

TEACHER TOOL 2: TEACHING NOTES FOR TEACHING THE FIVE DEFINING INSTITUTIONS

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Slavery, which its defenders have called America's "peculiar institution," was intricately interwoven into the fabric of the U.S. Constitution from the founding of the nation. Human bondage, the right to own another person as one would own a horse or a table, was one of the five defining institutions of the United States from its colonial beginnings to the abolition of slavery in 1865. Along with chattel slavery, four other institutions defined who we are as Americans:

1. In the political sphere — Representative Democracy
2. In the religious sphere — Protestant Christianity
3. In the economic sphere — Capitalism
4. In the social sphere — Marriage and the Family

These four institutions have been crucial to the making of America in the political, religious, economic, and social spheres of its citizens' experience.

Why was chattel slavery the fifth key institution in the history of the United States?

Because slavery was powerful enough to threaten and indeed pervert our nation's dedication to and practice of each of the other four defining institutions in U.S. history.

1. Religious sphere: In the realm of religion, slavery distorted Protestant Christianity by challenging the Reformation's fundamental tenet, namely, the priesthood of all believers and the equality of every soul before God. To many slaveholders, the chattel principle meant that, as property, a slave could have no soul. At best, slavery posited the spiritual inferiority of dark-skinned people who, presumably, needed light-skinned people to minister to and teach them how to believe and behave as Christians.

2. Political Sphere: Representative Democracy could not and did not exist in fully half the United States before 1865. The U.S. Constitution, through its infamous three-fifths clause, guaranteed the slave states that every slave, though denied the right to vote, would count as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of legislative apportionment in the Congress. Thus, the power of the South in the Congress grew even as democracy weakened. The backwash of slavery—segregation and racial discrimination—continued to subvert democracy in the United States for most of the 20th Century.

3. Economic Sphere: Slavery undermined the institution of Capitalism by subverting the idea of a free market economy in half the United States until 1865. Since so much of the labor of the pre-Civil War South was performed by enslaved workers, the product of their labor came to depend on their perpetual exploitation, not on a natural flow of supply and demand governed by voluntary, compensated, and contractual participation in markets. Governmental protection of the institution of slavery enabled the slaveholding minority in the South to concentrate its wealth in property, both real and human, and to resist joining the rest of the United States in modernizing its economy beyond agriculture.

4. Social Sphere: Slavery made a mockery of marriage, not to mention the family, for African Americans because it simply forbade the enslaved the right to a legally sanctioned marriage. The breaking up of marriages and families through sale is reported in heartbreaking detail in a large majority of slave narratives. Many also point out the blighting effects of slavery on the marriages of the slaveholders due to the sexual abuse of enslaved women by male slaveholders who believed that female slaves' bodies belonged to the master.

The freedoms that white Americans took for granted as their national birthright—freedom of worship, to vote, to contract one's labor, and to marry as one chooses—were, for enslaved black Americans, unavailable or severely constricted before 1865.

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