

**Black History:  
Dining Car Cooks and Waiters**

**Grade Level: 5 – 8**

**Time to Complete: 2 – 3 days**

**Standard(s) Covered:**

SS-05-1.3.1

Students will explain the basic principles of democracy (e.g., justice, equality, responsibility, and freedom) found in significant U.S. historical documents (Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights) and analyze why they are important to citizens today.

SS-EP-3.1.1

Students will define basic economic terms related to scarcity (e.g., opportunity, cost, wants and needs, limited productive resources – natural, human, capital) and explain that scarcity requires people to make economic choices 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 the significant events in the history of the U.S. and interpret different perspectives.

**Major Objective(s): Students will**

- Learn the first regular dining cars were introduced on the Philadelphia/Wilmington & Baltimore Railroad during the Civil War
- Learn the first waiters were black
- Understand that racism ruled
- Realize that no passenger train crew members worked more physically exhausting jobs than cooks and chefs
- Understand that many cooks sacrificed family life for the opportunity to make a decent living
- Learn that in 1926 dining and lounge car cooks and waiters formed the Brotherhood of Dining Car Cooks and Waiters
- Understand that today, Amtrak's waiters and stewards are female, as well as male, and from all ethnic backgrounds

**Major Points to Teach:**

In 1867 George Pullman introduced “hotel cars”, which combined dining facilities and a kitchen, with a lounge section and sleeping compartments. Waiters doubled as porters. He introduced the first “true” dining car, the Delmonico, in 1868, but it was not profitable and Pullman exited the dining car business in the early 1900s.

On some railroads the entire staff was black; on others, the chef (head cook) was a white man, with the cooks being African American.

Although the railroads employed traveling chef instructors, the kitchen staff mainly learned from one another. Railroads with large dining car fleets established formal cooking schools.

Kitchen temperatures reached way over 100 degrees in summertime with meat roasting, bread and pies baking, and steaks and chops grilling.

Dining car kitchen crews seldom encountered passengers, so they, customarily, did not earn tips. Chefs and cooks were also largely spared the kind of personal racism, from passengers that waiters and porters had to endure. But, discrimination defined and circumscribed cooks' and chefs' jobs, as it did for all black railroaders.

The railroads' racism is clear in policies that regarded waiters as objects. It was the railroads' insistence that food service was a black man's job. They sought to hire "men with black skins and white habits" who would cheerfully work extremely long hours under circumstances which were far more difficult than those posed by restaurant work.

Waiters earned more than cooks because they received tips, but they had to pay for anything stolen, as souvenirs, by passengers. Their direct interaction with whites made them vulnerable to rude or racist behavior.

In the south, state segregation laws had to be observed. Waiters and stewards followed rulebook instructions on "Serving Meals to Colored Persons". They were either to be excluded entirely, or served only after all the whites had finished eating, or seated behind curtains, at the last two tables at the end of the car.

Tips made the difference between poverty and a living wage because the railroads expected travelers to make up for the miserly sums they paid their waiters.

The humblest "waiters" on passenger trains were the food vendors. They worked the aisles of the coaches selling candy, snacks, newspapers and cheap paperback books. During WWII, Malcolm Little, who later became Malcolm X, lied about his age and got a job on the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad's "Yankee Clipper" as a food vendor.

Those who staffed lounge cars were black, but in an effort to intimidate them in the 1920s and 30s, The Pullman Company began to hire Filipinos and Chinese, and the Chinese were paid more. This strategy backfired when passengers complained of inferior service.

Dining and lounge car cooks and waiters, in common with other black railroaders, had to battle for almost every improvement in pay and working conditions, not to mention promotions beyond the race ceiling.

Not all waiters and cooks were satisfied with the Brotherhood of Dining Car Cooks and Waiters (BDCCW) and began to establish locals affiliated with the American Federation of Labor's Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Alliance.

Following WWII, the number of passengers declined, and then plummeted, in the 60s. By then, railroads were requiring fewer cooks and waiters.

### **Teaching Strategies:**

- Write a report that compares/contrasts the job of a waiter of today with a waiter on the railroad.
- Thinking as a railroad waiter, or cook, write several diary entries describing your day on the job.
- Solve the Cooks and Waiters crossword puzzle.

### **Vocabulary**

culinary

destination

discrimination

exploitation

gratuity

grievance

prejudice

racism

recruit

regimen

seniority

stamina

## Supporting Documents

### **Books**

Railroads in the African American Experience

### **DVD**

Rising from the Rails