

Pre-Reading

Name: _____



PRE-READING

The Nullification Crisis

You are preparing to do a VOXPOP role-play with your class. In the role-play, you will be assigned a character and you will represent their perspective in historical debates. Before we begin, read the following passage to learn more about the historical moment you are navigating.

It's 1832, and Charleston is a city in crisis. The economy and way of life, built around rice and cotton plantations dependent on enslaved labor, is crumbling. The price of cotton collapsed. **Plantation owners** who invested in land and slaves during the cotton boom are now deep in debt. Many fear the end of slavery in the United States, whether by internal revolts, or by order from the federal government.

Recent slave rebellions reinforced slaveholders' fears. In Charleston, White residents, many of them **Laborers**, patrol the streets, placing Black residents under citizen's arrests for slight violations of the law. They say strict enforcement of all laws maintains peace and safety. Their opponents, such as **Abolitionists** who want to see slavery abolished, say citizen's arrests abuse innocent Black people.

The other major source of tension is the recession, the worst since the founding of our country. Many Carolinians were already struggling because of the plummeting price of cotton. South Carolina produced raw material, mainly cotton and rice. They relied on imports from Europe for almost everything else, from clothing to farm equipment. Then, the federal government passed the Tariff of 1828, which placed a 50% tax on imports to help Northern manufacturers compete with foreign companies. Nicknamed the Tariff of Abominations, many Southerners wanted to remove, or nullify, the law establishing the tariff.

America was founded on a fundamental tension between the power of the state and federal government. **Laborers** and **Plantation Owners** have called for a nullification of the tariff, while Unionists like the **Merchants** and **Northerners** argue "nullification" is not a legitimate political action. **Abolitionists** who want to abolish slavery worry if South Carolina nullifies the Tariff now, it will establish the precedent that it's okay for states to ignore federal laws. If the federal government outlaws slavery in the future, South Carolina might be able to ignore that law, too. **Abolitionists** say the Nullification movement isn't really about the tariff at all: it's about the future of slavery in the United States.

You will decide how to respond to the Nullification Crisis.

But first, let's take a look at how we got here and consider the different perspectives on some key issues.

Finance: How can we save South Carolina's economy?

The Tariff of 1828, or the Tariff of Abominations, may have helped Northern manufacturers compete with Europe, but it hurt South Carolina.

Nullifiers, like **Plantation Owners** and **Laborers**, say the tariff is unconstitutional. They believe it was designed to protect Northern industry at the expense of Southern states. As early as 1799, Thomas Jefferson claimed that when the federal government passed laws using powers not granted in the Constitution, states could demand a "nullification" of that law.

Unionists, including **Merchants** and **Northerners**, believe "nullification" is not a legitimate political action: states can't pick and choose which federal laws they enforce. Even Thomas Jefferson said if a state rejects a federal law, it is rebelling against the government. The **Merchants** and **Northerners** say the tariffs will benefit everyone in the long run because it's good for the country to have a strong manufacturing industry. They think if South Carolinians want to avoid paying high taxes on imported goods, they should build up their own industries in South Carolina and focus on buying local goods.

Summarize: What is nullification, and why did the Nullifiers want to nullify the Tariff of 1828?

Law: How can we keep South Carolina safe?

To resist the institution of slavery, Black people are constantly organizing for freedom both violently and non-violently. In 1822, the state arrested community leader Denmark Vesey and stopped an organized slave rebellion involving thousands of people who had planned to kill white plantation owners and free the city of Charleston. In 1831, a group of over seventy free and enslaved African Americans led by Nat Turner killed over fifty Whites in Virginia.

Charleston is over 60% Black. White Southerners recognize they are outnumbered by African Americans, and live in fear of uprisings. Out of that fear, many **Laborers** stepped up their use of citizen's arrests: the power of any citizen to arrest someone if they see them breaking the law. Many Black people have been arrested for "crimes" like standing in the street. Nullifiers say if they arrest people for small crimes like loitering and public drunkenness, they can't commit larger crimes like rebellions. **Abolitionists** and **Northerners** say Nullifiers are abusing the power of citizen's arrests, and jailing Black people on false charges. They say citizen's arrests should be stopped.

Analyze: How can "citizen's arrests" create abuse of power?

Power: Who controls South Carolina? The federal government or the state?

According to the Nullifiers, the federal government is controlled by the desires of the majority. And the majority of Americans live in the North. The tariff is an example of the federal government helping Northerners at the expense of the South.

The Constitution gives Congress the authority “to lay and collect taxes...to provide for the common defense and general welfare” of the country. Nullifiers insist the tariff is unconstitutional because it does not promote the “general welfare” of the country. The Nullifiers insist the federal government can only exercise the powers given in the Constitution. All other powers belong to the states. South Carolina must take a strong stand showing they will not bend a knee to the federal government – now or in the future.

Unionists argue the Constitution’s *supremacy clause* gives the federal government final authority, and the *commerce clause* gives the federal government the power to “regulate commerce with foreign nations.” This is a price all states pay to be part of the larger union, and South Carolina agreed to these rules.

There is also another conflict between the state and federal government. A new South Carolina state law requires all Black sailors, even if they are free, be seized while their ships are in Charleston Harbor. When British ships reach Charleston all of their Black sailors are jailed, violating a trade agreement between the US and Great Britain.

In response, the federal government demanded South Carolina stop jailing innocent Black sailors, but the South Carolina government let the arrests continue. Unionists say defying the federal government puts us on the path to civil war. If a state law breaks a federal law, the state law needs to change.

Review: You will be assigned a role representing one of these groups. Based on the reading, list two concerns each group has going into discussions about how to respond to the Nullification Crisis.		
NULLIFIERS		
PLANTATION OWNERS 1. 2.	LABORERS 1. 2.	
UNIONISTS		
MERCHANTS 1. 2.	NORTHERNERS 1. 2.	ABOLITIONISTS 1. 2.