

# Presidents and Slaves

## Helping students find the truth

By **BOB PETERSON**

DURING A LESSON about George Washington and the American Revolution, I explained to my 5th graders that Washington owned over 300 people. One student added that Thomas Jefferson also was a slave owner. And then, in part to be funny and in part expressing anger—over vote fraud involving African Americans in the then-recent 2000 election and the U.S. Supreme Court’s subsequent delivery of the presidency to George W. Bush—one of my students shouted, “Bush is a slave owner, too!”

“No, Bush doesn’t own slaves,” I calmly explained. “Slavery was finally ended in this country in 1865.” Short exchanges such as this often pass quickly and we move onto another

topic. But this time one student asked, “Well, which presidents were slave owners?”

She had me stumped. “That’s a good question,” I said. “I don’t know.” Thus began a combined social studies, math, and language arts project in which I learned along with my students, and that culminated in a fascinating exchange between my students and the publishers of their U.S. history textbook. After I admitted that I had no clue exactly which presidents owned slaves, I threw the challenge back to the students. “How can we find out?” I asked.

“Look in a history book,” said one. “Check the internet,” added another. I realized that I had entered one of those “teachable moments” when



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*Chief Priestess Olakunle Oludina pours water on the ground during a ceremony at the start of the Avenging the Ancestors demonstration July 3, 2002, in Philadelphia. Eight descendants of George Washington’s slaves, as well as of other enslaved Africans, demonstrated to expose the history of slavery in the city.*

students show genuine interest in exploring a particular topic. Yet I had few materials about presidents and slaves, and no immediate idea of how to engage 25 students on the subject.

I also recognized that this was a great opportunity to create my own curriculum, which might help students look critically at texts while encouraging their active participation in doing meaningful research. Such an approach stands in sharp contrast to the “memorize the presidents” instruction that I suffered through growing up, and which too many students probably still endure.

I seized the opportunity.

First, I had a student write down the question, “Which presidents were slave owners?” in our class notebook, “Questions We Have.” I then suggested that a few students form an “action research group,” which in my classroom means an ad hoc group of interested students researching a topic and then doing something with what they learn. I asked for volunteers willing to work during recess. Several boys raised their hands, surprising me because I would have guessed that some of them would have much preferred going outside to staying indoors to do research.

## Action Research by Students

At recess time, Raul and Edwin were immediately in my face. “When are we going to start the action research on the slave presidents?” they demanded. I told them to look in the back of our school dictionaries for a list of U.S. presidents, while I got out some large construction paper. The dictionaries, like our social studies text, had little pictures of each president with some basic information. “Why doesn’t it show Clinton?” Edwin asked. “He’s been president forever.” I thought, yeah, Clinton was president for four fifths of this 10-year-old’s life. But I kept that thought to myself and instead replied, “The book is old.”

“Why don’t they just tell whether they have slaves here in this list of presidents?” asked Edwin. “They tell other things about presidents.” “Good question,” I said. “Why do you think they don’t tell?” “I don’t know, probably because they don’t know themselves.” “Maybe so,” I replied. “Here’s what I’d like you to do. Since slavery was abolished when Lincoln was president, and since he was the 16th president, draw 16 lines equal distance from each other and list all the presidents from Washington to Lincoln, and then a yes-and-no column so we can check off whether they owned slaves.”

I was soon to find out that filling in those columns was easier said than done.

When my students and I began investigating which presidents owned slaves, our attempts focused on traditional history textbooks and student-friendly websites from the White House and the Smithsonian Institution.

These efforts turned up virtually nothing. We then pursued two different sources of information: history books written for adults and more in-depth websites.

I brought in two books that were somewhat helpful: James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (Simon and Schuster, 1995) and Kenneth O’Reilly’s *Nixon’s Piano: Presidents and Racial Politics from Washington to Clinton* (Free Press, 1995). By using the indexes and reading the text out loud, we uncovered facts about some of the presidents. We also searched the web for the words “presidents” and “slavery.” We soon learned we had to be more specific and include the president’s name and “slavery”—for example, “President George Washington” and “slavery.” Some results were student-friendly, such as the mention of Washington’s slaves (and some of their escapes) at [www.mountvernon.org/education/slavery](http://www.mountvernon.org/education/slavery). There was also a bill of sale for a slave signed by Dolly Madison, the wife of president James Madison (for a link to the document see [www.rethinkingschools.org/rsr](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/rsr)). Many websites had a large amount of

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text and were beyond the reading level of many of my students. So I cut and pasted long articles into word processing documents so we could search for the word “slave” to see if there was any specific mention of slave ownership.

In their research, students often asked, “How do we know this is true? Our history books aren’t telling the truth, why should we think this one does?” I explained the difference between primary and secondary sources and how a primary source—like a bill of sale or original list of slaves—was pretty solid evidence. To help ensure accuracy, the students decided that if we used secondary sources, we needed to find at least two different citations.

## Bits and Pieces of Information

In the next several days the students, with my help, looked at various sources. We checked our school’s children’s books about presidents, our social studies textbook, a 1975 *World Book Encyclopedia*, and a CD-ROM encyclopedia. We found nothing about presidents as slave owners. I had a hunch about which presidents owned slaves, based on what I knew in general about the presidents, but I wanted “proof” before we put a check in the “yes” box. And though my students wanted to add a third column—explaining how many slaves each slave-owning president had—that proved impossible. Even when we did find information about which presidents owned slaves, the numbers changed depending on how many slaves had been bought, sold, born, or died.

In our research, most of the information dealt with presidential attitudes and policies toward slavery. It was difficult to find specific information on which presidents owned slaves. To help the investigation, I checked out a few books for them from our local university library. Overall, our best resource was the internet. The best sites required adult help to find and evaluate, and I

became so engrossed in the project that I spent a considerable amount of time at home surfing the web. The “student-friendly” websites with information about presidents—such as the White House’s gallery of presidents ([www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents](http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents))—don’t mention that Washington and Jefferson enslaved African Americans. Other popular sites with the same glaring lack of information are the Smithsonian Institution (<http://educate.si.edu/president>) and the National Museum of American History (<http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/presidency>).

As we did the research, I regularly asked, “Why do you think this doesn’t mention that the president owned slaves?” Students’ responses varied, including “They’re stupid;” “They don’t want us kids to know the truth;” “They think we’re too young to know;” and “They don’t know themselves.” (Given more time, we might have explored this matter further, looking at who produces textbooks and why they might not include information about presidents’ attitudes about racism and slavery.) During our research, my students and I found bits and pieces of information about presidents and slavery. But we never

found that one magic resource, be it book or website, that had the information readily available. Ultimately, though, we came up with credible data. I was amazed, and didn’t hide my amazement from our action research team, when they discovered that two presidents who served after Lincoln—Andrew Johnson and Ulysses S. Grant—had been slave owners. While the students taped an extension on their chart, I explained

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that I was not totally surprised about Johnson because he had been a Southerner. But it was a shock that Grant had owned slaves. “He was the commander of the Union army in the Civil War,” I explained. “When I first learned about the Civil War in elementary school, Grant and Lincoln were portrayed as saviors of the Union and freers of slaves.” When I told the entire class how Grant’s

slave-owning past had surprised me, Tanya, an African American student, raised her hand and said, “That’s nothing. Lincoln was a slave owner, too.” I asked for her source of information and she said she had heard that Lincoln didn’t like blacks. I thanked her for raising the point, and told the class that while it was commonly accepted by historians that Lincoln was not a slave owner, his attitudes toward blacks and slavery were a source of much debate. I noted that just because a president didn’t own slaves didn’t mean that he supported freedom for slaves or equal treatment of people of different races.

I went into some detail on Lincoln, in part to counter the all-too-common simplification that Lincoln unequivocally opposed slavery and supported freedom for blacks. I explained that while it’s commonly believed that Lincoln freed enslaved Americans when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, the document actually frees slaves only in states and regions under rebellion—it did not free slaves in any of the slaveholding states and regions that remained in the Union or had been occupied by Union soldiers. In other words,

Lincoln “freed” slaves everywhere he had no authority and withheld freedom everywhere he did. Earlier, in Lincoln’s first inaugural address in March of 1861, he promised slaveholders that he would support a constitutional amendment forever protecting slavery in the states where it then existed—if only those states would remain in the Union.

## Slave-Owning Presidents

By the time we finished our research, the students had found that 10 of the first 18 presidents were slave owners: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, James K. Polk, Zachary Taylor, Andrew Johnson, and Ulysses S. Grant. Those who didn’t own slaves: John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan, and, despite Tanya’s assertion, Abraham Lincoln. The student researchers were excited to present their findings to their classmates, and decided to do so as part of a math class. I made



*President George Washington watches over a group of black slaves working in a field at Mount Vernon.*

blank charts for each student in the class, and they filled in information provided by the action research team: the names of presidents, the dates of their years in office, the total number of years in office, and whether they had owned slaves. Our chart started with George Washington, who assumed office in 1789, and ended in 1877 when the last president who had owned slaves, Ulysses Grant, left office.

We then used the data to discuss this topic of presidents and slave-owning within the structure of ongoing math topics in my class: “What do the data tell us?” and “How can we construct new knowledge with the data?” Students, for example, added up the total number of years in which the United States had a slave-owning president in office, and compared that total to the number of years in which there were non-slave-owning presidents in office. We figured out that in 69 percent of the years between 1789 and 1877, the United States had a president who had been a slave owner. One student observed that only slave-owning presidents served more than one term. “Why didn’t they let presidents who didn’t own slaves serve two terms?” another student wondered.

Using the data, the students made bar graphs and circle graphs to display the information. When they wrote written reflections on the math lesson, they connected math to content. One boy wrote, “I learned to convert fractions to percent so I know that  $10/18$  is the same as 55.5 percent. That’s how many of the first 18 presidents owned slaves.” Another girl observed, “I learned how to make pie charts and that so many more presidents owned slaves than the presidents who didn’t own slaves.” During a subsequent social studies lesson, the three students who had done most of the research explained their frustrations in getting information. “They hardly ever want to mention it [presidents owning slaves],” explained one student. “We had to search and search.”

Specific objectives for this mini-unit, such as reviewing the use of percent, emerged as the lessons themselves unfolded. But its main purpose was to help students to critically examine the actions of early U.S. leaders and to become skeptical of textbooks and government websites as

sources that present the entire picture. I figure that if kids start questioning the “official story” early on, they will be more open to alternative viewpoints later. While discovering which presidents were slave owners is not an in-depth analysis, it pokes an important hole in the godlike mystique that surrounds the “founding fathers.” If students learn how to be critical of icons of the American past, hopefully it will give them permission and tools to be critical of the elites of America today.

Besides uncovering some hard-to-find and uncomfortable historical truths, I also wanted to encourage my students to think about why these facts were so hard to find, and to develop a healthy skepticism of official sources of information. I showed them two quotations about Thomas Jefferson. One was from a recently published 5th-grade history textbook, *United States: Adventures in Time and Place* (Macmillan/McGraw Hill, 1998), which read: “Jefferson owned several slaves in his lifetime and lived in a slave-owning colony. Yet he often spoke out against slavery. ‘Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free’” (p. 314). The other quotation was from James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Loewen writes:

*Textbooks stress that Jefferson was a humane master, privately tormented by slavery and opposed to its expansion, not the type to destroy families by selling slaves. In truth, by 1820 Jefferson had become an ardent advocate of the expansion of slavery to the western territories. And he never let his ambivalence about slavery affect his private life. Jefferson was an average master who had his slaves whipped and sold into the Deep South as examples to induce other slaves to obey. By 1822, Jefferson owned 267 slaves. During his long life, of hundreds of different slaves he owned, he freed only three and five more at his death—all blood relatives of his. (p. 140)*

We talked about the different perspective each quote had toward Jefferson and toward what students should learn. My students’ attention immediately turned to the set of spanking

new history textbooks that had been delivered to our classroom that year as part of the district-wide social studies adoption. Some students assumed that our new textbook *United States* (Harcourt Brace, 2000) was equally as bad as the one I quoted from. One student suggested we just throw the books away. But I quickly pointed out they were expensive, and that we could learn from them even if they had problems and omissions.

I then explained what an omission was, and suggested that we become “textbook detectives” and investigate what our new social studies text said about Jefferson and slavery. I reviewed how to use an index and divided all page references for Jefferson among small groups of students. The groups read the pages, noted any references to Jefferson owning slaves, and then reported back to the class. Not one group found a single reference. Not surprisingly, the students were angry when they realized how the text omitted such important information. “They should tell the truth!” one student fumed.

## No Mention of Racism

I wanted students to see that the textbook’s omissions were not an anomaly, but part of a pattern of ignoring U.S. racism—in the past and in the present. In the next lesson, I started by writing the word “racism” on the board. I asked the kids to look up “racism” in the index of their social studies book. Nothing. I asked them to try “racial discrimination.” Nothing.

“Our school should get a different book,” one student suggested. “Good idea,” I said, “but it’s not so easy.”

I told my students that I had served on a committee that had looked at the major textbooks published for 5th graders and that none of them had dealt with racism or slavery and presidents.

Students had a variety of responses:

“Let’s throw them out.”

“Let’s use the internet.”

“Write a letter to the people who did the books.”

I focused in on the letter-writing suggestion and reminded them that before we did so, we had to be certain that our criticisms were correct.

The students then agreed that in small groups they would use the textbook’s index and read what was said about all of the first 18 presidents, just as we had done previously with Jefferson. None of the groups found any mention of a president owning a slave.

## Letters as Critique and Action

In subsequent days, some students wrote letters to the textbook publisher. Michelle, a white girl, was particularly detailed. She wrote: “I am 11 years old and I like to read and write. When I am reading I notice every little word and in your social studies book I realize that the word ‘racism’ is not in your book. You’re acting like it is a bad word for those kids who read it.” She went on to criticize the book for not mentioning that any presidents had slaves: “I see that you do not mention that some of the presidents had slaves. But some of them

did. Like George Washington had 317 slaves. So did Thomas Jefferson. He had 267 slaves.” She continued: “If you want to teach children the truth, then you should write the truth.” Michelle’s letter and some of the student-made charts were also printed in our school newspaper.

We mailed off the letters and moved on to new lessons.

Weeks passed with no response and eventually the students stopped asking if the publishers had written back.

Then one day a fancy-looking envelope appeared in my mailbox addressed to Michelle Williams. She excitedly opened the letter and read it to the

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class. Harcourt School Publishers Vice President Donald Lankiewicz had responded to Michelle at length. He wrote that “while the word ‘racism’ does not appear, the subject of unfair treatment of people because of their race is addressed on page 467.” He also argued, “There are many facts about the presidents that are not included in the text simply because we do not have room for them all.”

Michelle wrote back to Lankiewicz, thanking him but expressing disappointment: “In a history book you shouldn’t have to wait till page 467 to learn about unfair treatment,” she wrote. As to his claim that there wasn’t room for all the facts about the presidents, Michelle responded: “Adding more pages is good for the kids because they should know the right things from the wrong. It is not like you are limited to certain amount of pages. ... All I ask you is that you write the word ‘racism’ in the book and add some more pages in the book so you can put most of the truth about the presidents.”

Michelle never received a reply.

## Improving the Lesson

Michelle and the other students left 5th grade soon after the letter exchange. In the flurry of end-of-year activities, I didn’t take as much time to process the project as I might have. Nor did I adequately explore with students the fact that most non-slaveowning presidents exhibited pro-slavery attitudes and promoted pro-slavery policies.

But the larger issue, one that critical teachers struggle to address, is why textbook publishers and schools in general do such a poor job of helping students make sense of the difficult issues of race. We do students a disservice when we sanitize history and sweep uncomfortable truths under the rug. We leave them less prepared to deal with the difficult issues they will face in their

personal, political, and social lives. Granted, these are extremely complicated issues that don’t have a single correct response. But it’s important to begin with a respect for the truth and for the capacity of people of all ages to expand their understanding of the past and the present, and to open their hearts and minds to an ever-broadening concept of social justice.

I believe my students learned a lot from their research on presidents and slaves—and clearly know more than most Americans about which of the first 18 presidents owned slaves. I’m also hopeful they learned the importance of looking critically at all sources of information. I know one student, Tanya, did. On the last day of school she came up to me and, amid the congratulatory goodbyes, said, “I still think Lincoln owned slaves.”

“You are a smart girl but you are wrong about that one,” I responded.

“We’ll see,” she said. “You didn’t know Grant had slaves when the school year started! Why should I always believe what my teacher says?” ■

Some of the students’ names in this article have been changed.

**Author’s Note:** About two years after I completed the research on slave-owning presidents with my students, a wonderful website called *Understanding-Prejudice.org* was put up by folks at Wesleyan University. This site includes extensive information on presidents who owned slaves (see [www.understandingprejudice.org/slavery](http://www.understandingprejudice.org/slavery)). I learned from this website that three presidents not on my list also owned slaves: Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, and James Buchanan. I was grateful for the additional information on this website, which opens up all sorts of new teaching possibilities.

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