

# **African American Women Workers in 19<sup>th</sup> Century and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Philadelphia**

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**Overview**

I am a social studies teacher in the city of Philadelphia and enjoy teaching African American History to our youth. I teach a course on African and African American Studies to ninth grade repeaters as well as tenth graders. I have attempted to supplement the curriculum with a unit on African American Women and Work and focus on Philadelphia.

Philadelphia is a city that has a rich history of African American contributions that our students need to learn and know. Many prominent African American Philadelphia women merchants, religious leaders, teachers, nurses and political leaders deserve attention. Indeed, the history of African American women focuses on women as just domestic workers, cooks, maids, and laundresses. Opportunities for African American women were created as these women were denied entrance to white establishments, and they provided services for their own communities.

Since the beginning of the abolitionist movement in Philadelphia through the Fifteenth Amendment and the women's movement, Philadelphian women have played, and continue to play, an active role to the Philadelphia community.

I would like to engage my students in the understanding of the American economic system and the important issues we all face as workers today. With more than two centuries of African American slavery in the South, black labor built the antebellum southern economy. Fieldwork provided by men, women, and children produced tobacco, cotton, rice, and sugar cane to create a thriving agricultural economy. This labor defined as well a social class system and changed the role of African Americans. Jobs designated by planters became known as "women's work". Cleaning, cooking, and child care for the master's family and home fit this category.

## **Rationale**

This curriculum unit is designed to supplement the African American history survey course during Women's History Month in March. The guiding challenge is to include African American women laborers in African American history. How can I show how African American women laborers have earned a voice in the workplace and increased their share of the economic pie? I would like to highlight the stark contrast between today's working environment, and the relationship between workers and owners of the past.

The goal is to have my students analyze the struggle and the battle of generations regarding societal racism and the overlooked segment of African American working class history.

### *History*

African American men felt that women could stay at home and care for their children while they worked the fields after the end of the Civil War. Believing that they were due forty acres and a mule, instead officials told them to return to the plantations and work on contracts with their former owners. African American women expected to cut down on the number of hours they worked in order to devote more time to their families.

During the postbellum period sharecropping and tenant farming took hold and it became obvious that each member of the family would have to be responsible for financial contribution for the family.

By 1870 many African American families had fallen into poverty. It became essential for women and children to work. Women had to become full time wage earners for their families to get ahead economically.

Female children over ten or twelve were often sent to the nearest large city to find work as live-in domestics. Racial prejudice kept African American women locked into such jobs as maids, laundresses and cooks. These traditional female jobs allowed women to make only nominal pay.

By 1900, live in domestic maids were on call by family members to perform any kind of task regardless of hours. Living out meant a maid had some control over the amount of time she spent on the job but rarely were workdays less than ten hours.

Many women relied on living assistance from extended family networks. Their relatives as babysitters and / or house cleaners employed young women so mothers could earn wages as domestics. Older single women could shop, cook, or clean for relatives while awaiting a position as live ins. African American churches provided a safeguard for families and their communities. Word of mouth job availability often was spread by women of the congregation. It was an automatic assumption that all money earned was sent home to one's parents to be contributed to the family's upkeep.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, a number of working girls homes were established in the city for safety and a clean place for them to live.

During the twentieth century, job opportunities for African American women remained very limited beyond domestic jobs. A small percentage moved into factory or government work. In Philadelphia for example, African American women seeking employment worked in a government facility called the Defense Personnel Support Center (as I recalled it the Quarter Master Center). However, most of the jobs available were only house keeping in nature, not manufacture or office work. Racial prejudice and discriminatory practice throughout the nation generally kept African American women from advancement into better paying jobs.

## **Objectives**

As I take a closer look at the many facets of African American history in this country, I often find myself finding documents of not only the struggle of an oppressed people but how that struggle was a part of a larger social, cultural, and economic movement to improve the lives of the working class. The African American freedom struggle is a long one. I want to make sure my students really understand the freedom struggle and perceive the life histories of ordinary, disinherited, working class and poor people who rarely appear in the history books. In order to locate their stories, I had to locate their stories locally. I am directing and connecting toward community, civil rights, labor struggles, and most of all the influence of the African American woman.

It is indeed the African American women who created the basis for change. My specific objectives for my students are:

- My students will be able to explore and read texts pertaining to African American women from slavery to wage earning. I want them to read to find out why white prejudice limited black people in their enjoying full citizenship, equal protection under the law, and economic success in the United States.
- I want my students to be able to have the African American community strive for self-improvement, education and equal rights and not depend on others.
- I want my students to be able to recognize that the economic climate impacts the labor market by describing how the past and the current economy operated. The employment outlook will shape occupational choices for African American women in the occupation of African American women.
- I want my students to be able to realize that attitude and behaviors associated with the job affected their performance and behaviors.
- Today the African American women can find jobs that are available in the federal, state, and city employment. I want my students to be able to become aware of

- “double standard” and how it is an infringement of an individual’s or groups rights.
- I want my students to be able to demonstrate an understanding of individual responsibility and not have to fit into sex-stereotyped occupations.

## Strategies

My process of instructional process will consist in three stages.

- The first stage will consist of my students be able to understand this unit. The understanding is framed in essential questions that will guide my teaching and stimulate inquiry toward the desired understanding.
- The second stage is to gather evidence needed to document and validate that the desired learning has been achieved. By their performances at the end of the unit will indicate that students have achieved the desired outcome.
- The third stage is clearly the result of enduring understanding the student displays in the classroom as well extension outside the classroom.

Having a clear goal helps the students and I focus on the purpose of the lesson.

Lesson 1: Introduction to African American Women in the Labor Force.

Procedure: The introduction to African American women in the labor force in Philadelphia begins by asking my students about their knowledge of jobs or occupations are doing today. I will use chart paper to list what they state of what they know, what they think they know, and what they want to know.

I will then provide students with articles on African American women during the antebellum and postbellum period. They will be divided into learning partners (clock buddies) for reading assignments. This method allows the teacher to circulate the expertise and creates a class climate where everyone is “chosen” as a partner. This method is a time-saving method.

Lesson 2: Reading Comprehension: Excerpts from Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present by Jacqueline Jones

Procedure: Student’s will choose a number using their calling sticks to write down their comments to report them to the entire class. This method impacts reading comprehension. Intensifies the focus and increase motivation to learn. I am hoping that my students will be inspired to have a healthy competition in learning.

Lesson 3: Primary Sources Using Photographs

Procedure: I will direct my students to study photographs of African American women in the city and have them attempt to answer the following questions:

- What is your impression of these women?
- What does their facial expressions and attire suggest to you?
- What advantage and disadvantages came with the different domestic jobs?
- What do you think happened to the quality of family life once these women married?
- What might these women have done to change their status?

### Assessment

Each student will report what he or she describes as his or her answers. Those that have other concerns that we have not address in the class, I will use the “Parking Lot” method. Students will use stickers to place on chart paper “Parking Lot” of their concerns.

### Lesson 4: Guided Discussion

Procedure: Students will then be guided into discussion around the ideas of these questions:

- How much freedom did emancipation provide African American women?
- Why do you think African American women might have been overlooked for jobs by state and federal government?
- How did the economic situation of African American women be further threatened in the late nineteenth century?
- Can you speculate what African American women might have done within the growing labor movement to improve their hours and wages? How do you explain the success of a minority of African American women?

### Lesson 5: Research and Reports

Procedure 1: Students will be able to research and report on successful African American women in Philadelphia and the lives of working-class black women.

Students will search the web and consult with libraries to locate stories of successful Philadelphia African American professionals and business women.

Students will research laws adopted to regulate female and child labor.

Students will research the impact of “Jim Crow” legislation on the working lives of African women.

Students will research labor union practices regarding black women.

Students will interview elderly women in their families about the jobs they held during their lifetime and the jobs of other women in their generation. These interviews will follow the model established in West Side Stories: Memories of West Philadelphia, a volume of interviews of residents of the Mercy Douglass Smith-Shepard Senior Center conducted by students of University City High School (see excerpts below in the appendix).

Procedure 2: Students will demonstrate knowledge of how to find jobs by identifying five or more sources of information about job availability (e.g., newspaper want ads, personnel departments, State operated employment offices, Civil Service listings, military recruiting centers, private employment agencies, counselors, adult contacts and apprenticeship programs).

Procedure 3: Role-play an interview with a prospective employer

In conclusion students will learn about work in the past as they prepare their ways into the work force.

Economics is concerned with the behavior of individuals and institutions engagement in production, exchange and consumption of goods and services. As technology today helps to reshape the economy, knowledge of how the world works is critical. People entering the workforce cannot function effectively without basic knowledge of the characteristics of economic systems and how work and earnings impact production.

A Pennsylvania governor remarked, "Among the freedoms we enjoy in America in our pursuit of happiness is the freedom to be independent, creative, visionary and entrepreneurial. We are free to pursue dreams..." "All means All." Every student must know how to manage resources, prepare for the workforce, make wise investments and be informed about public policy. They must develop a respect for individuals to widen and deepen their ability to live richly. They must be able to develop an appreciation for dignity and worth of every individual sharing power in order to attain justice.

#### Teachers Bibliography

Blockson, Charles L. African Americans in Pennsylvania: A History and Guide (Baltimore, Md.: Black Classic Press, 1994). Basic history of African Americans in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Hine, Darlene Clark, ed. Black Women in America. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). A comprehensive who's who of African American women.

Jones, Jacqueline. Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).  
Encyclopedia study of the work of African American women.

Licht, Walter. Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950 (Harvard University Press, 1992). A study of the evolving labor market of Philadelphia and the ways different groups of Philadelphia secured and lost employment.

### Student Bibliography

<http://www.hsp.org> Historical Society of Pennsylvania “For Educators” section features extensive materials of abolitionism in Pennsylvania; includes downloadable primary sources and curriculum units.

<http://www.archives.gov/midatlantic/education/> National Archives, Mid Atlantic Region “For Educators and Students” section includes primary source images and documents regarding the work of African American women in Philadelphia.

<http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/childlabor/> “For Educators and Students” includes primary source documents on the work of African American children.

<http://www.archives.upenn.edu> Vast information on West Philadelphia and its neighborhoods.

Blockson, Charles L. African Americans in Pennsylvania: A History and Guide (Baltimore, Md.: Black Classic Press, 1994). Basic history of African Americans in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

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Encyclopedia study of the work of African American women.

### Appendix

## Academic Standards for History

### 8.1 Historical Analysis and Skills Development

- A. Evaluate chronological thinking
- B. Synthesize and evaluate historical sources
- C. Evaluate historical interpretation of events
- D. Evaluate historical interpretation of events

### 8.2 Pennsylvania History

- A. Analyze the political and cultural contributions of individuals and Groups to Pennsylvania history from 1787 to 1914
- B. Evaluate the political and cultural contributions of individuals and Groups to Pennsylvania history from 1890 to the present
- C. Identify and analyze primary documents, material artifacts, and Historical sites important in Pennsylvania history from 1890 to the present
- D. Identify and evaluate primary documents, material artifacts, and historic sites important in Pennsylvania history from 1890 to the present.
- E. Identify and analyze how continuity and change have influenced Pennsylvania history from 1787 to 1914
- F. Identify and evaluate how continuity and change have influenced Pennsylvania from the 1890s to the present
- G. Identify and analyze conflict and cooperation among social groups and organizations in Pennsylvania history from 1787 to 1914
- H. Identify and evaluate conflict and cooperation among social groups and organizations in Pennsylvania history form 1890 to the present

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Sample Excerpts from **West Side Stories: Memories of West Philadelphia**, Interviews with residents of the Mercy Douglass Smith-Shepard Senior Center conducted by students of University City High School

Interview with Sybil Couche

By Alia Hatch

Sybil Couche, a retired School District of Philadelphia administrator, moved to the West Philadelphia community in 1942, at the age of twelve. She taught at West Philadelphia High and lived near the school. During her teenage years on 50<sup>th</sup> Street, she was considered or called a “400” or “toasty”. She was considered a



member of an affluent family who could afford certain amenities and whose parents closely supervised their children activities. Her parents had her join such elite social groups as Jack and Jill and the Twigs Children's Club.

Interview with Charlotte Walker  
By Ashley Ishmael and Niya Brown

Charlotte Walker was born on June 19, 1897 in Georgetown, South Carolina. She grew up in a poor family. Charlotte moved to West Philadelphia in 1920 with her husband. She met her husband during World War 1. When she moved to West Philadelphia at 48<sup>th</sup> and Haverford Avenue, the house had the appearance of a shack. Her husband tore the house down to the frame and rebuilt it. In her early years, Mrs Walker loved to bake cakes and give them to her neighbors. She shopped for bargains on Lancaster Avenue and often stayed up late into the night washing and ironing to help contribute the family's income.

Interview with Constance Atkins  
By Terrell Mc Call

Constance Atkins was born August 8, 1927 in Lynchburg, Virginia. In 1934, when she turned eight, Constance moved to West Philadelphia. Constance attended Belmont Elementary School, Sulzburger Middle School and West Philadelphia High School. She worked as a baby-sitter earning four dollars a week. Before she turned sixteen, Ms. Atkins learned many life skills working for a medical doctor. While working she saved enough money to buy a house on the same block as her father. There was no need to lock her doors. She lived there for over sixty years.