

Early Reconstruction featuring the Hyers Sisters

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

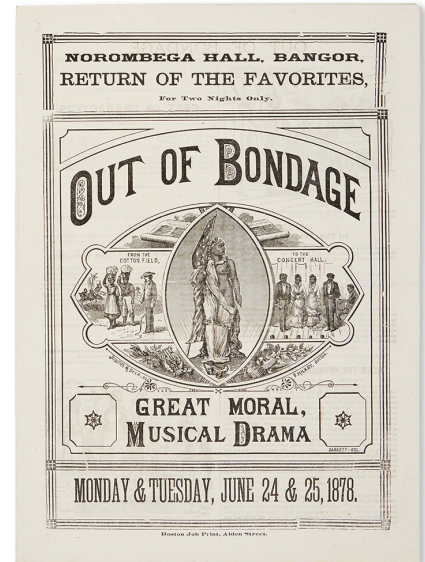
What did the career and artistic work of the Hyers Sisters reveal about life for African Americans during the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Post-Reconstruction?

OVERVIEW

“I went a mile and a half in the most furious tempest of wind and snow that I have seen for five years, to see the plantation sketches of the Hyers Troupe and hear their exquisite music, and I would go three miles through just such a tempest to have that pleasant and satisfactory experience again.”

-Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain)

*In this lesson, students imagine what life might have been like for African Americans during the Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-reconstruction by exploring the life and work of the Hyers Sisters, the originators of American musical theater. By analyzing primary source documents, watching clips from the Susheel Bibbs film “Voices of Freedom,” and performing a dramatic reading of scene excerpts from *Out of Bondage* – the Hyers Sisters’ first musical – students will come away with a better understanding of how the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Post-Reconstruction affected the lives of African Americans.*



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Sisters Anna Madah and Emma Louise Hyers were born in Sacramento, California in the 1850s. The daughters of amateur opera singers who made their way to California during the Gold Rush, Anna and Emma received musical training at a young age. After moving to San Francisco, this musical training was enriched by an education in civics via the city’s activist African American community that surrounded them.

On April 22, 1867, Anna (a soprano) and Emma (a contralto) made their singing debut in Sacramento’s Metropolitan Theater, performing operatic arias for an enraptured audience. Under the management of their father, the sisters then toured the country, performing across the United States to great acclaim.

The sisters began their career during Reconstruction, a time in U.S. history defined by the U.S. Government’s attempts to reconstruct the country socially and economically after the destruction of the Civil War. Perhaps more than anything else, Reconstruction is defined by the emancipation of enslaved people. Through the so-called “Reconstruction” or “Civil War” Amendments - the



13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments - African Americans gained the rights of freedom, citizenship, and (for men) participation in democracy through voting. Yet the process of fully realizing the rights to citizenship was an arduous one, and one that continues to this day. Lifted from the yolk of slavery, African Americans were given sparse economic resources to succeed, and needed to rely on federal and local programs such as the Freedmen's Bureau to attain loans, property, or secure jobs. And while freed from slavery, African Americans still faced extreme racism, prejudice, and violence throughout the United States.

It was in this environment that the Hyers Sisters operated, and by many accounts, thrived. At a time when the primary form of entertainment was Minstrelsy, noted for its reliance on racist and derogatory stereotypes of African Americans, the Hyers Sisters purposely chose to perform Opera. The sisters' virtuosity at the artform is evidenced by the fact that they were one of, if not the first, women and African American performers to receive billing on the illustrious Redpath Lyceum touring circuit.

By the late 1870s, the Hyers Sisters' prestige as opera singers granted them the opportunity to pursue the dream of touring Europe. However, at the same time, President Rutherford B. Hayes pulled federal troops from the South. Very quickly, the promises of reconstruction for formerly enslaved people vanished before the now unchecked threats of violence from groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the ratification of discriminatory "Jim Crow" laws throughout the South. The popularity of minstrelsy only increased at this time, and the Hyers Sisters had to choose whether to travel to Europe, or continue their artistic project of establishing the dignity and humanity of African Americans through the stage. They chose the latter, releasing *Out of Bondage*, the first American musical ever produced.

Out of Bondage exemplifies the Hyers Sisters approach to creating a genre which spoke to the dignity and ingenuity of African Americans. Written by Joseph Bradford, it focuses on a family of enslaved people who, in the process of the play, become free, move to Boston, and become professional singers. The story is intertwined with song performances, mostly coming from a repertoire of music closely associated with Spirituals and popular songs known among African Americans at the time.

Both the fictionalized account of the characters in *Out of Bondage* and the historical account of the Hyers Sisters demonstrates the opportunities and challenges African Americans encountered during and after Reconstruction.



OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Reconstruction was a contentious national project that sought to economically and socially rebuild the United States immediately following the Civil War
- The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were one of the biggest accomplishments of Reconstruction, ending slavery and greatly altering the lives of African Americans
- The creation of the Freedmen's Bureau and other mutual aid organizations assisted African Americans who gained freedom
- The removal of federal troops from the South in 1877 and the end of Reconstruction
- The Hyers Sisters created the first all-African American theater company in the United States and achieved enormous popularity by showcasing the African American experience during this time with grace and dignity

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to describe the effects Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction had on African Americans by watching video clips, investigating primary source documents, and doing a dramatic reading of excerpts of musical theater work performed by the Hyers Sisters.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Play **Clip 1, Song Excerpt from "Cheer Up Sam"**. Then ask students:

- What kind of performance is this video capturing? Have you seen anything similar to this in your life?
- Have you ever seen a musical, live or broadcast? Do you have a favorite musical?

2. Inform students that musicals became very popular forms of entertainment in the late 1800s, largely thanks to the Hyers Sisters, who both produced and sang in these kinds of productions. Play **Clip 2, The Birth of the Musical**. Ask students:

- What innovations did the Hyers Sisters bring to theater performances?
- Based on this clip, what would you say is the historical importance of the Hyers Sisters is for the history of American entertainment?
- How might the Hyers Sisters have contributed to the progression of American society?

3. Tell students that in the lesson they will be investigating the Hyers Sisters' legacy, and the time during which they lived.

PROCEDURE

1. Inform students that the Hyers Sisters were singers and entertainers who worked mostly during and after the period of Reconstruction. Play **Clip 3, Introduction to Reconstruction**. Then ask students:

- According to the clip, when did Reconstruction occur? (*Roughly 1865 to 1877*)
- Why is this period of time known as "Reconstruction"? (*The title speaks to the project of reconstructing American society after the Civil War.*)
- How were new laws enforced during this period? (*By federal troops stationed in the South.*)

2. Inform students that one of the primary laws needing to be enforced during Reconstruction were new Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Distribute **Handout 1, Reconstruction Amendment Chart** (*Teacher's Guide available*). Ask students to fill in the chart. If desired, students can then share what they wrote in the chart as part of a Think-Pair-Share activity. Then ask student volunteers to share the completed chart with the class.

3. Inform students that they will now watch a video detailing the Hyers Sisters' early career, starting in Northern California. Play **Clip 4, The Hyers Sisters**, then ask students:

- What kind of music did the Hyers Sisters get their start performing? How do you know? (*Opera - as represented in the musical reproduction at the beginning of their clip and the name of their first company, the Hyers Concert Opera Company.*)

- According to the clip, did the Hyers sisters have a successful career in the opera? What aided them in their success? (*As described by in the captions and by Susheel Bibbs, the sisters became famous, and were aided by their father, as well as the transcontinental railroad.*)

4. As a class, brainstorm what students know about Opera. Ask students:

- What do you know about Opera? Have you ever heard or seen it before?
- What associations do you make with Opera? Would you consider it "high class" or "low class" music?
- What kind of person do you think typically performed Opera in the United States in the 1860s?
- Why might it have been historically important for the Hyers Sisters to achieve fame singing Opera? What legacy might have that created?

5. Inform students that around 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes removed the federal troops supporting Reconstruction amendments from the South (*Note to teacher: for more on the events leading up to 1877, see the lesson Late Reconstruction featuring the Fisk Jubilee Singers.*) Ask students:

- What effects might this action have caused in the South?
- How might this action have led to increased activity among groups like the Ku Klux Klan?
- Do you think formerly enslaved people continued to have the same freedoms in

the South that they once did immediately following the Civil War? (*Note to teacher: for more on Jim Crow laws, Minstrelsy, and other Post-Reconstruction events, see the lesson Plessy V. Ferguson featuring Bert Williams.*)

6. Inform students that after Reconstruction, the Hyers Sisters chose not to go to Europe to continue their opera career, but to create performances in the United States that specifically showed the dignity and creativity of African Americans. Ask students:

- Why might the Hyers Sisters have made this decision?
- What about the Hyers Sisters' background and past might have informed this decision? (*If needed, remind students that the sisters grew up surrounded by the African American activist community in Sacramento.*)
- What might this decision say about the Hyers Sisters' priorities and values?

7. Display **Image 1, Out of Bondage Promotional Poster**. Explain to students that this is the poster of the Hyers Sisters' first production. Using the **Teacher's Guide for Analyzing Photographs and Prints from the Library of Congress** as a guide, have students examine the poster displayed on the board, with the goal of trying to identify what the play *Out of Bondage* might have been about. Focus on the following questions from the Teacher's Guide:

- Based on your investigations, can you hypothesize about what the play *Out of Bondage* might be about? What might the characters in the play be getting "out" of? (*The play details a family of enslaved people becoming free after the Civil War.*)

- What is the first thing you notice about this image?
- Find something small but interesting in the image.
- What do you notice that you can't explain?
- What do you notice now that you didn't earlier?
- Why do you think this image was made?
- Who do you think was the audience for this image?
- What's happening in the image?

8. After students have analyzed the image as a primary source, ask them:

- Based on your investigations, can you hypothesize about what the play *Out of Bondage* might be about? What might the characters in the play be getting "out" of? (*The play details a family of enslaved people becoming free after the Civil War.*)

9. Pass out to each student **Handout - Out of Bondage Scene Excerpts**, and explain that they will be doing a dramatic reading from the play. Assign characters for students to read, read each excerpt, and discuss the questions on the handout as a class. (*Warning: explain to students that some of the language used in the play is outdated and today may be considered offensive. Give students the assurance that they can say the words in the script without judgment, but also allow them to withhold from saying certain words if they are uncomfortable doing so.*)

10. After the reading, ask students to consider what is left out of the story: Nareisse, Kaloolah, and Prince's journey from Georgia to

Boston. Ask students the following questions, while noting their responses on the board.

- What challenges might that journey have posed for the recently freed people? (Ask students to take notes on what their classmates say, as inspiration for the following creative writing activity.)
- What resources did the three have when leaving the plantation in Georgia and

making the journey to Boston? What sort of help might they have needed?

11. Pass out to students **Handout - Creative Writing Activity: On the Journey to Boston**. Individually or in groups, ask students to complete the handout, using the notes from the board as inspiration for their story outline.
12. Ask student groups or volunteers to share their stories they developed from the handout with the rest of the class.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Inform students that to finish the lesson, they will be thinking through how the historical events they learned in class might have played a role in the fictional account presented in *Out of Bondage*. Ask students:
 - What were the Reconstruction Amendments? What role might they have played for the characters in *Out of Bondage*?
 - What was the Freedmen's Bureau? While not addressed in the play, how might that organization or organizations similar helped the characters in *Out of Bondage*?
 - What does *Out of Bondage* say about the Reconstruction Era? Does it portray the era positively or negatively?
 - Finally, what does the career of the Hyers Sisters say about the Post-Reconstruction era?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Create an extra scene for *Out of Bondage* based upon the outline created in **Handout - Creative Writing Activity: On the Journey to Boston**. Ask students to do a dramatic reading of the new scene.
2. Learn more about Reconstruction in the TeachRock Lesson *Almost Emancipated: Reconstruction* (<https://teachrock.org/lesson/almost-emancipated-the-reconstruction>).
3. Read the full history of the Founding of the Freedmen's Bureau from Senate.gov (<https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/FreedmensBureau.htm#:~:text=On%20March%203%2C%201865%2C%20Congress,includin%20newly%20freed%20African%20Americans.>)
4. Research another organization like the Freedmen's Bureau that served recently freed people, and summarize the organization's goals and history:
 - American League of Colored Laborers



- The National Negro Labor Council
 - The Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union characters in *Out of Bondage*?
5. Investigate the work of Isaiah Dickerson and Callie House, and summarize their work and historical importance during Reconstruction.

STANDARDS

COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

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

CALIFORNIA HISTORY—SOCIAL SCIENCE CONTENT STANDARDS

8.11 Students analyze the character and lasting consequences of Reconstruction

1. List the original aims of Reconstruction and describe its effects on the political and social structures of different regions.
2. Identify the push-pull factors in the movement of former slaves to the cities in the North and to the West and their differing experiences in those regions
3. Understand the effects of the Freedmen's Bureau and the restrictions placed on the rights and opportunities of freedmen, including racial segregation and "Jim Crow" laws.
5. Understand the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution and analyze their connection to Reconstruction.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK STANDARDS

Topic 5. The Civil War and Reconstruction: causes and consequences [USI.T5]

6. Analyze the consequences of the Civil War and Reconstruction (e.g., the physical and economic destruction of the South and the loss of life of both Southern and Northern troops; the increased role of the federal government; the impeachment of President Johnson; the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments; the expansion of the industrial capacity of the Northern U.S.; the role of the Freedmen's Bureau and organizations such as the American League of Colored Laborers, the National Negro Labor Council, the Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union; the accomplishments and failures of Radical Reconstruction; the presidential election of 1876; and the end of Reconstruction)



SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Literature Standards for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

LEARNING FOR JUSTICE SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

JU.9-12.15 I can identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world.



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- *Voices for Freedom - The Hyers Sisters' Dream & Legacy*: Song Excerpt from “Cheer Up Sam”
- *Voices for Freedom - The Hyers Sisters' Dream & Legacy*: The Birth of the Musical
- *Voices for Freedom - The Hyers Sisters' Dream & Legacy*: Introduction to Reconstruction
- *Voices for Freedom - The Hyers Sisters' Dream & Legacy*: The Hyers Sisters

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Reconstruction Amendment Chart
- Teacher’s Guide for Analyzing Photographs and Prints from the Library of Congress
- Handout – Out of Bondage Scene Excerpts
- Handout – Creative Writing Activity: On the Journey to Boston