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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2020 Volume I: American History through American Lives

In Their Own Words? - Using The WPA Slave Narratives in the Classroom

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Teaching about slavery in the United States is challenging yet crucial. This country was a slave holding country far longer than it was not. The history of slavery IS the history of the United States. I want students to develop their own learning by reading and hearing the stories of the formerly enslaved persons in their own words. The WPA Slave Narratives allow students to both see the experience of slavery and question historical sources. The narratives, however, are not the exact words of the past. Editing, transcription, memory issues, and racism all play roles in challenging the notion of a true 'primary' source. In this unit, students will investigate both the historical record of enslaved persons and the issues surrounding the use of historical sources in order to deepen historical thinking skills. Students will focus on historical significance, compare multiple sources, evaluate arguments, and make and support claims about the Narratives. They learn to address not whether a source should be used, but how to critically question any source available to them.

This unit is written for 8th grade social studies but could be adapted for other levels, including upper elementary and High School U.S. history.

(Developed for History and Social Studies, grade 8; recommended for Social Studies, grade 5, and U. S. History, grade 11)

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