

Miracle in Mississippi: Laurence C. Jones

Teacher's Guide

The Woodson Center's lesson on the life of social entrepreneur and education reformer **Laurence C. Jones** and his founding and sustaining of **The Piney Woods School** in Mississippi gives teachers a good deal of flexibility in its presentation to the class. The resources featured may be used for a full or partial class session, as appropriate. Students will:

- Explore Jones' life and ideas, and the founding and history of The Piney Woods School, through primary and secondary source documents;
- Analyze and discuss essential questions raised by the Piney Woods story;
- Reflect on the lesson through persuasive writing prompts, multiple choice questions, and collaborative project extension activities.

Learning Objectives

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

- Social, political, and economic forces that shaped the mission of Laurence C. Jones;
- Philosophical, philanthropic, and spiritual beliefs that built The Piney Woods School;
- Scale and causes of poverty, illiteracy, and other social ills in the "Jim Crow" South;
- Growth of relationships between Jones and his school's wealthy, influential funders;
- Impact of Piney Woods, its founder, and its students on American culture;
- Importance of the local Piney Woods community to the school's flourishing;
- Vision of education for "head, heart, and hands" that guides The Piney Woods School.

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. Many books about Laurence C. Jones, The Piney Woods School, and connected figures like Martha Foxx or the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, are available online or in print.

The most popular of these are *The Little Professor of Piney Woods* by Beth Day (1955) and *Miracle in Mississippi* by Leslie Harper Purcell (1956), both written for popular audiences. Though nearly a century old, Jones' own early memoir, *Piney Woods and Its Story* (1922), is an excellent starting point for advanced history students. *Piney Woods School: An Oral History* (1982), by alumna Alferdteen B. Harrison, is the most scholarly and comprehensive story of the school itself.

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

Alma Mater
industrious
stigma

appropriations
jubilant
suffragist

charter
paranoid
zealous

commendation
pneumonia

Full Class Session Instruction (1-2 class days, approximately 50 – 75 minutes per day):

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 it mean to receive an education? Who is education for?”
 - “What is a *vocation*? What does it feel like to be called to do something?”
 - “How important is it for wealthy, successful people to help uplift the wider society, especially those living in poverty? When and how can their help be most effective?”
2. The teacher should have the bell ringer displayed on the board and allow the students a few minutes to independently think 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 Piney Woods lesson, ensure that students have some background about the wider context for early 20th century America, especially the South: the demographics of Black America before the Great Migration, education movements led by men like Booker T. Washington, the collapse of Reconstruction and its political aftermath, and daily realities of life under “Jim Crow” law. [The Library of Congress exhibit on “Jim Crow and Segregation”](#) provides an overview of the era in primary sources and demonstrates Black efforts at resistance.
4. The teacher may want to review the history of education reform movements in the 19th and early 20th century, going back to the foundations of public education and the influence of thinkers like Horace Mann; the contribution of Booker T. Washington and his Tuskegee Institute towards Black empowerment and independence; and the philanthropic efforts to bring education to Black students in the rural South, exemplified by the Rosenwald Schools. (Related Woodson Center curriculum lessons on these topics are suggested below.)
5. At this point, the teacher may open the Miracle in Mississippi Slide Deck and introduce students to the story of Laurence C. Jones, the school he founded, and its significance for today.
6. After reading the background story on Laurence Jones and the accomplishments of the Piney Woods School, the teacher may pause and ask students the following questions:
 - “Why were Jones and other educators driven to establish schools in the rural South?”
 - “Which other historical figures do Jones and the Piney Woods school bring to mind?”
 - “Why did the school emphasize vocational training, rather than scholarship?”
7. The next part of the lesson gives teachers the flexibility to group students together to read and to discuss the Piney Woods Case Studies. Each group may be assigned a particular Case Study to read and then to complete the accompanying questions. If time allows, groups may read more than one Case Study. Students can be asked to develop a group statement about the Case Study to share with the class; the statement could articulate what struck them most about the story.
8. At this point, the teacher may want to connect Laurence Jones’ life and ideas to current events. Discussion questions may be posed to help students understand the relevance of Piney Woods to the most pressing issues in education and social mobility today. Questions could include:
 - “Why has Piney Woods endured until today? What accounts for its success?”

“The growth of the school required social support and financial contributions from its neighbors, including local leaders (Black and White), national philanthropists, and small gifts of money and labor from ordinary people. What are the strengths of this approach? What limitations on the work of the school did it impose?”

“If you were going to build a school today, what larger purpose would it serve? What would its motto and founding principles be? Who would be invited to attend?”

9. Lessons may conclude with an independent writing activity, e.g., a brief reflection on Jones’ life, or a small group discussion about the significance of Piney Woods School. 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 the Piney Woods School legacy for educational institutions today.



[Download Documents-Based Questions](#)



[Download Printable \(PDF\) Slide Deck](#)



[Download Case Studies \(as one document\)](#)



[Download Multiple Choice Quiz](#)

Additional Writing and Discussion Prompts

Laurence Jones told a graduating class of Black college students in 1952: “When one gets out of work, we give him unemployment compensation – taking away the necessity for him to save and prepare for his own well-being. It takes away the necessity for the jobless to develop their own traits of resourcefulness, thus making the individual weaker ... The welfare system led people to think that they can get the things they want without working for them ... which is causing more and more of our people to become human parasites ... Freedom isn’t free. It has to be worked for and earned by individuals ... A free man works. A slave is worked.”¹

Do you agree with this statement? What kind of social changes do you think Jones was responding to in these remarks? How did his own life experiences shape this response?

* * *

In 1924, Laurence Jones wrote: “If the church is losing its power in the lives of men, then woe is man! For he is getting farther and farther from the Only Source of truth that he ever was before. He is thrusting aside the gold and silver of this life and is coming to care only for the tinsel.”²

What role did faith, specifically Christianity, play in the building of the Piney Woods School? What role, if any, does faith play in your life today, and your goals for the future? Do agree with Jones’ assessment of the importance of the church (or some kind of organized faith community)?

A century after Jones wrote these words, traditional religious beliefs are declining rapidly across the developed, industrialized nations of the world. Do you think this is a problem? Are we trading “silver” for “tinsel,” or are you more optimistic about this development? Explain your answer.

¹ May 6, 1952, commencement address at Alcorn College in Mississippi, quoted in Piney Woods School: An Oral History

² “A Negro Teacher’s Faith,” Outlook, 192

Additional Resources

Media

[Piney Woods School: A Thread Through Time \(Mississippi Public Broadcasting, 2017\)](#)

[This is Your Life: Laurence C. Jones \(1954\)](#)

[International Sweethearts of Rhythm: America's Hottest All-Girl Band \(Schiller & Weiss, 1986\)](#)

[The Piney Woods School on 60 Minutes with Morley Safer \(CBS, 1992\)](#)

Articles

[Iowa Culture: Marshalltown Reformer Lifted African-Americans Out of Illiteracy \(Medium, 2019\)](#)

[Helen Jones Woods obituary \(The Washington Post, August 2020\)](#)

["The Desire for Freedom" - Grace Allen Jones \(Heather Cooper, University of Iowa, 2020\)](#)

Websites

[The Piney Woods School Homepage](#)

Official website of Piney Woods. Contains a great deal of information on its history, the life of Laurence Jones, and the school's contemporary leadership, curriculum, and student life.

[Piney Woods School Collection](#)

Primary documents from the school's history, held by the University of Mississippi.

[Smithsonian: International Sweethearts of Rhythm](#)

American Women's History Museum online collection on the hit all-female jazz band, which began at Piney Woods and for which Laurence's daughter, Helen, played trombone.

Woodson Center Lessons

[54th Massachusetts](#): The Civil War experience is an important part of the Piney Woods backstory, especially the values of its earliest supporters in Iowa, like Asa Turner. Discover the true story of the all-Black regiment restored to public memory by the film *Glory* (1989).

[Covert, Michigan](#): Like the community around Piney Woods, the settlers in this lakeside midwestern village came together to solve common problems. But they also rejected racial segregation of any kind, building an integrated community where all its people shared schools, churches, and civic life – a century before the Civil Rights Movement.

[Booker T. Washington and the Rosenwald Schools](#): Another story of a groundbreaking education project. The Rosenwald Schools were the vision of Jones' inspiration, Booker T. Washington, who sought to bring education to Black children in the rural South with the help of Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald. For decades, a Rosenwald grade-school was actually part of the Piney Woods campus, and one of its many sources of public funding.

Standards of Learning

The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

CIVICS

D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2.Civ.6.9-12. Critique relationships among governments, civil societies, and economic markets.

D2.Civ.8.9-12. Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles.

D2.Civ.10.9-12. Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

GEOGRAPHY

D2.Geo.5.9-12. Evaluate how political and economic decisions throughout time have influenced cultural and environmental characteristics of various places and regions.

D2.Geo.7.9-12. Analyze the reciprocal nature of how historical events and the spatial diffusion of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices have influenced migration patterns and the distribution of human population.

D2.Geo.8.9-12. Evaluate the impact of economic activities and political decisions on spatial patterns within and among urban, suburban, and rural regions.

HISTORY

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

D2.His.14.9-12. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

D2.His.15.9-12. Distinguish between long-term causes and triggering events in developing a historical argument.

D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

ELA

D4.1.9-12. Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

D4.2.9-12. Construct explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear or non-linear), examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation given its purpose (e.g., cause and effect, chronological, procedural, technical).

D4.6.9-12. Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple contexts; and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.

D4.7.9-12. Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.

AP U.S. HISTORY

Theme 1: American and National Identity NAT

Theme 2: Work, Exchange and Technology (WXT)

Theme 4: Migration and Settlement (MIG)

Theme 5: Politics and Power PCE

Theme 7: American and Regional Culture ARC

Theme 8: Social Structures SOC

4.B Explain how a specific historical development or process is situated within a broader historical context.

KC-6.1.II.C

Labor and management battled over wages and working conditions, with workers organizing local and national unions and/or directly confronting business leaders.

KC-6.1.II.B.ii

The industrial workforce expanded and became more diverse through internal and international migration.

KC-6.2.I.B

Urban neighborhoods based on particular ethnicities, races, and classes provided new cultural opportunities for city dwellers.

KC-6.3.I.C

A number of artists and critics, including agrarians, utopians, socialists, and advocates of the Social Gospel, championed alternative visions for the economy and U.S. society.

KC-6.2

The migrations that accompanied industrialization transformed both urban and rural areas of the United States and caused dramatic social and cultural change.

KC-6.2.I

International and internal migration increased urban populations and fostered the growth of a new urban culture.

KC-7.1.I

The United States continued its transition from a rural, agricultural economy to an urban, industrial economy led by large companies.

KC-7.2.I.C

Official restrictions on freedom of speech grew during World War I, as increased anxiety about radicalism led to a Red Scare and attacks on labor activism and immigrant culture.

KC-7.2.II.C

In the Great Migration during and after World War I, African Americans escaping segregation, racial violence, and limited economic opportunity in the South moved to the North and West, where they found new opportunities but still encountered discrimination.



KC-7.2.I.B

Migration gave rise to new forms of art and literature that expressed ethnic and regional identities, such as the Harlem Renaissance movement.

KC-7.2.I.D

In the 1920s, cultural and political controversies emerged as Americans debated gender roles, modernism, science, religion, and issues related to race and immigration.

AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION

- 4.A Develop a paragraph that includes a claim and evidence supporting the claim.
- 4.B Write a thesis statement that requires proof or defense and that may preview the structure.
- 4.C Qualify a claim using modifiers, counterarguments, or alternative perspectives
- 6.A Develop a line of reasoning and commentary that explains it throughout an argument.
- 6.B Use transitional elements to guide the reader through the line of reasoning of an argument.
- 6.C Use appropriate methods of development to advance an argument.
- 8.B Write sentences that clearly convey ideas and arguments.
- 8.C Use established conventions of grammar and mechanics to communicate clearly and effectively.