

Photography as Freedom: Analyzing Historic Photos of Black Missourians

Recommended Grade Level: 6th-12th grades

Duration: 1 class period

Historical Background

At the turn of the 20th century, Black Americans generated a surge of innovation and creative expression. Black educators, scientists and sociologists used intellect to fight negative stereotypes. Artists, authors and poets protested discrimination with their art. The Fourteenth Amendment granted Black Americans full citizenship in 1868. However, they were still treated as second-class citizens. Missouri's Black citizens lived with strict segregation in schools and public services, often suffering violent verbal and physical assaults and even lynching in extreme cases.

The Great War and the Great Migration presented new opportunities and challenges for the Black community. Of the 156,000 Missouri men drafted to fight in the war overseas, 10,750 were Black. People viewed military service as the ultimate display of patriotism. Many Black men hoped service would afford them better treatment at home. The war in Europe caused labor shortages in the United States, particularly in large cities like St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo. About one million Black Southerners migrated to and through Missouri. They searched for better jobs, better living conditions and better treatment but that was rarely the case.

This mass movement of Black Americans spawned the idea of the "New Negro." This term suggested education, refinement, assertiveness and racial consciousness. Black people from all backgrounds began being photographed to preserve their likeness for future generations. These images reflected people who were proud, self-reliant and who demanded and deserved full citizenship rights.

As photography became more mainstream so too did the presence of Black photographers and Black photography studios. The growing art form provided people a chance to be expressive, self-sufficient and serve their community. The photographs featured in this lesson are albumen print cabinet cards and they feature Missourians from the 1880s through the 1920s. Most of the subjects and the photographers who photographed them are unknown. How did Missourians use photography to create new images of "Blackness?" That is what your students will be tasked with exploring.

Knowledge Bank

Great War- Also known as World War I. A global war fought in Europe from 1914-1918 over nationalism and land.

Great Migration- Mass movement of Black Americans from the South to the North from 1910-1930.

New Negro- Term popularized during the Harlem Renaissance that implied a more assertive and self-determined Black person.

Lynching- Public murder by a mob. Usually used against Black Americans to enforce racial subordination and segregation.

Albumen print- A type of photograph with a soft, sepia tone effect.

Cabinet card- Card portrait popularized in the 1870s.

Objectives

- Students in Missouri public schools will acquire the knowledge and skills to gather, analyze and apply information and ideas.
- Students will critically examine images using a guided analysis activity to make inferences about the people in the portraits.
- Students will use information gleaned from the image analysis to question and reflect on the African American experience in the early 20 century.

Learning Standards

This lesson meets the criteria for over 20 Grade-and Course-Level Expectations for Social Studies education for grades 6-12.

Materials

- Photo analysis sheet (master copy included). Adapted from resources found on the National Archives and Records Administration website
- Photograph facsimiles (included in trunk)

Lesson Preparation

- Make copies of the photo analysis sheet as needed
- Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4
- Visit https://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/mdh_splash/default.asp?coll=aa_portrait for historic photographs of Black Missourians

Directions

- Begin by distributing the worksheet to each student
- Ask students to read the front of the worksheet. Give them 15 minutes to read and then discuss/answer the first two questions as a group.
- Next, distribute 4 to 5 photos to each group.
- Instruct each student to choose a photo and turn the worksheet over to begin analyzing it. Although these are facsimiles, any information that was found on the original has been copied to the facsimile (usually the name of subjects.) This information is important so instruct students to carefully inspect all parts (front and back) of the image. Allot 20 minutes for this component.
- To close out the activity reconvene as a class, ask everyone to turn their worksheets in to you and then have a post-activity discussion.

Extension

Have a post-activity discussion and ask students to consider the following questions:

- How is picture taking different today than when these photos were taken?
- If they use social media, what do the images they publically share say about them and their identity?

Optional Modifications

For younger/elementary audiences, display select photos on the board or overhead and do a photo analysis as a class. Use the “How to Analyze a Photograph” poster provided in the trunk. After the analysis, engage the students in one of the following:

- Compare the albumen print card photos to the colorized images from the 1950s and 60s taken by photographer William Galbreath. Ask them to point out differences between the two (i.e. clothing, poses, facial expressions, color etc.)
- Put them in pairs. Have one student pretend they are a portrait photographer and pose a classmate to look proud and dignified like the images they just examined. Direct them to choose props (if available), postures and expressions that will help achieve their goal. Have them switch roles.
- Ask students to bring in a photo from home to analyze in class
- Take-home activity: Ask students to go home and create self-portrait. Tell them to look in a mirror and draw a picture of themselves that communicates who they are and what makes them proud of themselves.

Assessment

Students should have a thoughtfully filled out photo analysis worksheet. They should be engaged in the post-activity discussion.