Agriculture and Slavery:

The History of Oppression in the Food System

5th Grade Social Studies

**Objectives**:

1. Students will learn that many foods typical to the American diet today did not originally grow here, but were brought here from other parts of the world by European colonial powers and subsequently cultivated and grown on American farms. Students will learn that the slave trade introduced many foods that originated in Africa to the United States and these foods have become part of the cultural tradition of African American cuisine as well as contributing to the overall American diet.
2. Students will learn about the history of injustice in the food system beginning with the exploitation of slave labor and how it continues to permeate the food system with its cheap labor supply, sometimes involving child labor in the United States and beyond.

**Materials**:

Inflatable globe

Chart of major agricultural products and where they originated

Seeds to plant: Okra, watermelon, black-eyed peas, millet, sorghum

Coffee beans and cola bean

**Procedure**:

Activity 1: *Where Did That Food Come From??* Game

Students get into 3 teams. Choose an agricultural product from the chart and starting with Team 1, ask them what continent it came from: North America, South America, Europe, Asia and Africa. They should collectively come up with one answer. If they answer correctly, they receive a bean. If they don’t, the other two teams have a chance to answer. If one of them answers correctly, then they get the bean. Then ask Team 2 a question about a different agricultural product, and so on. After three rounds, ask the teams to add up their beans and declare the winning team.

Activity 2: How did that food get on your plate?

Ask students to name some of their favorite foods and guess where they came from. Ask them if these foods now grow here. If not, where do they grow and how do they get here?

Activity 3: *Who grows your food?*

Discuss history of the slave trade in the Americas.

For further discussion, read African Crops and Slave Cuisines by Joseph E. Holloway Ph.D.

Activity 4: Planting the Freedom Bed

Students will plant in the garden five important crops that originated on the African continent.

Watermelon

Black-eyed peas

Okra

Millet and Sorghum

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| North America | [Blackberry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackberry) | [Jerusalem Artichoke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem_artichoke) |
| [Blueberry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blueberry) | Corn |
| [Cranberry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cranberry) |  |
| [Grape](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grape) |  |
| [Raspberry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raspberry) |  |
| [Strawberry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strawberry) |  |
| Cacao |  |
| South America | [Avocado](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avocado) | [Green Bean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_bean) |
| [Pineapple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pineapple) | [Lima Bean](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaseolus_lunatus) |
| [Strawberry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strawberry) | [Peppers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capsicum) |
| Peanuts | [Potato](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potato) |
|  | [Pumpkin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pumpkin) |
|  | [Squash](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cucurbita) |
|  | [Sweet Potato](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweet_potato) |
|  | [Tomato](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tomato) |
|  | Peanuts |
| Europe (Western) | [Currant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ribes) | [Horseradish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horseradish) |
| Strawberry | [Cabbage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabbage) |
| Grape | [Parsnip](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parsnip) |
|  | [Turnip](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turnip) |
| Europe (Eastern) | [Pear](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pear) | [Endive Lettuce](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endive) |
| Africa | [Date](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Date_palm#Dates) North Africa | [Artichoke](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artichoke) |
| [Watermelon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watermelon) | [Okra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Okra) |
| Coffee | [Yam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yam_(vegetable)) |
| \*Kola nut – Coca Cola | Cowpea or black eyed pea |
|  | Millet |
|  | Sorghum |
| Middle East | [Cherry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherry) | [Asparagus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asparagus) |
| [Plum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plum) | [Carrot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carrot) |
| [Fig](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_fig) | [Beet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beetroot) |
| [Grape](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grape) | [Celery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celery) |
| [Olive](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olive) | [Cress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garden_cress) |
|  | [Lettuce](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lettuce) |
|  | [Onion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Onion) |
|  | [Pea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pea) |
|  | [Radish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radish) |
|  | [Spinach](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spinach) |
| India | [Lemon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemon) | [Cucumber](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cucumber) |
| [Lime](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lime_(fruit)) | [Eggplant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eggplant) |
| [Mango](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mango) |  |
| China | [Apricot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apricot) | [Chinese Cabbage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_cabbage) |
| [Apple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apple) | Rice |
| [Peach](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peach) |  |
| [Persimmon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persimmon) |  |
| Southeast Asia | [Banana](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banana) |  |
| [Orange](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_(fruit)) |  |
| [Tangerine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangerine) |  |
| Micronesia | [Grapefruit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grapefruit) |  |

\*In the 1800s, a pharmacist in Georgia, [John Pemberton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Pemberton), took extracts of kola and [coca](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coca) and mixed them with sugar, other ingredients, and carbonated water to invent the first [cola](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cola) soft drink. His accountant tasted it and called it "[Coca-Cola](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coca-Cola)". Cocaine (not the other extracts from the Peruvian coca leaf) was prohibited from soft drinks in the U.S. after 1904, and Coca-Cola no longer uses either kola or coca in its [original recipe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coke%E2%80%99s_secret_formula#Original_formula).[8]

The kola nut has a bitter flavor and contains [caffeine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caffeine). It is chewed in many [West African](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_African) cultures, individually or in a group setting. It is often used ceremonially, presented to chiefs or presented to guests.[3]

Kola nuts are perhaps best known to [Western culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_culture) as a flavoring ingredient and one of the sources of caffeine in [cola](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cola) and other similarly flavored beverages, although the use of kola (or kola flavoring) in commercial cola drinks has become uncommon.[4]

The nut’s aroma is sweet and rose-like. The first taste is bitter, but it sweetens upon chewing. The nut can be boiled to extract the cola. This tree reaches 25 meters in height and is propagated through seeds.

**FURTHER READING**

**Where Did that Food Come From?**

The early explorers, starting with Columbus, brought back to Europe from the Americas corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, squash, beans, peppers, pineapples and tobacco. Columbus found the pineapple on the Island of Guadeloupe in 1493. It was apparently brought to the West Indies by Indians from its native home in South America – specifically Brazil and Paraguay. Much of the fruit sold in the United States today is grown in the Hawaiian Islands, South America and Mexico.

Grapes are native also to the United States, but the wine grape (*Vitis vinifera*) is native to central Europe. Plums are also native to the United States, originally growing wild from New England to Florida. No other native tree was so widely distributed, some form being found in every state!

Two other native American fruits are the avocado and the papaya. Avocados are native to Central America and Mexico and as far south as Peru. Their first planting in Florida was in 1833 and in California in 1871. The papaya is native to the West Indies and Mexico.

Strawberries are native to America but also to most of the temperate regions of the world, along with blackberries and raspberries. Cranberries are native from Canada, south to North Carolina, and west to Wisconsin. They are found mainly in low lying, swampy areas.

Blueberries are native to North and South America and also to Asia and Europe. Yet, only in the Americas and Canada is the blueberry cultivated as a horticultural crop.

That is about all of our common garden crops that originated in the Americas.

Watermelon and Okra are native to central Africa.

Kohlrabi and Brussels sprouts originated in Northern Europe. Celery grew wild in wet places all over Europe and Asia but cultivation wasn’t recorded until the 1500’s in Italy and France. The globe artichoke came from Italy.

From the Eastern Mediterranean region we get asparagus, beets, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, endive, kale, lettuce, parsley, parsnips and rhubarb.

Carrots, onions and muskmelons all come from the Middle East. Peas came from Middle Asia, Northwest India, Afghanistan but also throughout Europe.

Spinach is native to Iran and adjacent areas but early records show it growing also in Nepal.

India has given the world four vegetables: cucumber, eggplant, mustard and cowpeas.

Columbus brought the cucumber to Haiti where it was planted in 1494 (and possibly to other Islands).

Radishes and soybeans came from China and Japan, cultivated from many wild forms. Also from China came peaches, oranges and apricots.

Apples, pears and cherries came from Western Asia and the hill country around the Black Sea and Caspian Sea.

The date (from date palms) is one of the oldest fruits, originally from Arabia and Egypt, long before recorded history began. Olives originated in Syria, Egypt and Greece. They were brought to Mexico by the Spaniards and introduced to California by early missionaries.

Figs came from Syria and westward to the Canary Islands. Fossil remains in France and Italy indicate that figs grew there long before the stone age. They were probably first cultivated in ancient Arabia and Egypt. They were also introduced to the United States by the Spaniards. In 1769, the Mission at San Diego was established and figs were planted there (called “Mission” figs). They are still the leading black fig grown in California.

Bananas were found in the tropical Pacific Islands by the earliest explorers. They actually originated in southern Asia and the Malay Archipelago.

Mangoes are native to Southeast Asia. They were introduced by the Portuguese to America, first in Brazil about 1700. From there to the West Indies, 50 years later, and finally to Mexico in the 1800’s. Seedlings were first taken to Florida in 1860.

For questions or comments: [ron@primexgardencenter.com](mailto:ron@primexgardencenter.com)

**The Slave Trade in Recent History**

As many as 27 million men, women and children are estimated to be trafficking victims at any given time, according to a report by the State Department. And some of those victims are later forced to work in agriculture and food processing (though no one has a good idea how many).

The agriculture sector has an ugly track record when it comes to labor abuses. Sugar production fueled the slave trade that brought millions of Africans to the Americas. As the Polaris Project, an anti-slavery organization, [notes](http://www.polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/labor-trafficking-in-the-us/agriculture-a-farms), agricultural work today is often isolated and transient, with peaks and lulls in employment due to changing harvest seasons. These conditions leave workers vulnerable, creating opportunities that farmers and food factory owners continue to exploit.

The new State Department report has many references to farm work: Malian children transported to Ivory Coast for forced labor on [cocoa farms](http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2011/11/29/142891462/nestle-to-investigate-child-labor-on-its-cocoa-farms), and ethnic Indian families forced to work in the Bangladesh tea industry, to name a couple. Some of these offending farms and factories serve only the local economy. But some are selling food products on the international market.

**Current Farm Labor Conditions in the United States**

The current conditions with which food and farm laborers work in the United States are deplorable and akin to modern slavery. While America boasts the cheapest food supply in the world, it comes at an enormous cost to humans. Measured in the poverty and misery that result from a system that legally allows exploitation of those who plant, prune, harvest, produce, process and serve our food, the cost often falls most on the shoulders of farm workers who labor in the fields. Ironically, it is these people who are most at risk of being food insecure and unable to buy the cheap food their labor in turn feeds consumers.

While the conditions affecting food and farm labor extend beyond the field into processing facilities and even restaurants, farm labor remains among the worst paid, least protected jobs in the country. With few or no benefits, hard, back breaking work, and no job security, farm workers barely make [$12,000 a year](http://ciw-online.org/), and are excluded from overtime pay and collective bargaining. The reported average hourly wage of farm workers nationally is about [$6.17](http://livepage.apple.com/) for working as many as 12 to 14 hours per day.

**AFRICAN CROPS AND SLAVE CUISINES**

By Joseph E. Holloway Ph.D.

Crops brought directly from Africa during the transatlantic slave trade include rice, okra, tania, black-eyed peas, and kidney and lima beans. They were consumed by Africans on board the slave ships on way to the New World. Other crops brought from Africa included peanuts (ultimately from South America), millet, sorghum, guinea melon, watermelon, yams (Dioscorea cayanensis), and sesame (benne). These crops found their way into American foodways and became part of the ingredients found in the earliest cookbooks written by Southern Americans.

As early as 1687, a young physician, Sir Hans Sloane, living in the West Indies, found many of these crops growing on the island of Jamaica. These plants reached the mainland of North America either directly from Africa, or came with enslaved Africans destined for North America and through trade with the West Indies. These crops may have already found a home in North America before Sloane's encounter. Eventually, however, these crops went from being eaten exclusively by Africans in North America to being in white southern cuisine.

Black-eyed peas were first brought to the New World during the transatlantic slave trade as food for slaves. They first arrived in Jamaica around 1675, spreading throughout the West Indies, and finally reaching Florida by 1700, North Carolina in 1738 and into Virginia by 1775. Slave planter William Byrd mentions Black-eyed peas in his writings in 1738. By the time of the American Revolution Black-eyed peas were firmly established in America and a part of the cuisine.

George Washington wrote in a letter in 1791 that "pease" (Black-eyed peas) were rarely grown in Virginia. In 1792 he brought 40 bushels of seeds for planting on his plantation. Black-eyed peas became one of the most popular food crops in the southern part of the United States. George Washington later referred to them as "callicance" and "cornfield peas," because of the early custom of planting them between the rows of field corn.

Okra arrived in the New World during the transatlantic slave trade in the 1600s. Okra or gumbo, as it is called in Africa, found exceptional popularity in New Orleans. In French Louisiana, Creole cuisine and African cooking came together to produce the unique cuisine of New Orleans. Gumbo is a popular stew or soup mixing other vegetables in which okra is the main ingredient thickened with powder from sassafras leaves (gumbo file). One observer in 1748 noted that thickened soup was a delicacy like by Blacks. Okra was commonly being used by the American white population before the American Revolutionary War.

Enslaved Africans used the young fruit that contains the vegetable mucilage to eat by boiling. The leaves were also used medicinally to softening cataplasm, and seeds were used to make a coffee substitute on the plantations of South Carolina. Okra was popular among women to produce abortion, by lubricating the uterine passage with the slimy pods. In West Africa, women still use okra to produce abortion, using the same method.

The next important crop to arrive to the United States by of Africa is the American peanut. The peanut is known by several names including groundnut, earth nut and ground peas. Two other words of African origin are Pindar and goober. Among other recorded source of the use of these African names, both Thomas Jefferson and George Washington called peanuts' *peendar* and *pindars* (1794, 1798); the word was used before the Revolutionary War. The word goober was used principally in the 19th century. The period of its greatest popularity was the 1860s when the Civil War song "Goober Peas" started. After the war, when published, its words were attributed to "A Pindar" and its music to "P. Nutt."

The American peanut has an interesting history. While the peanut is indigenous to South America as a crop, it was first brought to Africa by Portuguese sailors and then back to Virginia from Africa by enslaved Africans. The peanut was used to feed Africans crossing the middle passage. One New World observer noted, "The first I ever saw of these [peanuts] growing was the Negro's plantation who affirmed, that they grew in great plenty in their country." In Africa, peanut stews, soups and gravies serve as an important part of any meal. Nut soups, however, in the American South are of African origin and are no longer enjoyed by the descendants of Africans, but rather are associated with Euro-Americans.

The peanut is a crop that George Washington Carver researched. From his experiments he found water, fats, oils, gums, resins, sugar, starches, pectins, pentosans and proteins. From these compounds he discovered over three hundred possible peanut products including Jersey milk that led to the production of butter and cheese. Among the three hundred products invented from his research were instant coffee, flour, face cream, bleach, synthetic rubber and linoleum. Dr. Carver found rubbing peanut oil on them helpful for rejuvenating muscles. Gandhi found the peanut milk as well as the soy bean formula Dr. Carver created for him a healthy part of his diet.

Sesame first arrived from Africa to South Carolina by 1730. In 1730, a Carolinian sent sesame along with some sesame oil to London. This is an item of considerable importance in Colonial America and England, because table oil was one of the products England hoped to obtain by colonizing the New World. In order not to import olive oil for cooking, Britain encouraged production of table oils by offering bounties on edible oils. By 1733, a book on gardening published in London, noted the cultivation of the sesame plant, and its usefulness as a source of "sallet-oil." Enslaved Africans grew sesame for other use than for its oil. Thomas Jefferson noted in the 1770s that benne (another name for sesame) was eaten raw, toasted or boiled in soups by African slaves. Jefferson also noted that slaves baked sesame in breads, boiled in greens, and used to enrich broth. Today sesame is used primarily as bread topping.

The first successful cultivation of rice in the United States was accomplished in the South Carolina Sea Islands by an African woman who later taught her planter how to cultivate rice. The first rice seeds were imported directly from the Island of Madagascar in 1685 and Africans supplied the labor and the technical expertise. African experts in rice cultivation were brought directly from the island of Goree to train Europeans how to cultivate this cash crop.

African cooks in the "Big House" introduced their native African crops and foods to the planters, thus becoming intermediary links in the melding of African and European culinary cultures. In short, the house servants while learning from the planters also took African culinary taste into the Big House. African cooks introduced deep fat frying, a cooking technique that originated from Africa. Long before the day of refrigeration, African understood how deep fat frying of chicken or beef could preserve these foods for a time.

Using their indigenous crops enslaved Africans recreated traditional African cuisine. One such dish is fufu. In South Carolina this dish is called "turn meal and flour." This meal is prepared by boiling water and adding flour while stirring the ingredients, hence the name "turn meal and flour." Throughout Africa fufu is a highly favored staple. This is a traditional West and Central African meal eaten from the Senegambia to Angola. Africans prepare fufu by mixing palm oil and flour. From these fufu mixture slaves made hoecake in the fields that later evolved into pancakes and hot water cornbread. Corn bread, prepared by African slaves, was similar to African millet bread. In the reports of slavers found in the journal entry from the ship *Mary,* June 20, 1796. "Cornbread" was mentioned as one of the African foods provided for their cargo. The report also mentions a "woman cleaning rice and grinding corn for corn cakes." Corn is fried into cakes as is still prepared throughout in Africa today.

As early as 1739, naturalist Mark Catesby noted that slaves made a mush from the corn meal called pone bread. He also noticed that slaves took hominy Indian corn and made grits, a food similar to the African dish called Eba. Catesby observed in 1747 that Guinea corn (sorghum vulgare) and Indian corn were used interchangeably by Blacks. He wrote that "little of this grain is propagated, and that chiefly by negroes, who make bread of it, and boil it in like manner of firmety.Â  "It [sic] chief use is for feeding fowls... It was first introduced from Africa by the negroes." Lawson noted that Guinea corn is used mostly for hogs and poultry [by whites], adding that enslaved Africans ate nothing but Indian corn.

From their food traditions Africans contributed greatly to the culinary taste of America. Southern cooking is a cultural experience to which both blacks and whites contributed; however, today black cuisine is strongly influenced by the African style of cooking, a carryover of this antebellum period. "Soul food" itself goes back to days when plantation owners gave slaves discarded animal parts, such as hog maw (stomach), hog jowl, pig's feet, ham hocks. Blacks took this throwaway and added a touch of African culinary techniques to create tasty dishes. Collard greens and dandelion greens were first recorded in 1887. Poke greens, turnip greens, and black-eyed peas were first brought to Jamaica from Africa in 1674. They later arrived in North America in 1738. All of these African foods contributed to the great diversity in American cuisine.