**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