

Covert, Michigan: The Spirit of Cooperation

Teacher's Guide

The Woodson Center's lesson on Covert, Michigan affords the educator a great deal of flexibility in its implementation. The resources featured may be used to implement a lesson that is appropriate for a full or partial class session. Students will explore the story of Covert through primary and secondary source documents, analyze and discuss essential questions, and have opportunities to reflect on the lesson through persuasive writing prompts, multiple choice questions, as well as collaborative project extension activities.

The materials in this lesson can be cut down and rearranged to suit classroom conditions, timeframe, student comfort level, or to connect with other material from an established syllabus or textbook. As either an introduction to, or an extension of, this lesson, teachers and/or students can check out the 2006 "All Things Considered" episode from Jacki Lyden of National Public Radio (text included in this lesson packet).

A Stronger Kinship by Anna-Lisa Cox, the definitive book on Covert referenced throughout this lesson, is also a useful resource for more advanced students and in-depth, long-term projects.

Full Class Session Instruction (1 class day, approximately 50 – 75 minutes):

1. A "bell ringer" or lesson hook is always a great way to stimulate student thinking and introduce a topic for the day's lesson. Suggested bell ringers to ask students:
 - "What does equality mean to you?"
 - "How do we know if and when equality has been achieved in society?"
 - "How does equality affect relationships between people in a community?"
2. The teacher should have the bell ringer displayed on the board and allow the students a few minutes to think independently about it. Next, students may turn to a peer next to them to discuss their thoughts on the opening prompt. Finally, the teacher may ask for any students to volunteer to share their thoughts with the entire class.
3. Before moving into the Covert lesson, ensure that students have some background about the condition of equality in America after the Civil War and the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. The [Library of Congress exhibit on Reconstruction](#) provides a brief overview of the achievements as well as the struggles for equality during the time of Covert's founding.
4. The teacher may want to take a few minutes to discuss the prewar realities of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, the realities of "Jim Crow" rule after the collapse of Reconstruction, and prevalent forms of discrimination in all parts of America despite the fact that Constitutional Amendments, as well as state laws, had been passed declaring citizenship and equal protection of the law for African-Americans. (Suggest relevant WC lessons)
5. At this point, the teacher may open the Covert, Michigan [Slide Deck](#) and introduce students to the story of its founding by Black and white pioneers.



6. After reading the background story on the founding of Covert, Michigan, the teacher may pause and ask students to consider the following questions:
 - “Do you agree that racism is not a given, but rather a choice?”
 - “What factors came together to make the founding of Covert possible?”
 - “What did the founding of Covert reflect about America at that time?”
7. The next part of the lesson allows the teacher flexibility to group students together to read and discuss the Covert Case Studies. Each group may be assigned a particular Case Study to read and then to complete the accompanying questions. Groups may read more than one Case Study if time allows. Students may also be asked to develop a group statement about the Case Study to share with the class. The statement could articulate what impacted them the most from the story.
8. At this point, the teacher may want to connect the Covert story to our current times. A discussion question may be posed to help students understand the importance of Covert’s founding and how its story can guide us today. Questions to be considered may include:
 - “What can the story of Covert, Michigan still teach us today?”
 - “The establishment of Covert required the cooperation of each and every person that called it home. In what ways does your community work well together? In what ways could it improve?”
 - “If the settlers of Covert had social media and could create a hashtag, what do you think it could be?”
9. Lesson may conclude with students writing a brief reflection on the Covert story or discussing its significance in small groups. Possible extensions of the lesson include answering Case Study questions, responses to the Documents Based Questions (DBQs) included as a supplement, and/or the creation of a digital trifold on cooperation, past and present, in their own community.



Download [DBQs](#)



Download [Case Studies](#) (one document, printable)



Download [Slide Deck](#) (printable PDF)

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lessons, students will be able to describe the:

- Unique character of Covert, Michigan as a model of multiethnic cooperation;
- Pioneer experience of settling the western frontier in the 1800s;
- Role of the “Underground Railroad” in helping enslaved people escape to freedom;
- Experience of Black American soldiers during and immediately after the Civil War;
- “Nadir of race relations” and the racist violence of that era, both North and South;
- Efforts towards Black political equality and civic integration in the 1800s;
- Role of Black Americans in politics and culture from Reconstruction to 1900.

Students will define the following vocabulary words, drawn from the Slide Deck, Case Studies, and Documents-Based Questions:

boarder	correspondence	fraternal	frostbite	insurmountable
nadir	omission	oral history	pioneer	spectacle
superintendent	township	transpire		

Additional Resources

Articles & Videos

Anna-Lisa Cox on A Stronger Kinship, C-SPAN Book TV, April 2006

The Town that Never Experienced Segregation, Daniel J. Middleton, Unique Coloring

Rural Michigan Town's Solidarity Gets Tested, The Detroit News, September 2017

The Fruits of Covert, Bim Adewunmi, BuzzFeed News, September 2017

Websites

Search for Soldiers: The National Parks Service

Database of Civil War veterans. Students can locate soldiers from Covert, their own hometown, from other assigned readings or class projects, or from their own family.

Cass County Underground Railroad Society

Consortium of local historians who collect, curate, and make public artifacts from the Underground Railroad in Cass County, Michigan, just south of Covert. Wealth of little-known information here.

Covert Historical Museum

Hometown museum founded by local historian Pearl Sarno in 1970, open May 15 – September 15.

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Database of high-resolution images of artifacts from Black history, including items from Covert.

Woodson Center Lessons

Biddy Mason: Born enslaved in Georgia, Mason trekked across the continent with early Mormon settlers and found freedom in California – where she became a millionaire real estate mogul.

Robert Smalls: Famous for his heroic seizure of the Confederate gunship *Planter* during the Civil War, Smalls escaped slavery and fought for freedom as a political leader during Reconstruction.

54th Massachusetts: Many early residents of Covert served in the Civil War. Discover the true story of the all-Black regiment restored to public memory by the film *Glory* (1989).

Booker T. Washington and the Rosenwald Schools: Another story of cooperation to solve a problem, this time between the great education reformer Washington, who sought to bring education to Black children in the rural South, and the Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald.

Elijah McCoy: Born to parents who escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad, this Michigan-based inventor, holder of over 57 patents, helped make trains safer and more efficient.



Class Activities and Projects

Survive to Thrive

Help students build a months-long gardening project to understand the Woodson Principles of **innovation**, **agency**, and **competence** as displayed by Covert pioneers who learned to survive and thrive with little help from outside resources.

Students will imagine a world without grocery stores and trade, and begin to brainstorm: what would it take for us to survive and thrive without twenty-first century amenities?

Assignments can include: researching plant zones, soil conditions, and plant use as food and medicine; planning a community garden; building in-ground or raised bed gardens.

Re-enactment Skits

Ask students to break into small groups and devise a 5-10-minute skit based upon any of the people, places, or events discussed in this lesson. Ask students to try and build their skit around one theme or message that they find especially important to take away from the Covert story, and convey that theme through the skit. Quotes from the case studies or attached readings can be used for inspiration and actual character dialogue,

Point-Counterpoint

Ask students to read the following quote and individually write down their immediate responses to its meaning. What does it say about the culture that Covert Township residents created? Could such an attitude have been possible throughout the nation?

“I really don’t know because I didn’t think anyone thought of color. We certainly didn’t. We were treated the same. I stayed at their homes, they stayed at my home. We ate at their tables, I ate at their tables, and we just played together. We never really thought of race.” *Violet Jeffries, granddaughter of Washington Pompey, on growing up in Covert, 1996*

Then, break students into small groups and ask them to weigh the merits and limitations of a “colorblind” society. What did Violet Jeffries mean when she says she and her friends “never really thought of race”? Should this be held up as a social ideal, or does it end up creating problems? Was Covert a truly “colorblind” community in all contexts? How should our society weigh the value of individual, ethnic, religious, and other forms of personal and group identity against the need for a shared civic identity as Americans?

Have each group present their arguments, with evidence from the lesson. Then, reflect as a whole class and see if the presentations changed any students’ perspectives.