

Unit 5, Lesson 12: Onesimus and Smallpox

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will draw historical conclusions and construct historical accounts from primary and secondary source materials relating to an enslaved man who helped introduce the idea of inoculation into the English colonies. The idea helped save many from the deadly scourge of smallpox.

Delaware Standard(s)

- **History Standard One 4-5a [Chronology]:** Students will study historical events and persons within a given time frame in order to create a chronology and identify related cause-and-effect factors.
- **History Standard Two 4-5a [Analysis]:** Students will draw historical conclusions and construct historical accounts from primary and secondary source materials.
- **History Standard Two 4-5b [Analysis]:** Students will examine historical materials relating to a particular region, society, or theme; chronologically arrange them; and analyze change over time.
- **History Standard Four 4-5b [Content]:** Students will develop an understanding of selected themes in United States history, including... Important people in American history.

Big Ideas

- Cause, effect, change over time

Essential Questions

- How did an enslaved African man help the human race?

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that an African enslaved man named Onesimus introduced an African practice that reduced the deadly effects of smallpox in Colonial America and that eventually contributed to its eradication.

Resources

- [Google Slides](#)
- [Resource 1: Warm-Up](#)
- [Resource 2: About Smallpox](#)
- [Resource 3: Onesimus - A Very "Useful" Man](#)
- [Resource 4: Checks for Understanding](#)
- [Resource 5: Delaware Connection](#)
- [Resource 6: Historic Marker Template](#)

Procedures

1. **Introduce the Lesson:** Tell students that they will be learning about an enslaved Black man in Colonial America who introduced an idea that may have saved millions of lives.
2. **Warm-Up:** Distribute or project a copy of [Resource 1: Warm-Up](#). Ask students:
 - a. What kind of document is this? [[advertisement](#)]
 - b. What is the purpose of this document? [[it is advertising that there are 250 enslaved people on board who will be “sold” to anyone wishing to “buy”](#)]
 - c. What is the document drawing special attention to? [[the fact that every care has been taken to ensure the enslaved people did not have smallpox](#)]
 - d. What can we conclude from the document based on what it is drawing special attention to? [[smallpox was something that people were concerned about](#)]
 - e. Why do you think the note at the bottom of this document states that one half of people on board “*have had the SMALL-POX” in their own Country?*” [[they would be considered safer to have around and therefore more valuable](#)]
3. **Reading 1:** Tell students that they are now going to learn about smallpox and its effects in the 1700s. Distribute copies of [Resource 2: About Smallpox](#). Tell the students that you will read aloud as they follow along, and that you will stop at the end of the paragraphs following the question headers to check for comprehension (determine whether students are able to answer the questions).
4. **Reading 2:** Tell students that they are now going to learn about smallpox and its effects in the 1700s. Distribute copies of [Resource 3: Onesimus - a Very “Useful” Man](#). Tell the students that you will read aloud as they follow along, and that you will stop at the end of the paragraphs following the question headers to check for comprehension (determine whether students are able to answer the questions).
5. **Option - Untold Video:** The Untold video creators offer a 2-minute video entitled “Epidemics in America” that connects the history of epidemics past and present. A good portion of the video focuses on smallpox and reinforces some of what students read in Resource 3. Access the video [here](#).
6. **Formative Checks for Understanding:** Distribute copies of [Resource 4](#) and ask students to complete the Readings 1 and 2 checks for understanding.
7. **Drawing Credible Conclusions.** Distribute copies of [Resource 5: Delaware Connection](#). Resource 5 is a letter to John Dickinson from a friend whose family has been infected by smallpox. Have students work with a partner to read the letter then complete the Check for Understanding that follows.
8. **Design a Historic Marker:** see [Resource 6](#). Have students design a historic marker for Onesimus. Information about Delaware’s historic marker program can be found [here](#). Access examples of historic marker images to serve as models and actual markers in Delaware [here](#).

Sources

Sources Used for Resource 2: About Smallpox

- symptoms and photo [here](#)
- <https://www.cdc.gov/smallpox/history/history.html>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7335227/>
- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/smallpox>

Sources Used for the Story of Onesimus

- <https://www.history.com/news/smallpox-vaccine-onesimus-slave-cotton-mather>
- <https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2014/10/17/how-african-slave-helped-boston-fight-smallpox/XFhsMMvTGceV62YP0XhhZI/story.html%C2%A0>
- <https://www.historyofvaccines.org/content/blog/onesimus-smallpox-boston-cotton-mather>