

Educator Resource

Civil War to Civil Rights: Education

Dates & Eras Reconstruction, Civil Rights

Themes African Americans, Education, Emancipation, Segregation, Separate but Equal, Civil War to Civil Rights

Grades 5–7

Standards VS.8

History Overview

Early in the 1800s, it was illegal for enslaved Virginians to read and write. However, it was not until the 1830's that this restriction extended to free African-Americans. Nat Turner, who was enslaved in Virginia, led a revolt against slavery in 1832. In response, southern legislatures created laws that forbade all African-Americans, free and enslaved, from reading, writing, and assembling. Ultimately, events like Nat Turner's rebellion led White southerners to fear a violent response to slavery from the enslaved. Threats to the expansion of slavery were seen as threats to slavery itself, and seen in a similar light, ultimately leading to secession and the Civil War.

Following the Civil War, Congress passed laws designed to help rebuild the country and bring the southern states back into the Union. This period is known as Reconstruction. During this time, hundreds of thousands of newly freed African Americans needed housing, education, clothing, food, and jobs. The African-American community itself created and supported the earliest form of schooling for African-American Virginians; for example, enslaved Virginians taught each other skills like reading and writing during secret meetings. An example of the African-American community supporting local education efforts is found in Mary S. Peake's story. In the 1850s, Mary S. Peake secretly taught enslaved and free African-Americans in Hampton, Virginia at Fort Monroe. As the United States entered the Civil War, the United States Army officially sanctioned Peake's and that of other African American women's teaching of the formerly enslaved who sought refuge at Fort Monroe.

During Reconstruction, free and freed people passionately supported their schools, feeling that education was essential to their definition of freedom. Between 1861 and 1876, African American teachers like Mary S. Peake outnumbered northern White teachers four to three. The community paid monthly tuition fees, raised funds for teachers' room and board, purchased lots for schoolhouses, and donated the material and labor to build schoolhouses.

Suggested Questions

1. Why do you think there were laws against African American literacy? What effect did lawmakers think literacy would have on enslaved people?
2. How did education in Virginia begin to change during Reconstruction time period?
3. Compare Mary S. Peake's teaching efforts before the Civil War and after the Civil War. What are the similarities? What are the differences? How did she impact the African American community?
4. What do you think life is like for people who are unable to read and write today?

Resources

[Fred Carter on Black Vs. White Schools \(audio clip\)](#)

[African American Literacy Infograph](#)

Additional Links

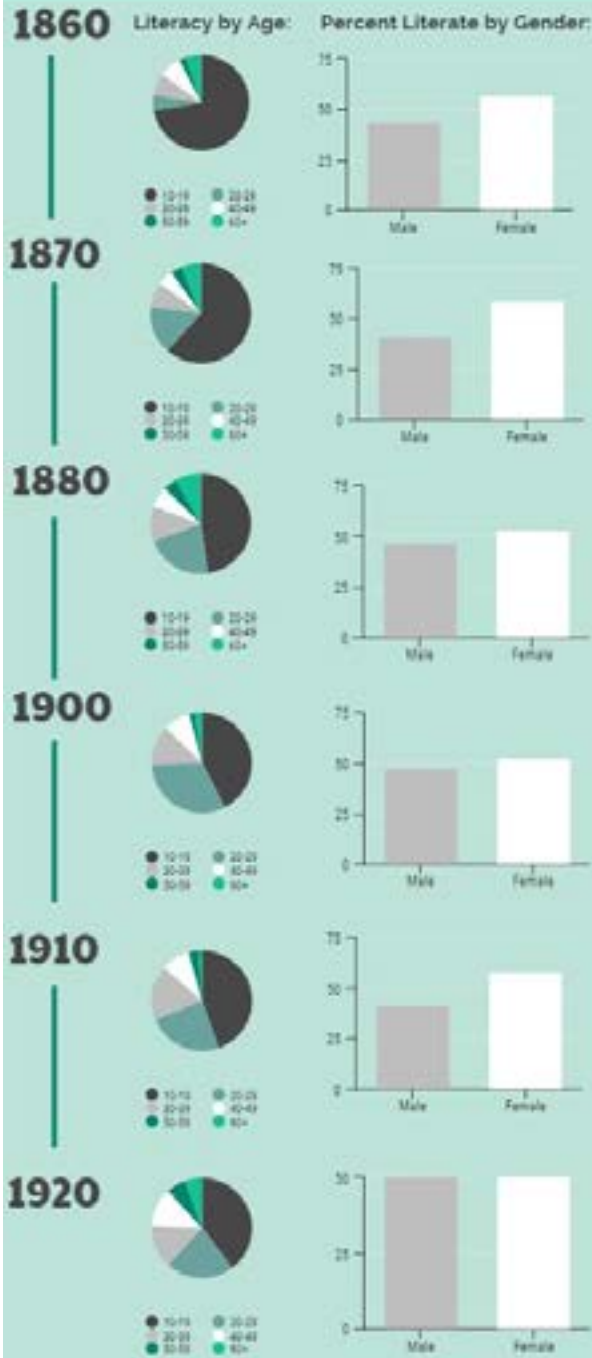
[Unidentified Woman from Lynchburg](#)

Suggested Activities

1. Have the students interpret the information on the literacy infographic. What are the major changes in literacy rates in Appomattox? What age group increased the most from 1860-1920?
2. The oral history clip includes information about the differences between African American schools and white schools. Have the students listen to the clip and create a venn diagram about these differences. Have the students analyze their findings with a partner. This clip could serve as the basis for a research project on African American schools. The students could research Hampton Institute, Christiansburg Institute, or the Tuskegee Institute further. Primary resources can be found on the Library of Congress website. Background information can be found in *Fifty Cents and a Dream: Young Booker T. Washington* by Jabari Asim.
3. Show students the picture of Mary S. Peake and the unidentified African American Woman from Lynchburg. More information about Mary S. Peake, can be found at <http://www.virginiamemory.com/online-exhibitions/exhibits/show/remaking-virginia>. Have the students create a 1 minute representation (this could be a skit, a picture, a comic strip, etc) of the educational experience of an African American.
4. Watch film *Ruby Bridges*: This film presents the real-life tale of young Ruby Bridges (Chaz Monet), one of the first African-American children to attend an integrated school in the Deep South in 1960. At only age 6, Ruby is selected to attend an all-white school in New Orleans, causing an uproar in the racially divided region. Among the people who try to help Ruby adjust to the tense situation are teacher Barbara Henry (Penelope Ann Miller) and Dr. Robert Coles (Kevin Pollak), a child psychiatrist. After the film, have the students critique Ruby Bridges' experience based on what they have learned about African American education.

African-American Literacy: 1860-1920

Appomattox, VA



Population Growth of African Americans in Appomattox:



There is a noticeable decline in the African-American population from 1860 to 1920. While it is outside the scope of this research to determine the causes of such a trend, this decline provides important context for understanding this population.

Literacy Rates of African-American Population by Percent:



This graph shows the overall positive trend toward higher literacy with the exception of the downward trend from 1870 to 1880.

1920 data is not included because most of the records for that year were lost to a fire.