

GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSING SLAVERY AT ASHLAND



DEFINE THE TERM “CHATTEL SLAVERY”

It is vital for students to understand the institution of slavery as practiced in the United States at a base level. Chattel slavery means that human beings were treated as personal property and were bought and sold as such.



DO NOT IMPLY THAT ENSLAVEMENT OR ENSLAVING WAS INEVITABLE

Avoid phrases like “Henry Clay was just a man of his time.” We can provide context for this history without excusing behavior. Instead, emphasize individual responsibility, choice, and decision-making instead of inevitably.

ADD NUANCE. AVOID OVER-SIMPLICITY.

A question that is frequently asked is “Was Henry Clay a kind master?” This is a complex question because it implies that there exists a man who can be kind to the human beings whom he enslaves. This question is phrased as a “yes” or “no,” but it cannot be answered in that way. Your answer should include the fact that despite comforts and resources provided, the enslaver denies the humanity of those enslaved. Enslaved people do not legally own their own bodies.

USE PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE

Try to use the term “enslaved people” or “enslaved human beings” instead of “slaves.” Slavery was a condition in which these human beings lived. That condition does not define who they are.

- *USE: enslaved human beings, enslaved people, enslaved by Henry Clay*
- *AVOID: slaves, servants We don't want to use language that softens the blow of this difficult history, either. Servants usually applies to paid laborers.*



BALANCE SOURCE MATERIAL

If we only think about slavery from the point of view of those who enslaved others or supported the institution of slavery, we may come away with the idea that slavery was a “necessary evil” or that it was unavoidable. We may also come away with the idea that the fiscal impact of the abolition on slave societies was more important than the freedom that would have been gained.

Recognize whose perspective informs your understanding of this history.



DO NOT COMPARE PAIN

Avoid comments like “Enslaved people at Ashland were better off than those on other plantations.” Pain, suffering, and dehumanization, cannot be compared. No two experiences are the same. Every experience differs. Comparative analysis is a useful tool in other aspects of historical study, but comparisons of pain do not further historical understanding.

DO NOT ROMANTICIZE THIS HISTORY

Often, enslavers are painted in a caring, paternal light. You may have heard that a master was “like a father” to the people he enslaved. This is a way of romanticizing history that assuages the guilt that we may have about our past. It does not further our understanding of this complicated relationship. It also undermines the tragic nature of slavery, insinuating that anyone was “better off” being enslaved.



CONTEXTUALIZE THIS HISTORY

Slavery at Ashland or in Kentucky did not happen in a vacuum. Individuals were part of a national narrative. When we add our story to this larger narrative, we understand cause and effect. For instance, Henry Clay's compromises dealt with the expansion of slavery into western territories. These decisions greatly impacted real human beings.



HUMANIZE THE NUMBERS AND STATISTICS

Historic sites like Ashland, have a complicating factor that often hinders the telling of a complete story - limited primary sources about enslaved people. It is important to express that the people he enslaved were human beings with desires, dreams, feelings, and souls.

CREATE A SAFE AND METHODOLOGICALLY-SOUND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

When dealing with difficult historical issues like slavery, do not use simulations. A simulation that casts one student as a master and another as an enslaved person is not an effective way to learn about the relationship between the two. None of our students can imagine what it would be like to own a human or be owned by a human. Our job is to help them understand the institution of slavery and its effects. We do this through the telling of individual stories. Remember that all students will have entrance narratives that impact how they initially receive this information. It is important to keep that in mind.