The Industrial Spy

Samuel Slater and the Transfer of Secrets · 1790–1810

GUIDING QUESTION

Was Samuel Slater a traitor, a thief, or the founder of American manufacturing?

Teacher notes

Objectives: students will be able to

- Place the chapter's key events, from 1789 to 1807, in order and explain why each mattered.
- Analyze 3 primary sources for context, audience, purpose, and point of view.
- Use the chapter's vocabulary accurately: Water frame, Carding, Trade secret, Rhode Island System, Emigration ban.
- Write an evidence-based argument that answers the guiding question.

AP U.S. History
Period 3 (1754–1800), Period 4 (1800–1848)

Standards

D2.His.1.9-12	Explain how events were shaped by their time and place and by broader historical contexts.
D2.His.4.9-12	Analyze the factors that shaped people's perspectives in different eras.
D2.His.10.9-12	Identify the limitations of different kinds of historical evidence.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple sources into a reasoned argument about the past.
RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1	Cite specific textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
RH.9-10.4 / RH.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in historical texts.
RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6	Compare and evaluate authors' points of view on the same events.
WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Pacing

Day 1 (50 minutes)

Day 2 (50 minutes)
5 min · Key terms matching

5 min · Before you read: guiding question and predictions
15 min · Reading and timeline
25 min · Primary source workshop (3 sources)
5 min · Exit ticket
20 min · Corroboration and discussion questions
25 min · Claim, evidence, reasoning paragraph

Teaching hard history

• Never use role-play or simulations of slavery, violence, or other atrocities. Ask students to analyze the testimony and documented choices of real people instead.

• Pair the voices of the people who did the work (enslaved people, children, strikers, immigrants) with the voices of those who profited, and ask whose records survived and why.

• Primary sources are reproduced word for word, including period language and dialect transcribed by interviewers. Before reading, discuss who recorded each source and for whom. Do not ask students to perform dialect aloud.

• Tell students before they see images of injured, captive, or dead people, and give them a way to step back.

• Distinguish what the sources show from what they cannot prove. Several stories in this exhibit correct popular myths; name the myth, then the evidence.

Guidance follows Learning for Justice, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Answer key: key terms
Water frame: E · Carding: C · Trade secret: A · Rhode Island System: B · Emigration ban: D

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.
2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2

Read

The American Industrial Revolution began with an act of industrial espionage. Samuel Slater carried the knowledge of British water-powered spinning across the Atlantic in his head, and—with American mechanics and Providence capital-rebuilt it on the banks of the Blackstone River.

Britain protected its textile machinery with laws that barred the export of machines and drawings and discouraged skilled mechanics from emigrating. Slater, apprenticed in 1782 to Jedediah Strutt, Richard Arkwright's partner at Milford and Belper in Derbyshire, absorbed the workings of Arkwright's spinning system over seven years. In September 1789, aged twenty-one, he sailed from London; a long-repeated story says he passed himself off as a farm laborer. He reached New York after a sixty-six-day crossing and in January 1790 contracted with Almy & Brown of Providence—William Almy and Smith Brown, backed

by the Quaker merchant Moses Brown. With local mechanics including the Wilkinson family and Sylvanus Brown, he got water-powered spinning running at Pawtucket on December 20, 1790. The 'Rhode Island System' he developed—hiring whole families, beginning with children aged seven to twelve—became the dominant labor model of the early southern New England mill.



The Slater Mill, Pawtucket, Rhode Island-the founding site of American industrial textile manufacturing. Kenneth C. Zirkel, "Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, Rhode Island" (2018). Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

PART 3

Timeline

Students write one sentence on why each event mattered.

1789

Slater's Crossing

Slater sails from London in September and lands in New York in November; tradition holds that he disguised himself as a farm laborer, though the story rests on later accounts.

1790

Water-Powered Spinning at Pawtucket

On December 20, Slater's machinery begins spinning cotton in a clothier's shop at Pawtucket—the first successful water-powered cotton spinning in the United States.

1793

Slater Mill Built

Slater and his partners raise the mill building at Pawtucket that survives today as the centerpiece of Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park.

1807

The Embargo Act

Jefferson's embargo cuts off British imports and triggers a boom in domestic mill construction across southern New England.

PART 4

Key terms

Water frame (answer E)
Richard Arkwright's spinning machine, powered by a water wheel, that made strong cotton thread continuously.

Carding (answer C)
Brushing raw fiber so the strands line up and can be spun into thread.

Trade secret (answer A)
Valuable business knowledge, such as a machine design, that a company keeps private to stay ahead of competitors.

Rhode Island System (answer B)
Slater's method of hiring whole families, including children, to work in small rural mills and live in company housing.

Emigration ban (answer D)
British laws that made it illegal for skilled textile workers to leave the country or for textile machinery to be exported.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Letter to Moses Brown

Samuel Slater, December 2, 1789

> Sir, A few days ago I was informed that you wanted a manager of cotton spinning, &c. in which business I flatter myself that I can give the greatest satisfaction, in making machinery, making good yarn, either for Stockings or twist, as any that is made in England; as I have had opportunity, and an oversight, of Sir Richard Arkwright's works, and in Mr. Strutt's mill upwards of eight years. . . . My intention is to erect a perpetual card and spinning.

Context: Slater, a 21-year-old former apprentice to Jedediah Strutt, had left England, according to a long-repeated tradition in disguise, because British law banned skilled textile workers from emigrating. Writing from New York, he offered to build Arkwright-style machinery from memory.

Source: Slatersville: Hero or Traitor? Additional Background Sources (reprinting George S. White, Memoir of Samuel Slater, 1836). National Park Service. 1789. https://www.nps.gov/common/uploads/teachers/lessonplans/Slatersville%20Hero%20or%20Traitor%20Additional%20Background%20S

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Reply to Samuel Slater

Moses Brown, December 10, 1789

> I, or rather Almy & Brown, who has the business in the cotton line, which I began, one being my son-in-law, and the other a kinsman, want the assistance of a person skilled in the frame or water spinning. An experiment has been made, which has failed, no person being acquainted with the business, and the frames imperfect. We are destitute of a person acquainted with water-frame spinning; thy being already engaged in a factory with many able proprietors, we can hardly suppose we can give the encouragement adequate to leaving thy present employ.

Context: Brown, a wealthy Providence Quaker merchant, had bought spinning machines that his workers could not make run. His reply shows that American investors had capital but lacked the technical knowledge that Slater carried in his head.

Source: George S. White. Memoir of Samuel Slater, the Father of American Manufactures. Philadelphia (digitized by e-rara). 1836. https://www.e-rara.ch/download/pdf/20468178.pdf

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DOCUMENT C

Report on the Subject of Manufactures

Alexander Hamilton, December 5, 1791

> The Cotton Mill invented in England, within the last twenty years, is a signal illustration of the general proposition, which has been just advanced. In consequence of it, all the different processes for spining Cotton are performed by means of Machines, which are put in motion by water, and attended chiefly by women and Children ... It is worthy of particular remark, that, in general, women and Children are rendered more useful and the latter more early useful by manufacturing establishments, than they would otherwise be.

Context: Treasury Secretary Hamilton urged Congress to support American manufacturing, pointing to the Arkwright mill that Slater had just reproduced in Rhode Island. His report shows how early leaders saw the labor of women and children as a national resource.

Source: Alexander Hamilton. Alexander Hamilton's Final Version of the Report on the Subject of Manufactures, 5 December 1791. Founders Online, National Archives. 1791-. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-10-02-0001-0007

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Corroborate
Compare "Letter to Moses Brown" (Samuel Slater, December 2, 1789) with "Reply to Samuel Slater" (Moses Brown, December 10, 1789). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. What skills and experience does Slater claim in his letter, and what problem does Moses Brown say his business is facing?

2. Both letters survive because they were printed in an 1836 memoir praising Slater. How might that publication shape which documents were preserved and how Slater is remembered?
3. Hamilton praises machines "attended chiefly by women and Children." How does his report help explain why the first Pawtucket mill hired children?
4. Governments today accuse rivals of stealing trade secrets and technology. Was Slater's decision to carry Arkwright's methods to America different from modern industrial espionage? Argue using the documents.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?
2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

BIOGRAPHY

Slater the Memoryman

How an apprentice carried an empire's secret across an ocean in his head—and what he needed help to rebuild.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/slater-the-memoryman

BIOGRAPHY

Moses Brown: The Quaker Capitalist

The abolitionist financier whose family fortune was tangled with slavery.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/moses-brown

LABOR

The Rhode Island System

America's first factory system built on the labor of children.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/rhode-island-system

Places: Massachusetts, Rhode Island

SOURCES AND CREDITS

Samuel Slater. National Park Service, Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park-. https://www.nps.gov/blrv/learn/historyculture/samuel-slater.htm

Old Slater Mill, National Register of Historic Places nomination. National Park Service-. https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/NRHP/66000001_text

Going in Circles: A Revolution Along the Blackstone. National Park Service-. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/going-in-circles-a-revolution-along-the-blackstone.htm

Image: Kenneth C. Zirkel, "Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, Rhode Island" (2018). Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

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