

Lesson Title

An African American Settlement in Wisconsin

Lesson Grade Level

High School

DPI Theme Area

Transition from Territory to Statehood, 1787-1848, Immigration and Settlement

Standards: History: B.12.1, B12.2, B.12.3, B12.5; Behavioral Sciences: E.12.6, E.12.8

Introduction/Background

This collection contains the papers of Charles Shepard and other residents of the black settlement of Pleasant Ridge (now Beetown), Wisconsin, including letters, tax receipts, and community history. Shepard (Sheppard) was the head of the first African-American family to settle in what became a pioneer black community about five miles west of Lancaster, Wisconsin. In 1848 the family of William Horner, a Haymarket, Virginia planter, moved to Wisconsin, bringing with them their freed slaves: Charles and Caroline Shepard (nee Brent), their three children, Harriet, John and Mary, and Charles' brother Isaac. A woman named Sarah Brown, who was left behind in slavery, later joined this family after Isaac returned to Virginia and paid for the woman's freedom. The two then married. Charles and Isaac left a mother and several brothers and sisters in Virginia who planned on heading west at a later date. Eventually, these individuals migrated to Washington D.C. The letters are chiefly communications between the Shepards in Wisconsin and their relatives in the East. Other letters are those of Thomas and John Greene, other settlers of Pleasant Ridge. The collection also contains an emancipation document.

It might help to read "History of the negro pioneer settlers of Grant County" before reading some of the letters from or to the Greens. In social history, little is known about women's lives because few written records such as diaries, journals, letters, etc. were left by them or saved and preserved. The same situation exists for African-Americans but the problem is even worse because few slaves were literate and few official or government documents listed the names of African-Americans, usually only listing whether they were free or slave and/or their first name and no surname.

Lesson objective(s):

Students will be able to:

1. Identify the experiences of African-Americans in early Wisconsin
2. Analyze primary sources such as letters, tax receipts, official documents for information about the lives of African-Americans in early Wisconsin
3. Compare and contrast the letters of African American pioneers to white settlers
4. Make inferences about slavery, the Horner family (the ex-slave owners), resettling in the frontier and gaining freedom

## Information Sources/ Resources:

### Suggested Activities:

The following are a series of activity suggestions rather than step by step lesson plans. You can spend as little or as much time on these activities as you wish.

1. Introduce the concept of social history to students and discuss that it is the study of everyday or ordinary people.
2. Discuss the problems historians have studying ordinary people, i.e., they leave few records, illegible handwriting, damage to documents because of age, storage conditions, etc.
3. If you have students read “History of the negro pioneer settlers of Grant County,” explain that historically the word “negro” was used in place of African-American or black, but has since gone out of common usage.
4. Before the lesson, look through and select the letters and/or documents you would like students to read. (Suggestions include: letters—Oct. 9, 1850; Apr. 4, 1852, the Emancipation documents are good; a very interesting letter in which Fanny notes that a child named Beulah looks like Thomas Green’s “old mistress,” Nov. 4, 1870. Ask students what she means by that.)
5. Or have the students start reading through all of the letters and documents. Some of the handwriting is difficult to read, so students can click on “Page text” on the left side of the page and read a transcription of the letter.
6. Depending on which letters you choose the following questions will guide students’ reading:
  - a. Why do you suppose the Horners freed their slaves and took them to Wisconsin with them?
  - b. What did the letter writers write about to each other? What things concerned them? Be specific.
  - c. Who wrote these letters? Was it the person whose name appeared at the end? How do you know? (There are a few letters where the person refers to the fact that someone else is writing or they had to wait for someone to read a letter to them or write one for them.)
  - d. The letters contain greetings and other everyday bits of information about many different people. Why do you suppose this is? Why do you suppose the connection among slaves and freed slaves was so strong?
  - e. You can adapt questions about analyzing primary sources to the letters such as: How does the writing relate to the time period? Are there any words that are new to you? Was the letter written just for the person to whom it was addressed? How do you know?
7. What do the other documents in the collection tell you about Charles Shepard and his extended family? (Look at the receipts, birth register, Emancipation documents, etc.)
8. Have students look at the photographs in the collection and answer questions.
  - a. Carefully study a photo for several minutes. What people and objects can you see? How are they arranged?
  - b. How are the people dressed? What are the expressions on the faces?

- c. What did you first notice about this photo? What is the physical setting? What other details can you see? Use descriptive words so that someone who has not seen the image might visualize it.
- d. What is the larger historical context of this image?
- e. What other questions come to mind about this photo?
- f. Whose story is being told and whose is left untold? (In the case of Edward Shepard, his wife and children—if he had any—his parents, etc.)
- g. When and where in the past do you think the picture was taken? How can you tell?
- h. What is really happening in the picture? Was the picture posed or was the shot candid?
- i. What might have happened a minute before the picture was taken? A minute after?
- j. Does anything in the picture relate to your own experiences?
- k. What questions do you have as a result of analyzing this photo? What else do you need to know to fully understand this document? Where can you find additional information about the time period?
- l. Do the letters help you put these pictures in their historical context? Why or why not?

(These questions have been adapted from *Looking Into Holidays Past Through Primary Sources* at *American Memory*.

[http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/doc\\_analysis/image/index\\_spring.html](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/doc_analysis/image/index_spring.html))

9. Another question to discuss is: How did the experiences of black pioneers of Wisconsin compare to those of the white pioneers? Students would need to look at some of the letters from white pioneers in the Wisconsin collection.

Glossary: Slavery, emancipation, infer, inferences

Conclusion:

Students will learn about the pioneer experience and African Americans in Wisconsin by reading through these letters. Students will also analyze the letters as primary sources. Whether settlers were black or white, students will understand that the pioneer experience was similar for everyone by comparing the letters of the Shepards to the letters of white settlers.

Assessment:

You can make up a worksheet based on the questions in this plan and have students hand it in. Class discussion based on the questions will indicate student understanding of some of the concepts of the lesson. Students can select a letter and write a response to it.