



# An Important Part of the Journey West

## OBJECTIVE

Using primary and secondary sources, students will think about how race affected opportunities and experiences in Oregon for Black pioneers who traveled along the Oregon Trail.

## INTRODUCTION TO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Primary Sources are pieces of information that you can use to learn about life in the past. When you use a primary source you are like a detective, searching for clues, asking questions, and digging through evidence to make a conclusion! Historians use primary sources like pictures and newspaper articles to think about what life was like for people in the past. Over the next four days you are going to get a chance to think like a detective and work like a historian! Using primary sources we are going to strengthen our note taking skills, think about why Black pioneers traveled along the Oregon Trail and learn about their experiences once they got to Oregon.

While you are reading through these sources it is important to note that the authors used the words slave and owner in order to explain the relationship between some Black and White people. Today many people are choosing to use the words enslaved and enslavers instead to explain this relationship. This shift in language is an effort to emphasize the humanity of Black individuals and develop the understanding that their circumstance was caused by the actions of other people.

## LANGUAGE OBJECTIVES

- Students will compare and contrast the different reasons Black and White pioneers journeyed along the Oregon Trail
- Students will compare and contrast the different opportunities for Black and White pioneers once they reached Oregon

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Research to Build and Present Knowledge  
**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1**

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.6**

Compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic; describe the differences in focus and the information provided.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.9**

Integrate information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

What were the motivations of the people who traveled west? How did race factor into those motivations?

In what ways were Black and White pioneer experiences the same on the Oregon Trail? In what ways were they different?

Why do you think some people's stories are written down and remembered, while other people's stories are not?

# Black Pioneers Along the Oregon Trail

## A Teacher Guide to Sources



### Understanding Your Sources

Before you begin teaching it is important to understand that the sources in this unit are presented in a particular order. By beginning with an obituary and ending with a personal interview, students are able to slowly develop their own understanding of what it means to think like a historian and use multiple sources to uncover a more complete story. Likewise, by beginning with a focus pioneer and later introducing other stories, students begin to understand that although Black pioneers faced similar obstacles, their journeys were all unique. Below you will find highlights from each source that can help guide the conversations you have with your students.

### Day 1: Pioneer Journal Entries

These particular journal entries have been selected because they were written either in the same year or in the year right before Amanda Gardner Johnson took her own journey west. Together they paint a picture of a journey that was both dangerous and worth it. These journal entries speak about dangerous roads, freshly dug graves, sickness and relentless rains. In her journal entry Amelia Stewart Knight shares that people's continued desire to make the difficult journey must mean that Oregon is indeed a wonderful country.

As you read these journal entries aloud to your students, encourage them to think about why people would have wanted to take such a difficult journey. Although it is important to understand that pioneers each had their own individual reasons for making the trip to Oregon, Amelia Stewart Knight's journal entry can be used to help students understand the promise that settling in Oregon held for some pioneers. End the day by reading the interview excerpt from Amanda Gardner Johnson. It is important for students to understand that this was not a journal entry but information shared in an interview later on in Amanda's life.

How is this interview excerpt similar to the other journal entries?

Many pioneers kept journals but not many were interviewed and written about. Why do you think this pioneer might have been interviewed later on in her life?

Let students know that they will learn more about this pioneer in tomorrow's lesson.

### Day 2: Who was Amanda Gardner Johnson?

#### Source #1: Understanding the Obituary

The obituary published by the Albany Democrat Herald is purposely presented first in this series of sources. In this source we learn that Amanda took 6 months to cross along the Oregon Trail with the Deckard family and that she had many brothers and sisters who stayed behind in Missouri. Although there is a mention of slavery in the obituary, there is no mention of Amanda's race nor is there any mention of exactly what her relationship was to the Deckard family. After listening to this source read aloud, students should work together to add to a class KWL chart (a 3 column chart where students record what they know, what they wonder and what they have learned about a particular topic). The interview excerpt that was shared on the first day should help students add to the "Know" section of the chart. Students know that Amanda was a pioneer who traveled along the Oregon trail. They also know that she was interviewed later on in her life about her journey. After reading her obituary ask students:

Do students have any questions based on what they have just heard?

Did this source help students answer the question: **Why do you think this pioneer was interviewed later on in her life?**

What do we Know?	What do we wonder?	What have we learned?
Amanda Gardner Johnson was a pioneer who traveled along the Oregon Trail		
She was interviewed later on about her experience on the trail		



# A Teacher Guide to Sources

## Day 2 continued: Who was Amanda Gardner Johnson?

### Source #2: Amanda's Photograph

The second source in this series is a photograph of Amanda and her husband, Benjamin Johnson. Using the questions provided on the teacher guide, students are encouraged to share what they notice about the people in the picture. Although students may be hesitant to state that the subjects in the photograph are Black, it is important that this detail is shared aloud. This source does not explain that Amanda was enslaved by the Deckards but understanding that Amanda was Black does set the stage for the next source which explicitly shares this information. After looking at this picture and adding to Wonder and Learned sections of the class KWL chart students are once again asked if this source answered the question:

**Why do you think this pioneer was interviewed later on in her life?**

### Source #3: Article Excerpt from the Albany Public Library

The article excerpt from the Albany Public Library provides a great deal of new information. This is the first time that students learn that Amanda was enslaved by the Deckards. This article also states that Amanda was offered her freedom when the Deckards decided that they would head west along the Oregon Trail. The most important part of this source is the response that the article states Amanda gave when she was asked if she would go with the Deckards to Oregon or stay in Missouri: **"I will go where my people go."** It is important to highlight this quote because it may lead students to infer that Amanda left with the Deckards simply because she wanted to. Once they have read source #4, students may have a different idea entirely.

After listening to this source read aloud to the class, students should work together in small groups to determine what new information can be added to the Wonder and Learned sections of the class KWL chart. While working, small groups should consider the following questions:

Did this source provide any new information?

Have any questions been answered? Do students have any new questions based on what they have just heard?

Did this source help students get closer to answering the question:

**Why do you think this pioneer was interviewed later on in her life?**



# A Teacher Guide to Sources

## Day 2 continued: Who was Amanda Gardner Johnson?

### Source #4: Interview

The Interview with Amanda Gardner Johnson is the final source in this series of sources. In this source students are able to hear directly from Amanda Gardner Johnson and learn about:

Her relationship to the Deckards

The reason she decided to travel along the Oregon Trail

Her experience along the trail and her experience once she settled in Oregon

The most important part of this source is the reason Amanda gives for why she decided to make the difficult journey to Oregon. In the interview Amanda shares that although she was offered her freedom, she was worried about accepting it and remaining in Missouri. Freedom for Black individuals was complicated and she worried that if she accepted her freedom and remained behind, someone might claim that she was actually still enslaved. This claim could have resulted in a return to bondage. This interview paints a very different picture than the biography and provides a different reason for why Amanda left with the Deckards. Fear of enslavement and an uncertain future are the reasons she gives for traveling to Oregon.

After listening to this source read aloud to the class, students should work together in small groups to determine what new information can be added to the class KWL chart. While working, small groups should consider the following questions:

Did this source provide any new information?

Have any questions been answered? Do students have any new questions based on what they have just heard?

Did this source help students get closer to answering the question:

**Why do you think this pioneer was interviewed later on in her life?**



# A Teacher Guide to Sources

## Day 3: Understanding the Oregon Exclusion Laws

Although Oregon laws prevented slavery from being established in the territory, they also made it difficult for free Black pioneers to settle there. The Oregon Exclusion Laws were a series of laws that required Black pioneers to leave the territory within a certain amount of time. Although Amanda Gardner Johnson was able to remain in Oregon and live her life as a free woman, many other Black pioneers were discouraged from settling in Oregon and prevented from establishing a life there.

### Source #5: Exclusion Laws Pamphlet

The most important thing for students to understand about the Exclusion Laws is that although slavery was prohibited in Oregon, freedom was not automatically granted to the enslaved individuals who arrived there. Oregon's Exclusion Laws stated that enslavers had 3 years to "remove" individuals who were enslaved, but it does not say that enslavers needed to give them their freedom. Only upon refusal to remove Black individuals would freedom be granted. Understanding this piece of information will allow students to see that Amanda Gardner Johnson's experience was more than likely not the experience many other Black pioneers had.

After learning about the Exclusion Laws students may wonder how Amanda Gardner Johnson was able to stay in Oregon once she arrived. It's important that students understand that although the laws successfully discouraged Black settlers, they were not consistently enforced.

Before reading this source with students it is important to prepare them for some of the language used in the Exclusion Laws. These laws used the words Negro and Mulatto to describe Black people and people of mixed race. Students should know that although these words were common at the time, we no longer use them today. As a teacher, you should set guidelines with your students for how you approach these words. You may also decide not to say these words at all as you read aloud. Talking as a class beforehand and making your purpose clear is one way to respect the students in your classroom and help them understand the power of language.

**As you read the mini pamphlet about Exclusion Laws with your students use the following questions to guide the conversation:**

Why do you think the Oregon's Exclusion Laws gave White settlers 3 years before they were required to remove enslaved people?

**\*\*If students have a hard time answering this question, encourage them to consider what settlers who were new to the area would have needed to do once they arrived in Oregon. Black pioneers were important contributors to the success of a new homestead.**

What do you think Oregon missed out on by discouraging Black pioneers from settling in the territory?



# A Teacher Guide to Sources

## Day 4: Understanding the varied experiences of Black Pioneers

The experiences Black pioneers had while traveling along the Oregon Trail were unique just like the experiences of White pioneers were unique. Amanda Gardner Johnson's relationship with the Deckards, her worries about leaving her home and her experience once she arrived in Oregon were all uniquely her own. It is important that students leave this unit understanding that reading multiple sources helps create a more complete story. Likewise, they should understand that reading about multiple experiences also helps us create a more complete story. The sources presented on the final day of this unit will help students learn more about the different experiences Black pioneers had along the Oregon Trail.

### Source #6: 4 Pioneer Stories

The stories presented on the final day of this unit do not include everything that we know about these pioneers. These mini bios are meant to evoke questions. After reading these stories students might wonder if it was hard for Robin and Polly Holmes to secure a lawyer and if they decided to stay in Oregon after they won their case. They might also wonder who reported Jacob Vanderpool for being in violation of the Exclusion Laws and what happened to his business after he was forced to leave Oregon. We are hopeful that these questions might inspire students to engage in further research.

As students work together to understand more about the pioneer stories presented, encourage them to think about how the Exclusion Laws affected each individual. What questions would they ask if they had the chance? Students will use the questions they have brainstormed to write a letter to a pioneer of their choice.

At the end of this unit students may be encouraged to spend time reflecting and writing about what they have learned over the past few days. How have their ideas changed? What new ideas do they have moving forward?

### Final Thoughts:

One of the essential questions posed in the beginning of this unit asks why some people's stories are written down and remembered, while other people's stories are not. Many Black pioneers who traveled along the Oregon Trail were discouraged from settling in Oregon. As a result Oregon missed out on successful business owners, extensive farming knowledge, and all of the skills that Black pioneers had to offer. Those stories did not end up as a part of Oregon's history. Sharing the stories we do have is one way we can begin to honor Oregon's Black pioneers.