AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE POPULIST MOVEMENT

NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES CORE CURRICULUM, GRADE 11:
UNITED STATES AND NEW YORK STATE HISTORY

UNIT THREE  Industrialization of the United States

These questions and documents can be used in conjunction with the New York State Education Department standard curriculum for grade 11 Social Studies: United States History and Government, in particular, Unit Three, Chapter 1: The Reconstructed Nation and Chapter 2: The Rise of American Business, Industry, and Labor, 1965–1920. Students will learn about the Populist Era 1880–1900, as a response to the overwhelming power of Big Business.

“Why did the Populist Party fail to ally itself with African American farmers?”

Document pages 62 - 65

This lesson is appropriate for units on Populism, racism or reform movements.

STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO

• identify the objectives of the Populist Movement
• describe the similarities between poor white and African American farmers in the late 19th century
• explain why the Populist Movement failed to incorporate African Americans
• evaluate why poor white and African American farmers failed to work together

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Populist Era 1880–1900, was a response to the overwhelming power of Big Business. Farmers who faced low prices for their crops and high levels of debt formed a third party called the People’s or Populist Party. They attacked the power of bankers, railroads, landlords and others they felt oppressed them. Some white members of the Populists proposed an alliance with African American farmers who faced similar problems.

Many populists embraced nationalism, xenophobia, nativism, white racism and imperialism. As a result, attempts to unite both black and white farmers in a common cause were a failure.

ACTIVITIES

I. Ask students, “What were the goals of the Populist Movement?”
   “How do you think poor white farmers in the South felt about former slaves?”
II. Group Work:
A. Divide class into groups of three.
B. Students read “The Negro Question in the South” written by Tom Watson, a leading Populist from Georgia, in October 1892 (see handout).
C. Students make a chart in which they list the similarities and differences between poor white farmers and African American farmers. Some responses may include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• dwelling together, lived in the same section</td>
<td>• mutual distrust and dislike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• won their livelihood by the same pursuits, cultivated adjoining fields on</td>
<td>• white farmers afraid the Negroes will dominate them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the same terms</td>
<td>• social equality does not enter into the calculation of demands for rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• suffered together the rigors of cruelly unjust laws</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• spoke the same language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• bought and sold in the same markets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• classified themselves into churches under the same denominational teachings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• housing almost equally destitute of comforts, living is confined to bare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necessities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• equally burdened with heavy taxes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• pay the same high rent for impoverished land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• pay the same enormous prices for farm supplies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Christmas finds them both without any satisfactory return for a year’s toil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. Class Discussion: Review chart and engage students with the following questions:

1. Why does Watson believe that both blacks and whites should support the People’s Party?
2. Why does he believe that they are separated?
3. To what extent does he believe that whites and blacks are equal?
4. If you were a white farmer, how would you react to this appeal?
5. Would your feelings about this appeal be different if you were a black farmer?
6. The People’s Party faded away in the early 1900’s; when this occurred, Tom Watson became an outspoken racist. Why do you think he changed his views?

IV. Assessment Activity:
Respond to the following question:
Why did the Populist Party fail to ally itself with African American farmers?
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Suggested formats for response include essay, a diary entry or letter from a person living in the 1890’s, an editorial or letter to the editor during the 1890’s, or a cartoon. Students using the diary, editorial or letter format should be reminded to be clear in their point of view both in planning and writing their response.

**Aim/Focus Question:** Why did the Populist Party fail to ally itself with African American farmers?

**DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY’S NEW YORK TIMES**

Historical events described in textbooks often began with reports in a newspaper. These questions help you compare the past with the present.

1. Find articles in current issues of The New York Times that report about groups competing for power on a specific issue. Read carefully and determine if there are underlying or overt issues of racism present in the conflict. Create a poster illustrating your analysis. Title your poster with your position. Use clippings to illustrate. Underline key words in the clippings that support your position.

2. The New York Times includes historical information in current news reports and obituaries. Watch for examples of historic events about racism in Times reportage. Underline the historical information. Create a Timeline that concludes with the current situation. Use information from Times clippings as well as other sources to complete your Timeline.

3. For a research paper, study one American political party currently in the news. Read and clip daily reports in The New York Times about this party. Analyze which groups are supporting this party and why. Develop a thesis statement about the future of this party’s success in a future presidential election. Support your opinion with examples from your dated clippings and other sources. List all sources in your bibliography.
THE NEGRO QUESTION IN THE SOUTH.

BY THOMAS E. WATSON, M.C.

The Negro Question in the South has been for nearly thirty years a source of danger, discord, and bloodshed. It is an ever-present irritant and menace.

In brief, the end of the war brought changed relations and changed feelings. Heated antagonisms produced mutual distrust and dislike—ready, at any accident of unusual provocation on either side, to break out into passionate and bloody conflict. . . .

Now consider: here were two distinct races dwelling together, with political equality established between them by law. They lived in the same section; won their livelihood by the same pursuits; cultivated adjoining fields on the same terms; enjoyed together the bounties of a generous climate; suffered together the rigors of cruelly unjust laws; spoke the same language; bought and sold in the same markets; classified themselves into churches under the same denominational teachings; neither race antagonizing the other in any branch of industry; each absolutely dependent on the other in all the avenues of labor and employment; and yet, instead of being allies, as every dictate of reason and prudence and self-interest and justice said they should be, they were kept apart, in dangerous hostility, that the sordid aims of partisan politics might be served!
The white tenant lives adjoining the colored tenant. Their houses are almost equally destitute of comforts. Their living is confined to bare necessities. They are equally burdened with heavy taxes. They pay the same high rent for gullied and impoverished land.

They pay the same enormous prices for farm supplies. Christmas finds them both without any satisfactory return for a year’s toil. Dull and heavy and unhappy, they both start the plows again when “New Year’s” passes.

Now the People’s Party says to these two men, “You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both.”

This is so obviously true it is no wonder both these unhappy laborers stop to listen. No wonder they begin to realize that no change of law can benefit the white tenant which does not benefit the black one likewise; that no system which now does injustice to one of them can fail to injure both. Their every material interest is identical. The moment this becomes a conviction, mere selfishness, the mere desire to better their conditions, escape onerous taxes, avoid usurious charges, lighten their rents, or change their precarious tenements into smiling, happy homes, will drive these two men together, just as their mutually inflamed prejudices now drive them apart.
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To the emasculated individual who cries “Negro supremacy!” there is little to be said. His cowardice shows him to be a degeneration from the race which has never yet feared any other race. Existing under such conditions as they now do in this country, there is no earthly chance for Negro domination, unless we are ready to admit that the colored man is our superior in will power, courage, and intellect.

Not being prepared to make any such admission in favor of any race the sun ever shone on, I have no words which can portray my contempt for the white men, Anglo-Saxons, who can knock their knees together, and through their chattering teeth and pale lips admit that they are afraid the Negroes will dominate us.”

The question of social equality does not enter into the calculation at all. That is a thing each citizen decides for himself. No statute ever yet drew the latch of the humblest home—or ever will. Each citizen regulates his own visiting list—and always will.

The conclusion, then, seems to me to be this: the crushing burdens which now oppress both races in the South will cause each to make an effort to cast them off. They will see a similarity of cause and a similarity of remedy. They will recognize that each should help the other in the work of repealing bad laws and enacting good ones. They will become political allies, and neither can injure the other without weakening both. It will be to the interest of both that each should have justice. And on these broad lines of mutual interest, mutual forbearance, and mutual support the present will be made the stepping-stone to future peace and prosperity.
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The Negro Question in the South by Tom Watson

GLOSSARY

antagonism rivalry; opposition to a conflicting force (noun).
cultivated to be sophisticated; prepared for the raising of crops (adjective).
despotism tyranny; system of government where the leader has unlimited power (noun).
discord disagreement; active quarreling or a conflict (noun).
emasculated weak; powerless (adjective).
fleece to cheat someone; to charge excessively for goods and services (verb).
onerous difficult to handle; troublesome; to have a burden (adjective).
sordid disgusting and/or dirty; low; base level (adjective).
usurious to lend out money for exorbitant interest in return (noun).