

Black History: Female Railroaders

Grade Level: 5-8

Time to Complete: 2 to 3 days

Standard(s) Covered:

SS-05-3.1.1

Students will describe scarcity and explain how scarcity required people in different periods in the U.S. (Colonization, Expansion, Twentieth Century to Present) to make economic choices (e.g., use of productive resources-natural, human, capital) and incur opportunity costs.

SS-05-5.1.1

Students will use a variety of primary and secondary sources (e.g., artifacts, diaries, maps, and timelines) to describe significant events in the history of the U.S. and interpret different perspectives.

Major Objective(s): Students will

- Examine relationships between Black women and the railroad
- Learn that many railroad women were convicts
- Understand that WWI in Europe, before the U.S. was drawn into the war, had a big influence on the American economy and lives of all women
- Learn that Black women railroaders had to battle exploitation, persevere against all odds, and fight for their dignity

Major Point to Teach:

Women's entrance into railroading is usually dated to 1885, but female slaves began railroad work two decades earlier.

Because enslaved women were assumed to be capable of as much plantation labor as men, it wasn't surprising to find them occasionally working alongside males on railroad construction crews.

During WWI, because of federal control of the railroads, Black females found some of their best new opportunities in that industry.

Black women car cleansers had to use separate toilets and locker rooms, which were often inferior to those used by Whites.

Pullman maids were, overall, an educated, poised, and mature lot. However, even urbanized African American women had few good employment prospects, so they were attracted to a job requiring long hours and days away from home.

Teaching Strategies

- Compose a poem about a Pullman maid
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- Write and perform a one-act play about Pullman maids
- Write a letter to the editor about the treatment of the Black female railroaders
- Create a timeline showing the evolution of Black female railroaders
- Write a diary entry of a Black female railroader

Vocabulary

Antebellum

domestic service

George Pullman

hopper

pittance

prejudice

Reconstruction

roundhouse

scarcity

spittoon

vendor

Supporting Documents

Books

Railroads in the African American Experience

Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters