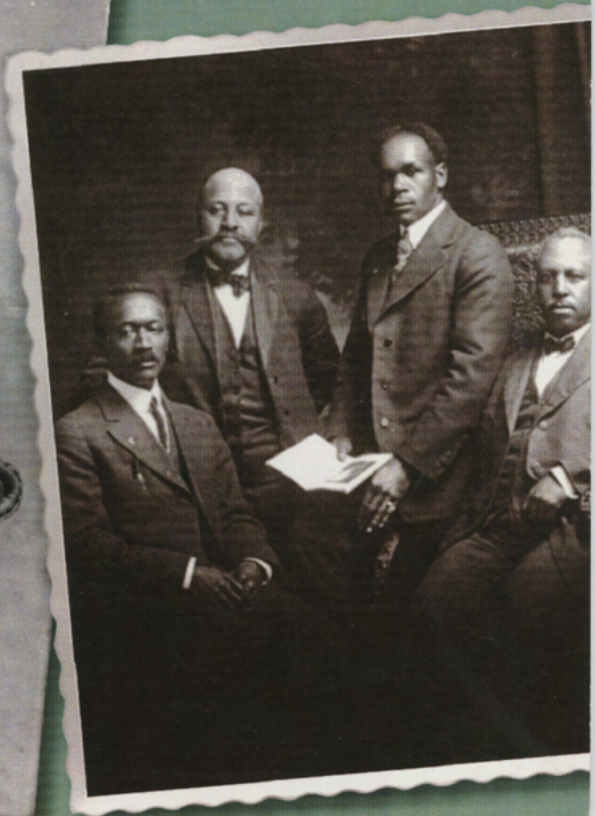


Been Laborin' Here All These Long Years

AND

Fruits of Our Labors

African American History and Culture
in Columbia County, New York



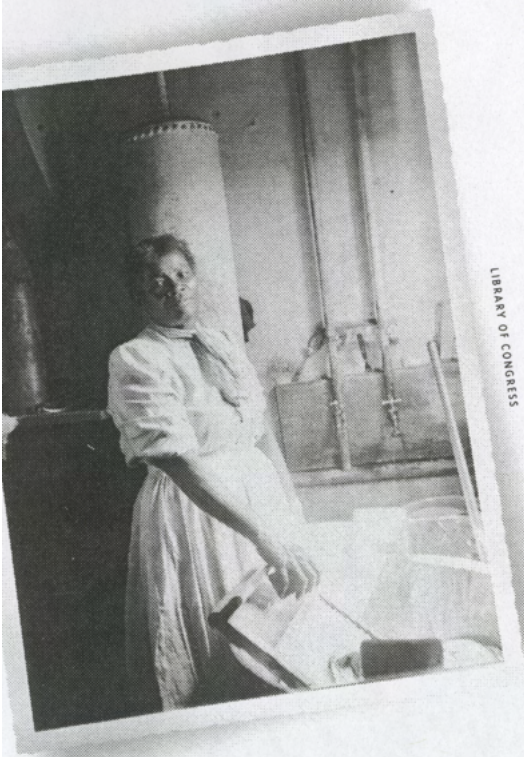
The Columbia County African American population witnessed seasonal increases in the 1880s when recruiters from the newly opened brickyards traveled to Maryland and Virginia and returned with black migrant workers. The seasonal employees toiled side-by-side with white laborers in the yards until the brickyards closed after the turn of the century. This left the African American workers with a choice. Some found work in the county. Most chose to return home to Maryland and Virginia.

Throughout their long history in Columbia County, African Americans relied on three institutions for support and nourishment: family, community, and the black church. The family served as the backbone of African American life in Columbia County. As most black people were poor, families assumed roles that would ordinarily be filled by paid professionals. For example, most families would not have been able to afford professional medical care when one of the members of the family fell ill. They often relied on time tested treatments and home remedies to see their ailing loved ones back to good health. Along with home remedies, African American families passed food and celebratory practices down through generations.

The immediate surrounding community was the lifeblood of African American culture. Adults organized literary societies, sports teams, lodges, and social clubs to provide entertainment, support, fellowship, and structure. Local branches of the Urban League and N.A.A.C.P. helped to fight inequity and prejudice, and bring about political change.

At the core of black community life and culture, black churches helped meet the spiritual, social, and political needs of African Americans in Columbia County. Within the walls of black churches, political organizations were formed, protests were organized, social activities were planned, speakers delivered speeches, and souls were nourished. Black ministers served as local leaders and leaders in black communities. In Columbia County, African American ministers were typically responsible for more than one church, and often traveled many miles each Sunday to meet the needs of churchgoers.

Since the seventeenth century, African Americans were influential in shaping the history and culture of Columbia County. Through community organizations, churches, and family traditions, the county's black population imparted a legacy and rich heritage that is still felt today.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Understanding Historical Sources

African American people have been a part of the history of Columbia County since the seventeenth century, although their presence has been largely unrecorded. Our understanding of their lives is based on diaries, newspaper accounts, photographs, objects, directories, oral histories, military and census records, and on general information about the black experience in Upstate New York. The history of the black community in Columbia County provides us with another important clue to the ethnic mosaic which is their experience.

Lesson Summary

Students will gain an understanding of historical sources through discussions and assignments on oral history, written record, and objects.

Lesson

1. Begin with the telephone game as an icebreaker. Whisper, "African American people have been a part of the history of Columbia County since the seventeenth century, although their presence has been largely unrecorded," in the ear of a student and tell him/her to pass the message along. Continue having students whisper the message until all students have a chance to hear it. Recite what they heard to the class. Reinforce the difference between the beginning and ending phrase. Tell the class they were able to learn the difference between the first message whispered and the last because the person who created the message (you, the instructor) was still standing in the room to correct the error. Ask students to discuss the problems they see in telling a story orally. Have students think about history and the larger implications of stories changing through oral tradition.

2. After discussing oral history with your students, ask them, "What do you know about your family history?" Then ask, "If someone wanted to know more about your history years from now how do you think they could find out more? Does your family write names in a family bible? Do you save family photographs or quilts?" Introduce the concepts of written records and objects. Pass out the census record assignment sheet from page five.

3. Ask students to collect and review modern newspapers, telephone books and magazines. Ask students to identify what they can learn from

New York State Learning Standards

- ◆ Social Studies: Standard 1
- ◆ English Language Arts: Standards 1, 3, and 4

Objectives

- ◆ Students will be able to identify and explain the three forms of historical evidence: oral history, written record, and objects
- ◆ Students will be able to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of interpreting oral history, documents, and objects
- ◆ Students will be able to identify the difference among these sources

Resource List

- ◆ Paper
- ◆ Writing utensil
- ◆ Photocopies of census worksheet
- ◆ Photograph of unidentified woman, Hudson, ca. 1865 on page 1

Assessment Tool

Students will use what they learned about historical sources to share more about themselves through a presentation about their histories. Ask a parent to describe a family celebration and have the student write down what the parent says. Students may bring in objects and photographs to tell the story of the way their family celebrates. These presentations may be graded as necessary.



Photos of the Green family. J.R. Green is wearing his World War I uniform. The other photos show his wife, Ruth Green, and their three children.

COLUMBIA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The table on the following page, recreated from an 1870 census provides historical information about three African Americans who were living in Austerlitz, Columbia County, New York.

them, and what do they think they can learn from historic diaries, newspaper accounts, directories, military and census records.

4. Give students time to look at the 1870 census information on the opposite page containing the names of three African Americans living in Columbia County, NY: Ann Garret, George Joyner, and Margaret Smith. Have students determine as much information as possible from the document. Discuss problems of handwriting and language differences as found in colonial New York—Dutch, Africans, Natives, English. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of written records. What do the students want to know that is not included in the census record?

5. Discuss objects and their role as historical sources. Ask students for examples of objects that tell us something about history. For example use the family photographs above. Ask students about the details of these pictures: What are they wearing? Do people dress like this today? Have students write a story about the family and what their life might have been like as African Americans living in Columbia County in 1865.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Vocabulary Words

bondage
bounty
burden
census
citizen
commodity
emancipation
escape
freedom
freeholder
fugitive
indenture
labor
manor
manumission
servant
overseer
race
rights
slave
slavery

Lesson

1. Pose questions to the students to prompt an initial discussion about the concept of freedom. “What does it mean to be free?” “Are you free?”
2. Tell students that prior to 1841, some people in Columbia County, were not free. As a slave every aspect of life was controlled by someone else. Discuss the document on page eight.
3. Ask students to consider what it would be like to be punished, sold, or separated from their parents, siblings or friends. Suggest that they might feel like running away. Discuss one or more of the ads for run-away slaves on page nine.
4. Ask students to use a dictionary to find the definitions of the words listed on the right. Write a sentence for each word. They may use more than one word in a sentence.

Instruct students to work individually and quietly. Inform students that they will receive a reward for each definition they complete.

Check each student’s work and award a small piece of candy, sticker, etc. for each definition. Select students to represent the 14% (3 of 20) of the Columbia County population who were not free in 1790. Instruct them to surrender their rewards to other classmates.

Prior to 1841, some people in Columbia County, were not free. As a slave every aspect of life was controlled by someone else.

15 Dollars Reward.

RAN away from the subscriber on Monday the 15th inst. a Black Woman named BETT. She is about 5 feet high, very black, speaks the Dutch and English language, aged about 22 years. She had on when she absconded a green pres'd flannel Gown—the also carried with her a factory cotton stripe, a large plaid silk gingham, a calico and white cambrick Gown. She was bought about three years since of Mrs. Schoonmaker of Red-Hook—being well known in that place it is presumed she may lurk about there or in Saukaches where her father lives.—Whoever will deliver her to the subscriber shall be entitled to the above reward and all reasonable charges.

Hudson, April 18, 1816. RUFUS REED.
299

30 Dollars Reward.

RANAWAY from the subscriber, on the night of the 28th inst. a Negro Man named

CÆSAR,

about 28 years of age, of a very dark complexion, speaks the English and Dutch language very well, but rather slow; his eyes are rather large; he is round shoulderd, has lost the small finger at the middle joint from the left hand, and had on when he ranaway a homespun suit of wcolled clothes. Whoever will apprehend the said Negro Man and return him to the subscriber, shall be entitled to the above reward

J. H. V. RENSSELAER.

Claverack, July 30, 1811.

Hard Work/Low Pay

New York State Learning Standards

- ◆ Social Studies: Standards 1 and 3
- ◆ English Language Arts: Standards 1 and 3
- ◆ Arts: Standard 1

Objectives

- ◆ Students will be able to chart and describe their families' work and migration patterns.
- ◆ Students will be able to compare and contrast their families' migration and work patterns with those prevalent historically in Columbia County.
- ◆ Students will be able to describe or list the types of jobs commonly available to African Americans in Columbia County during the late nineteenth century.
- ◆ Students will describe how the job diversity for African Americans of the late nineteenth century compares with opportunities today.

Before and after manumission, most of the African-American population of Columbia County lived in the northern section of the county. By the end of the 1800s, about half of the people living in Chatham Center were black. Most were farmers.

The latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed a migration of many of Columbia County's black citizens. While many local black families continued to work as farmers in the twentieth century, a unique aspect of African-American life in Columbia County, some lived in cities and most southern blacks settled in Hudson. The city dwellers worked as domestic servants, barbers, river pilots, hotel waiters, factory workers, millers, laundresses, teamsters, and, later, as chauffeurs and nurses. As elsewhere, African-Americans were restricted from many occupations, and were excluded from the craft and trade unions.

When the brickyards opened in the 1880s, recruiters traveled to Maryland and Virginia to bring black laborers to New York on a seasonal basis. Blacks and whites, many of whom were Italian immigrants, worked side-by-side in the brickyards, but the living quarters were strictly segregated. By 1895, there were four functional brick yards in the county in Greenport, Stuyvesant, and Stockport. The migration of southern black laborers to these brickyards began in the late 19th century, several years before the Great Migration to northern cities. When the brickyards closed shortly after the turn of the century, African-American workers were left with a decision: they could find other work or they could leave the area in search of work. Many chose to leave.

As the World Wars raged and African-Americans realized their fitness for combat and willingness to sacrifice for their country, they became more resolute and motivated to integrate various industries within Columbia County.

Lesson Summary

In the late 1800s, African Americans in New York were limited in the work they could get. Because of these limitations, and the occasional scarcity of work, they were often forced to relocate. Sometimes, white business owners recruited them from the south, and sometimes rough farm conditions forced them into the city. While the late 1800s offered a different work experience than many people know today, there were similarities. These exercises are designed to encourage students to think about and compare their experiences with those of the people who came before them.

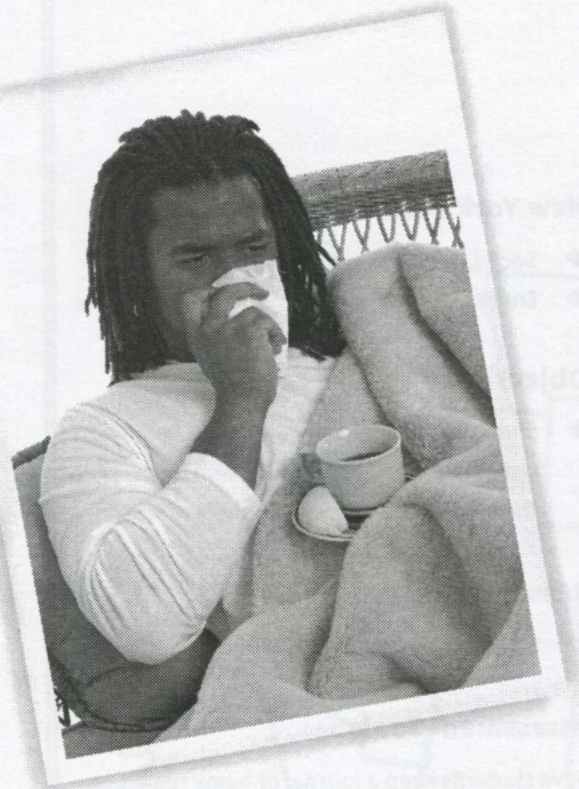


On an early twentieth-century farm in Greenport, New York

Enduring Traditions: Family Life



New York State



My Home Remedy Assignment

Create your own home remedy recipe for a sore throat. Include all the ingredients needed. Write instructions on how to make it and provide directions on how to use it.

Questions to consider:

- ◆ What ingredients would you use? Why?
- ◆ How would you use these ingredients? Would you drink them? Apply them to the skin?
- ◆ Are there any ingredients from the oral histories that you would use? Why or why not?

Primary Source [Home Remedies from oral histories]

1) Beulah Whitbeck's sore throat remedy: "A piece of salt pork fatback, lots of pepper, wrapped it in a rag and tied it around your throat."

2) Marion Van Ness: "I always made cough syrup, which consisted of onions and honey and brown sugar. I cooked that up."

3) Marie Parker: "A lot of the old people [made their own medicine]. I got a bottle here now my father used to use. It's for aches, rheumatism and things like that. Yep, he made that, see? It got some kind of a mothball, and liniment, some kind of liniment, different kinds of oil, and different things. And it's wonderful."

4) Bill Van Ness: "There was a remedy that the family used for, as my wife says, for colds, which consisted of lemon, onion, sugar. I don't know what else, but they boiled this and when you had a cold or what they used to refer to then was the croup. They would put Vicks on a flannel and put it on your chest and then they would give you this home remedy. And this home remedy would make you sweat so they would have to change the bedding, because it did, it would break the cold. And it was very good. Also, my dad used to have some skunk oil and he said that was good for rheumatism and he used to rub it on. Real skunk oil."

5) Ethel Loveless: "My grandmother, Janey, used to make a cough syrup for us. ... She would use honey, horehound candy, rock candy, raisins, and lemon. Oh, and a little whiskey. She would make this and let it set. [She did not boil it]. She just mixed it, and then, of course, the candy and the rock candy, everything melts. And then with the honey and everything. And then you let it set. And then you drink it, and it's really soothing for a cough."

6) Otelia Rainer: "Otelia's mother was sick with diabetes and nothing was working. Neither Otelia nor the doctor was able to get the medicine into her system. A friend of Otelia's came to visit that morning, and presented a solution that worked. She said it's aloes. She said, 'I'm from the West Indies and we live on it.' It takes care of everything in the body, the heart and takes care of the blood pressure and all of those things. We went into the kitchen and washed it, scrubbed the whole stalk. [My mother would] have to eat the stalk too. ..."

To Nourish the Spirit: Community Life

Adults in the African American communities of Columbia County took part in various literary societies, baseball teams, lodges and clubs that provided amusement and enrichment. Excluded from most mainstream organizations, these groups, established in Kinderhook, Hudson, Valatie and Chatham Center, offered fellowship and a community structure. Among Hudson's black community organizations were Masonic and Elks Lodges and The Eastern Star. Local branches of the Urban League and N.A.A.C.P. were established as necessary vehicles for making the community aware of inequities and bringing about political change both here and in the south.

Children in the community found ways to entertain and amuse themselves. When not attending church functions or on outings with their families, they spent time exploring the woods, roller skating, and eventually, in the early twentieth century, attending movies and getting ice cream at the ice cream parlor in town. Children today are surrounded by ever changing technologies and high tech gadgets. Children in Columbia County in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century lived in a low tech world.

Lesson Summary

Students will learn about life in Columbia County in the early twentieth century through the eyes of Bill Van Ness who recalls his childhood in the late 1930s and early 1940s. By reading the transcript on page 19, students will get a glimpse of what he did for fun. The students will also consider how they have fun and entertain themselves today, and how it is different or the same as what children did in the past.

Classroom Activity

1. Ask students to brainstorm how they have fun after they leave school everyday. They may work in small groups or individually.
2. Show students the photograph of students from the Mount Marino School in the 1930's, on page 18. Ask them to look at it closely and share any differences or similarities they see. Introduce Bill Van Ness and explain that he was a child in Chatham, NY in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1988 his oral history was recorded on a video tape. An excerpt is provided on page 19.

New York State Learning Standards

- ◆ Social Studies: Standard 1
- ◆ English Language Arts: Standards 1, 2, and 3.

Objectives

- ◆ Students will be able to gather and organize information about the traditions transmitted by various groups living in their neighborhood and community
- ◆ Students will be able to distinguish between near and distant past and interpret simple timelines
- ◆ Students will be able to compare and contrast the childhood activities and lifestyles of early twentieth century African Americans with their own experiences



Primary Source [Bill Van Ness Transcript]

Bill Van Ness talking about what he did for fun as a child in Chatham, New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s:

"In Chatham: mainly it was going to church. Sunday school, after church on Sunday we took long hikes in the woods. [We] hiked from Chatham over into Austerlitz in that area quite often. Sticking our bare feet in the brooks and whatnot and just enjoying nature in general. Also we could, after we had done our chores at home, we had roller skates, not like today's roller skates, the type of skates you clamp on your shoes and your father was always worrying about clamping those skates on your shoes because he said shoes cost money. And I think a pair of shoes, the leather shoes, at that time ... would run you about five dollars. But nevertheless we went into the woods, we wandered in the woods, roller skated, played games in our backyard. We were never allowed, such as the children today, to go down on Main Street in this small town. If we went down on Main Street or in the shopping area it was because we were sent to the store. One thing my dad always said, I do not pay rent down on Main Street or on any street corner. Your place is (at that time we lived at 65 Hudson Avenue) [is here]. And that's where we remained unless we were sent to the store or for a reason to go to someone else's house to carry a message for my mother or to some friend or something like that."





PHOTO CREDIT ??

Easter Sunday School class photographed on the steps of the A.M.E. Zion Church at Second and State Streets in Hudson, New York.

Resource List

- ◆ Photocopies of Chatham Courier excerpt
- ◆ Sheets of paper, pens or pencils

Assessment Tool

Have students share their answers with the class. The presentations should affirm that the students understand the concepts of social space and the roles and uses of the African American Church in Columbia County. These presentations or the plans may be graded.

- A) How big is the new building?
- B) Who is the building contractor?
- C) What is the floor made of?
- D) How many windows are in the church?
- E) When will the church building be completed?
- F) What are some activities that will take place in the building?

Additional Activities

Think about the grand opening of the church from the news article. Write a poem to celebrate the hard work that went into the building.

African American churches hosted religious meetings, fairs, sewing circles and other events. Write a list of events that could happen at the new church during the next month that would get your family and friends together.

Financial Support for this curriculum guide was provided by:

Hudson River Bank and Trust Company
J. C. Penny Golden Rule Award 1999
Mid-Hudson Library System
Stewart's Shop Corporation
Private donations for
Black Legacy Association Columbia County
(BLACC)



This curriculum guide was created by Valerie Aquila, John Emery, Mehna Harders, Kiernan Lannon, Anneke Nordmark, Sylvea Hollis

Thanks also to:

Gretchen Sullivan Sorin, Director of Cooperstown Graduate Program
Doreen DeNicola, President of DeNicola Design, Inc.

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James Kerr	Marion Van Ness	
Ethel Loveless	Selma Van Ness	

Columbia County Retired Senior Volunteer Program is sponsored by Columbia Opportunities, Inc.

New York State Standards were consulted in the creation of these lessons. Teachers are encouraged to use this guide as a supplement to their history lessons.

Marcella Beigel, the director of RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program), contacted the Cooperstown Graduate Program and asked that we create a curriculum guide based on an exhibit done by CGP's director, Gretchen Sorin. In 1990 and 1991, Sorin was a guest curator of two consecutive exhibits based on African American history and culture in Columbia County: *Been Laborin' Here All These Long Years* and *Fruits of Our Labors: The African American Experience in Columbia County, 1730-1945*.

A debt of gratitude is due to BLACC (Black Legacy Association of Columbia County) and the dedicated RSVP volunteers for their research and ongoing passion in helping document the story of African Americans in Columbia County, New York.