

Jim Crow Comes to Town: Reconstruction to *Plessy v. Ferguson*

A "Newscast" Activity

By Michael Koren

Overview

The period of time from the end of the Civil War until approximately 1900 was a period of much change for Americans, and African Americans in particular. African Americans saw an increase in freedoms and privileges after the Civil War while Reconstruction was in progress. However, after Radical Reconstruction ended in the late 1870s, they experienced an erosion of their newly found freedoms and rights. In addition, anti-black groups such as the KKK emerged and became more prevalent. With the decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, much of the gains, which occurred during the reconstruction process, were now lost or severely limited. This lesson, designed for students with varying abilities, will examine these changes.

Curriculum Standards

- Identify significant events and people in the major eras of United States and world history
- Employ cause and effect arguments to demonstrate how significant events have influenced the past and the present in United States and world history
- Explain the history of slavery, racial and ethnic discrimination, and efforts to eliminate discrimination in the United States and elsewhere in the world

Time Required

This unit will take about two weeks to complete.

Materials Needed

- The video *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow, Program One: Jim Crow Comes to Town (1864-1895)*
- The Jim Crow **biographies** of prominent figures
- Have students view the movie *Separate But Equal*
- Textbooks, encyclopedias, internet access, newspaper articles, and magazines

The Lesson

Initial Motivation

Ask students to think of something quite important that they didn't have which they now currently have. High school students may mention a driver's license or a job. Middle school students may mention a bicycle or telephone in their room. Ask students how they would feel if these things were slowly curtailed and eventually eliminated. For high school students, you might mention the restrictions placed on drivers under the age of 18. For middle school students, you might mention restrictions on phone or computer use.

Point out this is what happened in South after the Civil War. African Americans were granted freedoms that were gradually reduced and eventually eliminated. This was done in both legal and illegal ways.

Procedures

1. Students will research the following regarding the process of Reconstruction and improving African-American freedom:

- **The Freedmen's Bureau**
- **14th Amendment**
- **15th Amendment**
- **Black Codes**
- African Americans in public and political life in 1870s
- Northern volunteers to help the ex-slaves
- **The Force Acts of 1870-1871**
- The Radical Reconstruction program

2. Students will research the following regarding the end of Reconstruction and the gradual erosion of freedoms and rights for African Americans:

- Knights of White Camellia
- **Ku Klux Klan**
- The Amnesty Act of 1872
- **The end of Reconstruction**
- **Tenant farmers**
- **Sharecroppers**
- **Poll taxes**
- **Literacy tests**
- **The Grandfather Clause**
- **Jim Crow Laws**

3. Students will research the court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and its results and effects.

4. Students will watch PBS video, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow, Program One: Jim Crow Comes to Town (1864-1895)*.

5. Students could research the period known as the Great Migration

6. Divide students into groups of three or four. Each group will be responsible for putting on a newscast or a news documentary focusing on the increase and decrease in freedoms and rights of African Americans from 1865-1900. Each newscast or news documentary will be divided into three parts.

Part one will focus on the increase of freedoms and rights African Americans achieved from 1865-1877. This segment or story should tell what happened and why it happened.

Part two will examine the end of Reconstruction and the gradual erosion of freedoms and rights of African Americans from 1877-1896. This segment should also tell what happened and why it happened.

Part three will examine the court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and its effects of freedoms and rights of African Americans. This segment should examine the court case and tell how the court case affected African Americans following the 1896 decision.

News shows or documentaries should be about 20-30 minutes in length.

7. Students will write their news stories or scripts for each part of the newscast or documentary. For part one, students should examine how the topics suggested above improved the freedoms and rights of African Americans. For part two, the reports should show how the topics listed eroded or ended the freedoms and rights of African Americans. For part three, students should examine the effect the court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* had on African Americans and their rights and freedoms. All news shows and documentaries should have an introduction and conclusion.

8. Students may want to add time-appropriate commercials to their news shows or documentaries. The commercials should be set in the appropriate time period. Two or three commercials would be appropriate.

9. If students choose to do a news show, they should have an anchor who will read the headlines and introduce the reporters and their stories. The reporters will do their stories after the introduction. If students do a news documentary, a similar format will be followed. The documentary will have host or hostess who introduce the topic and provide a led in to each reporter and his/her story.

10. Teachers should videotape all groups and their shows. Students will need to decide if props are needed, and if so, what kinds of props are needed.

11. Before the newscast or documentary begins, assign each student to another student in order to critique his or her report or news story. The critiques should focus on how accurate the newscasts and/or documentaries were. Students should use their own research and notes to determine the accuracy of what they are critiquing.

Less demanding option

Divide students into groups of three. One student will write a brief story about improvement in freedoms for African Americans after the Civil War. Another student will write a brief story about the gradual loss of freedoms for African Americans after Reconstruction ended. The third student will write a brief story about the effect *Plessy v. Ferguson* had on African Americans. These stories will be presented in the form of a newscast.

Assessment

The project should be graded on the following factors:

News Story of the Student (50%)

- Stories deal with the appropriate topics
- Facts of the stories are accurate
- Report is clearly communicated
- Research and preparation are evident

Group News Show or Documentary (50%)

- News show or documentary has a flow to it
- Group has an introduction and conclusion
- News show or documentary is informative
- Commercials, if used, reflect the appropriate time era

Interdisciplinary Connections

This project could be used with English/Language Arts classes, drama classes, speech classes, and/or multimedia classes.

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