

Shaping the Constitution

RESOURCES FROM THE LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Lesson Plan: Jim Crow and Virginia Indians

Historical Sources:

[Halifax County School Photographs](#)

[Pamunkey Schoolhouse, Photograph, May 31, 1937](#)

[Walter Plecker Asserted that Virginia Indians No Longer Exist, December 1943](#)

Standards Addressed:

Virginia Standards of Learning:

- VS.8 *The student will demonstrate knowledge of the reconstruction of Virginia following the Civil War by*
- a) *identifying the effects of Reconstruction on life in Virginia;*
 - b) *identifying the effects of segregation and “Jim Crow” on life in Virginia for whites, African Americans, and American Indians.*
- USII.4 *The student will demonstrate knowledge of how life changed after the Civil War by*
- c) *describing racial segregation, the rise of “Jim Crow,” and other constraints faced by African Americans and other groups in the post-Reconstruction South.*

National History Standards:

Standards in History for Grades K–4, Topic 2, Standard 3c: Describe the problems, including prejudice and intolerance, as well as the opportunities that various groups who have lived in their state or region have experienced in housing, the workplace, and the community.

History Standards for Grades 5–12, United States, Era 6, Standard 2b: The student understands “scientific racism”, race relations, and the struggle for equal rights.

Brief Background Information:

American Indians were not American citizens even after ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, and they were often discriminated against and denied the equal protection of the laws. After the Civil War, white government officials in Virginia began to enforce racial distinctions that before the war had not always affected American Indian descendants. After the creation of the public school system, American Indian children were not allowed to attend white schools. Legalized segregation forced American Indian communities to search for differences

between themselves and African Americans. For American Indian tribes, reasserting American Indian identity meant rejecting the biracial categories of “white” and “colored.”

Schools became a key site in which to assert American Indian autonomy. Between 1880 and 1920, many American Indian communities established their own schools rather than attend black schools. In this way, American Indians resisted the color line by insisting on the creation of “Indian” as a third category. In Virginia, the Pamunkey tribe went so far as to carry membership cards so that they could not be forced onto the “colored” railway coach. Some Pamunkey tribal chiefs wore their hair long in order to show that it was straight and not curly. The Pamunkey tribe established its own school, which consisted of a single-story frame building.

Materials Needed:

- Three different colored cards (enough for each student to have one card); have an equal number of two colors and a smaller number of the third color.
- Printouts of Walter Plecker's 1943 letter or the transcript for each student

Teacher Preparation:

Read the essays about the "[Pamunkey Schoolhouse](#)" and "[Walter Plecker Asserted that Virginia Indians No Longer Exist](#)" at Shaping the Constitution.

Teacher Actions:

1. Have students brainstorm about times they have faced discrimination, or identify current events that show how people face discrimination. Discuss the meanings of

- **segregation:** The separation of people, usually based on race or religion
- **discrimination:** An unfair difference in the treatment of people
- **“Jim Crow” laws:** Laws that legally established segregation, or separation of the races, and reinforced prejudices held by whites

2. Take out sets of three different colored cards (for example: pink, blue, and green). Have an equal number of two colors (pink and blue) and a smaller number of the third color (green). Shuffle and pass the cards out to all the students. Tell the pink group to move to one side of the room and the blue group to the other side. Tell the green group that they can decide individually whether to stand together in the middle or back of the room, or to join one of the other groups.

3. Now bring up the pictures of the white and African American schools. Tell the pink group that they have to go to the white school. Tell the blue group that they have to go to the African American school. Ask the green group which school they'd rather go to and have them join that group.

4. Pass out the Plecker letter. (Have students pair up or join in small groups of people near them when reading and discussing the letters.) Draw attention to the last two paragraphs and have a student or two read them out loud:

Public records in the office of the Bureau of Vital Statistics, and in the State Library, indicate that there does not exist today a descendant of the Virginia ancestors claiming to be an Indian who is unmixed with negro blood. Since our more complete investigation of all of these records and the statements (mostly signed) of numerous trustworthy old citizens, many now dead, all preserved in our "racial integrity" files, no one has attempted by early recorded evidence to disprove this finding. If such evidence exists, our research worker would have found it.

One weak point, which is giving us endless trouble, is the fact that many birth certificates since 1912 have, without realization of future danger, been accepted with false registration as "Indian." Not a few, when we were off our guard, have slipped by as white. The General Assembly should empower us to state the recorded pedigree on the backs of such certificates and transcripts, to protect those desiring the truth now and in the future.

5. Ask a student to explain what these paragraphs mean. Discuss with the class the implications for the Virginia Indians.

6. Show the African American school and tell the green group to stand with the blue group. Then show the Pamunkey schoolhouse; ask which in the green group would rather go to school there. Allow the green group to re-form their own separate group.

7. Discuss the Virginia Indians' backlash against the biracial society in the state during the Jim Crow era. Why did Virginia Indians not want to be classified with African Americans? Why might a Virginia Indian or an African American try to pass as white?

8. Analysis: Again, have the students discuss the meanings of

segregation, discrimination, and "Jim Crow" laws

How have their understandings of these words changed with the addition of a third category of people? If you have time, you might discuss current shifts in demographics and discrimination felt by Latino Americans today or Asian Americans during WWII.