

BY PARTIES UNKNOWN

Lesson Plan for PBS Learning Media

Overview

Lesson Summary:

By Parties Unknown is a documentary that unravels the events surrounding the violent lynching of four Black men in Russellville, Kentucky, in 1908.

In this lesson, students will view clips from the film and answer the questions that are assigned to those individual clips. These clips are intended to guide students through the events leading up to, and following, the lynching of John Boyer, Joe Riley, John Jones and Virgil Jones, as well as the cultural atmosphere that embraced the spectacle of mob violence. The questions that accompany the clips are intended to open up a discussion as the class investigates these murders.

Students will follow up this investigation by completing one of three extension projects. Project selection can be assigned by the teacher or selected by the student to allow for greater student choice.

Grades: 9-12

Time Allotment: 2-5 class periods

Supplies:

- Computers or tablets with internet access
- Access to PBS LearningMedia
- Student headphones
- Student handouts: Timeline of Events & Individuals Involved

Learning Objectives: Students will be able to...

- Identify the impact of racism and violence in the United States between 1865 and the 1950s.
- Conduct their own exploration of online resources to expand their understanding of how the legacy of racist violence impacts our world today.
- Explore how individuals have resisted oppression and used their efforts and creativity to speak out against racism and violence.

This lesson plan can be used as either a one- or two-day film guide with discussion, or as a three-to-five day lesson with optional extension activities.

Procedure

Introductory Activity

Step 1:

Introduce the lesson through a discussion of the cultural atmosphere that surrounded the events investigated by this film.

- When was slavery abolished?
- After slavery ended, how did formerly enslaved workers find work?
- How was the freedom of formerly enslaved individuals limited?
- Why did lynchings take place?
- How many lynchings do you think were documented?

Learning Activity

Teacher Note: Although this can be completed as an individual activity, class discussion of the questions is encouraged. This film deals with a sensitive topic that may be difficult for students. Clips with sensitive/violent content or offensive language are marked with a content advisory.

Step 2:

To prepare students to watch the segments from the film “By Parties Unknown” distribute the student handouts, **Timeline of Events** and **Individuals Involved** to the class.

Begin by reading **The Confrontation** as a class. After reading use the following questions to lead a class discussion:

- What relationship was there between Rufus Browder and James Cunningham?
- How did James Cunningham have the ability to evict Rufus Browder from his home?
- From the description of the confrontation between James Cunningham and Rufus Browder, who did you think instigated the shooting?
- How did you come to that conclusion?

*Note: If students have difficulty remembering who the individuals being discussed are, encourage them to refer to the handout **Individuals Involved** for clarification.*

Step 3:

Next, in the **Timeline of Events** read **The Aftermath** with the class. After reading ask the following:

- Why do you think Rufus Browder was concerned about violence?

After discussing with the class read **The Mob** and **The True Reformers** with the class.

Step 4:

Now, ask students to watch the first segment from the film: ***Mutual Aid Lodges***.

After viewing this segment, ask the students to answer the following questions:

1. Why were mutual aid lodges, like the True Reformers, necessary in Black communities at this time?
2. How did Rufus' father, Fletcher Browder hope the True Reformers could help him?
3. Why would Sheriff Rhea have raided the True Reformers meeting to arrest Virgil and John Jones?
4. Why was Joe Riley arrested?
5. How was he connected to Rufus Browder?
6. Why do you think there was a tenuous relationship between law enforcement and mutual aid lodges like the True Reformers?
7. In the clip we see diagrams with those involved. There are few photos of the individuals, the majority of whom are white. Why do you think this is? If you were to create a similar diagram, how might you address this disparity?

Step 5:

After answering the questions accompanying the film segment, instruct students to read **Mob Violence** from the handout, **Timeline of Events**.

Then, discuss the events with the class:

- Why do you think the mob targeted the members of the mutual aid lodge, the True Reformers?

Read the following to the class:

On the morning the bodies of John Boyer, Rufus Browder's brother-in-law, John and Virgil Jones, members of the True Reformers mutual aid lodge, and Joe Riley were ordered to be cut down, they were taken to the courthouse, where the county corner determined that they died "by parties unknown".

- Why do you think this would have been listed as a "cause" of death in the murder of these four men?

According to the national census, as of 1900 the population of Russellville was 2,591 people.

- Do you believe that a mob in a town of only two and a half thousand people would be made up of "unknown parties"?
- What motivations might the coroner have had for listing this as a cause of death?

Step 6:

Now, ask students to watch the film segment ***The Trials of Rufus Browder***. As the class views this segment ask them to answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think the state court of appeals granted Rufus a third trial in a different county?
2. Why do you think Rufus' defense attorneys believed they should not appeal the outcome of Rufus' third trial?
3. How many years of imprisonment did the Governor reduce Rufus' sentence to?
4. What did Rufus Browder's death certificate report as his cause of death?

Step 7:

Finally, ask students to watch the final film segment ***The History of Lynching***. After the class views this final segment, answer the following questions as a class discussion.

1. How does the legal definition of a lynching differ from a murder?
In the book "Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940" history professor George C. Wright reported that over the 12 year period between 1883 and 1895, at least 13 men were lynched in Logan County Kentucky, the county where Russellville is located.
2. How do these lynchings, along with the lynchings of John Boyer, John and Virgil Jones, and Joe Riley point to a systemic issue of racism and white supremacy in the United States government at the beginning of the 20th century?
3. Thinking back on the protests surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, how do you feel this has changed?
4. What was "home rule" of the South?
5. In what ways did states set the foundation for the continuation of white supremacy and Black subjugation throughout the 20th century?
6. In what ways have these practices continued into the 21st century?
7. Dr. Wright explains that by the mid-twentieth century "the state takes the place of the lynch mob." What does he mean by that?
8. How do you feel this has changed in the nation today?

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Procedure

Culminating Activity

Students will get to choose which culminating activity they would like to complete depending on what interested them in the film clips they viewed last class.

Begin by briefly reviewing the discussion from yesterday. Have they thought about it during the last day? Do they have any further questions? Describe the expectations by explaining each of the three choices and outlining what they will need to complete for each activity.

Activity #1: Lynching in America

The impact of lynching in America takes place on both a large, national scale and individually upon the families and communities affected.

For this activity, students will conduct an investigation into the practice of lynching. They will read portions of the report “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror” published by the Equal Justice Initiative, choose an individual case of lynching and listen to audio testimony from families affected by the legacy of lynching. They will present their findings in a written report.

1. First, navigate to the Equal Justice Initiative report “[Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror](#).” Begin by clicking “The Report” (or following [this link](#)). Read through the Introduction of the Equal Justice Initiative’s report and use its findings to build your own definition of lynching and a description of the intended impact of lynching.
2. Next, navigate to Section 3 of the report, “Lynching in America: From ‘Popular Justice’ to Racial Terror.” In this section, use the report’s findings to investigate the accusations that led to lynching in the cases researched by the Equal Justice Initiative.
3. Now, navigate to “[Listen: Audio Stories From Generations Affected by Lynching](#)” to explore audio testimony collected by the Equal Justice Initiative. Choose and listen to the recorded story of either Tarabu Betserai Kirkland, Doria Dee Johnson, Vanessa Croft, James Johnson or Luz Myles.
4. Finally, use an online search to locate which county the lynching described in the audio testimonial you listened to took place. Using the [interactive map](#) of racial terror lynchings

prepared by the Equal Justice Initiative, notate how many additional lynchings took place in this county.

5. Now that you have completed your research, summarize your results into a report. Using your own words, write a short paper that defines lynching, describes how many cases of lynching were documented between 1877 and 1950, and explores its impact on American society. Be sure to include a brief summary of the audio testimony you chose to provide a firsthand account of the impact that lynching can have upon generations of a family.

Activity #2: The Art of Protest

The Guardian called Billie Holiday's recording of the song "Strange Fruit" the "first great protest song." Time magazine named it the "song of the century" in 1999. Rolling Stone ranked it No. 21 on its own list of "500 Best Songs of All Time" in 2021.

For this project, students will listen to Billie Holiday's recording of the song, read about the impact of this famous song and create their own work of protest art.

1. First, begin by listening to the song "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday on your choice of online sources. When the song has finished, answer the following questions:
 - a. What did you think of the song "Strange Fruit"?
 - b. How did the song make you feel?
 - c. Why do you think it made you feel that way?
 - d. How could it have had more of an effect on you personally?
2. Now, read the BBC article "[Strange Fruit: The Most Shocking Song of All Time?](#)" and answer the following questions:
 - a. What impact did "Strange Fruit" have on audiences at the time of its release?
 - b. Do you think the song would have the same impact if it was released today?
 - c. Why or why not?
 - d. What song protesting something has had an effect on you personally?
 - e. Why do you think it impacted you?
3. Finally, you are responsible for creating a piece of protest art. Start by identifying what you intend to protest, and why you are protesting it: Who does this cause affect? What effect does it have? Who is responsible for it? How could this be changed? Then, create your piece of art that conveys this to the audience. You can choose any medium you wish for your art; this could mean a visual work of art, a poem, a song, even a short film. Just make sure to communicate your intentions with your classroom teacher to ensure your work falls within class standards.

Activity #3: A Red Record: the Legacy of Ida B. Wells

Ida B. Wells was a fearless anti-lynching activist who successfully drew the public's attention to the horrors of lynching and advocated for human rights.

For this activity, students will research the life and legacy of Ida B. Wells, and they will be responsible for creating either an audio or video presentation exploring her life, her work and her impact.

1. First, research the life and legacy of Ida B. Wells. Locate at least three sources that describe her life, her work and her legacy, and create a transcript of the report that you will record.
2. Your transcript should include a short biography of her life, a description of her work and its impact on the American public, and an exploration of her legacy today. You must include at least one quote from Ida B. Wells herself. Be sure to include your sources at the end of the transcript.
3. Finally, record your transcript as either an audio or video podcast.

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Film Segments

#1: Mutual Aid Lodges

[41.13 - 42.26, 45.24 - 47.30]

#2: The Trials of Rufus Browder

[107.33 - 109.46, 111.29 - 115.45]

#3: The History of Lynching

[32.28 - 35.04, 43.54 - 45.24, 116.16 - 117.41]

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Student Handout: Timeline of Events

In the film By Parties Unknown, Michael Morrow, a historian and executive director of the SEEK Museum in Russellville, Kentucky, explores the arrest and trial of Rufus Browder, as well as the lynching of four innocent men. In this reading, we will explain the facts of the case as they are described in the film in order to provide a background of the events that took place in 1908.

Before beginning this lesson, answer the following questions:

- When was slavery abolished?
- After slavery ended, how did formerly enslaved workers find work?
- How was the freedom of formerly enslaved individuals limited?
- Why did lynchings take place?
- How many lynchings do you think were documented?

The Confrontation

Rufus Browder was an African American man working as a day laborer on a farm in the early 1900s outside of Russellville, Kentucky. On Friday, July 10, 1908, Browder told his boss, the farm overseer James Cunningham, that his wife is sick, and he needs to leave work early that afternoon in order to catch the last train headed into a nearby town to buy medicine for her. Cunningham told Browder that this won't be a problem, but later that afternoon he approached Browder and told him that if he leaves before 5 p.m. he will be penalized more than an entire day's wages, although he will only be leaving a few hours early. Browder left before 5 p.m. anyway.

Monday morning, Browder went to speak with Cunningham, who is working on a horse-drawn buggy. The conversation surrounding Browder's wages led to a confrontation between the two men. Browder later claimed that Cunningham threatened to evict him from his home on the farm. This argument escalated, and Cunningham struck Browder with a tool used for tying up horses. As a result, both Browder and Cunningham drew pistols and shot. Browder is struck in his upper chest area. Cunningham collapsed and died.

- What relationship was there between Rufus Browder and James Cunningham?
- How did James Cunningham have the ability to evict Rufus Browder from his home?
- From the description of the confrontation between James Cunningham and Rufus Browder, who did you think instigated the shooting?
- How did you come to that conclusion?

The Aftermath

Fearing mob violence, Browder rans. Sheriff Rhea spoke to Browder's father, Fletcher Browder, promising to protect Rufus from a mob if he turns himself in. Fletcher Browder agreed, and Rufus was arrested that day, along with his brother-in-law, John Boyer, who had been taking messages to Rufus while he was in hiding.

- Why do you think Rufus Browder was concerned about violence?

The Mob

Groups of armed white men flooded into the town of Russellville, where Rufus was being held. In order to protect him from the mob, Sheriff Rhea and the officer in charge of the local jail, Jailer Butts, hid Rufus in a cemetery overnight while an armed mob searched for him. Despite questioning both Rhea and Butts, the mob did not find Browder, and he was put on a train to be held at the jail in Bowling Green, Kentucky, the following day.

The True Reformers

In the Jim Crow-era South, several African American fraternal organizations were formed. Members of mutual-aid societies like The True Reformers worked to help African Americans who had difficulty finding help anywhere else.

John and Virgil Jones, both leading members of The True Reformers, traveled to Russellville to try to protect Rufus. Fletcher Browder approached the True Reformers to help pay for his son's legal defense. After The True Reformers agreed to help Rufus Browder, their lodge meeting is interrupted by Sheriff Rhea, who arrests both John and Virgil Jones.

*Now view the first film segment from **By Parties Unknown, Mutual Aid Lodges**. As you view this segment, answer the following questions:*

1. Why were mutual aid lodges, like the True Reformers, necessary in Black communities at this time?
2. How did Rufus' father, Fletcher Browder hope the True Reformers could help him?
3. Why would Sheriff Rhea have raided the True Reformers meeting to arrest Virgil and John Jones?
4. Why was Joe Riley arrested?
5. How was he connected to Rufus Browder?
6. Why do you think there was a tenuous relationship between law enforcement and mutual aid lodges like the True Reformers?

Mob Violence

On August 1, 1908, an armed mob once again descended on Russellville. This time, however, no prisoners were hidden. It is nearly a week after the arrest of John and Virgil Jones, and no precautions were taken. The mob pounded on the prison door, and the jailer answered. The mob entered the prison and abducted all four prisoners: John and Virgil Jones, members of The True Reformers; John Boyer, Rufus's brother-in-law who had been arrested for helping Rufus while he was hiding from the law; and Joe Riley, a Black man who had been arrested for an

unrelated charge. All four men were taken from the prison and lynched by the mob. Their bodies were discovered the next day. Virgil Jones is discovered with a typed note around his neck warning African Americans from forming lodges and confronting whites.

- Why do you think the mob targeted the members of the mutual aid lodge, the True Reformers?

On the morning the bodies of John Boyer, Rufus Browder's brother-in-law, John and Virgil Jones, members of the True Reformers mutual aid lodge, and Joe Riley were ordered to be cut down, they were taken to the courthouse, where the county coroner determined that they died "by parties unknown".

- Why do you think this would have been listed as a "cause" of death in the murder of these four men?

According to the national census, as of 1900 the population of Russellville was 2,591 people.

- Do you believe that a mob in a town of only two and a half thousand people would be made up of "unknown parties"?
- What motivations might the coroner have had for listing this as a cause of death?

*Now view the second film segment from **By Parties Unknown, The Trials of Rufus Browder.***

As you view this segment, answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think the state court of appeals granted Rufus a third trial in a different county?
2. Why do you think Rufus' defense attorneys believed they should not appeal the outcome of Rufus' third trial?
3. How many years of imprisonment did the Governor reduce Rufus' sentence to?
4. What did Rufus Browder's death certificate report as his cause of death?

*View the final film segment from **By Parties Unknown, The History of Lynching.** As you view this segment, answer the following questions:*

1. How does the legal definition of a lynching differ from a murder?

In the book "Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940" history professor George C. Wright reported that over the 12 year period between 1883 and 1895, at least 13 men were lynched in Logan County Kentucky, the county where Russellville is located.

2. How do these lynchings, along with the lynchings of John Boyer, John and Virgil Jones, and Joe Riley point to a systemic issue of racism and white supremacy in the United States government at the beginning of the 20th century?
3. Thinking back on the protests surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement, how do you feel this has changed?
4. What was "home rule" of the South?
5. In what ways did states set the foundation for the continuation of white supremacy and Black subjugation throughout the 20th century?

6. In what ways have these practices continued into the 21st century?
7. Dr. Wright explains that by the mid-twentieth century “the state takes the place of the lynch mob.” What does he mean by that?
8. How do you feel this has changed in the nation today?

The Trial

Rufus Browder was tried three times. Initially the jury could not reach a verdict. At his second trial, Browder was sentenced to death. His lawyers appealed the decision and got the trial moved to a different county. In his third trial Rufus Browder was sentenced to life in prison. His lawyers appealed to the governor for a pardon. The governor reduced Browder’s sentence to 10 years.

Epilogue

Six years later, in 1914, Fletcher Browder was notified that his son Rufus will be sent home. Fletcher Browder went to the train station to meet him, and when Rufus didn’t appear, he asked the conductor if he was aboard the train. The conductor led Fletcher Browder to a boxcar containing a casket. On his death certificate Rufus Browder was said to have died of tuberculosis on June 13, 1914. No one in his family was notified.

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Student Handout: Individuals Involved

The Confrontation

Rufus Browder: A day laborer who got into a confrontation with James Cunningham. In this confrontation, Browder is hit with a tool and shot; Cunningham was killed.

James Cunningham: A farm overseer who got into a confrontation with Rufus Browder over wages. Cunningham was killed.

Fletcher Browder: The father of Rufus Browder

John Boyer: The brother-in-law of Rufus Browder who helped him by communicating with Browder while he ran from the law.

The Law

Sheriff Rhea: The sheriff of Logan County, Kentucky.

Jailer Butts: The law officer in charge of the jail in Russellville, Kentucky.

John Rhodes: A lawyer hired by Fletcher Browder to provide the defense for Rufus Browder.

James C. Sims: A lawyer hired by Fletcher Browder to provide the defense for Rufus Browder.

Judge Sandidge: The judge who presides over the Rufus Browder case.

The True Reformers

John Jones: Brother of Virgil Jones and a leading member of the mutual-aid society The True Reformers.

Virgil Jones: Brother of John Jones and a leading member of the mutual-aid society The True Reformers.

The Fourth Victim

Joe Riley: A Black man from Russellville, Kentucky, with no connection to Rufus Browder or James Cunningham. He was arrested for carrying a pistol earlier that week.