Teacher Edition

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Students use context clues to comprehend challenging text, interpret a primary source, and appreciate the complexity of historical documents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Archive: Collection of historical documents, photographs, records, film, or audio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: goods 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 18th 1850

Messrs. Clark & Savall,

Gentlemen,

I have found no
business for the S.C. until now, yet I see but little
prospect for the present, the most of the ships land
on for Liverpool & there are filled up & I hope she
they leave then will be something done in the way of
most of the ships are taking up Easewide 2 650 per pk
83 per tare for better. I suppose the S.C. would make
about 3500 at the rates in N. York, but knowing you
in your way of business can I have declined laying
ship on I have been hunting for a year ever since
I arrived, but was can not get offered was 7/6 per 1000
hogs that I refused, I have been expecting to hear
from you everyday 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 load
there I, Capt. Cushing read me one that he had
not to take his next. I do not believe freight will
be on the high 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?

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.

THE ALPHABET.

Aa A a I i n Nn
Bb B b O o Oo
Cc C c P p Pp
Dd D d Q q Qq
Ee E e R r Rr
Ff F f S s Ss
Gg G g T t Tt
Hh H h U u Uu
Ii I i V v Vv
Jj J j W w Ww
Kk K k X x Xx
Ll L l Y y Yy
Mm M m Z z Zz
TEACHING TIPS

Simple Context:

Capt. Lowell is having trouble finding enough cargo to fill his ship to make a profitable journey. He needs to report to the shipowners, Clark & Sewall, how and why he is making the decisions he is to refuse certain prices.

Clark & Sewall mostly engaged in transatlantic trade, meaning transporting cargoes across the Atlantic to Europe or Africa and back. We see in the letter that Lowell is refusing coastal routes and their lower price rates in hopes of finding more profitable cargoes and destinations.

Outside Research:

John C. Calhoun:
(1782-1850) born in SC, served as the 7th US Vice President (1825-1832), strong supporter of States’ Rights and pro-slavery.

We do not know the circumstances of why Clark & Sewall named a ship after Calhoun. But C&S depended on slave-produced goods to support their shipping business.

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 \(^2\) @ 65c per pick $2 per bale for Cotton. I suppose the J.C.C.\(^3\) 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\(^4\) ever since I arrived & all I could get offered was 5/16 for 1000 bales that I refused. I have been expecting to letter 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 B).

\(^2\) **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 eighths 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.
My dear Uncle.

I have often wished to write to you, but I have been too busy.

I am now in New York, and wish to sell my goods.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Yours truly,

[Signature]
Answers:
1. Baltimore, MD
2. I arrived here last Wednesday. Found some freight on board the JC Calhoun.

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 two sentences of the letter. **Hint!** Handwritten documents don’t always use proper grammar or spelling.

   _____ arrived _________________. Found ________ on board ______ JC _______________.
**Answers:**

**Be a Detective:**

1. iron pipe, casks of coal, 80 enslaved people*

*the letter uses the term ‘negroes’, referring specifically to enslaved people*

2. We are unsure of the exact reasons why Lowell did not want C&S not to say anything about the transport of enslaved people. While the North was not as anti-slavery as history may lead us to believe, there may have been possible social/political/economic impacts to their business reputations in Maine if it was known that their fleet transported enslaved people.

**Pause | Reflect:**

**See Teacher Appendix**

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**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.

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**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 p[er] 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 p[er] 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 [&] 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

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**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 esteemed Gentlemen,

I received your favour of the 14th and was pleased to hear that my proceedings were satisfactory to you. I have taken or on board 65 tons of corn flour since I wrote you last, and a few boxes of goods on board load of fish bank coming around. I am informed they will raise the boat so that we shall get the fish. I am in treaty with a negro to do the 20 men in going thence. There is no doubt but I shall get them. I have already sent Mrs. Reed away up a little. She don't stand it very well, but he says he is doing all he can for the ship. I think we will make a fair freight of a cargo yet. I am not a doubtful. I think all that will serve us will be the passengers. I write you to both the same day that I write the blacks. You write me back is married and gone to the lakes. I should think he would have a cool time of it but I hope he will have a good time. I shall write again in a few days and let you know all that is going on.

Yours Respectfully, J.C. Lowell
Answer:
I have received your favor of the 14th & was pleased to hear that my proceedings were satisfactory to you.

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.
**Answers:**

**Be a Detective:**

1. We can infer that Clark and Sewall gave their approval to transport enslaved people. The decision was an economic one that ensured the highest profit.

2. Only 5 days have passed since the last letter. It seems Clark & Sewall quickly approved of Lowell's decisions.

**Pause | Reflect**

1. A wide range of emotional responses is normal. Ask students to identify their emotions with specificity. Take some time to compare and contrast moral and historical differences between the 19th and 21st centuries as a way to process these emotions.

2. It is important to remember that Lowell writes of enslaved people as property, not humans.

3. Prompts: Why are Maine's connections to slavery not more well known today? How has Maine's history been presented differently?

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**LETTER 3: OCTOBER 16, 1850 | TRANSCRIPTION**

**INTERPRETING TEXT**

**Baltimore October 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.³ 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.⁴ I shall write again in a few days & let you know all that is going on.  
Yours Respectfully  
J C Lowell

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**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.

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**BE A DETECTIVE | MAKING INFERENCES**

The existence of historical records depends on the chance of 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?

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**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 Arnisdad Captives, 1840*
Teaching Tip

These prompts are intended to give students space to process challenging history and to brainstorm its relevance to current events and their own lives. They can be used as essay/writing prompts, small group/class discussions.

Choose the prompts that best fit your students’ emotions and your curriculum goals.

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
TEACHER APPENDIX

Page 10 - Letter 2: Pause | Reflect

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

Supporting Student Responses with Historical Context

"I thought slave ships only carried slaves"

When the transatlantic slave trade was legal prior to 1807, ships would often carry only captured Africans from Africa to the Caribbean and the US. This did continue even after it became illegal. After 1807, the US domestic slave trade continued to be legal until the end of the Civil War. Because domestic voyages were shorter and often used smaller ships, it was more common for vessels to carry different types of cargo to ensure a profitable journey. Thus the transport of enslaved people among other cargoes on American (specifically New England) ships along the Eastern coastline is much more common than we may realize.

"I thought the slave trade was banned in 1807"

The international slave trade was banned in 1807, meaning it was illegal to transport enslaved or recently captured people intended for sale across international boundaries. This effectively ended slavery in Britain and other European nations. The US domestic slave trade, or the sale and transport of enslaved people that are already in (or born in) the US remained legal until Emancipation in 1863. Lax enforcement of the international ban on the transatlantic slave trade meant that it continued well after 1807.

"The language Lowell uses is offensive"

The term "negro" was ubiquitous in the 19th century. It referred to any Black individual, free or enslaved. Today we associate the term with slavery and derogatory/racist views towards Black people. For a concise cultural history of the term see: https://aaregistry.org/story/negro-the-word-a-history/

"Why is Lowell trying to hide the fact that he is transporting enslaved people?"

This is a great question and we lack an explicit answer. We can infer that Lowell and Clark & Sewall were aware of the moral implications of such action in New England and didn’t want it to be well known. It is appropriate to be angry at these past actions. A great way to channel this emotion is to think about how we can use this information about the past to raise awareness and engage in respectful dialogue, with the end goal of improving the present and future.
TEACHER APPENDIX

Page 10 - Letter 2: Pause | Reflect

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?

Supporting Student Responses with Historical Context

The Compromise of 1820

Also known as the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1820 was the legislation that allowed Maine to enter the Union as a state. Maine would enter as a “free state,” meaning slavery was illegal within the state’s borders, and Missouri would enter the Union as a “slave state,” meaning the owning and selling of enslaved people was legal. This “compromise” ensured a balance of power within the US legislative system between “free” and “slave” states. The state of Maine has often championed its legacy as a “free” state, but as the Lowell letters demonstrate, economic ties to the Southern slave-economy meant that Maine was dependent on slave labor to support industries such as shipping and manufacturing. An interesting connection, John Calhoun, the namesake of Lowell’s ship, was a major proponent and signer of the Compromise of 1820.