

Lesson Plan #8 for Genius of Freedom: *The Fifteenth Amendment* & Congo Square by Amy Cohen

Grade Level: Middle or high school

Topics: Centennial Exhibition, the 15th Amendment, Colonial Slavery, Yellow Fever

Pennsylvania History Standards: 8.1.6 B, 8.1.9 B, 8.2.9 A, 8.2.9 B, 8.2.9 C, 8.2.9 D, 8.3.9 A, 8.3.9 B, 8.3.9 C

Pennsylvania Core Standards: 8.5.6-8 B, 8.5.9-10 B, 8.5.11-12 B, 8.5.6-8 D, 8.5.9-10 D, 8.5.11-12 D, 8.5.6-8 E, 8.5.9-10 E, 8.5.11-12 E,

***African American History*, Prentice Hall textbook:** N/A

Overview: Students will examine the painting *The Fifteenth Amendment*, set on the edges of Philadelphia's upscale Washington Square. They will be introduced to the surprising history of this park, including its use as a potter's field, a mass grave, and a gathering place for African Americans. After reading poetry inspired by Washington Square's morbid and vibrant past, students will create their own works of art in a medium of their choice.

Materials:

Smartboard or projector

Individual student copies of "Congo Square" and "Meditations in Congo Square"

PowerPoint on *The Fifteenth Amendment*

Art supplies

Procedures:

1. Begin the lesson by projecting the first slide of the PowerPoint and asking students to carefully examine *The Fifteenth Amendment* by George Bacon Wood Jr., a (white) Philadelphia artist who created this work for the Centennial Exposition, held in the city in 1876.

- What is going on in the painting? (*a black man has borrowed a white man's pipe to light his own; the black man is noticeably well-dressed; a white woman looks on passively from her stand selling agricultural goods*)
- What is the setting? (*on a brick sidewalk by a low brick wall, with an open area of trees and a few brick townhouses in the background*). Note: Philadelphia teachers may want to ask if students recognize the setting as Washington Square, very close to Independence Hall.
- Why is the painting entitled *The Fifteenth Amendment*? What was the artist's intended message? (*the 15th Amendment, which was passed by Congress in 1869 and ratified by the states in 1870, gave African American men voting rights; this was a new provision when the painting was created; perhaps the artist wanted to indicate that greater political equality would lead to greater social equality*)

2. Ask students why they think the artist chose Washington Square as the setting for the painting. Before or after taking some responses, continue the PowerPoint to show a series of current images of Washington Square and its bordering streets.

- Slide 3-views of the interior of the park; note the charming “Franklin” style street lamps
- Slide 4-brick townhouses/the Marion Locks Art Gallery
- Slide 5-Interiors of the Curtis Building and the Athenaeum (a private library)
- Slide 6-High rise apartment buildings Independence Place and the St. James (aerial view)
- Slide 7-Interior of Lolli Lolli children’s store and Pileggi boutique
- Slide 8-Interior of Talula’s Daily and Talula’s Table (upscale restaurants)

Students will likely conclude that this venue was chosen because it is an attractive, wealthy area of the city. The artist may have thought the setting was aesthetically pleasing or that showing this scene of interracial acceptance in a wealthy area underscores the message of social equality.

3. Indicate that it was not until 1815 that the square was turned into a park, and it was not called Washington Square until 1825. Continue with the PowerPoint using these notes to explain the slides:

- Slide 9-William Penn’s plan for the city included five parks in order to prevent the spread of fire and to help realize his vision of Philadelphia as a “greene country towne.” As a Quaker, Penn wanted them named by location rather than for a person. Thus the original name of this yet undeveloped square was Southeast Square.
- Slide 10-Soon after the founding of the city in 1682, Southeast Square became a potter’s field, a place where strangers and indigent people were buried. Also buried in the square were victims of Yellow Fever which killed about 1 in 10 Philadelphia residents in 1792 (mainly poor working people who could not escape to more healthful areas outside of the city), thousands of Revolutionary War soldiers (often having died in Walnut Street Jail, the first building to be erected on the border of Southeast Square and notorious for having wretched conditions), and people of African descent, many of whom had been enslaved in Philadelphia. Doctors from Pennsylvania Hospital frequently stole cadavers from these burial grounds to use in their study of medicine.
- Slide 11-The square was closely associated with African Americans, so much so that it became known as Congo Square. Families, often separated during the week due to the small number of enslaved people typically owned by each master, would come together on

Sundays, their days off. Various African traditions, including libations for the dead, were followed during these gatherings.

- Slides 12 & 13-These are quotations from an 1830 book entitled *The Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time*; note that the author of the book claims to have interviewed people with direct recollections of the “Congo Square” period.

4. Again, show the students *The Fifteenth Amendment*. How does their knowledge of the square’s close affiliation with the African American community shape their understanding of/appreciation for the image? Do they think that the artist, George Bacon Wood, Jr., was aware of this historical connection between African Americans and Washington Square? *Answers will vary.*

5. Distribute copies of “Congo Square” and/or “Meditations in Congo Square” by multi-award winning poet Lamont Steptoe. Intrigued by its macabre past and cultural significance, Mr. Steptoe spent five years visiting Washington Square in every season of the year. His collection of poems and photographs, *Meditations in Congo Square*, was published in 2011. Ask students to indicate which aspects of Washington Square’s history are evoked in the poem(s). What kinds of images are conjured by the words? Which lines are most powerful and evocative for them? What are the salient similarities and differences between the poems? *Answers will vary.*

6. Conclude the lesson by having students choose a creative way to reflect on what they have learned. Let them choose from one or more of the following options, create additional choices, or have students come up with their own ideas.

- Write a poem, rap, or song based on the painting *The Fifteenth Amendment*
- Write a poem, rap, or song contrasting Washington Square of today with the Congo Square of the past
- Create a drawing or painting inspired by the poems of Lamont Steptoe
- Develop a theatrical dialogue between the white and African American man depicted in *The Fifteenth Amendment*
- Design a monument or other memorial for Washington Square commemorating the Congo Square chapter of its history



The Pipe-smith's Appointment to Sell Sugar
GEORGE BACON WOOD, JR.
Painted in the artist's studio, New York, N.Y.

Congo Square

I dance with the ghosts of Congo Square
Meet and marry what isn't there
O' the full moon in Congo Square
Shining on what isn't there!
The laughter and the tongues from far away
That echo in the present day
O' the joy and the freedom in Congo Square
Of the women and children who are not there!
The cakewalk and Bamboula is all the rage
How they mimic and mock their master's talk!
Guinee and Congolese can do as they please
In Congo Square
Rhythms can live for a day before going underground
To be put away
Tongues are loosened with some rum
But always there is no drum in Congo Square!
They come in rags and they come in tails
To share their woes and wails
They shimmy and they shake and they jump around
Make the dirt under their feet holy ground

I dance with the ghosts of Congo Square
Meet and marry what isn't there
So powerful is their glee, so powerful is their pain
It reaches across centuries for descendents to claim!
O' the full moon in Congo Square
Shining on what isn't there!
Echoes in the present day
Of what was there and gone away
Holy ground and sacred bones
History and dust cosmic phones
I dance with the ghosts of Congo Square
Meet and marry what isn't there!

Lamont Steptoe, 2006

Reproduced with permission of the poet

Meditations in Congo Square

There are children here running in and out of their mother's
skirts dusky feet of joy pearly white smiles in African masks of
sorrow

There are old ladies bowed puffing on corn cob pipe heads
wrapped in scarlet bandanas whiskered like old men
Someone's speaking in Ba-kongo another answers a question
asked in English with a phrase of Wolof

Someone is telling a joke in Mandingo a young man—salt
Water African—becrys his fate in Swahili

A ring shout is underway someone whose taken too much rum
bewails the absence of drums

Bushy black curls and frenzied feet move in rhythm to a Congo
beat

House slaves tip they hats to free-men-of-color another day of
Jubilee with some of us free

When dark begins to fall we'll leave this weekly ball pray that
Another sun will bless us pray for the death of those that
oppress us

We ain't got no gold but the riches we have money can't buy
We just grin and groan and laugh and moan

Lamont Steptoe, 2007

Reproduced with permission of the poet

The Fifteenth Amendment

By George Bacon Wood



The Fruit and Vegetable Market
GEORGE FREDERIC WATTS
1871





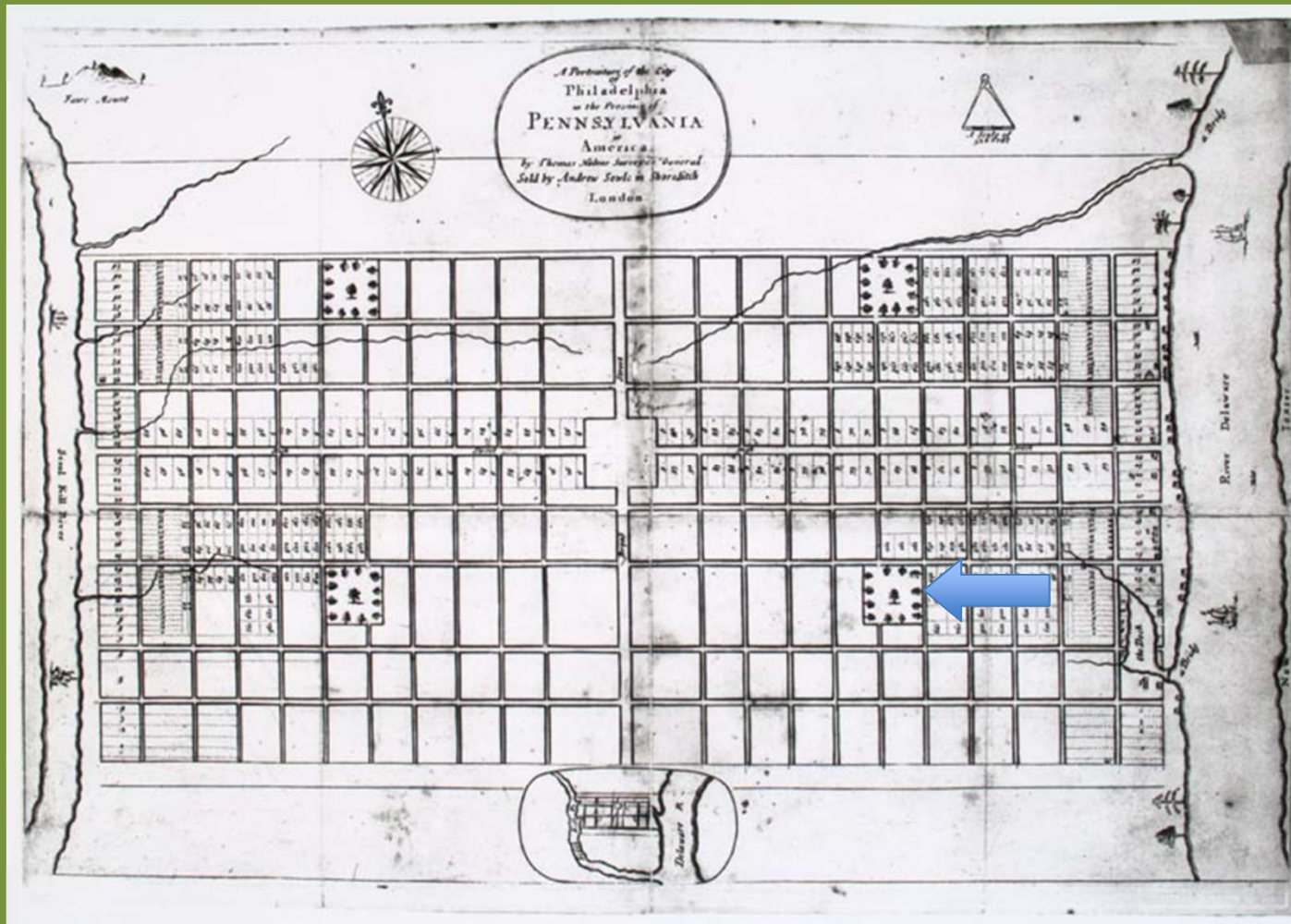






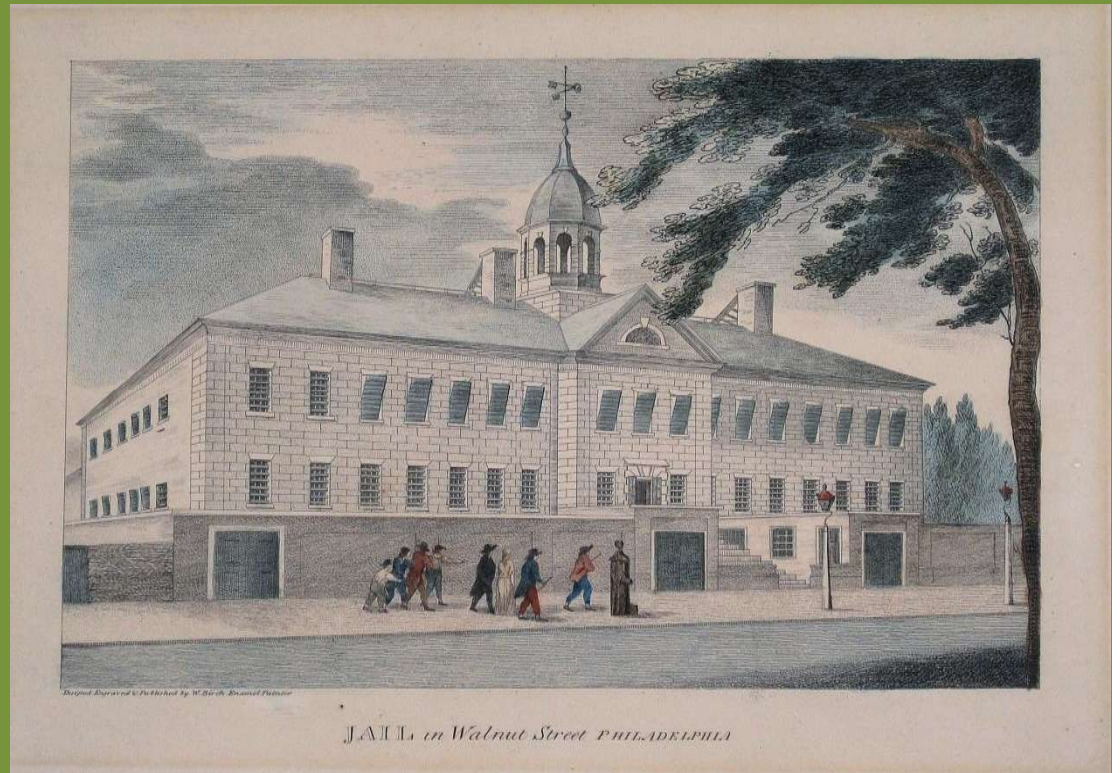


Southeast Square



Graveyard

- Potter's field
- Victims of Yellow Fever epidemic
- Revolutionary War soldiers (American & British)
- Africans



Congo Square

- Gathering place for enslaved Africans on Sundays
- Family togetherness
- African rituals
 - Honoring the dead
 - Music & dancing
 - Food
 - Stories
- Laws passed to restrict “tumultuous gatherings” & “the great multitude of negroes”

Philadelphia, June 1738:

Some of which are Tradesmen, as Taylors and Shoemakers, &c. Their Time are to be disposed of by *John Hopkins* in *Water-street*, *Philadelphia*.

Just Imported and to be Sold,
By *Robert Ellis* and *John Ryan*

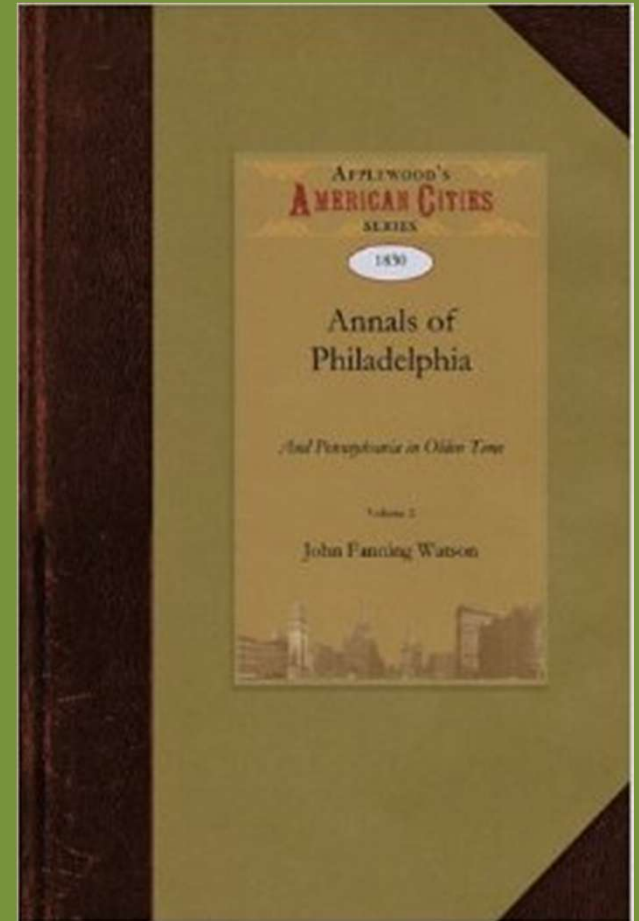
A PARCEL of fine young
Healthy, Negroe Slaves, Boys and
Girls, and are to be Sold very reason-
able. They may be seen at said *Ellis's*
House in *Water street*.

N. B. Three or four Months Credit will be given on good
Security, or an abatement of *Twenty Shillings* made in each
Slave on present Payment.

For *J A M A I C A*,
The *SHIP Hunter*,



“..an aged lady...told me she has often seen the Guinea negroes, in the days of her youth, going to the graves of their friends early in the morning and there leaving them victuals and rum!”
-John Fanning Watson, 1830



“It was the custom for the slave blacks at the time of fairs and other great holydays, to go there to the number of one thousand, of both sexes, and hold their dances, dancing after the manner of their several nations in Africa, and speaking and singing in their native dialects, thus cheerily amusing themselves over the sleeping dust below.”

-John Fanning Watson

