Overview

The Underground Railroad was an integral part of United States history. It is through the study of this important part of history that students will learn to evaluate and make judgments about the value of the railroad not only in the past, but also its impact on today’s society. The students will be able to make decisions using literature, geographical maps, historical readings, musical recordings, and photographs on which to base their evaluations and judgments.

Objectives

1. The students will use a map to determine the distribution of slaves in the United States.
2. The students will analyze and interpret life on the Underground Railroad through the use of pictures and small group discussion.
3. The students will analyze and interpret the life of a slave through responding to lyrics and music of that era.

PA Academic Standards

8.1.3.B: Develop an understanding of historical sources
8.1.3.D: Understand historical research
8.3.3.C: Identify important changes in United States history
1.1.3.G: Demonstrate after reading understanding and interpretation of both fiction and nonfiction text
1.2.3.A: Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all subject areas
1.6.3.E : Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations

Lesson Procedure:

1. The students will be placed into small groups (4 students maximum) to begin our discussion on the era of slavery in the United States. Each group will be given a
map that shows the states as either slave-holding or free states. Students will be asked to discuss in their small groups the following questions:
   i. Why do you think this map was created?
   ii. What evidence on the map gives you that idea?
   iii. List 3 things that you think are important on this map.
   iv. Does the information on this map confirm any of the information you may already know about the era of slavery?
   v. Does the map bring any questions to mind that you would now like answered? If so, what are they?

2. Once the small groups have had time to analyze the map and respond to the 5 previous questions, the teacher will bring the class together as a whole to discuss the students’ responses. The class will begin to produce a KWL chart under the teacher’s guidance (what they already Know about slavery, what they Want to know about it, and when the lessons are complete, what they have Learned).

3. The teacher will begin to tell students about the life of a slave: the slave owners kept the slaves illiterate and totally ignorant of geography. Ask the students why they think the owners did not want the slaves to be educated.

4. Have students get back into their small groups and give them each a copy of “The Slaves’ Dream”, song lyrics that were sung by slaves. The lyrics show how slaves were treated “like dogs” and how they dreamt of freedom only to awake to the harsh cruelty of their reality. Ask students to read the lyrics and respond to the following questions as a small group:
   i. How do the lyrics make you feel?
   ii. Why do you think this was written? Is there any specific line that proves your reason?
   iii. List something that these lyrics have taught you about being a slave.
   iv. What would you like to ask the person who wrote these lyrics?

5. Once students have had time to respond, bring the class together as a whole again to have a discussion on their responses. Students and teacher can add to their KWL chart with any new information this song has given them.

6. Tell students that aside from the slave-owners determination to keep slaves uneducated, the slaves knew that freedom lay to the north. (Refer to the map from the beginning of this lesson) Inform students that slaves knew to use the North Star, known as Polaris as their guide to the North. They used the stars of the Big Dipper to locate Polaris. (At this time, show students a picture of Polaris and the Big Dipper by using the book The Sky is Full of Stars).

7. Begin a discussion on the Underground Railroad. Include the following points to get the discussion started:
i. It was not an actual railroad, nor was it underground, but rather a network of paths that led slaves to the north.
ii. Slaves were guided by those who felt that freedom belonged to all humans, and not just the well off.
iii. People opened up their homes and property as “secret hiding places” along the routes being traveled.
iv. Runaway slaves often traveled at night because it offered less chance of being caught.

8. Ask students to get back into their small groups, and give each group the picture titled, The Underground Railroad. Ask students to analyze the picture through answering the following questions.
   i. After studying the picture, what impression does it give you? How do you feel, etc?
   ii. List all of the people, objects and activities in the picture. Who do you think the people are? Where are they going?
   iii. How do you think the people are feeling in this picture? What makes you think this?
   iv. What questions does this picture bring to your mind?

9. For one final time, once the small groups have had time to respond to the questions, bring the class together as a whole to conduct a large group discussion. Again, continue to add to the KWL chart as necessary.

Resources

Online Resources from the Library of Congress:


Webber, Chas T. The underground railroad. c1893. Prints and Photographs Division.
Offline Resources