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Worcester Town Hall in the Early 1900s: Jim Crow and the Industrial Revolution

Essential Question: How did the various groups of people living in Worcester in the early 1900s think and feel about contemporaneous social issues and post-Civil War political discourse?

Materials: From the online resources, the program leader will need to download the following items:

- Primary and secondary source material for assigned roles for students
- Role assignment cards
- Worksheet copies

Each group will need copies of their role cards and 1-2 copies of their primary sources documents. There should be one worksheet per student available.

Time: This program is designed to take an hour. It is relatively difficult to shorten, though the program leader can cut a discussion short to make the program more compact or they can include both topics as elements of the town hall and make it longer by allowing for both to be debated.

Introduction: Students should be given a brief run-down of expectations for the next hour:

- They will be assigned an identity from Worcester during the early 1900s. Then they will consider two topics for the town meeting:
 - 1) Jim Crow Laws and political conditions in the Southern United States
 - 2) Employment opportunities for people of color in Worcester and surrounding areas
- Students will decide how their persona would have felt about these two issues using their background knowledge and their primary/secondary sources
- Participate in the town hall meeting
- You will get 20 minutes to prepare (Fair warning on time)

Make sure the students are in groups and pass out assignment cards at random.

Main Activity:

Town Hall Preparation

Put the students into reasonably sized groups. In this instance 5-6 students would be ideal as they represent a group of people's ideas, so they can argue differently about the same points from the same perspective (i.e. perhaps one northern industrialist is against hiring African Americans because they are lazy and not fit for work, but another from the same group likes that they will work for very low wages). Have the groups move chairs or branch into a second room if available to develop their ideas, encourage in-group debate.

Allow the groups to talk and give them warnings about timing. Remind them that they should consider both problems, in case there is time for both discussions.

Encourage students to fill in the worksheet individually, but while working in a group, remember it is okay to disagree with the rest of the group.

Identities that will be included as options are:

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|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Freedmen who migrated North | Nipmuc peoples |
| European migrant workers | Northern Industrialists |
| Farmers and Farm hands | Women workers |

Town Hall Discussion

Gather the students back into a space where they will have the town hall debate.

Before the activity begins, explain the basic format. Each group will have a chance to speak and then the leader will encourage rebuttals and questions between groups. The teacher or leader of the group will be the person running the meeting.

First, the class votes on which topic they would like to start with. Make it clear that for time reasons they may or may not get to the second topic. If using an extended program, decide which topic to tackle first.

Once the topic is chosen, open the floor to comments and allow for the group discussion to flow. If it is stuck, the facilitator may encourage groups to speak up or ask guiding questions based on the topic they chose. The worksheets will have prompts on them, so the facilitator can refer to the worksheet in order to move the discussion forward.

Once the topic has run its course, the leader should close the floor. If it makes sense, have the group vote on a proposed item, but if there was no concrete solutions proposed, simply explain that the leadership will take their ideas into consideration and move on to the second topic.

If the second topic is started and not finished, simply 'adjourn' the meeting to a later date.

Wrap Up

Discuss how the same topics were approached very differently even within the same community. Mention that issues in the South did have large impact on those living in the North.

Ask about the difficulties of using primary sources and focus on the different interpretations of the same sources where available. Emphasize the lack of voices of people of color in historic documents and how important it can be to hear from those communities in history.

Ask the students how they think their discussion reflected larger political issues in the country at the time. Did they map well onto those larger political movements? Or were their issues specific to their geographic area?

Additional options

After this assignment is over, there are many ways to extend this activity. Students could be asked to do more research and write a persuasive essay about one of the town hall topics or research an important event or figure related to their assigned role. Additionally, students can be given more time to prepare, sourcing their own primary and secondary sources to use in conjunction with the provided sets.

Main Goals: By the end of the program the students should be able to explain the following idea:

Worcester in the 1900s presented a diverse community that struggled with political, economic and social change after the end of the Civil War causing conflict within the community.

State Standards: USI.41.A; USI.41B; USI.41.C; USI.41.E; USII.2; ELA Speaking and Listening 1, 2, 3; ELA Literacy in History (11-12) 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9; History Concepts and Skills Grades 8-12: 7, 8, 9.