

# **Replicate the History of the Black Bottom**

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## **Overview**

Hello visitors, Welcome to Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. My name is Myrtle Bastien and I will serve as your tour guide of West Philadelphia. I will tour an area once known as “The Black Bottom”. My position as a history teacher ten years in a high school located in what was known as Black Bottom gives me some knowledge of the area. This knowledge I will share with you in a snapshot overview. I will present my information in a manner, which hopefully gives you, the visitor, ample information that you may easily use as mini classroom lessons.

I want to share with you some aspects of the neighborhood reaction toward eminent domain and the community support for University City High School. I want you to continue to focus on a critical question: Was eminent domain good for the residents of the West Philadelphia Black Bottom?

## **Rationale**

This unit is designed to supplement the African American History Curriculum. It will start during the month of April when the Harlem Renaissance is studied and end in June when the contributions of African Americans in our own times are highlighted in the curriculum. The class consists of 33 inner-city students in a non-graded classroom. They will have a basic understanding of the history of the community, and the characteristics that make that particular community distinguished from other Philadelphia neighborhoods.

This unit will give students an opportunity to research historical documents such as newspaper articles, maps, census data, and photographs. The students will also conduct interviews, act out certain scenes from a play written about the Black Bottom, and create an historical marker for the school. Lessons will include neighborhood walks, visits by an archivist, and lectures.

I want students to have experience using primary sources to better know about the workforce and industries that were located in the area. I want my students to analyze and critically think about the how's and why's of, "Was eminent domain good for the residents of West Philadelphia black bottom?" By participating in the lessons the students will consider the positive and negative effects of eminent domain on the residents. How can we balance the dilemma of displacement vs. development? They will also learn how this neighborhood shaped the rich history of Philadelphia, and come to appreciate the many contributions of African Americans.

### Historical Background

In 1950 Philadelphia was a center of high tech industry. Philadelphia was then the third-largest city in the country, and the region was headquarters to many leading electronic and advanced scientific firms. These sectors were concentrated almost entirely on the east coast at the time. Philadelphia firms and entrepreneurs had access to necessary private financing. The University of Pennsylvania was a prestigious research institution. The nation's first computer was developed there. The Philadelphia region and its leading university had innumerable financial, industrial and technological advantages. Philadelphia, however, failed to grow high tech industries. Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania struggled throughout this period with sharp economic decline and a shift of jobs and people to the suburbs. The University and the city government wanted to keep professional people and scientific industries centralized. They tried to stem scientific suburbanization and economic segregation by working during this period to build a "city of knowledge".

West Philadelphia's swift racial transition began in the early 1940's. The expansion of the University of Pennsylvania and the builders of West Philadelphia's city of knowledge adhered to a painful racial disharmony. White professional families seemed to have little problem with minorities of their class and background but had little tolerance for working class minorities. The presence of large numbers of poor blacks was incompatible with the "new" community of scientific production.

The University City project sought to retain and lure academic and professional families of progressive politics and racial integration was celebrated. The presence of large numbers of poor blacks was not compatible with the plan to preserve the economic and cultural life of the city.

There were differences of opinions on what West Philadelphia was and should become. University City became home to the urban renewal area for the University City Science Center and for the new science-focused University City High School. The Redevelopment Authority estimated that of the 574 families living in the area, 467 non-white residents would be displaced. Black residents had been living and working in the area for a short time and tended to rent more than own their homes. The African Americans who lived in the area in the early 1960's had lived in their current home for less than five years and had lived in Philadelphia less than a generation. The relative

recent arrivals of these West Philadelphia residents made their housing and employment situations precarious. Having had little time to establish themselves financially in the city, their eviction from the area plunged them into deep poverty.

The University of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia paid little attention to the concerns of these residents. By the late 1970's there were very few residents left. Demolition and new construction had forced them to move. The Science Center was achieving a degree of critical mass and its completion was inevitable. The administrators from the University and their allies were frustrated at the strong objections raised about demolition of a neighborhood that they deemed ugly with cheap rooming houses and low grade shops.

The story of the University of Pennsylvania and West Philadelphia demonstrated how class biases intersected with racial prejudices in the creating of the city of knowledge. Poor people had no place in this new kind of community. The residents of the University City had to be of a certain income level, extremely well educated, and white. The persons displaced by the University City renewal projects were almost all poor and black. The thousands of jobs created by the Science Center were for scientists, engineers, and mostly white-collared professionals. Blue-collared minorities had to look for work elsewhere, and these sorts of job opportunities were unfortunately diminishing in the Philadelphia region.

University City High School was built as a public school in September 1970. It provided a free education to 3,000 students. The school was designed as an open classroom model for teaching science and math. The emphasis on math and science aimed to attract white students. The school sits on a fourteen-acre tract of land from 36<sup>th</sup> to 38<sup>th</sup> Streets bound by Filbert Street on the south and Warren Street on the north, in the Powelton area of West Philadelphia. The cost of the building was estimated at \$9.5 million. Seventy-five percent of the students were from West Philadelphia, while the remaining 25 percent were drawn from other parts of the city for the special science and math programs. The school contains: 76 classrooms, 46 laboratories, including 15 science and 10 commercial labs, a planetarium, a pool, an auditorium, a bookstore, a communications center, a computer room, and an orchestra hall. Other facilities that enhance the school are: tennis courts, parking lots, playing fields, and facilities for the arts.

The School District of Philadelphia officials considered the high school to be both comprehensive due to its wide course offerings, and magnet because of the special science programs that were designed to attract students from all areas of the city.

The advantage of having University City High School was its proximity to the Science Center at 34<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets. The Science Center would be able to furnish special staff and research assistance in the science and math programs, University City High School's location enables it to take advantage of nearby universities: Drexel University, the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, and the University of Pennsylvania.

These institutions are part of the University City Plan and were expected to provide assistance to all schools in the area.

Two years after the school opened, demonstrations led by neighborhood activist, Mr. Herman Rice, opened the school to greater enrollment of African American children from the neighborhood.

The planners of the urban renewal of the Black Bottom and the building of a science research corridor, including the University City High school, were are to affect their visions through the eminent domain seizure of private homes and other properties. Eminent Domain may be considered destructive when it affects a neighborhood and displaces many people. On the other hand, many may view it in a positive light as it fosters future economic development for the greatest number. This dilemma will be investigated in the lessons that follow.

## **Objectives**

In considering the various dilemmas presented by urban renewal initiatives and eminent domain, students will:

- Discuss culture and diversity
- Construct a timeline that represents African American participation in the neighborhood of the Black Bottom
- Analyze the interaction of people, places and environment
- Compare and contrast individual, group and institutional responses
- Sequence and discuss the power, authority and governance of in the city of Philadelphia
- Discuss the science and technology that both destroyed one community and benefited another
- Engage in discussion of University City High School, its origins and subsequent
- Form opinions about University City High School graduates' impact on the local economy
- Answer the question "Was eminent domain good for the residents of the West Philadelphia Black Bottom?"

## **Standards**

This curriculum will help students fulfill the School District of Philadelphia's Academic Standards in the following: Social Studies, Economics, Science and Technology, Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. These will be listed in the appendix.

## **Academic Skills and Knowledge**

By examining the neighborhood history, students will gain a deeper understanding and ownership of their knowledge. They will learn to inquire into community issues and

develop skills for problem solving. They will see the interrelationship among social political and economic situations. Participation in school history will prepare them for participation in our democratic form of government. The lessons in the unit will increase their awareness of global, ethnic and environmental issues.

## **Strategies**

Students will use graphic organizers to activate prior knowledge and to organize the goals of the lessons. They will do brainstorming activities to stimulate thinking about the concept of eminent domain. They will be continually guided by the focus question: Was eminent domain good for the residents of West Philadelphia Black Bottom? They will be expected to evaluate, formulate and advocate for a position on eminent domain. They will work in small cooperative groups to form opposing viewpoints. One student will keep the group on task, one will be the recording secretary, one will distribute and collect materials, and one will facilitate the discussion.

Students will engage in activities for vocabulary development. These activities will foster better understanding of the topic and provide strategies for comprehension of informational texts. Each day a word will be added to the word wall. Students will be directed to look for roots, prefixes, synonyms, antonyms, origins and meanings, and most importantly, to make connections to the unit.

The students will use maps, census data, and newspaper articles to gather information for a timeline. They will use this information to generate their own questions about the social and economic consequences of social injustices against African Americans in the Black Bottom.

Students will engage in expressive and language arts activities: letter writing, journal entries, reading and acting out a play, building a model of the school and working to request an historical marker to commemorate the once thriving African American “Black Bottom” community of Philadelphia.

The culminating activity will be a presentation of a play to the school community depicting the history of the Black Bottom showing the urban renewal of the 1950’s and 1960’s.

## **Classroom Activities**

Lesson 1: The Black Bottom (1940- 1950)

Part A: Maps and Landscape as Primary Documents

Objective: To interpret maps in order to locate information about a specific place

Procedure: Students will be introduced to a map of the Black Bottom. The area is bounded by 32<sup>nd</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Streets and from University Avenue to Lancaster Avenue. It was estimated that 4,496 people were displaced during the urban renewal. (Some figures report it as high as 10,000.)

A brainstorming activity will follow. Students will list all the homes, institutions and businesses that are located in this area. They will then use Google Maps on the Internet to virtually tour the neighborhood. Students will give the absolute location (longitude and latitude) and the relative location (two blocs from the school). Students will record their observations and evaluations of the area as they use landscape as a primary document.

### Part B: Reading Activity

Objective: To recognize cause and effect of an historical event

Procedure: Students will receive a portion of the text, *Cities of Knowledge* by Margaret Pugh O' Mara and *Black Bottom Picnic* by Dr. Pearl B. Simpson

They will read portions dealing with Philadelphia's role as a leading industrial city on the east coast. While reading the article they will take notes in the following categories:

- Observation: Students will categorize their findings on industry, business, and education
- Speculate: Students will discuss what stood out for them from the article. What was most interesting? What questions were raised? What was not understood?
- Analysis: Students will compare and contrast the similarities and differences between this era and the current experience in the Black Bottom.
- Assessment: Students will reflect on this activity by responding in their journals, write a short essay on the African American experience of this community, and identify the roles and contributions mentioned in the news article.

### Lesson II: Interview

Objective: To learn and appreciate the values of the community: to recognize the emergence of leadership in a local community, and necessity of sharing resources

Procedure: Students will work in small groups to brainstorm a list of questions to ask in their interviews. Some possible questions are:

- What is the person's name?
- What street did he or she live on or was born on?
- What was his or her early life like (school, recreation, family)?
- How was that the same or different from today?
- What does this person remember about the neighborhood before the displacement of people and destruction of homes? How old were they at the time?

After all questions are generated, the class will select the most significant ones. I will serve as a resident and have several children practice interviewing me. We will then discuss tips for good interviews.

Students will work with Mark Lloyd, University of Pennsylvania archivist, Dr Walter Palmer, professor from University of Pennsylvania, and Dr. Pearl B. Simpson, to help them before and after their interviews of members of the Black Bottom.

Students will use notes to write a short essay about the person they interviewed and about the information they learned. These will be compiled and used for class and school references. This work will reflect the community's stance in standing up for their rights in resisting oppression.

### Lesson III The Black Bottom (1967-1971)

#### Part A: Key Terms

Objective: To explain key terms of lesson

Procedure: Students will learn a strategy about coding words (explain the strategy). The following words will be listed: eminent domain, archivist, archives, urban renewal, redevelopment, urban, suburban, community, neighborhood, architects, planners, blight, the Fifth Amendment.

Example: Eminent domain is the power granted in the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution giving federal, state and local governments the right to take private property for public use, providing that the taking is done through due process of the law, which includes compensating the private owner for his or her loss.

Assessment: Students will complete an essay to determine their understanding of the concept of eminent domain.

#### Part B: The Building of West Philadelphia University City High School

Objective: To provide a cursory overview of the school's history

Procedure: Students will view charts and hear a lecture about the school's early history, its enrollment over the years, its graduates and postgraduate statistics, the impact of the school's graduates on the local economy.

The class will discuss what they have learned and post questions for further research.

### Lesson V: The Black Bottom (1971-present)

Objective: To determine present problems facing the school and neighborhood.

Procedure: Students will reflect on people's reaction to eminent domain. Not everyone was unhappy about leaving the Black Bottom. The availability of government funds, which made possible the expansion of colleges and universities, also enabled the hospitals and five medical schools to grow.

Students will learn about the life and political activities of Dr. Walter Palmer, the founder of the Black Bottom Organization. They will consider the present economic growth and entrepreneurship in the area.

#### Lesson VI: The Black Bottom: Learning from the Past

Objective: To realize that the past is prologue to the present and can be used as a window to the future.

Procedure: Students will be given a script of the play presented by the Black Bottom Community and students from University City High School Performing Arts. The story of the Black Bottom will be told through this classroom activity drama showing the "urban renewal" of the 1950's and 1960's. The original play was performed on April 22 and April 23, 1999 at 7:30 PM in the Harold Prince Theater, Annenberg Center of the University of Pennsylvania at 37<sup>th</sup> and Walnut Streets. The following scenes will be replicated:

- Street Scene: A walk through a Black Bottom neighborhood (1953)
- Bandstand: Teenagers come up with a scheme to integrate the American Bandstand TV Show (1953)
- Guided tour: A woman from the black bottom gives a tour to member of the City Council protesting their description of the neighborhood as a slum area. (1963)
- Sit-In : Black Bottom Members stage a sit-in a Mayor Tate's Office demanding that the city not destroy the Black Bottom and negotiating for neighborhood residents to be included in the planning process. (1963)
- Community Meeting: Black Bottom Residents meet at the Drew Elementary School and debate the Development Plans. Three young adults break into the meeting and voice their opinions. (1966)
- Occupation of Market Street: Black Bottom community members close down Market Street, demanding an end to further encroachment of the Universities of Pennsylvania and Drexel University upon the West Philadelphia neighborhood. (1969)

#### Follow-up Activities

Historical Marker: Students will write letters to the Bureau for Historical Preservation, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission to request a marker commemorating the Black Bottom community. The cost of having such a marker (city-type) is approximately \$1,300, so students will have to do fund raising activities to cover the cost. This can be a service project for the senior class. The students will also have to research the format and standards for an historical marker.

In petitioning for a historical market, we will seek the help of Mr. Charles Blockson, founder and director of the Blockson Archives of African American documents and writings at Temple University in Philadelphia. Mr. Blockson has long experience in the creation of historical markers relating to the African American experience in Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Model of the Community: I will contact the school's woodshop teacher, Mr. Willie Brown, to discuss plans for making a model for the Black Bottom. Students will design and construct a wooden model of the prior buildings on the present site West Philadelphia University City High School. This project can be conducted as a special class or after-school activity.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

O'Mara, Margaret Pugh. (2002) *Cities of Knowledge*. Ph.d Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania. Chapter 4 discusses the period of urban renewal from 1945 to 1967. It is a valuable resource for information about West Philadelphia.

Simpson, Pearl. (2003). Black Bottom Picnic. This privately published work deals with culture of African American women and information about the Black Bottom Organization and its annual picnic in July.

Skaler, Robert. (2002) *West Philadelphia: University City to 52<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Images of America: Pennsylvania. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing). The pictures and text of this book help to understand the rich history of West Philadelphia.

Historical Marker Program can be reached by E-mail or telephone at (717) 705-4266.

Mark Lloyd is the Archivist at the University of Pennsylvania

Walter Palmer can be reached by email at BlackBottom.Org

### **Appendix/Standards**

Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening

Students will have opportunities to read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents; use, understand and evaluate a variety of media; and use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes

- 1.1 Learning to Read independently (A, B)
- 1.2 Reading Critically in all Content Areas (A, B, C)
- 1.6 Speaking and Listening (A, D, E)
- 1.8 Research (A, B)

## Pennsylvania Academic Standards for History

The following academic standards will be addressed as students understand and explain basic

- 5.2.3 Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship (E)
- 7.2 Physical Characteristics of Places and Regions (A)
- 7.3 Human Characteristics of Population and Culture (A)
- 7.4.3 Interactions Between People and Places (A and B)
- 8.1 History Analysis and Skills Development (A, B, C)