Laws and Liberty

Read how colonial laws controlled people and denied equal rights.

SS24.6.6b "Summarize the purpose of slave codes in colonial society and explain how they demonstrated that laws can be discriminatory and unfair."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two details that show what slave codes were meant to do. Circle two details that show how the laws treated people unfairly.

Who Could Travel Freely?

1 Imagine a road outside a Virginia farm in the early 1700s. An enslaved person traveling to visit family might be stopped and asked for a written pass. Virginia lawmakers made rules like this part of **slave codes**, laws that controlled enslaved people of African descent. These laws were not simply directions for safe travel. They gave enslavers and officials power to watch where enslaved people went. The rules helped keep forced labor in place by making it harder for people to move freely or escape.

2 Virginia's lawmakers also decided who could be held in slavery. A 1662 law said a child's status, free or enslaved, followed the mother's status. If the mother was enslaved, her child would be enslaved too. Later slave codes added restrictions, including limits on carrying weapons and on leaving a plantation without written permission. These laws protected enslavers' claims to people's labor across generations. They treated human beings as property rather than as people with equal rights. Other colonies wrote slave codes too, though their rules differed.

3 A law can be written down and enforced yet still be unjust. In colonial Virginia, an enslaved person needed permission to travel, while a free white colonist did not face that rule. A child born to an enslaved mother could be enslaved from birth, no matter what the child wanted or did. These differences were based on status and race, not on a person's actions. Slave codes show how lawmakers used legal power to favor enslavers and deny freedom to others. Understanding their purpose helps us judge whether a law treats people fairly.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the written-pass rule help slave codes serve their purpose?

2. How did the 1662 law help keep forced labor in place across generations?

3. What difference between enslaved people and free white colonists shows that the travel rule was unfair?

4. Why does the passage say slave codes were unjust even though lawmakers wrote and enforced them?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a colonial council proposes this made-up rule: only enslaved children must ask an enslaver for permission to use the town well; other children may use it freely. In 4 to 5 sentences, explain what the rule would do, whose power it would increase, why it would be unfair, and how it connects to the purpose of slave codes.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two details that show what slave codes were meant to do. Circle two details that show how the laws treated people unfairly. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the written-pass rule help slave codes serve their purpose?	**It let enslavers and officials control where enslaved people went, making it harder for them to move freely or escape.**
2	How did the 1662 law help keep forced labor in place across generations?	**It made a child born to an enslaved mother enslaved too, allowing enslavers to claim that child's labor.**
3	What difference between enslaved people and free white colonists shows that the travel rule was unfair?	**Enslaved people needed permission to travel, but free white colonists did not face that rule.**
4	Why does the passage say slave codes were unjust even though lawmakers wrote and enforced them?	**They used legal power to favor enslavers and deny enslaved people freedom and equal rights based on status and race.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The proposed rule would make enslaved children ask before using the town well, while other children could use it freely. It would give enslavers more control over those children's daily lives. The rule is unfair because all children need water, but it limits only one group. Like the slave codes, it would use a law to control enslaved people and protect unequal power.

Accept answers that connect restrictions or inherited status to the purpose of maintaining forced labor and enslavers' power. For the open task, students should identify the unequal treatment and explain how the made-up rule resembles the slave codes.