

Changemakers: Assumptions and Myths About the Past

This inquiry is adapted from material created by Jennifer Suchland, Ph.D., The Ohio State University.

Compelling Question	
What do we learn when we critique assumptions about history?	
State Standard(s)	Ohio/ Grade 8/ History Content Statements 1, 4, 20, 21 Kentucky/ 8.C.RR.1, 8.H.CH.1, 8.H.CH.2, 8.H.CO.3
C3 Framework Indicator(s)	D2.His.6.6-8, D4.1.6-8, D4.3.6-8
Learning Goals	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 48%;"> <p>Students will understand</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The impact of the Fugitive Slave Acts and Ohio’s Black Laws on freedom seekers, Black freemen, and abolitionism. ■ How the Fugitive Slave Acts and Ohio’s Black Codes reflected societal norms in antebellum U.S. ■ The societal effects of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in antebellum U.S. ■ The critiques of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. ■ The significance of William Still’s The Underground Railroad. ■ The role of northern newspapers on institutional slavery. ■ The significance of Black run newspapers in antebellum society. ■ The varying beliefs and methods in the abolition movement. </div> <div style="width: 48%;"> <p>Students will be able to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Critique common assumptions about history. ■ Apply critical literacy skills when examining primary and secondary sources. ■ Generate questions that support an inquiry. ■ Construct claims based upon evidence. </div> </div>

Supporting Question	Supporting Question	Supporting Question	Supporting Question
What can we learn from laws?	What can we learn from books?	What can we learn from newspapers?	What can we learn from the actions of abolitionists?



Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Text: Fugitive Slave Clause: U.S. Constitution (Appendix A) ■ Primary Source: Fugitive Slave Act (1850) (Appendix B) ■ Video: (2:19). American Experience. (2013, Jan. 8). <i>Fugitive Slave Act</i>. PBS. pbs.org/video/american-experience-fugitive-slave-act ■ Primary Source: Ohio Black Laws (1804) (Appendix C) ■ Text: Ohio Black Laws of 1804 (Appendix C) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Text: Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe (Appendix D) ■ Video: (5:17) American Experience (2022). <i>Harriet Beecher Stowe: Uncle Tom’s Cabin The Abolitionists</i>. PBS Learning Market ket.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/amex25.socst.ush.hbstowe/harriet-beecher-stowe-uncle-toms-cabin ■ Video: (54:17). PBS: <i>Underground Railroad: William Still Story</i>. pbs.org/video/wned-tv-history-underground-railroad-william-still-story (Appendix E) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Video: (25:00). History, Philosophy and Newspaper Library. <i>American Newspapers, 1800-1860: An Introduction</i>. University of Illinois. library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/antebellum-newspapers-introduction (Appendix F) ■ Primary Sources: Library of Congress (n.d.). <i>Collection Frederick Douglass Newspapers, 1847 to 1874</i>. loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-newspapers/about-this-collection (Appendix F) ■ Primary Sources and text: Lewis, D. (2016, May 25). An archive of fugitive slave ads sheds new light on lost histories. <i>Smithsonian Magazine</i> smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/archive-fugitive-slave-ads-could-shed-new-light-lost-histories-180959194 (Appendix G) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Timeline: The U.S. Abolitionist Movement (Appendix I) ■ Text: Abolitionist Strategies (Appendix J) ■ Primary Source: “The Branded Hand” Anti-Slavery Pamphlet ds-omeka.haverford.edu/crossing-borders/exhibits/show/crossing-borders--from-slavery/abolition-and-the-white-savior ■ Website: NPR History Dept. (2015, Feb. 26). <i>How Black Abolitionists Changed A Nation</i>. NPR. statista.com/statistics/1010169/black-and-slave-population-us-1790-1880 ■ Chart: Population of the United States in 1860, by race and gender. O’Neil, A. (2021, March 19). <i>Population of the United States in 1860, by race and gender</i>. Statista. statista.com/statistics/1010196/population-us-1860-race-and-gender
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fugitive Slave Clause: U.S. Constitution Reading Guide (Appendix A) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Discussion and list addressing the societal effects and critiques of... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sourcing and Analyzing Newspapers (1800-1860) Guide (Appendix F) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The U.S. Abolitionist Movement Guide (Appendix I) ■ Abolitionists Strategies Guide (Appendix J)

Formative Performance Task (cont.)	Formative Performance Task (cont.)	Formative Performance Task (cont.)	Formative Performance Task (cont.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fugitive Slave Act 1850 Reading Guide (Appendix B) ■ Ohio's Black Laws of 1804 Reading Guide (Appendix C) ■ Investigation of Inquiry Assumptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ ...<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i> ■ Underground Railroad: The William Still Story Reading Guide (Appendix E) ■ Investigation of Inquiry Assumptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ "Runaway" Advertisements Guide (Appendix G) ■ How Early U.S. Newspapers Brokered Slavery Guide (Appendix H) ■ Investigation of Inquiry Assumptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Discussion about the varying beliefs and methods in the abolition movement ■ Investigation of Inquiry Assumptions

Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT: Students will create a chart addressing each of the inquiry assumptions. Students will identify each assumption as myth or fact and provide supporting evidence for their claims. Additionally, students will address the compelling question by formulating responses to the questions: How do myths and assumptions become part of history? What harm can historical myths and assumptions cause?
	EXTENSION: To extend the learning, students could investigate one of the inquiry assumptions, or a question they generated during the inquiry, to a greater degree.

Taking Informed Action	UNDERSTAND: Students will discuss how and why historical myths and assumptions gain acceptance.
	ASSESS: Students will discuss the dangers of historical myths and assumptions and the need for critical literacy skills.
	ACT: Students should create a PSA flier or advertisement alerting the public to the dangers of historical myths and assumptions and how to identify them.

Inquiry Description

The Changemakers series of inquiries provide teachers multiple opportunities to incorporate the history of the Underground Railroad into their curriculum across the academic year. Additionally, there are opportunities for cross-disciplinary study and collaboration. While the inquiries are aligned to eighth grade Ohio and Kentucky standards, we hope teachers across grade levels and disciplines utilize these materials. Throughout this series, lessons and activities will connect the Underground Railroad and the abolitionist movement to today through personal and community stories. Spanning various subjects, the overarching theme focuses on the impact changemakers have during their lifetime, the evidence they leave behind, and their ongoing impact today. Lessons and activities are unique and can build upon each other.

The theme is "Changemakers in the Past, Present & Future." The series begins with an inquiry about historical myths and assumptions emphasizing historical and critical thinking. The second and third inquiries require students to apply these skills while developing questions and completing research regarding two historical narratives: John

Parker and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. The next two series inquiries provide the opportunity to consider, reflect upon, and engage the question of how we are connected to the past. The fourth inquiry has students consider the legacies and evidence we leave for future generations, including the powers that limit and restrict such evidence. The fifth inquiry engages students in changemaking to identify and address a problem of today to create a better tomorrow.

In inquiry 1 of 5, “Assumptions and Myths About the Past,” students engage in historical investigation by critiquing common assumptions about abolition and the Underground Railroad. Using primary and secondary sources, students will hone their historical thinking skills by investigating how and why assumptions and myths about the past become accepted as fact. They will question the intent behind assumptions and myths to better understand our past and the present.

Students will engage in social justice work by challenging common narratives of U.S. history. In their investigation of sources, students will seek multiple perspectives with emphasis on those traditionally overlooked or purposefully disregarded, specifically Black abolitionists. Students will also encourage the public to engage in critical literacy to identify historical myths.

This inquiry embodies the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center principles of courage, cooperation, and perseverance by illustrating how each was necessary for the success of the Underground Railroad. We encourage teachers and students to visit our museum and continue this exploration through our exhibits and focus on narratives. The Freedom Center uses education to dispel myths and promote historical truths, so a visit would be an excellent addition to the “Changemakers in the Past, Present & Future” series of inquiries.

Required Prior Knowledge

Before engaging in this inquiry, students should be able to identify primary and secondary sources. It would also be beneficial for students to have experience sourcing and analyzing primary and secondary sources. If needed, the lesson plan “Teaching Primary and Secondary Sources” provided by The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, 2011 can be found at:

georgewbushlibrary.gov/s3fs-public/2021-09/SecondaryLP_PrimarySecondarySources_Web.pdf

Staging The Compelling Question

Provide students with the following definitions of *myth*: 1.) a story of supposedly historical events that explains part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon. 2.) a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone, especially one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society. 3.) an unfounded or false notion. Students should identify examples that illustrate each definition. Guide students to identify examples from U.S. history. During discussion, ask: How do myths get started and what is their appeal? Why would you exaggerate or romanticize the past? Are myths good or bad? You may choose to share this anecdote about President Regan to facilitate discussion:

In 1983, Reagan found himself in hot water after a New York Daily News writer looked into an account of heroism Reagan related during a Congressional Medal of Honor ceremony and discovered that there was no evidence the event ever occurred. In the story, a B-17 bomber came under fire in the course of a European bombing raid in World War II. With the plane rapidly losing altitude, the B-17 commander ordered his soldiers to evacuate the bomber. When all but one young soldier had left the bomber, the commander gripped the remaining soldier's hand and said, “Never mind, son, we'll ride it down together.”

The writer examined all 434 Medal of Honor cases and could not find any citation of the event Reagan described. It was discovered that the story bore similarities to a scene from the World War II-era film “A Wing and a Prayer.” Others claimed to have read the story in the Reader's Digest. White House Press Secretary had his own response.

“If you tell the same story five times, it's true,” he said.

Sources:

- salon.com/2015/02/07/ronald_reagans_wartime_lies_the_president_had_quite_a_brian_williams_problem
- washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2000/10/12/reagans-whoppers/7e548625-b462-4b75-852d-b49a2f439393

Next, engage students in KWL, identifying what they know think they know, and want to know about the abolition movement and the Underground Railroad. Inform students that they will be investigating common assumptions and determine if they are myths:

- White abolitionists ran the Underground Railroad
- Abolitionists believed in emancipation and equality
- Freedom-seekers who made it to the North found freedom
- Slavery was a Southern issue
- The Underground Railroad was a large-scale system that helped hundreds of thousands of people to escape

Promote inquiry by adding items from the KWL to the list of assumptions to be investigated. Keep the KWL posted throughout the inquiry and add to the “what we learned” column when appropriate.

Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question – What can we learn from laws? - has students examine the Fugitive Slave Clause of the U.S. Constitution, The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and Ohio’s Black Laws 1804. The purpose of this investigation is to discern what the laws tell us about freedom seekers, Black freemen, and Abolitionism, in order to critically examine the inquiry assumptions.

By examining this question,

- **Students will understand** the impact of the Fugitive Slave Acts and Ohio’s Black Codes on freedom seekers, Black freemen, and Abolitionism.
- **Students will understand** how the Fugitive Slave Acts and Ohio’s Black Codes reflected societal norms in antebellum U.S.
- **Students will be able to** critique common assumptions about history.
- **Students will be able to** apply critical literacy skills when examining primary and secondary sources.
- **Students will be able to** generate questions that support an inquiry.

As students investigate the texts, encourage them to identify evidence that supports or refutes the inquiry assumptions. Additionally, encourage students to continually generate questions to support the investigation. The prompts in the reading guides Appendix, A, Appendix B, and Appendix C include the following: Revisit the inquiry assumptions. What did this investigation expose? What questions do you have?

After reading about Ohio Black Laws, you may choose to share the following information with students:

Before the war, Northern states that prohibited slavery also enacted laws similar to the slave codes and the later Black Codes: Connecticut, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and New York enacted laws to discourage free Blacks from residing in those states. They were denied equal political rights, including the right to vote, the right to attend public schools, and the right to equal treatment under the law. Some of the Northern states, those which had them, repealed such laws around the same time that the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished by constitutional amendment.

Supporting Question 2

The second supporting question – What can we learn from books? - has students examine Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and William Still’s *The Underground Railroad*. The purpose of this investigation is to

discern what these books tell us about freedom seekers, Black freemen, and abolitionism, in order to critically examine the inquiry assumptions.

By examining this question,

- **Students will understand** the societal effects of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in antebellum U.S.
- **Students will understand** the critiques of Uncle Tom's Cabin.
- **Students will understand** the significance of William Still's *The Underground Railroad*.
- **Students will be able to** critique common assumptions about history.
- **Students will be able to** apply critical literacy skills when examining primary and secondary sources.
- **Students will be able to** generate questions that support an inquiry.

As students investigate the texts, encourage them to identify evidence that supports or refutes the inquiry assumptions. Additionally, encourage students to continually generate questions to support the investigation. Ask the following: What did this investigation expose? What questions do you have?

White Southerners Said "Uncle Tom's Cabin" Was Fake News by Kat Eschner (2017, March 20) at [smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/white-southerners-said-uncle-toms-cabin-was-fake-news-180962518](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/white-southerners-said-uncle-toms-cabin-was-fake-news-180962518) may be a useful teacher resource when preparing for discussing regarding *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

You may guide discussion to Josiah Henson, the inspiration for Uncle Tom. Information about Henson can be found at [nps.gov/people/josiah-henson.htm](https://www.nps.gov/people/josiah-henson.htm).

The following information can be used to guide discussion and student thinking regarding William Still and *The Underground Railroad*.

- A free Black citizen living in the North, William Still aided hundreds of freedom seekers in the Underground Railroad and conducted regular interviews with freedom seekers who made it to Philadelphia, PA.
- By 1872 slave narratives had already circulated as a genre for more than a century. Still's compendium included stories with some of the same writing styles and themes as other slave narratives. However, it also was different because it combined several kinds of writing including correspondence, legal documents, transcribed speeches, among others.
- "By giving us many different voices and personal histories, *The Underground Railroad* offers a more textured and arguably more representative exploration of slavery, its victims, and its opponents than do the narratives of such famous writers as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Booker T. Washington. Most importantly, Still's volume underscores the vitality and creativity of the African American community in the face of terrible historical trauma, and it embodies the collaborative nature of the Underground Railroad itself." (Ian Frederick Finseth, editor of the 2007 edition of *The Underground Railroad* by William Still)
- It was assumed that enslaved women ran away less often than men because they were less likely to leave children behind. This is a misreading of "runaway" advertisements of the era. The Underground Railroad Records demonstrates that Black women ran away often, with and without children, husbands, and other family members. They were creative and steadfast in their fight and flight. (Quincy T. Mills, editor of the 2019 edition of *The Underground Railroad Records*, by William Still)
- By collecting the stories of freedom-seekers, he aided separated family members find each other. Black families were forcefully broken-up when slave masters sold off their kin. In the wake of that separation, it was nearly impossible to be reunited.
- The timing of Still's anthology is important. Appearing years after the end of the Civil War, the publication provided a counter to the emerging narrative of "Southern glory" and the racist narrative suggesting that African Americans were incapable of the responsibilities of freedom. Thus, the stories of the Underground Railroad captured by Still and others speak as much or more to the ongoing struggles for Black freedom after emancipation as they provide evidence of Black resistance to enslavement.

Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question – What can we learn from newspapers? - has students examine Frederick Douglass’s newspapers, fugitive slave ads, and how Northern newspapers brokered slavery. The purpose of this investigation is to discern what newspapers tell us about freedom seekers, Black freemen, and abolitionism, in order to critically examine the inquiry assumptions.

By examining this question,

- **Students will understand** the role of northern newspapers on institutional slavery.
- **Students will understand** the significance of Black run newspapers in antebellum society.
- **Students will be able to** critique common assumptions about history.
- **Students will be able to** apply critical literacy skills when examining primary and secondary sources.
- **Students will be able to** generate questions that support an inquiry.

As students investigate the texts, encourage them to identify evidence that supports or refutes the inquiry assumptions. Additionally, encourage students to continually generate questions to support the investigation. The prompts in the reading guides Appendix, F, Appendix G, and Appendix H include the following: Revisit the inquiry assumptions. What did this investigation expose? What questions do you have?

Additionally, supporting question three provides students with information about sourcing and examining American newspapers between 1800-1860. A 25-minute video, *American Newspapers, 1800-1860: An Introduction*, library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/antebellum-newspapers-introduction, provides quality background information students should know to properly examine newspapers. Appendix F prompts students to record useful tips when watching the video and then apply them when examining Frederick Douglass’s newspapers.

Supporting Question 4

The fourth supporting question – What can we learn from the actions of abolitionists? - has students examine a timeline of the abolitionist movement, texts about abolitionist strategies and the contributions of Black abolitionists, and “The Branded Hand” anti-slavery pamphlet. The purpose of this investigation is to discern what the actions of abolitionists tell us about freedom seekers, Black freemen, and abolitionism, in order to critically examine the inquiry assumptions.

By examining this question,

- **Students will understand** the varying beliefs and methods in the abolition movement.
- **Students will be able to** critique common assumptions about history.
- **Students will be able to** apply critical literacy skills when examining primary and secondary sources.
- **Students will be able to** generate questions that support an inquiry.

As students investigate the texts, encourage them to identify evidence that supports or refutes the inquiry assumptions. Additionally, encourage students to continually generate questions to support the investigation. Revisit the inquiry assumptions. What did this investigation expose? What questions do you have? Additionally, this supporting question permits examination of C3’s D2.His.6.6-8: Analyze how people’s perspectives influence what information is available in the historical sources they created. A discussion about who has predominantly written our history helps explain why Black abolitionists have not been given enough credit.

You may choose to share the following information with students:

White and Black Abolitionists

While united in a common cause, the people involved in the Underground Railroad did not have the same reasons for participating, nor did they experience the same consequences for getting caught.

- What consequences did freedom seekers and their free Black allies face if caught?
- Why did some white Americans participate in the Underground Railroad? What risks did they take?
- What were the different resources and tools available to Black freedom seekers and free Black

communities in the North and white abolitionists?

Free Black Communities and Abolitionism

Cases such as Harriet Tubman’s reveal just how extensive, determined, and resourceful the free black community could be in the antebellum years. Despite the heroic sacrifices made by Tubman and others, the Underground Railroad could only help a fraction of those enslaved. The number of enslaved people who managed to reach freedom was –approximately 50,000 over the period from 1800-1860, although there is no way to ever know the true number.

Whether we speak of Boston, Philadelphia, Washington D.C. or New York, Detroit, Cleveland, or Chicago – indeed wherever African Americans lived – they remained at the forefront of the freedom struggle, exposing the contradictions of American society. In fact, the broader anti-slavery movement relied upon Black speakers like the Crafts, Henry “Box” Brown, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown to authenticate the abolitionist message and combat the white master’s insistence that their property was content and thrived in slavery.

Source: Gates Jr., H. L. & Yacovone, D. (2013). *The African American: Many Rivers to Cross*. SmileyBooks.

These charts are quality sources for examining inquiry assumptions:

- **Chart: Black and slave population of the United States from 1790 to 1880.** O’Neil, A. (2021, March 19). *Black and slave population of the United States from 1790 to 1880*. Statista. [statista.com/statistics/1010169/black-and-slave-population-us-1790-1880](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1010169/black-and-slave-population-us-1790-1880)
- **Chart: Population of the United States in 1860, by race and gender.** O’Neil, A. (2021, March 19). *Population of the United States in 1860, by race and gender*. Statista. [statista.com/statistics/1010196/population-us-1860-race-and-gender](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1010196/population-us-1860-race-and-gender)

Additional teacher resources include:

- Elliot, V. (2020, Dec. 10). *A Great Inheritance: Reflected Shortcomings in Abolition and the Women’s Rights Movement*. National Parks Service. [nps.gov/articles/000/a-great-inheritance-reflected-shortcomings-in-abolition-and-the-women-s-rights-movement.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/a-great-inheritance-reflected-shortcomings-in-abolition-and-the-women-s-rights-movement.htm)
- NPR History Dept. (2015, Feb. 26). *How Black Abolitionists Changed a Nation*. NPR. [npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/02/26/388993874/how-black-abolitionists-changed-a-nation](https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/02/26/388993874/how-black-abolitionists-changed-a-nation)

Throughout the investigation, students may uncover Native American involvement in the Underground Railroad or routes that led South and West. These additional resources provide more information:

- National Parks Services. (n.d.). *Native Americans and the Underground Railroad*. [nps.gov/articles/000/native-americans-and-the-underground-railroad.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/native-americans-and-the-underground-railroad.htm)
- Little, B. (2021, Jan. 29). *The Little-Known Underground Railroad That Ran South to Mexico*. History.com. [history.com/news/underground-railroad-mexico-escaped-slaves](https://www.history.com/news/underground-railroad-mexico-escaped-slaves)

Summative Performance Task

As a performance task, students will compile findings from their ongoing investigation and answer the compelling question - What do we learn when we critique assumptions about history? Throughout the inquiry, students should have been utilizing evidence to critique assumptions about history and generate investigation questions. To summarize their findings, students will create a chart addressing each of the inquiry assumptions. Students will identify each assumption as myth or fact and provide supporting evidence for their claims. To extend the learning, students could investigate one of the inquiry assumptions, or a question they generated during the inquiry, to a greater degree.

Additionally, students will address the compelling question by formulating responses to the questions: How do myths and assumptions become part of history? What harm can historical myths and assumptions cause? Students should use examples from this inquiry as evidence to their claim.

Taking Informed Action

This inquiry provides opportunities to critically examine assumptions about history and discuss how historical myths become accepted over time. Students are encouraged to take informed action by furthering their understanding of this process and sharing this understanding with others. Begin by engaging students in a discussion about how and why historical myths and assumptions gain acceptance. Furthermore, discuss the dangers of historical myths and assumptions and the need for critical literacy skills. This is an opportunity to explore the notion of “fake news” and the influence of social media on facts and truth. Finally, students should create a PSA flier or advertisement alerting the public to the dangers of historical myths and assumptions and how to identify them.

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American Experience (2022). *Harriet Beecher Stowe: Uncle Tom’s Cabin | The Abolitionists*. PBS Learning Market. <https://ket.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/amex25.socst.us.hbstowe/harriet-beecher-stowe-uncle-toms-cabin>

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Elliot, V. (2020, Dec. 10). *A Great Inheritance: Reflected Shortcomings in Abolition and the Women’s Rights Movement*. National Parks Service. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/a-great-inheritance-reflected-shortcomings-in-abolition-and-the-women-s-rights-movement.htm>

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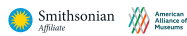
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