Venture Smith’s Autobiography and Runaway Ad: Enslavement in Early New York
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Coal: An Energy Source to be Reckoned With

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Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes, in the introduction to The Classic Slave Narratives, that more than 6,000 ex-slaves left some form of written testament between 1703 and 1944. Most enslaved Africans were illiterate. There are very few preserved journals or personal letters written by them during their captivity. So where did all these documents come from?

In the long history of human bondage, it was only the black slaves in the United States who—once secure and free in the North, and with the generous encouragement and assistance of northern abolitionists—created a genre of literature [the slave narrative] that at once testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge of every black slave to be free and literate.

On the anti-slavery lecture circuit, in magazines, and in books, ex-slaves told the stories of their lives. Another huge effort at documentation occurred in the next century, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the Federal Writers Project paid scholars and students to travel the South and interview elderly African Americans who were formerly enslaved. More than two thousand narratives were recorded on tape and then transcribed onto paper.

Taken together, these primary documents are a rich historical resource, much of which is now available on the Internet. But advising students to simply “go on the Web” and “search on the key words ‘slave narrative’” would probably lead to confusion for most of the class. Without some guidance from a teacher, students can be overwhelmed by the enormity of the collections, confused by old-fashioned terms and writing style, or misled by reading random bits of the historical record.

Preparing to Read Narratives
Here are some suggestions for how teachers can prepare students for critical reading and learning from these documents.

1. Reduce the volume of examples. Hundreds of choices are overwhelming to middle-level students. Select a small sample of narratives. An excerpt of the Narrative of Venture Smith follows as a handout for students to read and discuss. One good source is the University of Virginia’s online lesson plans at “Documenting the American South.”

2. Many of the narratives are hundreds of pages long. Decide on the topics you want the class to examine. Point students towards the sections they should read.

3. Some of the narratives include painful or sensationalized accounts and long passages about religious beliefs. Teachers need to read all material before assigning it and decide what is appropriate for the age and abilities of their students.

4. Teachers may need to simplify or translate archaic English or material written in non-standard dialects. On the following handout, ellipses (...) show where the editor has removed words, and [brackets] indicate that the editor has added a word. Students should understand that the original document has been excerpted and text altered—as indicated—to clarify meaning.

5. The narratives are from a different historical era. Because of this, African Americans are often referred to as “Negroes” or “colored.”

6. Derogatory and racist language that is unacceptable in our society today appears in these texts. We recommend that teachers discuss the use of language with their classes before beginning the project. This should be an open discussion, not a lecture, because our terms with regard to the human condition are still evolving. For example, some historians believe that the narrators of these accounts should be referred to as “formerly enslaved people” rather than “former slaves,” since slavery is a condition imposed on people, not part of their core identity.

Provide students with background, context, analysis, guiding questions, and related resources, as suggested in the lesson plan below.
The Example of Venture Smith

The paragraphs in the following excerpt from the Narrative of Venture Smith are numbered to make it easy for students to refer to specific passages during discussion (Handout 1). I read aloud the first passage, then ask students to take turns reading the remaining eleven passages. We use the ten questions (at the end of the handout) as a basis for class discussion.5

I chose Smith’s narrative as a teaching resource because it is quite readable, and it clearly describes some of the horrors of slavery as well as the struggle that was required of black men before they could enjoy a semblance of freedom for themselves and their families. Also, Smith’s narrative may surprise some readers in that his experiences of bondage happened not in the South, but in the Colony of New York.6

One interesting detail is that, in the narrative, the unit of currency changes from British pounds to U.S. dollars. The Continental Congress adopted the dollar as the nation’s monetary unit in 1785, when Venture Smith would have been about 56 years old (see discussion question 7 on page 6).

Corroborating Evidence

A problem for historians trying to piece together the past from primary sources is deciding which documents are reliable and which ones are tainted by faulty memory or even intentional obfuscation. There are disputes over the reliability of sources like slave narratives, which may have been ghost-written and which ones are tainted by faulty memory or even intentional obfuscation. Historians find any inconsistencies? For example, Hedly is spelled “Heday” in the ad. It can compare this ad with Smith’s description of the foiled escape attempt. “My master owned a certain Irishman, named Hedly, who about that time formed a plan of secretly leaving his master. After he had long had this plan in meditation, he suggested it to me.” (see passages 6-9 of the narrative, Handout 1).

The runaway slave advertisement published by his “owner” in The New-York Gazette, also in The Weekly Post-Boy on April 1, 1754, verifies much of Venture Smith’s story: The opening reads, “Run away from George Mumford of Fisher’s-Island, the 27th Instant, four Men Servants, a white Man and Three Negroes ...” It goes on to describe Smith in some detail.

Examining the Evidence

After students have read and discussed selections from Smith’s narrative, ask them to examine the runaway ad, and then compare the two documents. Can students itemize the details that appear in both documents?

- location of Mumford’s land
- number of escapees
- name of the group’s leader
- use of a boat
- Smith’s African origins.

On the other hand, can students find any inconsistencies? For example, Hedly is spelled “Heddy” in the ad. It is not unusual that the names of illiterate people of that era might be spelled differently in various documents. Hedly, an Irish immigrant, was apparently an indentured servant, a position in society not much better than that of slave.

Newspaper accounts are not necessarily truthful or accurate, but in this case, the author (Mumford) has a good reason to precisely describe his “escaped property” in a public notice.

Conclusion

Toward the end of the lesson, one might pause to remark that an advertisement for the capture of a human being who is enslaved is a morally repugnant thing. This may seem obvious, but in our enthusiasm to teach the facts of history, we shouldn’t skip over depths of meaning, even if it makes us uncomfortable to recall the truth.

Today, ironically, the runaway notice serves a good purpose as a historical document. The fact that details of Smith’s autobiography are also found in the notice adds credibility to the larger narrative. The corroborating evidence in the runaway advertisement strengthens the conclusion that Venture Smith faithfully related his autobiography to his readers.7

Notes
2. ibid, ix.


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A NARRATIVE
OF THE
LIFE AND ADVENTURES
OF
VENTURE SMITH,
A NATIVE OF AFRICA:
But resident above sixty years in the United States of America.
Related by Himself
New-London:
PRINTED BY C. HOLT, AT THE BEE-OFFICE.
1798.

These passages are excerpted from a longer book, which can be printed from the University of North Carolina website docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture/venture.html. Words in [brackets] were added by the editor to clarify meaning.

(1) I was born at Dukandarra, in Guinea, about the year 1729. My father’s name was Saungm Furro, Prince of the Tribe of Dukandarra. … Our master told us all [the prisoners] to appear to the best possible advantage for sale. I was bought on board by one Robertson Mumford, steward of said vessel, for four gallons of rum, and a piece of calico, and called VENTURE, on account of his having purchased me with his own private venture [money]. Thus I came by my name. All the slaves that were bought for that vessel’s cargo, were two hundred and sixty.

(2) After all the business was ended on the coast of Africa; the ship sailed from thence to Barbadoes … After an ordinary passage, except great mortality by the small pox, which broke out on board, we arrived at the island of Barbadoes; but when we reached it, there were found, out of the two hundred and sixty that sailed from Africa, not more than two hundred alive. These were all sold, except myself and three more, to the planters there. The vessel then sailed for Rhode Island, and arrived there after a comfortable passage. Here my master sent me to live with one of his sisters until he could carry me to Fisher’s Island (New York), the place of his residence. I had then completed my eighth year. After staying with his sister some time, I was taken to my master’s place to live. I was pretty much employed in the house, carding wool and other household business. In this situation I continued for some years, after which my master put me to work out of doors.

(3) I then began to have hard tasks imposed on me. Some of these were to pound four bushels of ears of corn every night in a barrel for the poultry, or be rigorously punished. At other seasons of the year, I had to card wool until a very late hour. These tasks I had to perform when only about nine years old.

(4) Some time after, I had another difficulty and oppression which was greater than any I had ever experienced since I came into this country. For my master having set me off my business to perform that day and then left me to perform it, his son came up to me big with authority, and commanded me very arrogantly to quit my present business and go directly about what he should order me. I replied to him that my master had given me so much to perform that day, and that I must faithfully complete it in that time. He then broke out into a great rage, snatched a pitchfork and went to lay me over the head therewith, but I as soon got another and defended myself with it.

(5) He immediately called some people who were within hearing at work for him, and ordered them to take his hair rope and come and bind me with it. They all tried to bind me, but in vain, though there were three assistants in number. I recovered my temper, voluntarily caused myself to be bound by the same men, and carried before my young master, that he might do what he pleased with me. He took me to a gallows made for the purpose of hanging cattle on, and suspended me on it [with hands bound over my head]….I was released and went to work after hanging on the gallows about an hour.

(6) After I had lived with my master thirteen years, being then about twenty-two years old, I married Meg, a slave of his who was about my own age. My master owned a certain Irishman, named Heddy, who about that time formed a plan of secretly
leaving his master. After he had long had this plan in meditation, he suggested it to me. At first I cast a deaf ear to it, and rebuked Heddry for harboring in his mind such a rash undertaking. But after he had persuaded and much enchanted me with the prospect of gaining my freedom by such a method, I at length agreed to accompany him. Heddry next inveigled [convinced] two of his fellow-servants to accompany us. We stole our master’s boat, embarked, and then directed our course for the Mississippi River. We mutually confederated not to betray or desert one another on pain of death.

(7) We first steered our course for Montauk Point, the east end of Long Island. After our arrival there, Heddry and I made an incursion into the island after fresh water, while our two comrades were left a little distance from the boat, employed in cooking. He returned to our companions and I continued on looking for my object. Heddry went directly to the boat, stole all the clothes in it, and then traveled away for East Hampton. I returned to my fellows not long after. They informed me that our clothes were stolen, but could not determine who was the thief, yet they suspected Heddry, as he was missing.

(8) I then thought it might afford some chance for my freedom, or at least be a palliation [excuse] for my running away, to return Heddry immediately to his master, and inform him that I was induced to go away by Heddry’s address. I informed my master that Heddry was the ringleader of our revolt, and that he had used us ill. He immediately put Heddry into custody, and myself and companions were well received and went to work as usual.

(9) At the close of that year I was sold to a Thomas Stanton, and had to be separated from my wife and one daughter, who was about one month old. He resided at Stonington Point. About a year and a half after that time, my master purchased my wife and her child for seven hundred pounds old tenor. I hired myself out at Fisher’s Island, earning twenty pounds; thirteen pounds six shillings of which my master drew for the privilege and the remainder I paid for my freedom. This made fifty-one pounds two shillings which I paid him.

(10) In October following I went and wrought six months at Long Island. In that six month’s time I cut and corded four hundred cords of wood, besides threshing out seventy-five bushels of grain, and received of my wages down only twenty pounds, which left remaining a larger sum. I returned to my master and gave him what I received of my six months’ labor. This left only thirteen pounds eighteen shillings to make up the full sum of my redemption. My master liberated me, saying that I might pay what was behind if I could ever make it convenient, otherwise it would be well. The amount of the money which I had paid my master towards redeeming my time, was seventy-one pounds two shillings. Being thirty-six years old, I had already been sold three different times, made considerable money with seemingly nothing to derive it from, had been cheated out of a large sum of money, lost much by misfortunes, and paid an enormous sum for my freedom.

(11) My wife and children were yet in bondage to Mr. Thomas Stanton. I worked at various places, and in particular on Ram Island, where I purchased Solomon and Cuff, two sons of mine, for two hundred dollars each. During my residence at Long Island, I raised one year with another, ten cart loads of watermelons. What I made by the watermelons amounted to nearly five hundred dollars. Various other methods I pursued in order to enable me to redeem my family. In the night time I fished with set nets and pots for eels and lobsters, and shortly after went a whaling voyage in the service of Col. Smith. After being out seven months, the vessel returned laden with four hundred barrels of oil.

(12) About this time I became possessed of another dwelling house, and my temporal [worldly] affairs were in a pretty prosperous condition. This and my industry was what alone saved me from being expelled that part of the island in which I resided, as an act was passed by the selectmen of the place, that all Negroes residing there should be expelled. Being about forty-six years old, I bought my oldest child, Hannah for forty-four pounds. I had already redeemed from slavery, myself, my wife and three children, besides three Negro men. About the forty-seventh year of my life I disposed of all my property at Long Island, and came from thence into East Haddam, Conn.

Etching of a runaway slave from the Anti-Slavery Record (July 1837), courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society Press.
Handout 2

Runaway Slave Advertisement

*The New-York Gazette*, April 1, 1754.

Run away from George Mumford of Fisher’s-Island, the 27th Instant, four Men Servants, a white Man and Three Negroes, who hath taken a large two-mast Boat, with a square Stern, and a large white Pine Canoe; the Boat’s Timbers are chiefly red Cedar. The White Man named Joseph Heday, says he is a Native of Newark, in the Jerseys, a short well set fellow of a ruddy complexion…. Venture had a Kersey dark colour’d Great Coat, three Kersey jackets, two pair of Breeches of the same, a new cloth colour’d Fly-Coat, with red shaloon lining, a green ratteen Jacket, almost new, a crimson birded stuff ditto, a pair of large Ozenbrigs Trowsers, a new felt hat, two pairs of shoes, one pair new, several pair of Stockings; he is a very tall fellow, 6 feet 2 inches high, thick, square shoulders, large bon’d, mark’d in the face, or scar’d with a knife in his own country.

Discussion Questions

*Read the selections from the autobiography. Then discuss questions 1 – 8.*

1. How did Venture Smith arrive on Fisher’s Island?

2. How was he treated as a young man? What evidence supports your view?

3. Why did he allow himself to be tied up by his master’s son?

4. How could a white man, the “Irishman, named Heddy,” be “owned” like a slave?

5. In your opinion, was Smith right to turn in his fellow escapee Heddy? Explain your reasoning.

6. Who were the slaves that Venture Smith himself purchased in later years?

7. In Venture Smith’s narrative, the unit of currency changes from British pounds to dollars. Why would this have happened?

8. What do you learn about life for African Americans in the colony of New York by reading the autobiography of Venture Smith?

*Read the runaway slave advertisement from 1754 and compare it with the autobiography. Then discuss questions 9 – 11.*

9. What details of the autobiography are replicated in the runaway ad? (Hint: there are at least five details that appear in both documents.)

10. Are there any details of the autobiography that are different from or contradicted in the runaway ad?

11. Why does the runaway ad support the conclusion that Venture Smith faithfully related his autobiography to his readers?
Classroom Debates Made Easy

Kathleen M. Doyle

Are you reluctant to hold a debate in your class because you are not sure how to organize one? Are you afraid a debate could turn into a “free-for-all”? Or perhaps you don’t know how to ensure an intelligent discussion among middle school students. Maybe you are already pressed for time and fear that a debate would take up too much time for preparation and follow-through. For years, I wanted to conduct debates in my classrooms, and for years I avoided them. When I finally decided to take the plunge, I “winged” it. After much trial and error, I am finally satisfied with my classroom debates.

Debates are exciting and rewarding, for both teacher and students. Today, debates are my students’ favorite activity. I can conduct a quick and engaging whole-class debate through one homework assignment and one class period, or a more thorough debate over several class periods.

Setting Objectives
The approach you choose will depend upon your objectives. If you want a whetting of appetites for a new unit, or a break in the routine, or an alternative assessment at the end of a unit, a speedy debate can work. If you are aiming to teach research skills, analysis of bias, persuasive writing, and more in-depth coverage of content, a lengthier whole-class debate is in order. If teamwork, cooperation, and more individual accountability are your goals, a debate between teams can be effective.

Usually in a social studies class, the teacher will introduce a controversial issue in the form of a question, such as: Should social security be privatized? But in a debate format, it is important to have an assertive statement, which speakers will either support or oppose. Propositions my students have debated include:

- Social Security should be privatized
- Welfare should be the responsibility of the states.
- Dropping the atomic bomb was a war crime.
- Marijuana should be legalized.
- Creationism should be taught in public schools.
- The death penalty is just and effective.
- Affirmative action is necessary and effective.
- The Confederate flag is a racist symbol.
- An Equal Rights Amendment will increase equality for women.

Propositions can be about historical or current events, depending on the subject of the unit of study.

Motivating Students
I have worked as a special education teacher and as a “regular” social studies teacher in a variety of settings with students of varying abilities, from grade eight through twelve. In my 20 years of teaching, I have found that even the students who are truly afraid of speaking in class find debates exhilarating. All of the students quickly learn that the better their research, the more fun they have in the debate.

Often the first debate of the year is a little like the first pancake — a bit sloppy. The students are easily motivated after their first experience to work harder the second time around. Over the course of the school year, you will witness your students’ research, critical thinking, and public speaking skills improve far beyond what they were before. Debates inspire students to do their best work. What more can a teacher want? Debates make teaching social studies easy!

Whole-Class Debates

Day one: Give some tips on finding and selecting appropriate sites, and steering clear of problematic sites. The internet makes finding information on any given topic so much easier than “in the old days.” Fifteen years ago, I had to allow at least a week for students to find appropriate articles or books to use in their research. Now, I simply tell my students to bring in four articles for the next class period: Two articles that support the proposition and two that oppose the proposition. The trade-off, however, is that the students need to be more sophisticated in their selection of sources.

Guidance from the teacher about sources is critical. When my class finished learning about Prohibition, we did a debate on whether marijuana should be legalized. Some of the articles the students brought in were not exactly scholarly. I suggested that there were plenty of medical, university, and otherwise scholarly studies supporting and opposing legalization, and that while “joesstonedcafe.net” might make some interesting points, such a source was not acceptable. (I made
that one up, but similar ones do exist.)

Students are encouraged to challenge one another’s sources during debates.

**Day two:** Distribute the Handout and explain the components of a model argument (Part I):

- The proposition is the statement students will either support or oppose. Try to phrase the proposition without negatives. For example, a proposition that states, “The U.S. should never have dropped the atomic bomb” is a poorly worded proposition when you are trying to teach students to also understand the terms “affirmative” and “negative.” It is better to phrase the proposition as, “Dropping the atomic bomb was necessary,” or “The United States committed a war crime when it dropped the atomic bomb.”

- Affirmative arguments support the proposition and negative arguments refute the proposition. A proposition should be fairly general so as to allow a variety of more specific arguments. For example, an argument in support of the proposition above could be, “Truman hoped that using an atomic weapon against Japan would intimidate Stalin.”

- Evidence includes quotes, statistics or other important information from knowledgeable people, usually professional experts in a field (depending on the issue), but can include first-hand accounts by witnesses or participants.

- Sources must be cited for each piece of evidence. Students should list the author, the title of the article, the title of the journal or website, and the date the information was published. A web address (URL) alone is insufficient. If your school emphasizes a particular style of research writing such as APA or MLA, the students should use that method with their citations.

- A conclusion reveals whether the student understands what he or she has written, particularly when the stated argument is vague and the evidence is too directly quoted.

After reviewing these components of a well-reasoned argument, distribute several appropriate articles that students can use in addition to the articles they may bring in. (This has the added advantage of keeping the students busy who did not do their homework.)

Ask a student to read aloud the Model Argument about requiring students to wear a school uniform (Handout, Part II). Explain that each student will write four arguments (two affirmative and two negative), and that each student must show you his or her arguments as they are completed. After students have had some practice writing arguments, I usually insist on seeing two arguments by the end of a class period (90 minutes). Students who have worked diligently, yet who have been unable to finish two arguments, may have until the start of the next class (after which I begin deducting late points).

While the students are working, look over the articles they brought in. Check the sources. Sometimes students will “cut and paste” articles from a webpage without including source information. They must have the source information in order to receive full credit.

**Day three:** I allow another class period for working on the arguments. At this point, I check to see that arguments are correctly identified as affirmative or negative, that the students cite a different source for each piece of evidence, and that they have written a conclusion. I also check that students have copied the proposition as originally written at the top of both affirmative and negative arguments. (When students list their negative arguments, they often revise the wording of the proposition so that its position is reversed. This is incorrect.)

The four completed arguments are due at the end of class. Again, if they have been working diligently, as long as the four arguments are done by the start of the next class, I do not mark their work late.

I read through the rules for debate (Handout, Part III) and discuss any questions that students may raise about these rules.

**Day four:** The debate begins! Have students arrange their chairs or desks into a circle so that they can see one another. You will need to have some type of object that students can gently throw or hand to the next speaker. I use a Nerf ball.

On a notepad, I map out where each student is sitting. As someone speaks, I make a slash next to his or her name. If he or she uses research in the statement, I cross the slash. Thus I have a record of how frequently each student spoke, and whether each speaker cited a source for a statement.

To start off the debate, I review the rules and summarize the issue. Sometimes I’ll ask for a show of hands to see who supports the proposition. If a large majority supports one side, I encourage students to play devil’s advocate, taking on the minority point of view. Occasionally, I will remind students to pass the ball to others who haven’t gotten it yet. Mostly, I try to sit back, observe, and let the students select the next speaker (by passing the ball). Sometimes I do need to step in and referee, but rarely. I ring a bell on my desk if I need everyone to stop talking.

At the end of the debate, I offer some comments and observations and have the kids put the chairs back into rows.

I collect each student’s four completed arguments for grading. I weigh the grades 50 percent for participation in the debate and 50 percent for their written arguments.

**Conducting a Speedy Debate**

After students have had practice doing whole-class debates, they can easily handle a speedy debate. For a speedy debate, I will give students a “heads up” several days in advance. I provide articles and suggest that they add some articles of their own to their debate research. I distribute the articles and write the
proposition on the board. If no class time can be devoted to preparation, I usually require that students complete only two arguments for homework: one affirmative and one negative. I encourage students to write extra arguments for extra credit. On the date of the debate, we follow the same procedure described earlier.

Conducting Team Debates
Team debates hold each individual student more accountable than do whole class debates. They are quite exciting, but also more time-consuming. Team debates work best after students have had practice with whole class debates.

At the end of my Civil Rights unit of study, I have debates about affirmative action, the Confederate flag, reparations for slavery, and harsher punishments for hate crimes. In a class of twenty-four students, I assign six students to each proposition. Teams of three will develop at least four affirmative arguments and four negative arguments, working together over several days. They will also prepare for rebuttals (which are not necessarily the same as arguments; they can be brief but pointed replies which make sense in light of an earlier statement).

In a class of 90 minutes, we can get through two team debates. The students who are not debating, will observe, take notes, and vote for the team that presented the best evidence, and that had the best performance (sometimes the best performers do not have the best evidence, and the ability to tell the difference is an essential skill for citizens, who must think critically).

We flip a coin to see which team will begin as the affirmative side. The affirmative team presents its four arguments, one at a time, allowing the negative team to rebut each argument. A time limit of 30 seconds for each argument and rebuttal is helpful. The members of the rebutting team should try to rebut a statement without giving away all of their arguments, which they hope to present later. (This rhetorical pacing gets easier with practice.) Then the negative team presents. After all arguments are presented, the teams switch sides. The new affirmative team presents first. Some arguments might now be redundant, but switching sides allows more information to get presented to the class, and in cases where one side of the debate is clearly more difficult to support, switching sides makes the process fair. (If time is short, each team might only present two of its arguments before switching sides.) After the debate, if there is time, I allow students to ask questions.

Notes
2. Often, when employing a Google online search, a Wikipedia entry will appear. Unless you have previewed the entries, instruct students to avoid these “open encyclopedia” articles, which are written without the usual oversight of reviewers and editors. See the letter to the editor “The Drawbacks of Wikipedia” by Deanna Buhr in Social Education, March 2006, page 61.

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I. Components of a Model Argument

(A) The proposition is the statement that you will strive to either support or oppose.

(B) Affirmative arguments will support the proposition and negative arguments will refute the proposition.

(C) Evidence includes quotes, statistics, or other important information from knowledgeable people.

(D) Sources must be cited for each piece of evidence. The author, the title of the article, the title of the journal, newspaper, or website, and the date of publication should all be cited. A web address (URL) alone is insufficient.

(E) Your conclusion will show how well you can succinctly summarize the evidence and argument. It also reveals how well you understand what you have written earlier.

II. A Model Argument about School Uniforms

Proposition: Wearing school uniforms improves the overall social and academic atmosphere of the school.

Affirmative Argument: Wearing school uniforms improves student behavior.

Evidence #1: Many teachers and administrators perceive improved behavior when students wear uniforms. According to an article entitled “Uniform Effects” by Debra Viadero (Education Week, January 12, 2005, pp. 27-29), Principal Rudolph Saunders of Stephen Decatur Middle School in Clinton, Maryland, states that students simply behave better when they are dressed in uniforms. “It’s like night and day. We have ‘dress down’ days, and the kids’ behavior is just completely different on those days.” He also perceives that students fight less and they focus on their schoolwork more. Teacher Betty Mikesell-Bailey, from the same school, says that in-school suspensions have declined and test scores have gone up since they instituted uniforms. Students no longer bully one another over their clothing.

Evidence #2: Long Beach, California was one of the first big-city school districts to adopt uniforms in 1994. Within the first year, crime dropped twenty-two percent (Alexis Aguilar, “Belleville West High Sizes Up Uniform Policy,” St. Louis Post Dispatch, September 9, 2004). Schools in and around St. Louis began adopting uniforms in 2000, and according to Superintendent Jed Deets of the Cahokia school district, behavior has improved. He also states that dress down days invite “a marked increase in behavior problems.”

Conclusion: A requirement that students wear uniforms seemed to improve discipline in some schools where this was tried.

III. Rules of Debate

(A) The individual holding the ball is the only person who may speak. When finished, pass the ball to a person with an opposing argument. Give everyone a chance to speak.

(B) Attack the argument, not the person. Any insult results in a deduction from your participation grade.

(C) Earn full credit by quoting from your evidence (and understanding what you have quoted).

(D) Some credit can be earned if you make logical arguments without citing research, but it is best to cite your sources.

(E) A minimum of points can be earned by simply participating. Enthusiasm is good.

(F) Zero points for zero participation. (Absentees must write a persuasive essay that cites from their research.)
King Coal: A Piece of Eastern Pennsylvania History

Jill M. Beccaris and Christine Woyschner

Forty years I worked with a pick and drill,
Down in the mines against my will,
The Coal King’s slave, but now it’s passed
Thanks be to God I am free at last.

— Tombstone of an anthracite miner in Hazleton, Pennsylvania

Our heritage and culture are the threads that keep our past interwoven with our present and future. We, the authors, are descendants of coal miners and steel workers who emigrated from Poland to Northeastern Pennsylvania around the turn of the nineteenth century. During our own public schooling in Pennsylvania and New York, we saw little of our own families’ heritage in the history we were taught. Nonetheless, we know from family stories and independent study that we have a rich heritage to share with our students.

Differences in family background and culture make each of us unique, and a skillful teacher can integrate these differences into her units of study about state, national, and world history. Students’ family members, especially elders, can also be a bountiful resource in this respect.

Today, the Pennsylvania standards for teaching history require that we teach about the importance of coal mining in our state’s history (section 8.2). The three-week unit of study we describe here is geared to upper-elementary and middle-school students, but could be amended for high school students and fewer lessons. The topics of coal mining, silk mills, and steel mills link to history lessons that are taught in every state—lessons about immigration, industrialization, and the labor movement.

The following activities guide students in answering some “essential questions” about this time and place in history:

• What was the role of child labor in coal mining in Eastern Pennsylvania around 1900?
• How did children participate in the growth of labor unions and the establishment of workers’ rights?
• How did the coal mining industry shape the economic and social development of towns in our region of the United States?
• How did the coal mining industry influence the lives of immigrants who moved to Eastern Pennsylvania during this period?

Reading Aloud
We begin by reading aloud chapter two of Growing Up in Coal Country to make an initial, personal connection between the students’ experiences today and those of children one hundred years ago. This book provides rich details about the youth—the breaker boys, nippers, spraggers, and mule drivers—who worked in the collieries (the mine and its attendant buildings and railroads). A brief class discussion follows, in which we compare what parents and other adults expect of children today, as opposed with what adults expected in the past, in “coal country,” 1900.

The teacher passes out Handout 1, telling students to read it silently. The handout provides a sample of oral history, passed down to me (J.M.B) by my grandfather, whose own father survived an explosion in the mines. The class discusses some of the hazards of mine work, which are also described in the final pages of the first reading.

Writing a Letter, 1901
We ask students, as their first activity, to imagine this: You are a ten-year-old boy, living in 1901, who is about to start working in a Pennsylvania coal mine. You are sitting beside a wax-paper window in a small wooden house in the foothills, writing a letter to “a friend.” In your letter, address questions such as: What time will you get up? What will you wear? What sort of work will you do? How long will you be down in the mine each day? Do you get a day off? When will you finish your schooling?

Challenge students to tell the reader what this child might be feeling, just before “going off to work in the mines.” Invite students to imagine that “the friend” they are writing to is, in fact, themselves in the present day.

Spinning a Web
In addition to this writing assignment,
another activity that begins in the first week is the development of a web that loosely charts what a student is learning about the topic.

The students begin with a program like Inspiration (the Rapid Fire option is great for this) or with chart paper. The teacher writes the generative topic of “coal mining” in the middle of the web, then students state what they know or think they know about the topic. They add to the web as they research their patch town role (see below); they also reflect on readings and activities by writing in their journals. The students can add new information to the web and “correct” errors with supporting evidence.

Teachers can choose to have students complete an additional web in cooperative groups (based on one’s place of employment in the patch village, described below), or just build upon the large class web. Students revisit and revise their webs about three times a week. The finished web can serve as an alternative assessment.

**Viewing a Map**

On the third day of the unit, we project onto the wall a map of the anthracite region of Pennsylvania (page 84 of *Kids On Strike!*), as well as display a physical map of the United States. (Anthracite is the hardest and cleanest-burning type of coal.) Ask students some questions about the maps.

- In what part of Pennsylvania did geologists find anthracite coal? (In the Eastern part.)
- Compare the two maps. Do the coal deposits follow the shape of a particular landform? For example, do you find coal collected at the bottom of lakes? (No, the coal veins follow a ridge of mountains.)
- What is the name of these mountains in Eastern Pennsylvania? (The Pocono Mountains are part of the larger Appalachian Mountain Range.) This region contains the largest known deposit of anthracite coal in the world.4
- After coal is mined, it must be transported to places where it is needed— to cities and factories. What obstacles or aid does the landscape of Eastern Pennsylvania present to this effort? (Mountains hinder transport; rivers might help.)
- Name some of the major rivers, and trace their route to the sea. What major cities are located on the shores of these rivers?

**Playing a Role**

A “patch town” is a village where coal miners lived and worked. The coal company owned and operated all aspects of these towns. We give students two class periods to research these “patch towns” or “patch villages” with books (especially chapter 5 of *Growing Up in Coal Country*), classroom resources, and websites.

To give this activity a sharp focus, we tell students to research a specific occupation for a patch town resident. These jobs, many of which involve work at the colliery, are determined when students draw slips of paper from a miner’s helmet. Students should learn about all of the facets of the chosen occupation.

Students should read additional literature, such as *Coal Miner’s Bride*, and *The Coal King’s Slaves* to provide a foundation for them to compare and contrast life in the early 1900s with life today.

The culminating activity for these lessons is the “hot seat.” During this activity, students take on the role of their character, answering questions from the teacher and classmates about their occupation.3 The class also created a patch town with their characters as the residents; they simulated a mine disaster and created an ethnic cookbook.

**Reading Testimony**

The final set of activities, which require five class periods, focus on labor history — how coal workers organized to acquire basic rights such as safe working conditions and fair pay.

Chapter 8 of *Growing Up in Coal Country* summarizes in ten short pages the evolution of labor organizing — from the secret Molly Maguires of the mid-1800s, which terrorized mine bosses and owners, to the United Mine Workers, which organized regional strikes to bring the concerns of the miners to the attention of Congress, the courts, the president, and the rest of the nation.

We read aloud the passage on page 107 of *Kids On Strike!* about ten-year-old Andrew Chippie, who attorney Clarence Darrow placed in the “hot seat.” Andrew spoke his “harrowing tale” on the stand before Theodore Roosevelt’s Anthracite Commission, which studied miners’ grievances after the Strike of 1902.

**Analyzing Lyrics**

Toward the end of the unit of study, students listen to a folk song, and then read and explicate the lyrics song. (Lyrics and MIDI sound clips are available at websites, and recordings may be available at your local library).4 Challenge students to apply the knowledge they have acquired to decipher the meaning of the words. Take, for example, the folk song “Sixteen Tons,”

I loaded sixteen tons  
Of number nine coal  
And the strawboss hollered,  
“Well, damn my soul.”

You load Sixteen Tons,  
And what do you get?  
Another day older  
And deeper in debt

Saint Peter don’t you call me  
‘Cause I can’t go  
I owe my soul  
To the company store…

Can students recall the fact that mines, stores, and other valuable properties in the patch towns were often owned by the same company?

We might ask students to read the lyrics of “The Death of Mother Jones” and explain why Mary Harris Jones was a hero of the labor movement (as explained in chapter 5 of *Kids On Strike!*).

What does each song convey about the life of a coal miner? What could coal miners hope for? What options did they have to fight the terrible working conditions?
Posters, Interviews, & Poems
Students could research further the circumstances leading up to the Strike of 1902, which affected the entire country, or Mother Jones’ Children’s Crusade of 1903. The presentation of their research could take any creative form, such as writing in a journal or composing a newspaper. Students could make authentic-looking posters to recruit new immigrants to work in the mines, or posters calling for a regional strike. As a culminating activity, the students could debate the Coal Strike of 1902. Should President Theodore Roosevelt have acted sooner to end the strike, or to help the workers? To what extent did the Anthracite Commission solve the workers’ problems?

In our region of Pennsylvania, there are people with personal memories of coal mining and millwork whom students could interview. Students practiced with each other in the classroom before interviewing an adult family member or friend.5

In other parts of the country, students might interview grandparents about the work that that generation did. Students can give an oral report to the class about their interviews, or create a biographical free-verse (non-rhyming) poem to be presented in class.

Composing a Timeline
The culminating activity is the construction of a time line that grows along one wall of the classroom. Students connect pictures, artwork, and text on note cards to the timeline with strands of yarn. Information that students have collected in their notes, webs, and artwork gets integrated into this timeline.

My students are very savvy with Power Point and spreadsheet applications. Also, the website www.readwritethink.org has a great timeline generator. A low-tech timeline with strands of yard also works well. The timeline on the handout shows what one eighth grader perceived as the most important events of that era.

Conclusion
It is important for teachers and students to see their own experiences reflected in the history curriculum. As educators, it is our responsibility to make that link between the individual and society, and to offer students guidance in examining “who we are” as a region, state, and nation.

Some of the activities we have described are based on family and local history, but they also have general applicability. The region that we explored, our own area of Eastern Pennsylvania, offers a snapshot of what was occurring in many places in the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

We hope that, from the examples in this lesson, teachers will be inspired to use many resources—primary historical evidence, maps, museum visits, interviews with elderly citizens, nonfiction for children, and music—in lessons that they create about their state’s history.6

Notes
6. A version of this article first appeared in the Social Studies Journal 52 (Spring, 2004) of the Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies.


Answers from the BACK PAGE
1a, 2c, 3b, 4c, 5a, 6d, 7b

Resources for Students


For Teachers

Working in the Mines: Historical Background

By Jill M. Beccaris, social studies teacher. This history is based on an interview, February 14, 2003.

Like many immigrants in Northeastern Pennsylvania, my maternal grandparents lived in a town created by the industry of coal mining. The town, Hudson, Pennsylvania, was also home to a silk mill that employed my grandmother, Helen Stachowski. Her great-grandfather and grandfather worked in the coal mines, after coming to America from Poland.

My grandfather, John Stachowski, was six years old when he began to work in the mines. He tells many stories of the hardship and prosperity that the mines brought to towns like Hudson and dozens of others that span the Anthracite area, with names like Wilkes-Barre, Scranton, and Hazleton.

The anthracite rich region covers 1,400 square miles of Northeastern Pennsylvania. The early European settlers of this region used soft bituminous coal for heating and cooking. Anthracite coal was hard and, therefore, difficult to light. Anthracite was also difficult to mine. Not until 1808, when Judge Jesse Fell from Wilkes-Barre invented a furnace grate that would burn anthracite coal efficiently, did people realize its potential value.

In the early 1800s, canals were built to transport barges full of coal from towns in the hills to the main waterways such as the Delaware, Lehigh, Schuykill, and Susquehanna Rivers. Then the railroad was invented. The “anthracite railroad” companies (the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western, the Lehigh Valley, the Central Railroad of New Jersey) grew rich and acquired many of the coal mines in the region. In the period from 1875 to 1924, the production of anthracite coal increased from 23 million tons to 90 million tons, annually.

The mining of coal in this region shaped the economic and social development of towns in Northeastern Pennsylvania during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coal created the wealth that built the towns. Coal fueled the engines in silk and cotton mills and the furnaces in the steel mills. Coal fueled the steam engines that pulled the trains. Coal was carried to the cities, where it heated homes and buildings. And coal created the jobs that drew immigrants to the region.

The demand for cheap labor in the collieries (the name given to the coal mines and their surrounding buildings, railroads, etc.) led hundreds of thousands of people to emigrate from Europe. Men and boys worked in the mines, and women and girls could work in the silk mills—this meant employment for all that were able. Child labor was cheap, and families were poor, so many children did not attend school, or left after only a few grades. They went to work in the mines and the mills instead.

Accidents led to the injury or death of many miners and mill employees. For example, young boys lost fingers or limbs in the machinery of the breakers, where they sorted chunks of coal as it rolled down chutes, or as “spraggers,” jabbing long pieces of wood under the wheels of mine cars to slow them. “Bobbin girls” caught their fingers, hair, or clothing in the spinning machinery of the silk mills.

In 1910, at the age of twenty-five, my great-grandfather survived a mine explosion. When he came to, he thought he was still in the mine because everything was dark. He asked a fellow miner for a cigarette, only to discover that he had lost his sight and both

A Student’s Timeline of King Coal in Pennsylvania

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1750</th>
<th>1800</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coal discovered in Pennsylvania (1762)</td>
<td>First recorded strike in the mines (1842)</td>
<td>Avondale Mine Disaster (fire, 1869)</td>
<td>UMWA leads a large strike in 1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining begins in Wilkes-Barre, PA (ca. 1776)</td>
<td></td>
<td>John Mitchell was president of United Mine Workers of America from 1898 to 1908</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of his hands in the explosion. First aid, quickly administered to stop the flow of blood, had saved his life. But he would never work again.

When his son, my grandfather, was six years old, he would accompany his blind father on a trolley to the local “beer garden” to “pass the can” to the miners for donations to feed his family. My grandfather would often tell me, “I was never a boy, always a man. I had no choice, and responsibility to my family.” I think my grandfather meant that he had “no choice” but to grow up quickly and strive for the basic necessities of life. My grandfather was six years old in 1918.

Disasters like these inspired workers to organize into unions and fight for safety regulations, healthy working conditions, child labor laws, and compensation plans to help workers and their families after an accident.

Notes
2. Sheldon Spear and Robert Janosov, Chapters in Northeastern Pennsylvania History (Shavertown, PA: Jemags, 1999), 133-139.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1902</th>
<th>1917</th>
<th>1959</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strike of 1902 for more than 100 days wins national attention</td>
<td>Peak production, 180,000 workers, 100 million tons of coal mined (1914-1917)</td>
<td>Knox Mine Disaster marks decline of deep mining in the region (flood)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
COAL: A Fuel to be Reckoned With

If you think of coal as a fuel of the past—a fuel for railroad steam engines and old basement furnaces—well, think again. Coal is very much a part of the energy we use today and will need tomorrow. This fact presents both opportunities and problems for consumers and citizens.

Make your best guess in answering these questions, and then check against the answers on page 13. Visit the websites listed below to learn more.

1. Today, coal generates about ____% of the electricity produced by power plants in the United States.
   a) 50  b) 90  c) 25  d) 10

2. The nation with the largest known coal reserves is _________________.
   a) Saudi Arabia
   b) Brazil
   c) The United States
   d) Russia

3. The burning of coal creates about ____% of the carbon dioxide pollution in the United States today. (CO₂ is the main greenhouse gas linked with global warming).
   a) 7  b) 37  c) 57  d) 87

4. In 2005, _____ people died in coal mine accidents in the United States. (In the early 1900s, there were nearly 3,000 deaths per year!)
   a) 2  b) 12  c) 22  d) 122

5. Today, about ____% of the U.S. coal industry’s work force belongs to a labor union.
   a) 28  b) 55  c) 75  d) 90

6. Which of these states is not among the top five suppliers of coal?
   a) Wyoming  b) Texas  c) Pennsylvania  d) Florida

7. Most of the coal (more than 90%) burned in the United States today is used to
   a) heat buildings
   b) generate electricity
   c) create synthetics and plastics
   d) melt iron and steel

Sources