Lesson 1: A Look at Virginians During Reconstruction

Objectives:

Students will

1. Identify some of the problems Virginians faced during the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War
2. Recognize how the national government supported African Americans during Reconstruction
3. Appreciate how African Americans in Virginia exercised their newly won rights
4. Identify and interpret primary source documents
5. Determine cause and effect relationships
6. Sequence events in Virginia history
7. Interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives.
8. Write a story that incorporates historical specifics, including primary sources.

Materials:

Primary sources [available as PDF documents]

- Registry of Black Voters 1867
- 1869 Marriage License

Handout: Role play parts for Virginia Constitutional Convention, 1867-68

1. White Radicals
2. Black freedmen/Radicals
3. White southern/Conservatives

Optional: Create a transparency adapting the Talking Points on the William Jasper family and have an overhead projector.

Strategies:

Day 1

1. **Hook:** Begin by asking students what they remember about slavery – specifically about how slavery impacted the lives of those who were slaves. Write students’ recollections on a web on the board or a flip chart. Then ask students what they know
about free blacks before the Civil War: specifically what rights did and didn’t they have?

2. Tell students that they will learn about the true story of William Jasper and his family, people who were first slaves then free blacks in Virginia, and will then get a chance to examine some documents for clues about life in Virginia after the Civil War.

3. Use the talking points above about William Jasper and his family to tell students this story. As you do, ask students how the Jaspers’ experience is similar to or different from what they remember about slaves and free blacks.

4. Next have students work in pairs or small groups using the two primary source documents to focus their attention on life in Virginia during Reconstruction. Direct them to examine the documents and answer the following questions for each one:
   - What kind of document is this? How do you know?
   - When was it written?
   - How does each document involve William Jasper?
   - Why was the document written? Explain how you know the document’s purpose.

Additional questions and observations: On the marriage license, why might there be a different name for William Jasper’s wife, than that in the Talking Points? (Explain that Sara Jasper died and that William Jasper married again.) Also notice ages, and occupation. On the list of voters, note the total number of colored voters voting, that only men are listed, and that they were not just registered but voted in 1867. Do you need to put something in the talking points about Jasper’s marriage to explain it to the teachers?

5. Reconvene the class and have students report out what they found. Ask students:
   - What rights do these documents show that Jasper (and others) had in 1867 and 1869 that they did not have as slaves or as free blacks?
   - How did free blacks get the right to marry legally and to vote (among other rights)?

6. **Wrap up:** The last question will provide an important problem-posing link to students’ study of Reconstruction: encourage students to hypothesize how these rights became legal for freed black people in Virginia, and write their hypotheses on the board or a flip chart.

**Day 2**

1. Before class, write the information listed in # 3 below on the board or a flip chart.

2. **Hook:** Begin with the word “Reconstruction”: ask students what it means and what they think needed to be reconstructed at the end of the Civil War in Virginia. What groups of people would need help and why? Problems faced by Virginians during Reconstruction include:
• Millions of freed slaves needed housing, clothing, food, jobs, and an education/literacy
• Virginia’s economy was in ruins
• Confederate money had no value
• Banks were closed
• Railroads, bridges, farms and crops were destroyed

3. Give students a brief explanation of the Congressional actions during Reconstruction by reading and showing them the information below. Be sure to remind students that in 1863 Lincoln’s *Emancipation Proclamation* had already freed slaves in areas under Confederate control. Also explain that the amendments listed below were additions to the U.S. Constitution.

- **13th amendment** – December 6, 1865
  - This amendment abolished slavery in the entire United States.
- **14th amendment** – July 9, 1868
  - This amendment made former slaves citizens of the United States and the state in which they live.
  - It also forbade the denial of equal rights.
- **15th amendment** – February 3, 1870
  - This amendment said that voting rights cannot be denied to a person because of his race.
  - This amendment did not specifically say that African Americans have the right to vote.

- Congress set up the *Freedmen’s Bureau*, a national government agency that provided food, schools, and medical care for free slaves and others in Virginia and the rest of the South.

4. Set the stage for the role play on the 1867 Virginia Constitutional Convention by explaining that

- According to Congress, the requirements for Virginia – and all former Confederate states – to be readmitted into the union was that they had to accept Amendments 13, 14 and 15, and write a new constitution. Also Congress passed the Reconstruction Act of 1867 demanding that southern states ratify new constitutions guaranteeing black suffrage (right to vote).

- All Virginia voters could vote on whether to have a convention to create a new state constitution – and that among these voters was William Jasper. Be sure to explain why black voters would want a new state constitution.
• The major topic at this convention was education: whether or not to have public education for all children, and whether to have black and white children attend the same schools.

5. For the role play, you can divide students into three large groups and assign them to play these groups of delegates to the 1867 Virginia Constitutional Convention OR you can divide students into smaller groups of three. In a class of 30 students, with three large groups you’ll have one simulation and with smaller groups you will have 10 simulations:

- White Radicals (including white northern emigrants and a few southerners)
- Black freedmen/Radicals
- White southern/Conservatives

6. Give each student in the same group the same role description. These explain each group’s views on the topic of education, and it will be useful to go over the wording to be sure they understand:

**White Radicals** – We believe that public school for all children is essential as the foundation of a democratic society, and it has worked this way in our northern states for years. Also, public schools are important to the reconstruction of the South. People need an education to be good citizens and productive people. But, while it might be fair to have black children attend any school, we worry that if we write this into this constitution, Virginia voters will vote against, or not ratify, the constitution.

**Black freedmen/Radicals** – We believe that public school for all children is essential as the foundation of a democratic society. To be good citizens, all children need to learn to read and write. We also believe that black children should have equal access to all schools – that is only fair. Black children deserve the same schools as white children. Education is the gateway to all the other rights and black children should be prepared to become full American citizens.

**White southern/Conservatives** – We are not convinced that there should be public schools for white children, whether rich or poor. Wealthy families can pay for private schools. And why do poor people need an education? Their menial labor does not require them to read and write. We are even less sure about public education for black children and absolutely certain that black and white children should not attend the same schools. We are afraid that, since Virginians already have to pay off large war debts, adding taxes to pay for public education would be a bad idea at this time.

7. Direct students once in their groups to have each member of the group read his or her role, then put what they read in their own words. Next ask students to discuss how they will vote on the education questions. (Remind students they’ll have to vote on these questions as if they were delegates to the Convention: whether or not to have
public education for all children, and whether to have black and white children attend the same schools.)

8. Acting as facilitator, reconvene the whole class with students still in their roles and ask each group’s representative to explain their group’s position. (With the large groups ask each group to select a representative who will speak for the group, in the small groups each student will speak. With smaller groups, when they are finished, ask one group to present their vote to the class.) Finally, record the votes of each person on the two education questions – and announce the winning positions.

9. Debrief: Ask students to step out of their roles – and to be themselves again and give them an opportunity to tell how their role felt to them. Tell students that the actual convention voted to have public education for both black and white children – the first time there was public education at all in Virginia. Note that, although most people at that time assumed public schools would be segregated, the 1869 Constitution did not include these words. The first Virginia superintendent of education, William H. Ruffner, developed a plan for establishing public schools in 1870 and in that plan, he instituted separate schools for blacks and whites. And, finally, point out that, since Virginians owed so much money in war debts, there was not much money left over for public schools for white students and definitely not for black students.

10. Inform students that all African American men (remind students that women did not have the vote) who voted in Fairfax County voted in favor of this Constitution. Note that African American men in Virginia had several opportunities to vote: First, they elected delegates to the Convention, then African American delegates at the Convention helped decide what would go in the Constitution. And after the Convention, African American men had another chance to be citizens. They, along with white male voters, voted whether or not the Constitution would be ratified. African American men voted unanimously for ratification of the Constitution of 1869.

11. Finally, ask students to compare what actually happened during Reconstruction with their hypotheses on Day 1 (when you asked them to hypothesize how these rights became legal for freed people in Virginia).

12. Wrap up: Ask students to write a story that William Jasper might tell his children and grandchildren explaining what life was like for Virginians, particularly African American Virginians, during Reconstruction. Explain that students will need to include specifics from this history as an integral part of their story. It might be useful to take some time during English/Language Arts to complete this writing, since it provides students with practice in “writing effective narratives and explanations,” (Grade Four English Standard of Learning 4.7).

Differentiation:

1. For Day 1 select the main ideas from the Talking Points and put them in 4th grader-friendly terms on a transparency to show on an overhead projector while you tell the story of William Jasper and his family. This will support both visual and auditory learning modes.
2. When explaining Congressional actions during Reconstruction, have students work in small groups and assign each group one of the four actions to illustrate the action (with stick figures). Have students use flip chart paper and markers or crayons to do this, and ask each group’s representative to explain their drawing to the rest of the class. Post students’ drawings as a reminder.

3. For the Role Play be sure to mix able and less able readers so as to be sure that all students in a group understand their group’s opinions and positions.

4. With the narrative writing assignment at the end of the lesson, you could offer students a choice of how to accomplish this task, thus drawing on multiple intelligences. They might write the story, write and illustrate a multi-frame cartoon, act out their story or write and sing a song.