

INQUIRY

We the People: Expanding the Teaching of the US Founding

Overview

About This Inquiry

This C3-style inquiry helps students engage with the complexities and contradictions of the US founding by exploring an array of primary sources, short documentary videos, and contemporary perspectives.

The inquiry centers the voices of those in early US history who were excluded from formal political participation, but nonetheless appealed to the nation's founding democratic ideals to assert their own rights and freedoms. Their contributions help students recognize the power of their own civic choices and see that the project of founding the nation is ongoing and open to all.

Compelling Question	How do we reckon with a history full of complexities and contradictions?
Supporting Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What does the Declaration of Independence state about the nation's founding ideals? 2. What contradictions existed between the ideals and the reality of the founding of the United States? 3. How did groups excluded from power at the time of the founding use the language of the founding ideals to assert their own rights? 4. How should we remember the nation's founding?

Learning Objectives

- Examine how their identity is a combination of who they say they are, who others say they are, and who they hope to be in the future.
- Analyze the internal and external conflicts that characters face and the impact these conflicts can have on an individual's choices and actions, both in the text and in the real world.
- Demonstrate an increased sense of confidence in their ability to communicate their ideas orally and in writing.

Rationale & Additional Background

Expanding “We the People”

This inquiry provides students with a vital reframing of the history of the founding of the United States. It centers the voices and experiences of people excluded from the definition of “We the People” enshrined in our founding documents. By exploring an array of primary sources from these perspectives—including the Pequot minister and activist William Apess, a group of Black abolitionists from Massachusetts, and Judith Sargent Murray, an advocate for white women’s rights—students will see how groups excluded from political participation and denied rights during the early years of the nation nonetheless played an essential role in articulating the promise of its democracy.

This inquiry explores their contributions in order to broaden students’ understanding of the pioneering individuals and identities that worked to build a more just and inclusive nation. The goal is to foster in students an awareness that the act of founding the nation is ongoing and open to participation by all. This awareness can both inform and inspire students as they prepare to exercise their civic agency today.

While this resource prompts students to expand their ideas about who should be considered a “founder” of the nation, it is important to note the complexities of the term “founder.” Many Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans, for example, were not invested in the project of “founding” the nation or obtaining citizenship within it. They were not offered the option to participate or given the choice to opt out. Nevertheless, for those people denied rights at the time of founding, expanding the nation’s ideals became a necessary part of their struggles for freedom and self-determination.

Exploring the Complexities of the Founding

In both American popular culture and high school survey courses, our nation’s beginnings are too often celebrated uncritically, while the oppression endured by those left out of the nation’s political and social community at its founding is either minimized or erased. By presenting an uncritical view of the Founding Fathers and founding texts such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the dominant narrative also ignores the accomplishments of those same communities. Such narratives can foster in students a distorted understanding of history, as well as an incomplete sense of how individual and collective choices have shaped our history.

This resource, by contrast, invites students to probe the gaps between the ideals in those founding documents and the lived realities of injustice in the United States. At the center of this inquiry is an examination of the nation’s founding paradox: declaring that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” while refusing freedom and equality to so many of the nation’s inhabitants, both in 1776 and in the centuries since.

This inquiry takes inspiration from the author James Baldwin, who wrote that US history is “more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.”¹ Baldwin compels us to understand the history of the United States *through* the lens of its founding paradox rather than quickly resolving it. By examining both the revolutionary potential of ideas like “all men are created equal” and the nation’s failure from the start to live up to those ideals, students will be prepared at the end of the inquiry to explore US history in all its complexity.

¹ James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (Penguin Random House: Library of America Series, 1998), 685–686.

Preparing to Teach

Notes to Teacher:

1. Structure of the Inquiry

This inquiry includes primary sources and formative performance tasks that build toward each supporting question. The materials allow students to construct an evidence-based argument that addresses the compelling question: “How do we reckon with a history full of complexities and contradictions?”

See the [Inquiry Blueprint](#) for an at-a-glance view of all inquiry materials.

2. Length of the Inquiry

This inquiry is expected to take five to seven 50-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences or historical background information.

Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiry to meet the needs and interests of their particular students, including those with individualized education plans (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

3. Prerequisite Knowledge

This inquiry is intended to supplement a US history course and is not an exhaustive study of the founding of the nation. It is also not intended as an in-depth exploration of the various groups (including non-property-holding men, enslaved people, Native Americans, and women of all backgrounds) who were excluded from political participation and denied rights during the period of the early republic.

To engage fully with the content and activities of the inquiry, students need to have some foundational knowledge about the centrality of slavery and settler colonialism² to the development of the colonies and the early republic. Students should also have a basic understanding of the American Revolution and the government established by the Constitution.

Finally, before starting this inquiry, students must be familiar with the concept of race as a social construct that nonetheless carries very real and powerful social consequences. We recommend teaching the lesson [The Concept of Race](#) before teaching this inquiry if students have not yet been introduced to the socially constructed meaning of race and how that concept has been used to justify exclusion, inequality, and violence throughout history.

² settler colonialism (*noun*): a type of colonialism in which the indigenous peoples of a colonized region are displaced by settlers who permanently form a society there (definition from Oxford Languages).

Inquiry Blueprint

Compelling Question How do we reckon with a history full of complexities and contradictions?				
Staging the Compelling Question		Students will be introduced to the themes of the compelling question by responding to a quote from James Baldwin (“American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it”) to spark their initial thinking about the complexities and contradictions within United States history.		
Supporting Question 1		Supporting Question 2		Supporting Question 3
What does the Declaration of Independence state about the nation’s founding ideals?		What contradictions existed between the ideals and the reality of the founding of the United States?		How did groups excluded from power at the time of the founding use the language of the founding ideals to assert their own rights?
Formative Task		Formative Task		Formative Task
Students will complete a Sketch to Stretch activity to illustrate the nation’s founding ideals.		Students will hold a silent discussion using the Graffiti Boards teaching strategy to explore the contradictions that existed between the ideals and the reality of the founding of the United States.		Students will create a found poem using primary sources to illustrate the nation’s founding ideals as expressed by individuals excluded from certain rights and freedoms during the founding era.
Featured Sources		Featured Sources		Featured Sources
Reading: The Declaration of Independence Excerpt Handout: The Ideals of the Declaration Graphic Organizer		Video: The Revolutions: The Future of America’s Past (0:50–8:00) Video: The Invasion of America Video: “The Story We Tell,” from the film <i>Race: The Power of an Illusion</i> (0:43–5:34) Reading: An Indian’s Looking Glass for the White Man, 1833 (Unabridged Abridged Heavily Abridged)		Reading: Petition for Freedom to the Massachusetts Legislature, 1777 Reading: “On the Equality of the Sexes” by Judith Sargent Murray, 1790 Reading: Quote from Rosemary Bray Reading: Creating a Found Poem Handout: Founding Era Primary Sources
				Supporting Question 4
				How should we remember the nation’s founding?
				Formative Task
				Students will use the Stories thinking routine to discuss how we should remember the nation’s founding.
				Featured Sources
				Image: Portrait of George Washington on the Dollar Bill Image: “Absconded from the Household of the President of the United States” (2016) by Titus Kaphar Handout: Image Analysis Procedure Reading: Quote from Titus Kaphar Reading: Quote from Sophia Rosenfeld

Summative Assessment	<p>ARGUMENT “How do we reckon with a history full of complexities and contradictions?” In a format of your choice (e.g., digital presentation, poster, paragraph), discuss the complexities and contradictions in the history of the founding of the United States and how we should remember and respond to those complexities and contradictions today.</p>
Taking Informed Action	<p>UNDERSTAND Accomplished through the supporting questions and formative tasks.</p> <p>Building on the ideas explored in supporting question 3, identify someone who is not typically regarded as a founder of the United States, but who nonetheless made important contributions to democratic ideals such as self-determination, freedom, and human rights. The following is a list of suggested historical figures to consider, but you may pick a figure who is not on this list:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • William Apess • Pontiac • Mary (Molly) Brant • Abigail Adams • Judith Sargent Murray • Phillis Wheatley • Benjamin Banneker • Ona Judge <p>Once you’ve chosen a figure, research answers to the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why should this individual be remembered as an important historical figure in US history? What contributions did they make? What struggles or opposition did they face? • How did this person contribute to democratic ideals such as self-determination, freedom, and human rights? What tools or lessons have they left for those who wish to achieve democracy more fully today? <p>ACT In a medium of your choice (e.g., spoken word poem, blog/social media post, school exhibition, mural, performance), communicate your conclusions about your selected figure to a broader audience.</p>