

Colored Conventions Project Teaching Guide for K-12

EXHIBIT:

Equality Before the Law: California Black Convention Activism, 1855-1865

Prepared by Nakisha Whittington

Reviewed by Denise Burgher and Janel Moore Almond

EXHIBIT:

[*Equality Before the Law: California Black Convention Activism, 1855-1865*](#), curated by Gabriel Barrett-Jackson, Emma Cones, Christina Delany, Lindsay Drapkin, Lila Gyory, Sydney Hemmindinger, Rosa Pleasant, Reilly Torres, Victoria Walker, Daniel Waruingi. Created for Prof. Sharla Fett's History 213 Class, Occidental College, Spring 2016.

A. RESOURCES

Keyword Definitions (minimum 2 to 5)

1855 National Colored Convention--- The first convention in 1855 marked the beginning of documented organized civil rights activism in the American West.

1857 National Colored Convention--- One of the four California Colored Conventions held between 1855 and 1865 which was created in response to Black people in California being treated as second-class citizens- socially, legally, economically while being constantly threatened and violently assaulted by white men without legal and political recourse in Gold Rush era California.

California Gold Rush---The California Gold Rush was sparked by the discovery of gold in the Sacramento Valley in early 1848 and was arguably one of the most significant events to shape American history during the first half of the 19th century. White southerners brought enslaved persons into the California mines as early as the summer of 1849. Enslavers and the persons they held in bondage came primarily from western U.S. states - Texas, Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas.

People (minimum 2 to 5)

[Jacob Francis](#)

[Nancy Ross Gooch](#)

[William H. Hall](#)

[Nancy Davis Lester](#)

[Peter Lester](#)

[Biddy Mason](#)

[Wellington Delaney Moses](#)

[Mary Ellen Pleasant](#)

[James R. Starkey](#)

[Emma J. Turner](#)

Places (minimum 2 to 5)

Sacramento, CA--Site of the 1855 and 1856 California State Colored Conventions
San Francisco, CA--Site of the 1857 California State Colored Convention.

Key Texts (minimum 2 to 5)

“Mirror of the Times”---Thomas Duff, former convention delegate and Vice President, reflected on the proceedings of the 1857 San Francisco Convention, weighing the relative advantages and disadvantages of respectability politics. Duff stressed continuous, dedicated action in order to attain greater equality and challenge the ban on African American testimony in court.

“Voices from San Francisco” (Frederick Douglass Papers 1855)---Reports in the eastern Black press, such as this one from San Francisco, show national interest in how Black activists in one location responded to the proposals of other conventions--the 1854 Cleveland Emigration Convention in this case. Equally important, this article details the political organizing that led to the first California State Colored Convention.

Convention at Sacramento (The Liberator)---*The Liberator* published a letter in January of 1856, two months after the 1855 First State Convention of the Colored Citizens of the State of California, from one of the convention attendees. Jeremiah B. Sanderson wrote to W.C. Nell. Sanderson reported widespread support for the convention’s primary goal, which at this time was to allow the right of testimony of Black citizens in court.

Letter to the Editor (Sacramento Daily Union) 1855---A prominent topic of the California conventions during this time period was the fight to repeal the California state law that made it illegal for African Americans or any person of color to testify in a court of law if the case at hand regarded a white person. In a letter to the Editor of the *Sacramento Daily Union*, Burke expressed his support of their efforts to abolish this law.

Respectability Politics---a set of beliefs in which socially constructed mainstream standards of appearance and behavior will protect a person who is part of a marginalized group, especially a Black person, from prejudices and systemic injustices.

Predominant Themes (minimum 2 to 5)

Black Male Leadership---The first California Colored Convention was initiated by prominent men who realized the dire need for economic and political uplift for Black Californians.

Multi-Ethnic Discrimination in California---The experience of Blacks, Mexicans, Chinese, and Native Americans in California during this period was consistently circumscribed by discriminatory laws preventing them from possessing full citizenship and rights.

Black Testimony Exclusion in California---California state legislature banning Black testimony was a racially discriminatory, unproductive law that prolonged the path to citizenship for the Black community.

Chinese and African American Interactions in the late 1800’s---On several occasions, Black newspapers reflected their shared interests with the Chinese. At times, both African Americans and Chinese immigrants, for example, chose to navigate social inequity by adhering to concepts of respectability. Even more telling,

African Americans recognized the multi-ethnic context of their battle for civil rights by calling attention to similar racial discrimination against the Chinese in California.

Black Hair Power in the 19th century---Black hair was a medium contributed to not just personal style but the personal politics of style. . Hairdressers often served as a bridge between Black citizens and a specific politics of respectability simultaneously with Black Dignity as their work met the demands of their clients by what whites had represented Black stylistic expression in a white Euro centric environment.

Black Education in California---Education played a pivotal role in political organizing for racial equality in California. Black activists saw education as an opportunity to become competitive in the labor market, financially independent and hopefully to extinguish white racism through the practice of Black respectability.

California Black Churches and Schools---African American churches and schools were central to supporting and creating and sustaining activist communities in California. The Black church held community events where Black men, women, and children socialized and congregated where they discussed how to better the lives of those within their community.

Black California Press---The press, addressed repressive legislation that threatened the liberty of Black citizens. Civil rights, community, and racial politics were ingrained in the California Black newspapers. Writers and editors established relationships that blurred the distinction between activism and journalism.

Points of Interactivity

Exhibit Page Name + Link	Data Visualization Name	Visualization Type
Delegates	Convention Delegates and Location	Interactive geographical map
Tables and Maps	Name and Movement of Convention Delegates	Interactive timeline map
Tables and Maps	Colored Population in Gold Rush counties of California	Interactive demographic map
Tables and Maps	Black Institutions in Mid-Nineteenth Century California	Interactive social explorer map with geographic locations and institutions

B. METHODS

To successfully teach these exhibits we strongly encourage teachers to explicitly teach the following methods used to tell more complete stories of African American, African Diaspora, and American history:

Historiography

1. What is **historiography**?

Historiography can be understood as the history of history. A historiographical piece or essay discusses how history has been written over time and tracks the debates historians grappled with in a certain field. (Included is a link to video by Study.com; the first two [2] minutes of the video are free.)

2. How can students practice historiography as they study this exhibit?

3. How does historiography get written? Who gets to write history?

Suggested Exercise: Have students discuss the historiographical contributions of each section of the exhibit.

Primary Documents

1. What are **primary documents**?

2. How do we **research and analyze** primary documents?

3. Is there a **tool** that we can use to help us think about primary documents?

4. What is the proper MLA **citation** practice for primary documents?

Suggested Exercise: Students must locate, review and use the following primary documents:

- See the selection of newspaper coverage in various outlets in the [Newspaper Coverage](#) section of the exhibit for several options.

Data Visualization

1. What is **data visualization**?

*The act of showing data (information) using images such as pictures, maps, graphs, drawings. This [infographic](#) is a good example. (Source: Simon Rogers. **The Guardian** newspaper, International Edition. Friday, March 7th, 2014)*

2. What does **digital data visualization** allow you to see and analyze differently than data presented in textbooks?

Suggested Exercise: Have students choose one data visualization in the exhibit and narrate the story it tells, or teachers may encourage students to create their own visualizations based on their own research or the data provided.

Attribution and Citation

1. Why is it important to cite sources?

2. What information does citation communicate?

Suggested Exercise: Students will learn to accurately and appropriately cite this exhibit and the works referenced within, including:

- Primary documents within the exhibit (eg. [Article](#) from 1862 lamenting the exclusion of Black children from the school system.)
- [Secondary documents](#) within the exhibit (eg. Text in exhibit that discusses the economic and political significance of Black hairdressers in California.)

C. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the argument or main idea of the exhibit?

The main idea of *Equality Before the Law: California Black Convention Activism 1855-1865* is to demonstrate how Black migrants with hopes for a new start free of the barriers of white racism did not find a promised land awaiting them in California. Yet, the rapid succession of four California state conventions indicates how quickly Black men and women began to work together toward their vision of achieving economic, civil, and human rights.

2. Who are the subjects of the exhibit?

The subjects are [Jacob Francis](#), [Nancy Ross Gooch](#), [William H. Hall](#), [Nancy Davis Lester](#), [Peter Lester](#), [Biddy Mason](#), [Wellington Delaney Moses](#), [Mary Ellen Pleasant](#), [James R. Starkey](#), [Emma J. Turner](#).

3. What are the topics of the exhibit?

The exhibit explores the [Colored Conventions Movement](#), [Black testimony exclusion law](#), [Multi-ethnic legal discrimination](#), [Black migration in relation to Gold Rush](#), [Black male leadership](#), [Black hair power](#), [Education for people of color](#), [Black churches and schools](#), [Black media and press](#), [Black women's fundraising as political activism](#), [Chinese and African American interactions in the late 1800's](#).

4. What is the timeline of the exhibit?

The exhibit captures events from 1850-1880.

5. What are the major events of the exhibit?

The major events of the exhibit are the California Gold Rush, [California Colored Convention](#), 1860 U.S. Census, and [The National Colored Conventions](#).

6. Where do these major events take place?

The events take place across California, but specifically the northern areas of the state (Sacramento and San Francisco).

7. What are other places/things of significance discussed in this exhibit?

The Black Press, Black Organizing, the Black Church and School Support, Multi-Ethnic Allies.

D. QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

8. Now that you have learned more about these events, why does this exhibit matter?

This exhibit matters because it reveals the resilience and unity of California's Black community during the Gold Rush era and well into the late 19th century. Through Black organizing and the Colored Conventions California people of color were able to repeal racist laws and promote economic prosperity.

9. Why do these events matter?

These events matter because the four California Colored Conventions held between 1855 and 1865 were a response to Blacks being treated as second-class citizens and constantly threatened and violently assaulted by white men without legal and political recourse in Gold Rush era California. The first convention in 1855 marked the beginning of documented organized civil rights activism in the American West.

E. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The prompts below in purple are from the Exhibit, [*Equality Before the Law: California Black Convention Activism 1855-1865*](#)

1. How does this exhibit help fill gaps in the following?
 - Social Justice and Citizen's Rights
 - Documentation of Black history
 - The Colored Conventions movement itself
 - California Black Organizing
2. How does this exhibit create a richer context for the following?
 - The Black Press
 - Black intra-community dynamics
 - Westward migration in the United States
3. How does this exhibit address or intervene in the historiography of the following themes?
 - Black Political Activism
 - Black Press
 - Black Church Leadership

F. REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out for you the most in reviewing and studying this exhibit?
2. What did you find most exciting about what you learned from this exhibit?

3. Why does this exhibit matter?
4. How does this exhibit extend your understanding of American westward expansion?
5. How do the experiences of Black people in California compare and contrast to that of other ethnicities during the 19th century?

G. STANDARDS

Standards are taken from the [Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies and Writing](#) in grades 11 and 12. Note: *Teachers should use these standards as a guide and align their lessons with the specific standards for their individual state.*

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5

Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6

Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.8

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Colored Conventions Project 2020-21
Teaching Guide for K-12 - *Equality Before the Law*