

Oakland Teaching American History Grant
Lesson Study 2010-2011
Possible 8th Grade Topics

I. What (and who) is Education For?

The American Protestant mainstream of the mid-nineteenth century sought to inculcate in American children a set of values that included democracy and Protestantism. Yet as Irish and German Catholic immigrants flooded into the United States in the 1840s and 1850s, many with school-age children, the values underlying the American educational project were called into question.

The most famous battle over education in this era took place in New York City, when first-term New York State governor William Seward decided to join with New York City's bishop John Hughes in supporting the pleas of Irish immigrant families to establish for their children "schools in which [the children] may be instructed by teachers speaking the same language with themselves and professing the same faith." Seward suggested that these schools be supported by public funds.

In 1840, New York State already offered a free taxpayer-supported primary education to children; while it was considered "non-denominational," this education included a certain amount of praying, singing hymns, and interpreting passages from the Bible. To the Protestant establishment, the idea that immigrants might find this education unacceptable was infuriating and threatening: if the Irish Catholics left the school system, would Jews and Presbyterians follow, demanding public funding for their schools as well? Would each Protestant sect demand its own state-funded school system? Protestants saw in the Catholic petition the collapse of the entire system of public education – and to a certain degree, they anticipated the collapse of what they continued to be the broadly established basis for American identity, social stability and order.

In exploring this controversy and its significance, students might discuss the following issues:

- 1) Review the state of American education in the early republic: what did people imagine to be the purpose of education in the early republic? How was education implemented? Who controlled education, and why?
- 2) What parties took part in the conflict? What was at stake for them? Why did this conflict emerge when it did?
- 3) What are the relationships between Americans' beliefs about education and their pragmatic interests?
- 4) How does this crisis expose conflicting beliefs about religious freedom, taxpayer-supported education, social order, "American" values and immigration?
- 5) What are "American" values today, and are they taught in school?

II. Etiquette Manuals in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

The mid-nineteenth century in America witnessed the flowering of the genre of the etiquette manual. As young people left their families on farms and moved into America's growing cities to seek work, etiquette books (as well as columns in magazines like the *Godey's Ladies' Book*) sought to teach them how to behave in such a manner as to demonstrate their honorable characters and to maintain a society that was productive, polite, safe and orderly. Through the genre of American etiquette manuals, students can investigate the following issues:

- a. How did Americans expect strangers to act toward one another during the mid-nineteenth century? How was trust to be generated and sustained?
- b. An etiquette manual generally claims to present timeless values, but how can the study of an etiquette manual actually help us understand the ways in which American culture was changing during this period?
- c. How did America's new, large, ethnically diverse cities affect expectations for social behavior?
- d. To what degree were expectations about social behavior determined by the needs of the market? Was the new system of public conduct "capitalistic"? What would this mean?
- e. Alternately: what kind of hierarchies are created and preserved by etiquette? Are these discriminatory?
- f. Using etiquette handbooks intended for young men and *Godey's Lady's Book* columns intended for women, compare expectations for men and women in the nineteenth century. What can we learn from the way these expectations overlapped or diverged with one another?

III. The Genre Painting and the American Landscape

In the 1840s and 1850s, the American public became very fond of giant, colorful, majestic landscape paintings. Genre paintings, which became popular at around the same time, portrayed Americans in what were intended to be "everyday" environments and activities: at work, at school, at the ballot box, or at their leisure.

Using reproductions of genre and landscape paintings found in the collection of the De Young museum, students could analyze and compare these two types of American art. After recording their own impressions of the art works and interpreting their observations, students can read reviews of art exhibitions from the mid-19th century to learn what contemporaries thought about these two types of painting.

- 1) What did landscape paintings seek to demonstrate about the significance of the American landscape? How did they teach Americans to feel about the everyday landscapes they inhabited or the dramatic landscapes they were intended to consider "their own?"
- 2) What did genre paintings teach Americans about the "everyday"? In paintings referring to group activities, what kinds of people were participants and what kinds of people were outsiders?

- 3) What is the relationship between the landscape painting and the genre painting? Do these two art forms complement one another or do they make fundamentally different statements about American identity?
- 4) How did art critics of the 1840s and 1850s talk about paintings produced by their contemporaries? What issues were raised? How did artwork figure in political discussions? Are we, today, “reading too much into” the art of the past?

IV. Mourning the Civil War

The Civil War was a period of unprecedented suffering and loss of life in American history. The 620,000 soldiers who died in the war represented two percent of the nation’s population. Local civil wars left homes destroyed, economies in ruins, and thousands of people uprooted. As the war drew to a close, Americans who had observed or participated in the war struggled to find meaning in their ordeal. They did so by telling stories to one another.

In this lesson, students would study some of the numerous cultural artifacts Americans created as they mourned the war. A key theme of the lesson would be the ways in which narratives evolve over time, and memories can be deployed for political purposes. Potential case studies:

- a. Photography. The American Civil War was the first American war to be extensively documented by photography. Then, as now, photography was considered to be a medium that captured reality accurately. Yet, of course, photographs could be made to serve many different purposes. Students could study the photographs of Civil War battles known to be staged, like those of Alexander Gardner, and discuss their significance. Do these photos lie? Gardner’s photographs could also be productively compared to the popular “spirit photographs” of the era. During the mid- and late-nineteenth century, many photographers influenced by the Spiritualist movement produced images of ghosts and other occult phenomena. Why did Americans see so many ghosts in the 1860s? What kind of “reality” did Spiritualist photographs capture? How can we interpret their popularity? What can we learn from the prominent role of women in producing Spiritualist phenomena? How do Spiritualist photographs relate to war photographs?
- b. Poetry. Students could read Walt Whitman’s two famous memorial poems of Abraham Lincoln, “Oh Captain, My Captain,” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Discussion topics could include the way in which these two poems attempted to shape a “national” memory of the fallen president and the war. Students could also discuss the significance of the dramatic formal differences between the two poems. The poems could be compared to other contemporary war poems and elegies. Were Whitman’s works typical? What did other poets try to say about the war? What did the poems contribute to American public culture? How does this compare to American public culture of today?

War poetry could also be read alongside other forms of war oratory, particularly Lincoln's own memorial speech, the Gettysburg Address. How was Lincoln interpreting the war in this speech? What was he suggesting to Americans about how they should think about the war? Does his interpretation still ring true today?

- c. African American Voices. Some historians have described the Civil War as an "African American war of self-liberation." Several hundred thousand African Americans fought for the Union Army, and many more were involved in destroying the system of Southern slavery in one way or another. Yet the legacy of freedom for African Americans was mixed, to say the least, and black memories of the Civil War and its aftermath are, accordingly, bittersweet. A lesson on this topic might illustrate the way African Americans' interpretations of the war changed as they realized the limitations of Reconstruction.

This lesson might begin by examining African American commentaries on the Civil War that were written immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation or the war's end. These commentaries could include speeches by prominent abolitionists, poems and eulogies, editorials in black newspapers, or letters written by freedmen. What did the war mean to men and women who had just been released from slavery? These documents could be compared to later black writings on the war, such as songs, autobiographies (e.g. Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery), and the WPA slave narratives. What did the war mean to African Americans a generation after it ended? Why does the meaning of the war seem so different now? Are the later interpretations of the war more accurate, or are both sets of interpretations equally true?