

A wide range of emotional reactions are normal, but it is important to understand why we feel the way that we do. Investigating our emotions helps us understand how history personally impacts our everyday lives and interactions.

Frustrated? —— At whom? At what time period, past or present? For what?
Guilty? —— For what? How can you empower yourself to use this knowledge for positive change?
Angry? —— At whom? For what?
Disbelief? —— What makes this history hard to believe? What other historical perspectives have you learned that make this history difficult to understand or believe?
Relieved? —— What about this history helps your understanding of the past or the present?

Bias is when we favor or prefer one thing or idea over another. Biases can be rooted in well-informed research or ignorant assumptions. It is important to be aware that your opinions and perspectives on history can be influenced by your personal bias.

2. Can you identify any possible biases at work in your emotions?

3. Debate: Quick and simple stories about the past make it easier to teach and learn history, but often leave out many perspectives and important events that would otherwise change how we understand the past. Complicated and detailed histories may be more accurate, but take longer to learn and understand, which may lessen the number of people willing to take the time to learn about the past.

Make a pros and cons list for each approach. Which approach do you feel is most effective at helping us reach understanding and healing? Not everyone will agree with your answer. Try to consider the question from another person’s point of view.

4. Can you draw any parallels between Captain Lowell’s letters and financial decisions that companies may make today, ones that provide economic gain to some but bring physical or emotional harm to others? Is this okay? How can you communicate your answer to these companies?

5. Almost 15 years after Captain Lowell’s voyage from Baltimore to New Orleans, the end of the Civil War marked the abolition of slavery across the United States. In many ways, however, the nation has yet to achieve its ideals of justice, equality, and opportunity today. What are some connections to current events that demonstrate ongoing struggles to achieve justice, equality, and opportunity for all humans?
WRITE | CREATE: SHAPING HISTORY TODAY

Maine's role in supporting the American slave economy is not an easy history to accept, but it is an important one. This research is not political, it is historical and based on evidence. The more we know about the past, the better equipped we are to understand our present and to think about our future.

Captain Lowell's letters are housed in Maine Maritime Museum's archives as part of a very large collection of letters, documents, and journals. Sometimes finding important evidence is like finding a needle in a haystack. This is the job of historians who can spend months or even years combing through archival materials to learn new stories.

*History is not static. New discoveries continue to evolve our understanding of the past.*

Help shape our understanding of the past/present.

Start by researching your family, a special place, or the town you live in. Visit libraries, historical societies, or simply start a conversation with an older adult in your life.

Share what you learn! Historians 100 years from now could be using your work to learn about us today!

- Submit an essay to your local newspaper
- Publish a “zine” (in print or online) with photographs, family stories, or your own memories about a place
- Contribute to your school yearbook

These platforms are usually archived in libraries for future reference!

Want to learn more about Maine, American slavery, and its lasting impact?

Check out these online resources:

- Maine Maritime Museum's Internet Archives
- SlaveVoyages.org
- ArcGIS Online
- Opportunity Atlas
- Social Explorer
- Atlantic Black Box
- NewspaperArchive.com
- Library of Congress Digital Collections
APPENDIX

LOCATIONS REFERENCED IN LOWELL LETTERS
wed you fin-
yng proc-
on on bo-
a few bo-
round. I a-
we shall go-
d to 20.
'll get th-
the. He do-
s he can fi-
ght for my
will save
the same a-
sh is man-
uld have
a good th-
now all