

Black History: Pullman Porters

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explain the basic principles of democracy (e.g., justice, equality, responsibility, freedom) found in significant U.S. historical documents (Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights) and analyze why they are important to citizens today.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

Major Objective(s): Students will

- Examine the role of the African American porter and his relationship with the Pullman Company
- Learn that from the earliest antebellum decades of railroading, African Americans were assigned servant roles on passenger cars
- Understand the Pullman porters had a 12-year struggle to unionize and extract decent pay and working conditions from the Pullman Company
- Realize that the porters were exploited by the Pullman Company
- Learn that to many whites, porters should be “natural” servants, a quality that, they believed, only blacks truly possessed.
- Understand that race influenced all Pullman employment

Major Points to Teach:

African Americans were cemented into the role of railroad servants, soon after the Civil War. As four million slaves entered a tentative freedom, they represented a vast labor pool that formed a potential source of workers for new, non-rural occupations. This coincided with the success of George Pullman, and other pioneers, in providing sleeping accommodations for passengers who were now traveling longer distances than before.

The sleeping-car porter's job was "a cross between a concierge, bellhop, valet, housekeeper, mechanic, baby sitter, and security guard. He was prepared, at any moment, day or night, to be a good listener, answer questions, find lost articles, and handle emergencies.

George Pullman's decision, to hire only black porters, reflected four intertwined business and racial decisions. He recognized that whites would feel that their travel was more luxurious, and their status enhanced, if black servants waited on them.

Pullman believed that blacks were "by nature adapted faithfully to perform their duties under circumstances which necessitate unfailing good nature, solicitude, and faithfulness."

As later generations of porters saw it, the earliest porters continued to be slaves, only now to the Pullman Company, having to act like slaves in order to earn the tips, on which they depended.

Pullman porters' smiling faces, in posed photographs, hid the ugly realities of their work. Although white travelers assumed that they were well-paid and well-treated, in fact they were amongst the most exploited black workers outside of agriculture and domestic service.

When porters launched a new unionization effort in the mid-1920s, they had many grievances. The Pullman Company expected them to work nearly 400 hours a month, about double of that of industrial workers. Many additional unpaid hours were spent making up their trains, before departure, and preparing them for storage, or the next run, after the last passenger was gone. They were not guaranteed sleep during their runs and there was psychological abuse. They were under the stress of being fired or suspended for a legion of infractions.

Efforts by the Pullman porters to organize, in the early 1900s, all fizzled. Suspected union activity was grounds for firing. Unionization efforts were further hampered by a lack of solidarity within the porters' ranks.

Teaching Strategies

- Be a reporter who interviews a Pullman porter. Come up with good questions which will bring forth answers that provide good information. Then, write an article using that information. Make sure your first sentence draws in the reader.
- Choose a partner with whom you may role-play being a Pullman porter serving a passenger. Write your own dialogue. Switch roles using new dialogue.
- Write a diary entry as a Pullman porter, describing your last train run. Include a description of your feelings, as well as your duties.
- Watch the DVD "Rising From the Rails"
- Complete the Pullman Porters word search.

Vocabulary

bellhop

chattel

concierge

emancipation

exploitation

George Pullman

grievance

obsequious

solicitude

solidarity

stereotype

sundries

valet

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Books

Railroads in the African American Experience

Rising From the Rails

DVD

Rising From the Rails