

Grade
Level:
**Adaptable,
grades 6-8**

Fannie Lou Hamer and the Cotton Kingdom

US History, Social Studies: Civil/Human Rights, Economics, and Culture

Learning Objectives:

- To introduce students to Fannie Lou Hamer as a significant figure in American Civil and Human Rights History
- To engage primary source materials (particularly the US Census)
- To encourage critical thinking about the connection between the US Census and Political Representation
- To encourage critical reflection about the connections between racism, White supremacy, and economics

Necessary Materials:

- BrainPOP episode about Fannie Lou Hamer, available for free on the Find Your Voice website
- Biographical sketch of Fannie Lou Hamer available [here](#)
- [1940 Federal Census for Sunflower County](#)
- Federal Census Analysis Questions
- Speaking Outline
- Journals, one for each student

Background Knowledge:

Depending on your familiarity with Fannie Lou Hamer and the cotton economy, you might wish to engage in additional reading. Chris Myers Asch's book, [The Senator and the Sharecropper](#), provides a rich and detailed background about the connection between race, politics, and economics. Further, Ta Nehisi Coates's award-winning essay, [The Case for Reparations](#), can help you conclude and extend this lesson. You can draw upon Coates to link southern and northern histories of racist policy and discuss contemporary implications of racism's legacy.

Instruction Steps:

Anticipatory Set

Step One: To pique student interest in Fannie Lou Hamer, start the "Cotton Kingdom" lesson plan by

showing the [BrainPOP episode](#) about her. After watching the episode, ask students:

"Who is Fannie Lou Hamer?" and highlight several of the key points by writing them on the board as students share. You may wish to add in additional/relevant points from your own reading of the Biographical Sketch.

Teacher Input

Step Two: Narrow the lens here and ask students to consider how Hamer came to live in Sunflower County, Mississippi in 1919. You may wish to note here that: Hamer was the youngest of 20 children, born to Lou Ella and James Lee Townsend and landowners commonly paid sharecroppers to swell their workforce by offering them a \$50 per child incentive. Before chemical weed killers and machinery, tending to the cotton crop required a big labor force: planting, weeding, thinning, and picking.

Step Three: Given this intensive work, in which her entire family participated, ask your students to consider what life was like for sharecropping families: where did they live? When did the sharecropping children go to school? For how long? And who taught them?

You may wish to note here that families who sharecropped commonly lived right on plantations where they worked. Families paid for housing, food, and supplies by selling their cotton back to the landowner. Many families were cheated because they couldn't read or write or do math. If you were cheated, you were still stuck because you couldn't move off of the plantation until your debt was paid and those who held the power to settle disputes (law enforcement officials) also benefited from the system of white supremacy so they were not willing to take the side of black families. Some of your students might wonder why families didn't leave Mississippi and head North. You can encourage this question, if you would like to engage with the history of the Great Migration. Many of Hamer's brothers and sisters did, in fact, move North, but Fannie Lou--the youngest--stayed back to care for her aging parents.

By the time she reached adulthood, she refused to leave because she felt she had a right to live “as a decent human being” in the land of her birth.

If they attended school Black children typically went only from November to March, at best, simply because cotton required so many months and hands, beginning in March and culminating with a late summer, early fall harvest. As a consequence, children went to school during winter when it was very cold and these schools often had little heat, poor accommodations and even worse books and materials. One teacher could be responsible for more than 50 children, and that teacher was often poorly trained.

Guided Practice

Step Four: Transition to primary source analysis by distributing or projecting the Federal Census. By examining two families that were contemporaries of Hamer’s (Townsend) family, you can guide students through the process of learning more about what Sunflower County looked like in 1940--when Fannie Lou Townsend (soon Hamer) would have been 23. Core points of discussion should include, what the function of the census is, how census data links to political representation, and how this ostensibly neutral tool was used to maintain white supremacy.

For example, by age 32, Martha Green had had 9 children and almost no education. Her family sharecropped on a farm. Her husband worked 52 weeks, 60 hours a week for no income; she did the same for 36 weeks, 30 hours per week. How do you have no net income? How is that possible? This example demonstrates the ways in which the sharecropping system trapped its workers into what many have recognized as a modern form of slavery. Also, take careful notice of the first names of the family. Why might so many of the Green children have biblical names?

Independent Practice:

Step Five: Print out Federal Census Data from five families in Sunflower County from this time period. Break students into five groups and ask them to analyze a family by asking the following questions:

1. Describe the family unit at a demographic level, i.e., how much education do they each have?; how old are they?; how young were mom and dad when they started a family?; how much income did they have in the preceding year?

2. How can several family members work (often more than 50 hours per week) and not report any income?
3. If family members don’t report any income, why don’t they simply move to a place where there were better paying jobs?
4. If young boys and young girls weren’t earning official income for the family, and they also weren’t attending school, what were they doing?
5. If mom and/or dad had very little formal education, how did this affect their ability to be voters and participate in local politics?
6. Fannie Lou Hamer’s formal education ended when she was 12. Was she very educated compared to young boys and girls in Sunflower County in 1940?
7. Does your particular family have first names that are found in the bible? If so, why might that be? Also, why do many men have first names of famous white men (Roosevelt, for example)?
8. Can you imagine a more difficult way to grow up? If so, what would that be? And, how can you escape it? In other words, is there a way to fight back?
9. The United States entered World War 2 in December 1941. How would that event possibly affect a sharecropping family in Mississippi?
10. The Delta is still all about agriculture and farming. But why are so few people employed in that line of work?
11. In what ways could a family possibly have fun in this incredibly hard life?
12. What did the census taker miss in their questions?

Step Six: Encourage each group to present their findings to the class by following this speaking outline:

1. Introduce your group’s family by name
 - Present the most interesting/important family members (specify why).
 - Did your group’s family make any money in 1940?
 - Nearly 80 years later, who had the best chance for success in that family and why?
2. How hard would it be for your group’s family to become successful in the years to come?

3. Nearly 80 years later, what has changed from 1940 to 2020, when we will do another census?
4. What question(s) would your group add to the census and why?

Close with a discussion about the legacy of racism. Here you might incorporate ideas from Coates’s piece, “The Case for Reparations” as you ask students to reflect on how learning about the lives of families in the Mississippi

Delta, over 80 years ago, might reshape how they understand the legacy of racism and the perpetuation of privilege. Here an initial time to journal before orally responding can help students give form to their thoughts.

Assessment of Student Learning:

Students will engage in primary source analysis, presenting their findings orally to the class. Students will also reflect on big questions related to the legacy of racism, the perpetuation of white privilege, and the purpose of primary historical sources in their journals.

Closure

Step Seven: Write the aphorism “Geography is Destiny” on the board. Ask students to reflect first in their journals and then aloud in pairs/or to the class on the meaning of this phrase for the families they studied.

Ask students to reflect first in their journals and then aloud in pairs/or to the class on how the Federal Census provides a “snapshot” of what life was like nearly 80 years ago in Sunflower County. What does the Census capture; what does it crop out?

Find Your Voice Highlights

Students are encouraged to find their voices by creating a presentation about one family living in the Mississippi Delta in the year 1940. Through this process of primary source engagement, students will also come to find their voices—by reflecting in writing and orally to big questions regarding the legacy of racism in the United States.

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