

Local Slave Narratives from the WPA:

Lesson Plan

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Lesson Plan

Grade Levels: 10-12

Duration of Lesson: 50 minutes to 90 minutes

Learning Objectives

- Analyze the oral history of former slaves to better understand their lives both before and after slavery
- Evaluate the possible limitations of these oral histories (additional or extension activity)

Summary:

Students will read a narrative taken from a former slave that lived in their local area. They will have the opportunity to see where they lived after manumission and how their lives changed. If the teacher chooses, the students will also be able to look into the possible limitations of sources like these.

Materials:

- Technology access for the students; either individually or per group
- Slave Narrative from the Federal Writers' Project (see link below)
- Discussion Questions

Instructional Background Material:

The WPA, or Works Progress Administration, was a vast project enacted under the New Deal to employ out of work Americans in various sectors of the economy- including historians. One of the largest projects was the Federal Writer's Project: Slave Narrative project where historians attempted to interview every surviving former enslaved person that was still alive in the late 1930's. They amassed thousands of oral histories and collected photos of many of their subjects.

Preparation:

It will take teachers some time to locate narratives so allow time to search through the Library of Congress website.

Instructional Steps:

1. Teacher should locate a narrative from a former enslaved person via the website at the Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>. The link will take instructors to the Library of Congress landing page. Each state is listed on that landing page. Texas is Vol. 16 and contains 4 parts with narratives arranged

alphabetically. Teachers should ensure that the oral history they choose is from their local community or as close to their local community as they can locate geographically. To do this, simply open a link under the state and search the pdf for your local city. Be sure that the narrative that you chose has an address in the heading.

2. Please note, these are written as the subjects spoke. ELL students may need additional help deciphering the dialect.
3. Have students read the interview in groups or on their own.
4. Have students google the address listed on their narrative. Students are often familiar with the relative locations of the homes or the neighborhoods the subjects once lived in.
5. Teacher can allow the students to discuss the discussion questions on the handout as a small group or in a class setting.

Post-Assessment:

Teachers should use the following questions to facilitate a post lesson discussion:

- Are there any potential problems with recording these memories almost seventy years after they occurred?

Extension Activities:

- Teachers may want to familiarize themselves with the Library of Congress's page on the limitations of these oral histories. (Link: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/limitations-of-the-slave-narrative-collection/>) Students find that the subjects often look back on slavery more fondly than they might have thought they would. This can surprise some students and it is good to antagonize why. Teacher can facilitate a discussion on potential problems with oral histories that are taken long after the fact, when the subjects are discussing their childhoods, and during a period when many of these subjects are experiencing profound poverty as a result of the Great Depression.