



THEATRE IV
Classroom

Connections

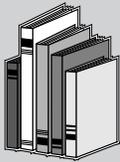
**Teacher
Resources**



**In the Classroom
For Teachers & Students
Grades 3 - 8**

Sweet Chariot and the
Classroom Connections Study

Guide are produced in support of the following Virginia Standards of Learning: English 3.1, 3.4, 3.5, 3.7, 3.9, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.7, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 7.1, 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 8.2, 8.4, 8.5, 8.7; History and Social Sciences: 3.6, 3.12, VS.1, VS.4, VS.7, USI.1, USI.5, USI.9, USII.1, CE.1; Music: 3.11, 3.15, 4.15, 5.11, 5.13, MS.5, MS.6, MS.7, MS.8, MS.9.



At the Library

Ben and the Emancipation
Proclamation by Pat Sherman

Dear America: A Picture of
Freedom by Patricia C. McKissack

Freedom Roads: Searching for the Un-
derground Railroad by Joyce Hansen

Slave Spirituals and the Jubilee Singers by
Michael L. Cooper



On the Web

**PBS: *Slavery and the
Making of America***
www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/

**National Endowment for the Humanities
Lesson Plan: *Spirituals***
<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/spirituals>

**Library of Congress: *Born in Slavery
- Slave Narratives from the Federal
Writers' Project, 1936 - 1938***
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroom-materials/connections/narratives-slavery/>

Sweet Chariot

by Bruce Craig Miller

(Based on oral histories taken during the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Writers' Project and traditional spirituals)



Theatre IV's production of *Sweet Chariot* shares the narratives of ex-slaves as told to WPA writers. These stories were compiled in the Slave Narrative Collection. Over two thousand interviews with former slaves were conducted in seventeen states during the years 1936-38.

Theatre IV combines these first-hand accounts of life as a slave and Emancipation with slave spirituals to re-create a world of longing and hope in *Sweet Chariot*. The spirituals not only held religious meaning for African-American slaves, they also served as a means of communication - especially along the Underground Railroad. Through spirituals that served as coded messages, slaves could issue a warning to others, or communicate plans for escape or uprising.

The play asks, "*Did you make history today?*" Come enrich your history by experiencing the rich historical narratives and spirituals that tell the stories of African-American ex-slaves in *Sweet Chariot*.

Understanding Primary Sources

The Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewed surviving ex-slaves during the 1930s. The result was the Slave Narrative Collection. Collected in seventeen states during the years 1936-38, there are more than two thousand interviews with former slaves. The interviews gave ex-slaves an opportunity to describe what it felt like to be a slave in the United States.

Words to Know

narrative - something told or written (a story)

emancipate - to set free

Read the interview on the facing page. Then work with a partner to discuss and answer the following:

1. What made Mary Jane a slave? _____

2. What did Mary Jane see before the slaves were freed? _____

Who do you think the people were? _____

3. Name three specific improvements in Mary Jane's life after her family's emancipation from slavery:

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

4. This interview was done in what year? _____ How do you think the interviewer may have felt about Miss Wilson's story? _____

5. Use a map to locate Portsmouth, Virginia and Norfolk, Virginia. How might Miss Wilson's life have been different had she been born in New York City? _____

6. Why do you think it was important to interview ex-slaves? What can we learn from narratives such as Mary Jane's? _____

Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project

Negro Pioneer Teacher of Portsmouth, Virginia*

Interview of Miss Mary Jane Wilson by Thelma Dunston April, 1937

One of the rooms in the Old Folks Home for Colored in Portsmouth, Virginia is occupied by an ex-slave - - one of the first Negro teachers of Portsmouth.

On meeting Miss Mary Jane Wilson, very little questioning was needed to get her to tell of her life. Drawing her chair near a small stove, she said, "My mother and father was slaves, and when I was born, that made me a slave. I was the only child. My mother was owned by one family, and my father was owned by another family. My mother and father were allowed to live together. One day my father's master took my father to Norfolk and put him in a jail to stay until he could sell him. My missus bought my father so he could be with us."

"During this time I was small, and I didn't have so much work to do. I just helped around the house."

"I was in the yard one day, and I saw so many men come marching down the street, I ran and told my mother what I'd seen. She tried to tell me what it was all about, but I couldn't understand her. Not long after that we were free."

Taking a long breath, the old woman said, "My father went to work in the Norfolk Navy yard as a teamster. He began right away buying us a home. We was one of the first Negro land owners in Portsmouth after Emancipation. My father built his own house. It's only two blocks from here, and it still stands with few improvements."

With a broad smile Miss Wilson added, "I didn't get any teachings when I was a slave. When I was free, I went to school. The first school I went to was held in a church. Soon they built a school building that was called 'Chestnut Street Academy,' and I went there. After finishing Chestnut Street Academy, I went to Hampton Institute. In 1874, six years after Hampton Institute was started, I graduated."

At this point Miss Wilson's pride was unconcealed. She continued her conversation, but her voice was much louder and her speech was much faster. She remarked, "My desire was to teach. I opened a school in my home, and I had lots of students. After two years my class grew so fast and large that my father built a school for me in our back yard. I had as many as seventy-five pupils at one time. Many of them became teachers. I had my graduation exercises in the Emanuel A.M.E. Church. Those were my happiest days."

** This was taken from the American Memory section of the Library of Congress website. A few dialectical spellings were changed to make it easier for young students to read and understand the interview. No content or meaning was altered.*

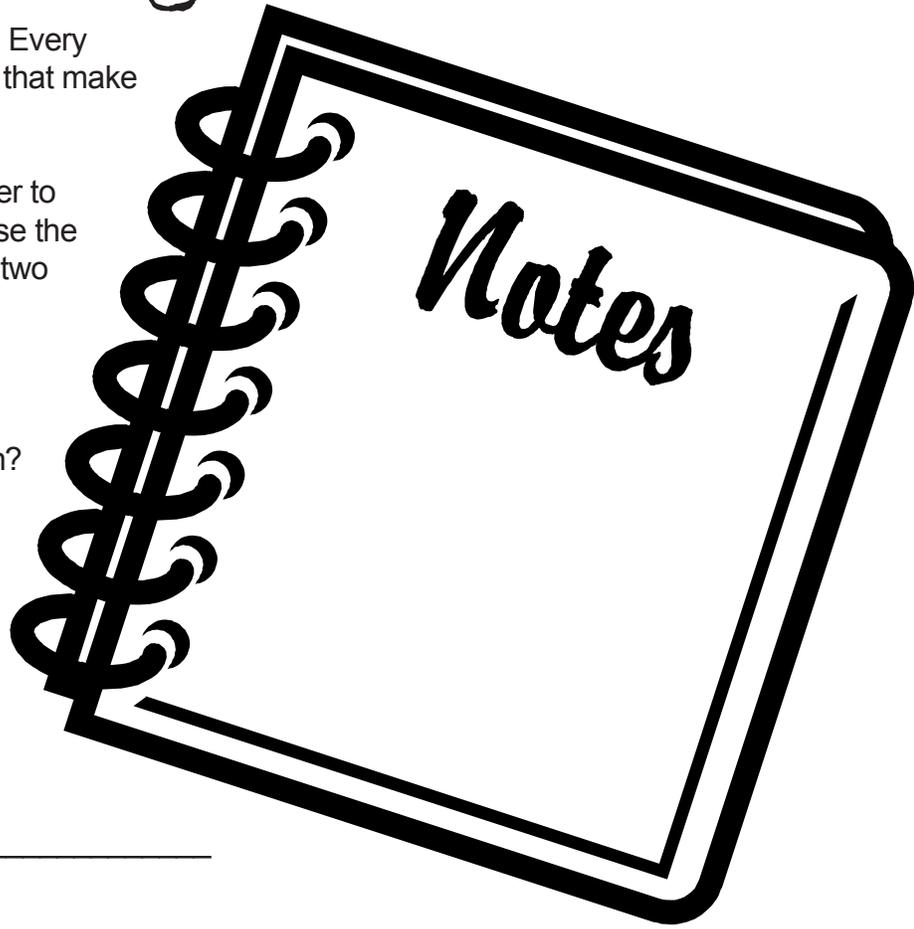
Extend It:

Create interview questions for someone you know (a family member, friend, or neighbor) to learn more about that person's life and experience. What can we learn by studying others' narratives?

Stories of Your Life

Much of this play was made up of stories. Every person has stories to tell - big and small - that make up the narrative of their life.

You be the interviewer! Work with a partner to learn about the stories in his or her life. Use the three interview questions below, and add two questions of your own. Make notes, then create a timeline of four events from your partner's life in the space below.



Question #1: When and where were you born?

Question #2: What was your first memory as a very small child?

Question #3: What is one important event that has changed your life in some way?

Question #4: _____

Question #5: _____

Lyrics as Primary Sources

Slave spirituals were folk songs that were religious in nature and first sung by African Americans in slavery. The spirituals functioned in many ways. While the songs expressed religious beliefs, they sometimes served as secret codes or messages - sometimes for those working along The Underground Railroad, and sometimes even as rallying calls for slave uprisings. Many of these songs have now become embedded in American folk culture for people of all backgrounds.



Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

*Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home*

*I looked over Jordan, and I what did I see
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me
Coming for to carry me home*

*If you get there before I do
Coming for to carry me home
Tell all my friends I coming too
Coming for to carry me home*

*I'm sometimes up, I'm sometimes down
Coming for to carry me home
But still my soul feels heavenly bound
Coming for to carry me home*

Activity Option #1:

Read (or sing) the lyrics, and discuss how music played an important role in communication among African American slaves.

Activity Option #2:

Read and discuss the lyrics. What do you think is meant by “carry me home” - what double meaning might that have for enslaved peoples? Think about the imagery in this song and illustrate the scene that comes to mind.

Activity Option #3:

Read the lyrics. Think about the challenges faced by enslaved Africans and African Americans who may have sung this song. Think about changes our society has seen since this song was first sung. List some of these changes.

Then, talk to your parents or other adults about changes they have witnessed in their lifetimes. Write a journal entry predicting how life may change during your lifetime. How would you like to see it change for the better?



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Theatre IV

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Classroom Connections
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Gues at the Theatre

When you are in an audience at *Sweet Chariot*, or any play, pay attention to the following:

Cue

- 1) Command given by stage management to the technical departments.
- 2) Any signal (spoken line, action or count) that indicates another action should follow

House Lights

The auditorium lighting, which is commonly faded out when the performance starts.

Blackout

The act of turning off (or fading out) stage lighting

Curtain Call

At the end of a performance, the acknowledgement of applause by actors - the bows.

Build / Check

Build is a smooth increase in sound or light level; check is the opposite - a smooth diminishment of light or sound.

Fade

An increase, decrease, or change in lighting or sound.

