



# Bass Reeves: Legendary American Lawman

## Critical Thinking Questions

### *Methods of Information Collection*

Compare the meanings of legend and historical fiction. How are these different from a primary source or data in a scientific journal? How can we be sure that what we learn about the past is true? What does a good researcher do to get accurate information?

What is an opinion? What is a fact? Describe the importance of each for informing and persuading readers. As students, why is it important to discern “fact from fiction”? What information about Bass Reeves is likely fiction? Share why.

In what jobs today is it important to have facts and verified data? How can incorrect facts or faulty data affect students, professionals, citizens, and society in general?

Each person grows up with a desire to trust what they hear from parents, teachers, local leaders, doctors, pastors, friends, etc. How is society affected when “trusted voices” are proven fallible? Have you ever been given false information (intentionally or by mistake) by someone you believed was reliable? Have you given false information (intentionally or by mistake) to someone who trusted you?

How have cell phones changed the way the public gets information? Research the legalities of using a cell phone to record audio or video of private or public interactions, including those involving law enforcement. How do cameras and cell phones help both police officers and individuals with whom they interact? Are there potential harms?

How did Bass Reeves capture Bob Dozier? If this scene had been on today’s news, what would be your reaction while observing this happen?

What did Bob Dozier do that made him a criminal? Do you think Bass Reeves wanted to shoot Dozier? Compare and contrast the slide deck information with your answer.

### *Civil Interaction*

Society needs law enforcement to be reliable and trustworthy. How did the “fair and jovial” character of Bass Reeves help people trust him?

Describe how the demeanor of a police officer (or any professional) might be different on the job than at home with their friends and family. Have you ever behaved differently at home than at school or work? If so, share why.

Research the current job description of an U.S. Marshal. Share the similarities and the differences from what Reeves did to what current marshals do.

Different time periods use different words for the same status or job. When Bass Reeves was a U.S. Marshal, the word outlaw was used. What words are used now? Can you think of the modern versions of these words: *dungarees*, *stewardess*, *galoshes*, *pocketbook*?

A character trait can be good or bad. Primary sources describe Reeves as brave, just, and respected. Why are these good character traits? If a person in the year 2122 wrote a story about your present character, how would the “primary sources” of your life describe you?

After escaping slavery, Bass Reeves learned to speak the languages of the Five Nations who lived in the federal Indian Territory. Name these tribes. Why did this knowledge help him as a U.S. Marshal? Which languages would you like to learn, and why?

### *Civic and Military Duty and Public Safety*

In what war did Bass Reeves see combat? Give reasons why people choose to go into the military or law enforcement. Do you know someone in the military? Do you know a police officer? What kind of work do they do in a typical day?

Name a branch of the military. (Army, Air Force, Marines, Space Force, Navy)  
Research the types of jobs under the heading of law enforcement.

Who joined Bass Reeves when he searched for criminals? How is law enforcement different now from when Reeves was alive? What is the same?

Self-defense means protecting yourself from danger. As a U.S. Marshal, Bass Reeves had to protect himself from criminals who would not surrender. How can police officers protect themselves when a confirmed criminal resists arrest?

Describe how Bass Reeves probably felt when he accidentally killed another Black man as he was fixing his rifle. He was arrested and stayed in jail until he was found not guilty. Explain a time when you got in trouble, even if what you did was an accident.

Imagine being a police officer or police detective. How would you feel if you found out that your family member had killed another family member? Name a character trait or a Woodson Principle that you would need in order to arrest your own family member. Why did Bass Reeves volunteer to arrest his son?

Research police shootings between 2010 to 2020 according to demographics: by race or ethnicity of officers, ages of officers, gender of officers, ranks of officers, etc.

- How many claimed to have shot in self-defense?
- How many officers were charged and jailed?
- What are the demographics of the police and/or victims involved? How many of the victims were innocent bystanders, resisting arrest, or surrendering individuals?

How have you been impacted by news coverage of police shootings? How are you impacted by the data found from your research in the last question?

## *Race and Justice*

When Oklahoma became a state, Black police officers were no longer allowed to arrest white people. How does racial conflict affect our criminal justice system today?

Some laws are just, others are unjust. Who defines what is just?

Give an example of a good law. Why is it good? Was the Fugitive Slave Act good for some and bad for others? What do we do when a law or a rule is beneficial for some but burdensome or cruel for others?

What did the Fugitive Slave Act give U.S. Marshals the right to do? Refer to the current job description of an U.S. Marshal. Do you disagree with any of their responsibilities?

What do you think this statement means: “No Sunday west of St. Louis, and no God west of Fort Smith.” This expression was popular in the decades after the Civil War. Why did people believe religion was important for a peaceful, orderly society? How does faith help govern a person’s actions or shape a person’s character?

## *Recommended Reading*

[\*Black Gun, Silver Star\*](#) by Art Burton (2008)

[\*The Black Badge\*](#) by Paul L. Brady (2005)

[\*Black Cowboys of Texas\*](#), edited by Sara R. Massey (2004)

[“The Resurrection of Bass Reeves”](#) by Christian Wallace, *Texas Monthly* (2021)

[“Bass Reeves: The Invincible Lawman”](#) by Art Burton, *True West* (2021)