Using the Perspective of Ancient Mali to Investigate American History

Workshop dates: May 10-13, 24-27, 2004

Grade level: 3, 4

SOL connections: 3.2; 3.4; 3.7; 3.8; 3.11b; 3.12; VS1; VS4a; VS4d; VS9b

Workshop Summary: Understanding history is more than memorizing facts and timelines; it is a sophisticated investigation of the past, and often students are asked to grapple with emotional and difficult issues and topics. Elementary students are not exempt from this process, and in both world and Virginia history they are asked to begin to explore the impact and legacy of the institution of slavery.

The use of primary sources to teach American history gives students an opportunity to investigate the past in a hands-on, interactive way. This workshop focused on using content primary sources in activities that emphasize perspective and understanding misconceptions. A critical component of handling issues like slavery is to personalize the experience rather than allow students to rely on misunderstandings and stereotypes. Ultimately, students create a vocabulary that allows them to think about issues of race relations and social justice in a more in-depth study.

Ancient Mali provides a rich and dynamic culture that offers a different perspective of slavery. Students are exposed to the literature of the girots, to interactive games and activities to simulate the economic system and government, and listen to music and analyze art from the Mali culture. They are asked to find connections between this African dimension and their own American culture today.

Presenting a key source country of the trans-atlantic slave trade in personal, cultural terms also gives students a background to study the growth of slavery in 18th and 19th century America as fourth graders.

Featured Resources: Digital primary source images and handout materials were used in workshop activities with permission from the following resources:

- “Ancient Mali: The Rise and Fall of a West African Empire” by Sully Carter. This resource guide to the Virginia Standards of Learning includes historical and cultural information, as well as a collection of classroom-tested activities, games, and lessons. For more information, visit their website: Think Again Publishing: http://www.thinkagainpub.org
- “A Song Full of Hope, 1770-1830”: Covering the years that preceded the American Revolution through the decades in which our nation was forged, this book and accompanying CD recount, like no others, the African American experience through contemporaneous documents, diaries, visuals, and texts. http://www.heinemann.com