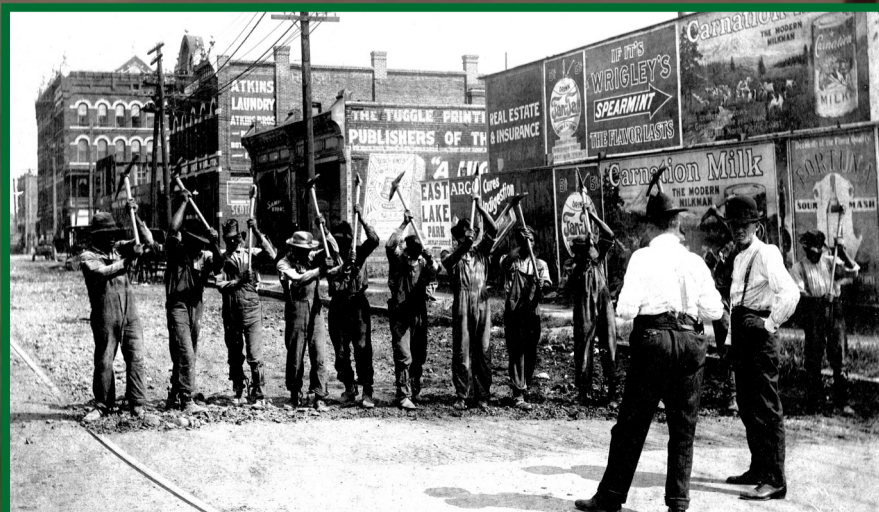


Convict Leasing and Birmingham's Industrialization



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Birmingham and the Human Costs of Industrialization: Using the C3 Framework to Explore the “Magic City” in the Gilded Age

Jeremiah Clabough and John H. Bickford III

The U.S. Civil War destroyed the existing social, cultural, and economic fabrics of Southern society. Over the ensuing decades, Southern society was reconstructed, but vestiges of the past emerged in the form of Jim Crow segregation laws enforced by terror against African Americans.¹ Industrialization, which was well under way in the Northern cities, started to take hold in some parts of the South, most notably in Birmingham, Alabama.

The Establishment of Birmingham

The industrial potential of the Birmingham area was first identified in the 1840s and 1850s through geological surveys that showed an abundance of natural resources—large deposits of coal, iron ore, limestone, and sandstone, the ingredients needed to make steel.² After the war, during the Reconstruction Period, industrial entrepreneurs restarted earlier plans, which led to the founding of Birmingham in 1871. Business entrepreneurs saw many opportunities for investments. This created a need for more laborers, and the now growing city developed a vibrant and youthful feel.³ In less than 30 years, Birmingham was a thriving industrial center, earning the nicknames the “Magic City” and later “The Pittsburgh of the South.” In 1880, the population was 3,086. By 1900, the population had jumped to 38,415.⁴

All cities have a unique identity based on interconnected factors, and applying the C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc for studying the cultural, social, political, regional, and economic factors that shaped Birmingham can answer important questions about industrialization in Birmingham and in America as a whole.⁵

The Costs and Benefits of Industrialization

Students can examine how industrialization impacted Birmingham’s residents by exploring the compelling question: Were the benefits of Birmingham’s industrialization worth the costs?

In answering this question, students should consider the effects of Birmingham’s booming iron industry on laborers, residents, and the city’s overall identity.

Both primary documents and historical monuments can help students contextualize the time period by enabling them to see the issues and events that were important to people during a particular era.⁶ Well-chosen sources can be a catalyst for students’ considerations of the impact of industrialization on Birmingham.

A free Birmingham Industrial Heritage Trail Walk/Bike tour app, expected to be unveiled this fall, can serve as an excellent guide for students engaged in this inquiry. The virtual trail, which uses a GPS triggered platform called TravelStorys, contains 20 audio narrations, each tied to an important site or monument in Birmingham. Each entry draws from a variety of primary sources including photographs, newspaper clippings, and oral histories about a monument or site in the Birmingham metropolitan area. The goal is to present Birmingham history in an accessible, intuitive platform that is also historically sound and can become the basis of all types of learning, from informal tourism to curriculum-based learning for social studies classrooms. While the app itself will present narration and excerpts from oral histories, students and teachers will also be able to access the sources from a supplementary website (www.backstoryed.com/birmingham-industrial-heritage-trail).⁷

ON THE COVER: A dedication and sign-lighting ceremony marked the grand opening of Birmingham’s Rotary Trail, April 6, 2016. The 46-foot Magic City is a version of the original “Magic City” sign erected in 1926. The sign marks the gateway’s western end. (Tamika Moore / AL.com) Inset: Guards supervise a convict-lease work gang in Birmingham (1909). (Courtesy of Birmingham Public Library Archives)



Vulcan Park

Disciplinary Concepts and Gathering Evidence about Birmingham's Industrial Heritage

For this inquiry, teachers can set up learning stations with primary and secondary sources to explore Birmingham's industrial history. The primary sources, in particular, enable students to learn the perspectives of historical figures.⁸ During this process, students apply disciplinary concepts and tools (Dimension 2 of the C3 Framework) and evaluate primary sources within the app entries (Dimension 3). Examples of learning station topics might include the following:

1. *Sloss Furnaces*, today a national historic landmark, was a preeminent manufacturer of pig-iron (crude iron). By 1886, Sloss Furnaces was estimated to be worth around a quarter of a billion dollars (in contemporary terms).⁹ The furnaces helped turn Birmingham into an iron-producing boomtown and one of the largest producers of pig-iron in the world, which helped fuel the Second Industrial Revolution.
2. *The Statue of Vulcan*, the Roman god of fire, was built more than a century ago as Birmingham's entry into the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. The imposing 56-foot, 100,000-pound iron-ore statue was designed to represent Birmingham's industrial identity—its roots in the iron industry. Students can consider the statue's size and symbolism by analyzing photographs that documented its construction

and then deliberate its prominent position in Birmingham today.

3. *Convict-Leasing System*. Prisoners have often been put to work as laborers. In Birmingham, companies paid the state of Alabama or other cities for the use of prisoners to work in their fields, buildings, or mines. Convict leasing was a plentiful source of free, expendable labor for Birmingham's industry at a time when unions and progressive politics complicated labor-owner relationships. In many ways, it was analogous to slavery for imprisoned African Americans, many of whom were jailed under false charges. Using various primary and secondary sources, students can learn about the terrible and dangerous conditions prisoners labored under, often with no parole or release date in sight, and consider the role of this system in Birmingham's industrialization.

These learning stations enable students to apply disciplinary concepts in history (interrelationships among social, economic, cultural, political, and regional factors that influence a location) to grasp elements that shaped Birmingham's character in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Prior to the following lesson, which expands on the Convict-Leasing learning station, teachers can have students gain experience analyzing different types of primary sources, such as

Courtesy of Birmingham Public Library Archives



Guards supervise a convict-lease work gang in Birmingham. Between 1875 and 1928, the state and counties of Alabama leased prisoners to agriculture and industrial firms. The Birmingham District was by far the most invested in the use of convicts for labor.

photographs and excerpts from letters or newspapers. The Library of Congress's Primary Source Analysis Tool can help students record observations, reflections, and questions; alternatively, the National Archives' Document Analysis Worksheets provide distinct questions for each type of primary source and are differentiated by students' grade range.¹⁰

For this lesson, geared for 6th to 8th grade students, the graphic organizer/worksheet on p. 9 can guide students in interpreting each source and its historical significance.¹¹ Handout 1 is a transcription of a letter from a federal judge in Alabama to the U.S. attorney general about unlawful accusations, imprisonment, and forced labor of African Americans. Handout 2 is an excerpt of a letter from an African American convict laborer to the president of the Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts about the miserable and abusive conditions the laborers suffered. Handout 3 illustrates the significant economic growth occurring in Birmingham during this time period, as well as the skyrocketing population growth.

Viewed together, these primary and secondary sources provide students with a deeper understanding of convict leasing, the power of the iron and steel industry, and costs and benefits of industrialization.

To begin, provide students with a copy of the background essay on p. 6. Students in groups of three can then work on the same or different document handouts and complete questions about each source. The worksheet prompts students to scrutinize documents for meaning.

Students reading Handout 1, the letter, will understand that a judge was concerned about the civil liberties of African Americans being systematically infringed upon. The date (1903) and the judge's actions to secure a witness's safety are overshadowed by details about the "systematic scheme" and concerns that this atrocity "has been practiced for some time." Document 1 is inextricably intertwined with the others. Handout 2 offers the personal perspective of an African American convict laborer and depicts the post-Civil War form of slavery that was used for

the economic gain of businesses. In describing the high number of manufacturing plants that sprouted up in Birmingham, Handout 3 illustrates the economic benefits of Birmingham's growth, and provides a concrete picture, in numbers, of the population growth as people flocked to the burgeoning city.

Teachers can lead whole class discussions based on students' interpretations and small group discussions from the primary and secondary sources at each station. Some possible questions that teachers can use to guide this discussion might include the following:

1. What are the most important things that you learned from these sources?
2. What do these sources say about Birmingham's industrial identity?

Taking Informed Action

In the final activity, have students use all of the evidence obtained from the handouts and class discussions to take informed action (Dimension 4) about Birmingham's industrialization. The teacher can provide the students with several scenarios about each station and have them work in groups to choose one scenario from the topic of a station as a writing activity. The ability to select from different learning options enables students to apply their academic strengths.¹² Below are two scenarios for the convict-leasing station.

1. *Writing prompt: Imagine that you were an activist opposed to the convict-leasing system because of its violations of African Americans' civil rights and liberties. Write a letter to a local newspaper detailing why the convict-leasing system should be abolished. Your letter should also include information about the dubious charges filed against prisoners, their living conditions, and working conditions.*
2. *Writing prompt: Imagine that you are a captain of industry in Birmingham and want to lure investors to enable your company and the city to grow. Write a one-page letter to a possible investor detailing why the investor should consider your company. Some items to highlight are the economic potential of Birmingham's industries, the benefits of a large, strike-free labor system, and the abundant natural resources in the local region.*

The length of the writing activity may be adjusted based on students' writing abilities. The key is for teachers' prompts to be based on resources and technology of American society in the late 1800s. Letters were one form of communication used to capture and share ideas during this time period. Through answering one of these prompts, students draw on knowledge from primary sources examined at a learning station to make connections on how industrialization played an instrumental role in shaping Birmingham's identity.

Conclusion

The complementary sources and strategies discussed position middle level learners to critically investigate a largely forgotten aspect of the Gilded Age: convict leasing. The primary sources are insightful and disconcerting; the close reading strategies enable students to unpack and connect these diverse sources. Students will likely be astonished at how Birmingham's remarkable industrial growth was abetted and accelerated with the exploited labor of African Americans. Were it not for these human costs, Birmingham would most certainly be a different city today. These texts and tasks position students to think critically, historically, and civically about issues in their region.¹³

Notes

1. Some sources to explore African Americans' lives in the aftermath of the Civil War include Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name* (New York, N.Y.: Anchor House, 2008); C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913: A History of the South* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); Matthew Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866–1928* (Columbia, S.C.: The University of South Carolina Press, 1996); "Slavery after the Civil War," *Middle Level Learning* 44 (May/June 2012), www.socialstudies.org.
2. Eugene Allen Smith, "Geological Surveys in Alabama," *The Journal of Geology* 2, no. 3 (1894): 275–287.
3. W. David Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 144.
4. Birmingham's Population, 1880–2000, Government Documents, Birmingham Public Library, www.bplonline.org/resources/government/BirminghamPopulation.aspx. From: U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990: Population and Housing Unit Counts: United States. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1993. [Table 46: Population Rank of Incorporated Places of 100,000 Population or More, 1990; Population, 1790 to 1990; Housing Units: 1940 to 1990] (C 3.223/5: 1990 CPH-2-1) www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cph2/cph-2-1-1.pdf.
5. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013), 83. A free pdf of the C3 Framework is at www.socialstudies.org/

continued on page 10

Background Essay for Students

Convict Leasing and the Growth of Birmingham

The city of Birmingham, Alabama, was established in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War, in 1871. The huge deposits of natural resources (iron ore, coal, and limestone—three key raw materials used to make steel) were identified by geologists in the middle of the nineteenth century, but this untapped potential in the Birmingham area was put on hold following the outbreak of the Civil War. When the war ended in 1865, industrial entrepreneurs restarted opportunities to capitalize on the natural resources in the Birmingham area.

In the Gilded Age—the period in the late 1800s of rapid economic growth in the United States—industrial entrepreneurs had to deal with complicated labor relations and the potential for strikes that interrupted production output. They addressed these labor issues by drawing on rural whites in the Birmingham area as well as another source of labor. Companies hired convicts from other cities and from the state of Alabama to work in these industrial jobs. The convicts were almost exclusively African Americans, often falsely charged or convicted with suspect evidence, who then had to work in dangerous conditions for an undetermined period of time. In other words, cities and the state of Alabama were able to earn significant profits by charging more African Americans with crimes to meet the high need for laborers.

With the increased labor force, a good portion of which was made of African Americans in the convict-leasing system, and large financial investments of industrial entrepreneurs, Birmingham experienced amazing growth. Birmingham's population increased in 1870 from 3,086 to 38,415 by 1900—a surge of over 35,000 citizens, or about a 1,000 percent increase. As a result of this phenomenal growth, Birmingham earned the nicknames the “Magic City” and “The Pittsburgh of the South.”

Table 1. Chronology of Birmingham History

Year/Date	Event
December 14, 1819	Alabama becomes the 22nd state in the United States.
1850	Alabama's first state geologist publishes a report that highlights the abundance of natural resources in the Birmingham area.
January 11, 1861	Alabama joins the Confederate States of America and officially secedes from the United States.
April 12, 1861	U.S. Civil War begins with Confederates attacking Fort Sumter in South Carolina.
May 9, 1865	General Robert E. Lee surrenders to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, ending the Civil War.
1871	Birmingham is founded as a city in Alabama.
1872	South & North Alabama Railroad connect to L&N Line in Chattanooga.
1873	The cholera epidemic occurs in the summer, killing 128 people.
1875	The convict-lease system is established in Birmingham. Companies and individuals pay state and county governments for the labor of prisoners.
1880	Pratt Coke and Coal Company is formed and sells first high-grade coal.
1882	Sloss Furnaces begins operation and sells 24,000 tons of iron its first year.
1885	Birmingham Barons (originally known as Coal Barons) are created and play in a Southern baseball league.
1904	Vulcan statue is created as a symbol of Birmingham's industrial heritage and is shipped to St. Louis World Fair.

Handout 1

Letter from a Federal Judge in Alabama to the U.S. Attorney General

Sir: Some witnesses before the Grand Jury here have developed the fact that in Shelby County [Alabama] in this District, and in this Coosa County in the Middle district, a systematic scheme of depriving negroes of their liberty, and hiring them out, has been practiced for some time.

The plan is to accuse the negro of some petty offense, and then require him, in order to escape conviction, to enter into an agreement to pay his accuser so much money, and sign a contract, under the terms of which his bondsmen can hire him out until he pays a certain sum. The negro is made to believe he is a convict, and treated as such. It is said that thirty negroes were in the stockade at one time.

Thursday, a negro witness who had been summoned here, and testified before the Grand Jury, was taken from the train by force, and imprisoned on account of his testimony; but finally his captors became frightened and turned him loose. The grand jury found indictments against nine of the parties. I deemed it essential to the safety of the negro that a deputy marshal should protect him while in that county, and while here giving testimony; and that the accused parties should be promptly arrested and held to bail, in order to deter them, at least, from further violence to the negro....

—Yours Truly, T. G. Jones

Letter from Thomas Goode Jones (Federal Judge in Alabama) to Philander C. Knox (Attorney General in Washington, D.C.), March 21, 1903, ff 5280-03, RG60, NA as quoted directly in Blackmon (2008), *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* on p. 423–424.

Handout 2

Excerpt of a Letter from a Convict Laborer to the Alabama Board of Inspectors of Convicts

“[Our living quarters are] filled with filth and vermin. ... [Gunpowder cans were used to hold human waste that periodically] would fill up and run over on bed [where some prisoners were shackled in place at night]. ... Every Day some one of us were carried to our last resting, the grave. Day after day we looked Death in the face & was afraid to speak. ... Fate seems to curse a convict. Death seems to summon us hence. ... Comer is a hard man. I have seen men come to him with their shirts a solid scab on their back and beg him to help them and he would say [‘]let the hide grow back and take it off again.[’] I have seen him hit men 100 and 160 [times] with a ten prong strop [sic], then say they was not whiped [sic]. He would go off after an escape man come one day with him and dig his grave the same day. We go to cell wet, go to bed wet and arise wet the following morning and evry [sic] guard knocking[,] beating[,] yelling[,] Keep [sic] in line Jumping Ditches [sic].”

Ezekiel Archey to Reginald Dawson, Pratt Mines, January 18, 1884, Alabama Department of Archives and History, <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/voices/id/5414/rec/1>

Economic Impact of Industrialization in Birmingham

Excerpt from: W. David Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 250.

Despite the protracted depression of the mid-1890s; the city bustled with industry. A promotional booklet issued by the Commercial Club in 1896 indicated that there were about 180 manufacturing plants including Furnace, Basket Factories, Bicycle Factories, Blank Book Manufactories, Boiler Works, Bolt and Nuts Works, Bottling Works, Brass Foundries, Breweries, Brick Works, Iron Bridge Works, Broom Factories, Wagon and Buggy Works, Candy Factories, Cabinet and Pattern Works, Cigar Factories, Cider Works, Cotton Compresses, Foundries and Machine Shops, Furniture Factories, Grist Mills, Harness Factories, Lithographers, Mattress Factories, three Daily Newspapers and ten Weeklies, Packing Houses, Pipe Works, Planning Mills, Rolling Mills, Saw Works, Stove Factories, Trunk Factories, Wheelbarrow and Truck Factories, Wood Turning and Scroll Works, Yeast Factory, Car Wheel Works, Cultivator Works, Pump Works, Cotton Seed Huller Works, and others. Five railroads served Jones Valley, Jefferson County had almost 600 miles of track. As always, mineral industries constituted the heart of the local economy. In 1896, the district had approximately 3,400 furnacemen, 3,500 ore miners, 5,000 coal miners, 1,500 coke oven employees, and 8,000 workers in rolling mills, pipe foundries, and other metal-fabricating installations. Coal production in 1900 was more than twice what it had been a decade earlier, and pig iron production had climbed by one-third.

Birmingham's Population 1880–1930

Year	Population*	Percent Change
1880	3,086	—
1890	26,178	+748.3
1900	38,415	+46.8
1910	132,685	+245.4
1920	178,806	+34.8
1930	259,678	+45.2

* U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1990: Population and Housing Unit Counts: United States. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1993. [Table 46: Population Rank of Incorporated Places of 100,000 Population or More, 1990; Population, 1790 to 1990; Housing Units: 1940 to 1990] (C 3.223/5: 1990 CPH-2-1), www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/cph2/cph-2-1-1.pdf

SOURCE: <https://www.bplonline.org/resources/government/BirminghamPopulation.aspx>

Document Worksheet

Source	If This is a Primary Document: Who is the source? What do we know about this person? Who is the audience? What do we know about the audience?	Historical significance. What did you learn from this? Why is it important? Be specific.	Connections. How is this document similar to or different from others? Be specific.
Letter from Judge (Handout One)			
Letter from Convict Laborer (Handout Two)			
Economic Impact (Handout Three)			

BIRMINGHAM AND THE HUMAN COSTS OF INDUSTRIALIZATION *from page 5*

- c3. The paperback book (with explanatory essays) is available for purchase at www.socialstudies.org/store. See S.G. Grant, "From Inquiry Arc to Instructional Practice: The Potential of the C3 Framework," *Social Education* 77, no. 6 (2013): 322–326.
6. Stewart Waters and William Russell, "Monumental Controversies: Exploring the Contested History of the United States Landscape," *The Social Studies* 104, no. 2 (2013): 77–86.
 7. Primary sources from the The Birmingham Industrial Heritage Trail Walk/Bike tour app can be accessed from www.backstoryed.com/birmingham-industrial-heritage-trai.
 8. Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin, "Tampering with History: Adapting Primary Sources for Struggling Readers," *Social Education* 73, no. 5 (2009): 212–216.
 9. W. David Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District*, 139.
 10. The Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool, www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/; Access the National Archives document analysis worksheets at www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets.
 11. Jeffery Nokes, "Historical Reading and Writing in Secondary School Classrooms," in *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, eds. Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger, and Maria Grever (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 553–571.
 12. Bridget Dalton, "Level Up with Multimodal Composition in Social Studies," *The Reading Teacher* 68, no.4 (2015): 296–302.
 13. Wayne Journell, *Teaching Politics in Secondary Education: Engaging with Contentious Issues* (Albany, N.Y.: The State University of New York Press, 2017); Donald Oliver and James Shaver, *Teaching Public Issues in the High School* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1966); Walter Parker, "Social Studies Education Ec21," in Walter Parker, ed., *Social Studies Today: Research and Practice* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2015), 3–13.

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Teacher Resource Guide

Books for Teachers

Blackmon, Douglas. *Slavery by Another Name*. New York, N.Y.: Anchor House, 2008.

Lewis, W. David. *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic*. Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1994.

West Jr., Thomas. *The Elyton Land Company Minutes Books 1871–1895: The Corporation that Founded Birmingham, Alabama*. Birmingham, Ala.: Banner Press, 2007.

Woodward, C. Vann. *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913: A History of the South*. Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1951.

Trade Books for Students

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.: The Birth of an American Terrorist Group* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010).

Farrell, Mary Cronk. *Fannie Never Flinched: One Woman's Courage in the Struggle for American Labor Union Rights* (New York: Abrams Book, 2016).

Keith, Todd. *Birmingham Then and Now* (London: Pavilion Books Group, 2014).

Mullenbach, Cheryl. *The Industrial Revolution for Kids: The People and Technology That Changed the World, with 21 Activities* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014).

Digital Collections of Primary Sources

Alabama Department of Archives and History
<http://archives.state.al.us/>

Birmingham Public Library, www.bplonline.org/

Encyclopedia of Alabama, www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/

Sloss Furnaces, www.slossfurnaces.com/

Tannehill Ironworks: Historical State Park
www.tannehill.org/museum.html

Vulcan Park and Museum, <http://visitvulcan.com/>

The 1848 Women’s Rights Convention: Where was Frances Seward?

Alan Singer

As a general rule, historians tend to avoid “what if” or “why not” questions because they are highly speculative and are not usually answerable.¹ These questions can, however, be useful. Asking such questions can point to areas that would benefit from further research. For social studies classrooms “what if” or “why not” questions can serve as compelling questions that stimulate student interest.

For example, a close look at the life of Frances Seward, the wife of senator William Seward, who became secretary of state between 1861 and 1869, can give students insight, not only

into the role she played in social movements of the nineteenth century, but in the particular challenges politically or socially conscious women faced maintaining identities separate from their husbands. Frances Seward’s story can also engage students as detectives trying to solve a historical puzzle.

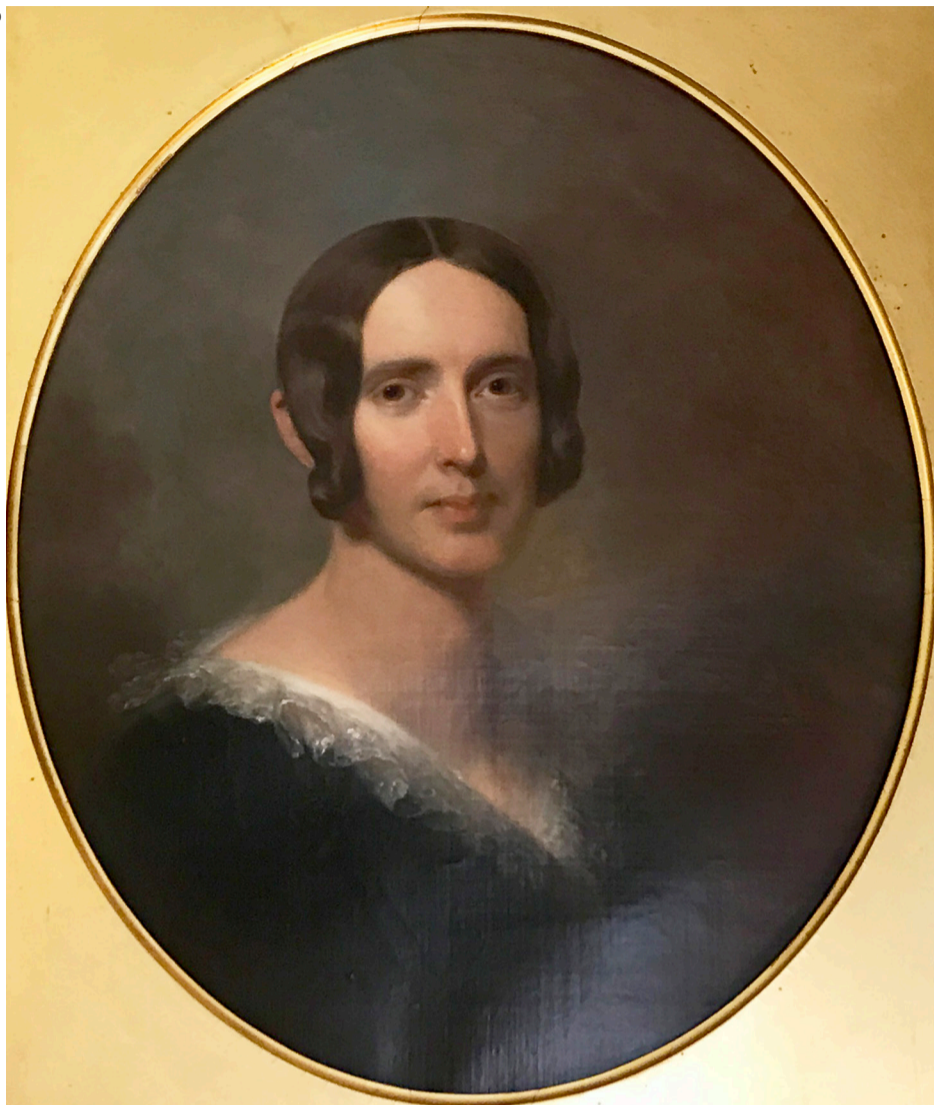
The Seward family lived in Auburn, New York—only 15 miles from Seneca Falls when the first women’s rights convention was held there from July 19–20, in 1848. Frances Seward, an anti-slavery activist and supporter of women’s rights, knew many of the women who participated in the historic conven-

Sculptor Lloyd Lillie’s “The First Wave” features life-size bronze statues of the five women who organized the first Women’s Rights Convention in the United States, and a few of the men who came in support of social, political, and religious equality for women. This statue is in the Seneca Falls Visitor Center at the Women’s Rights National Historic Park in New York. *Elizabeth Cady Stanton is at the far left. Beside her is Frederick Douglass.*



Women’s Rights National Historic Park, Seneca Falls, New York, www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/first-wave-statue-exhibit.htm

From the collections of the Seward House Museum, Auburn N.Y., www.sewardhouse.org



Frances Adeline Miller Seward, painting by Henry Inman (1844)



Elizabeth Cady Stanton (ca. 1890)

Veeder/Library of Congress

tion, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and yet Frances did not attend. Her absence from the historic event is a mystery. She was a person who often suffered ill health. Was it illness that kept her away? Did she have a strong difference of opinion about the program? Did her husband, who was against slavery, but not a supporter of women's rights, influence her absence? Or was there another reason?

More than a Famous Senator's Wife

Frances Seward often remained in Auburn while her husband was in Washington, D.C., (serving first as a senator and then as secretary of state, a post that often took him overseas). Raised a Quaker, Frances was a fierce abolitionist. Her home was a "station" on the Underground Railroad, a safe house for fugitive slaves; she supported Harriet Tubman's work; supported Frederick Douglass's newspaper *North Star* financially; and funded a school for African American children.² (See Handout 1, "Brief Biographies")

Although I have not found any published biography of Frances Seward as a book, many details of her life are revealed in various sources online. For example, as a young woman, she studied

at the Troy Female Seminary in Troy, New York, which was founded by Emma Willard (the same school that Elizabeth Cady Stanton attended, though not during the same period). The Troy Female Seminary was the first higher education institution for women in the United States. The seminary's faculty was committed to women's rights, and this probably had a deep influence on Frances's values and opinions.³

Searching for Clues

One clue about Frances Seward's absence from Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, which was attended by about 200 people, lies in the journal writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a prolific writer who lived in Seneca Falls and who was one of the organizers of the convention. Stanton mentions Frances Seward a number of times in her memoir, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815–1897*.⁵ She recounts one conversation in which Frances expressed support for the goals of the women's rights movement, but also an unwillingness to be subjected to her husband's ridicule. This conversation might also shed some light on why Frances and William Seward often lived separate lives. In *Team of Rivals*, author Doris Kearns Goodwin

described William Seward as a slender, short man with an “outsized personality” and a “slashing swagger” that allowed him to dominate other men.⁴

I searched for more clues in Frances’s written correspondences, part of the extensive Seward Family Digital Archive (sewardproject.org).⁶ Unfortunately, I found no surviving letters between February 1845 and July 1849 written by Frances. There are six letters addressed to Frances from George Washington Seward, William Seward’s younger brother, written between August 16 and November 9, 1848, but these all discuss family health and a possible visit. There is also one letter from George to William and two from Frances’s sister Lazette Miller Worden to William, but these also are limited to family concerns. There are no letters in the archive either sent or received by Frances from the leading feminists of the period.

We know that as an adult, Frances Seward suffered from health problems that doctors of that era did not understand well—or perhaps were dismissed as “women’s problems.” She was not comfortable during her five pregnancies, and did not have easy labors. William Seward was usually away from home, pursuing a renowned career in public service. Although his letters home expressed much affection, his prolonged absences may have contributed to his wife’s depression.⁷

A History Lab for Students

Real life rarely provides simple answers to our questions. When we examine why a historical figure acted, or failed to act, in a given moment, a wide net should be cast, and multiple lines of

evidence considered (See Handout 2). Invite students to read and discuss the materials in the handouts, and then make up their own minds about likely reasons why Frances Seward, a supporter of women’s rights, did not attend the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls in 1848, just two hours away by horse and carriage from her home. 🌐

Notes

1. Richard Evan, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2013).
2. Maggie MacLean, “Frances Seward,” www.civilwarwomenblog.com/frances-seward.
3. “Frances Adeline Seward,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frances_Adeline_Seward.
4. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 12–13.
5. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815–1897* (New York: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898).
6. The Seward Family Digital Archive, curated at the University of Rochester, can be accessed at sewardproject.org. A good entry point for research is rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/william-henry-seward-papers.
7. Patricia C. Johnson, “I Could Not Be Well or Happy at Home ... When Called to the Councils of My Country”: Politics and the Seward Family,” *University of Rochester Library Bulletin* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1978), rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/1018.

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Brief Biographies of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Seward

Instructions: Read about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Seward, then answer questions 1–4.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902)

Based on *The Reader's Companion to American History*. Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, eds. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), and www.history.com/topics/womens-history/elizabeth-cady-stanton. Also, visit the website of the Women's Rights National Historic Park, www.nps.gov/wori.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was a prominent 19th-century suffragist, abolitionist, and civil rights activist. Besides being a political activist, Stanton was also the mother of seven children

Elizabeth Cady was born in Jamestown, New York, where her parents were progressive activists. Her cousin and close friend, Gerrit Smith, was also a prominent abolitionist. As a young woman, she attended Emma Willard's Troy Female Seminary in Troy, New York. This was a preparatory school run by women who strongly promoted women's rights in an era when that was a radical concept. Elizabeth married Henry Stanton in 1840 and for their honeymoon they traveled to London, England, to attend an antislavery conference. In London, Elizabeth met Lucretia Mott, a leading American abolitionist and advocate for women's rights. Together they organized the 1848 Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York, partly in response to being denied the right to fully participate in the London conference because they were women.

In 1851, Elizabeth began working with Susan B. Anthony, a political partnership dedicated to the emancipation of women that lasted for the rest of their lives. Three years later, Elizabeth was the first woman to speak before the New York State legislature, where she demanded equal rights for women, including the right to vote. By 1860, most of the reforms she demanded were law, except for the right to vote. Along with Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth was a founder of the National Women's Loyal League during the Civil War that advocated for a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery. She and Anthony were furious when the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments ignored women's suffrage, and in 1869 they organized the National Woman Suffrage Association.

During her long career, Elizabeth Cady Stanton also advocated for liberalizing divorce laws and for reproductive self-determination for women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton died in 1902 and did not live to see the passage of the 19th amendment ensuring women the right to vote.

continued on page 15

Frances Miller Seward (1805–1865)

Based on “Frances Seward” by Maggie MacLean, Civil War Women, www.civilwarwomenblog.com/frances-seward. See also the websites of the Seward House Museum, www.sewardhouse.org, and the Seward Family Digital Archive, sewardproject.org/StudentResearch.

Frances Miller Seward was born in Cayuga County, New York. Like Elizabeth Cady, she was a student at the Troy Female Seminary. She married a politically ambitious lawyer, William Seward, who became a governor of New York State in 1839, then a U.S. Senator from New York in 1849, and finally the Secretary of State under presidents Lincoln and Grant (1861–1869). Frances Seward often remained at their home in Auburn, New York, while her husband was in Washington, D.C., or overseas. Frances raised four boys and one daughter (another daughter died in childhood), and also cared for her aging father, despite her own poor health. Her ailments usually baffled her doctors.

Frances Seward was much more than the wife of a famous politician. She was an abolitionist, like many of her fellow Quakers, and her home was a secret safe house for freedom-seekers and self-emancipators fleeing enslavement. Frances sponsored Harriet Tubman, giving her a place to live in Auburn and a means of support so that she could continue her work as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Largely as a result of Frances’s initiatives, the Swards financially supported Frederick Douglass’s newspaper *North Star*, as well as a school for African American children in the town of Florida, in upstate New York. Frances Seward died in 1865 of a heart attack, about two months after William survived an assassination attempt by a co-conspirator of John Wilkes Booth.

The Seward House in Auburn, New York, is now a museum open to visitors. It was built in 1816 and was Frances’s childhood home. When you research Frances Miller Seward online, it’s important not to mistake her with her daughter, Frances Adeline

(“Fanny”) Seward, who kept a detailed diary that has been published as a book.

Questions

1. **What do you think was Frances M. Seward’s most important achievement? Why?**

2. **In your opinion, why were many opponents of slavery also strong supporters of women’s rights?**

3. **Some suffragists advocating the right of women to vote were upset with Stanton for also pushing other feminist issues. Do you agree with Stanton that women had to fight for full equality, or with the critics who argued it was important to concentrate on only one issue, the right to vote? Explain your views.**

Considering Multiple Lines of Evidence

The main source for many of the passages below is Elizabeth Cady Stanton's memoir, formally titled *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815–1897* (New York: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898). The book is online at digital.library.upenn.edu/women/stanton/years/years.html.

Questions to Consider about the Evidence

1. Based on the evidence presented below, what was the relationship between Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Seward? On what evidence do you base your conclusion?
2. Why were issues like property and voting rights crucial to 19th century women's rights advocates?
3. What was Senator William Seward's view of women securing voting rights? What evidence is presented in the text?
4. What were Frances Seward's views on women's rights?
5. Why did Frances Seward often remain quiet in public about her views on women's rights?
6. In your opinion, do the memoir entries by Elizabeth Cady Stanton provide sufficient evidence to explain why Frances Seward did not attend the Women's Rights Convention? Explain your views. What further evidence would you like to see?



Items of Evidence A through G

Item of Evidence (A). In her published memoir, Elizabeth Cady Stanton mentions Frances Seward a

number of times, the first instance being a discussion of their campaign for a "Married Woman's Property Bill," which became a law in New York State in 1848. Curiously, while a lifetime advocate for women's rights, Stanton did not refer to Frances Seward by name, but as the wife of the governor. Stanton wrote:

"In 1843 my father moved to Albany, to establish my brothers-in-law, Mr. Wilkeson and Mr. McMartin, in the legal profession. That made Albany the family rallying point for a few years. This enabled me to spend several winters at the Capital and to take an active part in the discussion of the Married Woman's Property Bill, then pending in the legislature. William H. Seward, Governor of the State from 1839 to 1843, recommended the Bill, and his wife, a woman of rare intelligence, advocated it in society. Together we had the opportunity of talking with many members, both of the Senate and the Assembly, in social circles, as well as in their committee rooms. Bills were pending from 1836 until 1848, when the measure finally passed." (*Eighty Years and More*, 135)

New York State's 1848 "Married Woman's Property Law" became a model for other states. Here is an excerpt:

"The real and personal property of any female who may hereafter marry, and which she shall own at the time of marriage, and the rents issues and profits thereof shall not be subject to the disposal of her husband, nor be liable for his debts, and shall continue her sole and separate property, as if she were a single female."

SOURCE: Law Library of Congress, "Married Women's

continued on page 17

Property Law," memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awlaw3/property_law.html)

Item of Evidence (B). In her memoir, Stanton describes her own efforts to secure the right of women to vote in New York State. In February 1854, she was the first woman to address the New York State legislature. For their efforts, Stanton and other advocates for women's rights were sharply ridiculed in the local press, which Stanton quotes in her memoir.

The *Albany Register*, in an article on "Woman's Rights in the Legislature," March 7, 1854, declared: "People are beginning to inquire how far public sentiment should sanction or tolerate these unsexed women, who would step out from the true sphere of the mother, the wife, and the daughter, and taking upon themselves the duties and the business of men, stalk into the public gaze, and, by engaging in the politics, the rough controversies and trafficking of the world, upheave existing institutions, and overrun all the social relations of life." (*Eighty Years and More*, pp. 190–191)

Item of Evidence (C). In her memoir, Elizabeth Stanton recalls being at a dinner party in Auburn with Senator William Seward and Frances Seward present. Senator Seward "ridiculed" Stanton's advocacy of the right of women to vote. All the while, Frances Seward remained silent.

"The Senator was very merry on that occasion and made Judge Hurlbert and myself the target for all his ridicule on the woman's rights question, in which the company joined, so that we stood quite alone. Sure that we had the right on our side and the arguments clearly defined in our minds, and being both cool

and self-possessed, and in wit and sarcasm quite equal to any of them, we fought the Senator, inch by inch, until he had a very narrow platform to stand on. Mrs. Seward maintained an unbroken silence, while those ladies who did open their lips were with the opposition, supposing, no doubt, that Senator Seward represented his wife's opinions" (*Eighty Years and More*, 197).

Item of Evidence (D). After the dinner, the women and men went to separate rooms for conversation (and for the men, smoking cigars, as was the custom). At this point, Stanton and Frances Seward were able to have a private conversation offering insight into the relationship between Frances Seward and her husband. Stanton writes,

"Imagine, then, my surprise when, the moment the parlor door was closed upon us, Mrs. Seward, approaching me most affectionately, said: 'Let me thank you for the brave words you uttered at the dinner table, and for your speech before the legislature, that thrilled my soul as I read it over and over.' I was filled with joy and astonishment. Recovering myself, I said, 'Is it possible, Mrs. Seward, that you agree with me? Then why, when I was so hard pressed by foes on every side, did you not come to the defense? I supposed that all you ladies were hostile to every one of my ideas on this question.' 'No, no!' said she; 'I am with you thoroughly, but I am a born coward; there is nothing I dread more than Mr. Seward's ridicule. I would rather walk up to the cannon's mouth than encounter it'" (*Eighty Years and More*, 197–199)

Item of Evidence (E). In letters to her husband, William Henry Seward, from the late 1820s and 1830s,

continued on page 18

Handout 2c

Frances Seward shares a little about the children, loneliness, and her medical problems.

“I promised you my Dear Henry to write every day after you left home but I had so much to do yesterday more than usual that I did not find any time until after eleven o’ clock and then I was too sleepy. In the first place ... my rheumatism is much better and Augustus [their son] has not coughed any since you left home—he says “Pa gone leave Ma all alone”—“Ma cry--cry--cry.” February 15, 1829

“A happy New Year” to you dearest if you have run away and left me alone with the two tiny ones— they are dear creatures and I have no right to complain for as Gus says ‘Ma you are not all alone when I am with you’. Still it is a lonely New Year and four months will seem like such a long time....” January 2, 1831

“Only one week has passed since you left us but to me it seems a much longer time. I have waited until my heart is sick with hope deferred, for some intelligence [a letter] from you but as yet have heard nothing. I think you must have written before leaving New York. I can hardly tell what I have been doing this long week. I only know that the time has dragged wearily along.” June 4, 1833

“I was not quite well enough to enter into the spirit of the times. Clary and Lazette [Frances’s sister] went to the ball in the evening with Beardsley and I went to bed with the four bairns [small children] who behaved uncommonly well, but I have not thanked you yet for the long kind, letter I received from you about two hours after dispatching my last which was as you probably discovered written under the influence of the vapours [depressed or hysterical nervous condition] I feel more and more sensibly every day my incapacity for a life

of dissipation [withdrawal] and every day am better satisfied with the prospect of living in comparative retirement.”—January 2, 1835

“Your letter came last Saturday evening and would you believe it, it remained unread until the next morning. I was when it came suffering from an attack of sick headache rather more violent than I have ever before experienced. I was relieved [sic] by vomiting and bathing my head and feet but was unable to sit up before the next morning. I hope Frances [her niece] has recovered from her cold by this time. I have thought of her many times. I find that the least appearance of illness in those I love alarms me much more than it did before the melancholy experience of this winter.” —March 22, 1837

SOURCE: Seward Family Digital Archive, sewardproject.org.

Item of Evidence (F). Letters to and from Frances Seward suggest ways she advocated for children’s issues, particularly the education of African American children.

Elizabeth Parsons, headmistress of the Samuel S. Seward Institute, responded to a letter from Frances Seward, November 3, 1849, regarding “whether [Parsons could] in any way take a pretty little colored girl into [her] school & give [the child] the benefits of instruction &c.”

On July 1, 1852, Frances wrote William, “A man by the name of William Johnson will apply to you for assistance to purchase the freedom of his daughter. You will see that I have given him something by his book. I told him I thought you would give him more. He is very desirous that I should employ his daughter when he gets her which I have agreed to do conditionally if you approve.”

continued on page 19

Handout 2d

In July 1852, Frances visited the Auburn Orphan Asylum. She wrote William Seward, “I was greatly interested in the Orphans ... One of them has died & is to be buried this morning. As he was a poor colored child placed there by my advice, I am going round and shall defray the funeral expenses.”

SOURCE: Peter Wisbey, (former Executive Director of Seward House), “In the ‘Emancipation Business’: William and Frances Seward’s Abolition Activism” (2004), www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nycayuga/ugrr/seward.html; Brochure from Seward House, Sites and Stories: Auburn—North 119 Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, African American Life Sponsored by Auburn Historic Resources Review Board, 122, www.cayugacounty.us/portals/0/history/ugrr/report/PDF/5f.pdf



Item of Evidence (G). An online article by Librarian Patricia Johnson in 1978 detailed aspects of Frances Seward’s personal and family life. This is not a primary source document, but rather the work of a historian who studied many primary sources.

Excerpt: Frances Seward probably had a number of physical and nervous disorders now accepted by medical science for which there was little

recognition and no cure in the nineteenth century. Yet none of them, either singly or in combination, was enough to make her a reclusive invalid. The circumstances of her life and her own temperament did that. She was retiring by nature, and at the first sign of trouble her instinct was to retreat further into herself and her family circle.

Her residence in her father’s house deprived her in the early stages of her illnesses of any physical necessity to overcome her depression or discomfort. The stoves would be stoked, the wash done, and the children fed whether she rose from her bed or not. Her husband’s repeated absences deprived her of his tenderness and the gentle raillery and humor which might have encouraged her to recover. Her depression doubtless fed on itself, and she came to feel neglected and cheated of the life she had expected....

SOURCE: Patricia C. Johnson, “I Could Not Be Well or Happy at Home ... When Called to the Councils of My Country’: Politics and the Seward Family,” *University of Rochester Library Bulletin*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1978), rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/1018.

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