

# USS Constellation: Battling for Freedom

• A Black History Month Special Presentation •

**Premiere: February 2007** check your local listings

**classroom: April 23-24 • July 4-5**



The long nightmare of the trans-Atlantic slave trade had multiple dimensions and phases, from the first forced arrivals of Africans in the New World in the 17th century through the outbreak of civil war and abolition of slavery. Even after the international slave trade became illegal in the United States in 1808, slave traders violated the law in order to bring highly profitable human cargo across the ocean for sale. The paths of these human beings into slavery comprise a collection of countless interlocking and horrific stories. *USS Constellation: Battling for Freedom* tells one of them – the dramatic and little-known tale of a flagship U.S. Navy vessel's dogged pursuit of the *Cora*, an illegal carrier attempting to transport over 700 slaves to the United States.

This gripping two-hour documentary opens in 1859, with the United States bitterly divided over the issue of slavery. A small fleet of U.S. naval ships known as the African Squadron had been charged with the task of policing illegal slave ships off the coast of Africa. In a fast-paced chase at sea, the drama of their efforts to halt the slave ship *Cora* is recounted in rich detail. First-person stories from the journals and letters of sailors aboard the *Cora* paint a vivid portrait of the chase.

Interwoven throughout the story of this pursuit is the plight of a young African hunter captured from his village and forced into slavery. From the vantage point of this village in the Congo interior, students will gain deep insights into the harrowing methods through which Africans were captured, enslaved, and transported abroad as human cargo. This excellent program provides a human perspective on the complex realities of the slave trade, from its origins in Africa to its ramifications overseas.

## curriculum links

This program would be useful for History, Social Studies, and Geography courses and is appropriate for middle school and high school students. It fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education: (1) Conflict and Cooperation; and (2) Patterns of Social and Political Interaction.

## vocabulary

Using the dictionary at [www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com), an Internet resource such as [www.history.com](http://www.history.com), or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

abolitionists	scions
frigate	the trans-Atlantic slave trade
the Middle Passage	sloop
piracy	squadron
profligate	suppress
rogue	volatile

## discussion questions

1. What was the mission of the African Squadron? What were the incentives to fulfill their goals?
2. When was the international slave trade abolished by the United States? What was the suggested punishment for slave smuggling after it was made illegal?
3. Why do you think some Africans participated in the slave trade? Did this surprise you?
4. What percentage of the total number of slaves taken from Africa were brought to North America? In total, approximately how many people were taken from Africa to the New World as slaves?



## discussion questions (cont.)

5. Did all of the sailors aboard the *USS Constellation* share the same attitudes and viewpoints on slavery? What were some of their differences? What united them?
6. What were some of the ways illegal slave ships avoided capture by the African Squadron? What were some of the signs the *USS Constellation* looked for when trying to identify a slave ship?
7. One historian in this program refers to slavery as America's "original sin." What do you think he means by this? Do you agree or disagree with this assessment of the role of slavery in U.S. history?
8. What are some of the ways primary sources are used in this documentary? What do they reveal about the story of the *USS Constellation* that other sources might not?
9. What do you think should have been the punishment for those found guilty of smuggling slaves illegally?
10. Do you think there should be any official compensation, or "reparations," given to African Americans to make amends for the history of slavery? Discuss.
11. What new facts or insights about slavery did you learn from watching this documentary?

## extended activities

1. This documentary dramatizes various aspects of the trans-Atlantic or "triangular" slave trade. Break up into groups of four or five and research this concept and how it operated. Then, create a posterboard, PowerPoint, or other illustrated presentation depicting this process. These presentations can include maps or other diagrams that demonstrate the multiple phases and stages involved in this trade. Students should accompany these presentations with a one-page essay describing the process in written form. One spokesperson from each group can present the written essays and describe the information their presentations depict to the larger class or group.
2. Imagine you were on board either the *Cora* or the *USS Constellation*. Then, choose either a historical person depicted in this documentary or design a fictional character based on the descriptions you heard and saw while watching this program. Write a letter or journal entry from the perspective of your chosen person, describing your experiences during the chase or from some aspect of the trans-Atlantic journey. Alternately, students can write newspaper accounts of this story, and may even want to illustrate their stories as if they were on the front page of a major newspaper or magazine.

## websites&books

### websites

An excellent site with primary sources on slavery and the slave trade: [www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/slavery/index.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/slavery/index.cfm)

A wonderful exhibit from the New-York Historical Society: [www.slaveryinnewyork.org](http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org)

An informative site on the history of the *USS Constellation*: [www.usconstellation.org](http://www.usconstellation.org)

### books

Berlin, Ira. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2000).

Horton, James Oliver and Lois E. *Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America: Volume 2: African Roots Through the Civil War* (Rutgers University Press, 2002).

White, Deborah Gray. *Let My People Go: African Americans 1804-1860 (The Young Oxford History of African Americans, V. 4)* (Oxford, 1996).