

Lesson Plan

Title: Sleeping Car Porters

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Magazine Issue: "Railway Men: Black Porters Stand Up for Fairness," in the Black history in Canada issue of *Kayak: Canada's History Magazine for Kids*

Grade Level: 5/6, 7/8, 9/10

Theme(s):

- Arts, Sports & Culture
- Canadian Identity
- Discover Your Community
- Peace & Conflict
- Settlement & Immigration
- Social Justice

Subject Area: Social Studies/History

Lesson Overview:

In this lesson students will use role play to learn about the experiences of Black sleeping car porters on the job. They will also have the opportunity to analyze artifacts related to the Black sleeping car porters to gain a better understanding of the men's daily lives and their contributions to the struggle for labour rights and human rights for Black Canadians.

Time Required: 3 - 4 lessons

Historical Thinking Concept(s):

- Establish *historical significance*
- Use *primary source evidence*
- Identify *continuity and change*
- Analyze *cause and consequence*
- Take *historical perspectives*

Learning Outcomes:

Student will:

- Comment on the political and social context of African Canadians between 1900 and the Second World War
- Examine the role and experiences of Black sleeping car porters
- Become familiar with working conditions of sleeping car porters before they became unionized

- Investigate primary source documents, images, and artifacts to build historical knowledge
- Make inferences about the artifacts relating to Black sleeping car porters
- Explain how Canada's identity has been and continues to be shaped by its global participation
- Discuss the struggle for equal human rights by Black Canadians in the twentieth century to the present day

Background Information:

The Pullman Palace Car Company established the Pullman porter position in 1867. George Pullman, the company owner, designed the Pullman sleeping car to provide luxury overnight travel service in the United States. Pullman hired Black men to work as porters because they were a source of cheap and abundant labour. Whites, in general, accepted this approach because historically Blacks were stereotyped as servants. Black men accepted jobs as porters because it was difficult to obtain any other kind of gainful employment to support their families. By the beginning of the 1900s, Canadian railway companies adopted the practice of using Black porters when the Pullman service expanded into Canada. At this time, railway companies were the largest employers of Black Canadian men in the country.

The porters' job required them to leave their families for weeks at a time, receiving no more than three hours of sleep a night. That means they had a 21-hour workday! They were subjected to being fired without reason or recourse and called racially derogatory names. Also, most porters were nicknamed "George" and were not called by their real names. This nickname was humiliating and degrading for porters.

Black porters were also denied job promotions. Some wanted to join the newly established labour unions for White porters, but were blocked from joining because of their race. As a result of this discrimination, in the 1920s some Black porters in the United States decided to organize their own trade union to fight for better working conditions and successfully formed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). In the early 1940s, Black porters in Canada began organizing with support and guidance from their American brothers to form their own union.

In 1942, the BSCP established divisions in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver. In May of 1945, the BSCP signed its first collective agreement with Canadian Pacific (CP) Rail. The agreement increased porters' wages and their days off. The number of hours they worked each week was reduced. This was the first time that a trade union organized by and for Black men signed an agreement with a Canadian company.

The Lesson Activity:

Activating: How will students be prepared for learning?

Distribute the 2018 electronic Black History Month issue of Kayak: Canadians History Magazine for Kids as a printout, on a laptop or other electronic device. Read aloud as a class or have students read in small groups.

Simulation Exercise: Have students engage in the following role-playing simulation to help them appreciate/ understand the experience of Black sleeping car porters. At the end of the exercise, the class must decide:

“Should the porters accept the poor treatment in the workplace to keep their jobs or should they fight for better working conditions?”

OR

“What is it like to be the victim of workplace discrimination?”

In this activity, students become different people in a train travelling scene. Students will take the knowledge they have gained from the reading and apply it to a role play situation.

Setting: The scene takes place on a passenger train. Two porters are assigned a sleeping car with four passengers. There is one conductor/supervisor on this shift.

Print these role cards and give them to several students who will act out the scene while the rest of the group observes.

OR

Divide class into groups of six and have each group rehearse the scene before taking turns to present to the class.

Have each group present to the class.

Debrief with the class: If you were a porter, how would you feel about your job? If you were a passenger, what would you think about the porters? What did you think about the way the conductors treated the porters? Should people be chosen for or denied employment positions because of skin colour, gender? Discuss. What do you think the porters should do about their working conditions?

Acquiring: What strategies facilitate learning for groups and individuals?

- Students will work together in teams to learn about the job of porters through investigating a number of artifacts.
- Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5.
- Inform students that they are going to learn more about the Black porters in Canada. In their groups, they will investigate a number of sources to gather information about this job and the men who performed it.
- You can print the artifacts/ images or display them on a computer screen. Have the students examine the artifacts and answer the related questions together as a class. Alternatively, provide each group with a set of artifacts to examine and analyze.

Questions for artifact 1 - A porter with two other employees at a stop during the tour of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle across Canada, 1914, Library and Archives Canada

What type of artifact is it?

- What do you see? Tell students to begin their observation statement with "I see...."
- Based on your observations, where/when do you think this happened?
- What can the uniforms tell you about the job responsibilities for each person in the image? OR
- How can the uniforms help you to infer what the job responsibilities for each person in the image were?

Questions for artifact 2 - Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Plaque at Roundhouse Park, Heritage Toronto

- What type of artifact is it?
- What do you see? Tell students to begin their observation statement with "I see...."
- What do you think the significance of this plaque is?

Questions for artifact 3 - Railway Porters and Their Union National Historic Event Plaque in the Windsor Station in Montreal, Quebec

- What type of artifact is it?
- What do you see? Tell students to begin their observation statement with "I see...."
- What do you think the significance of this plaque is?

Questions for artifact 4 - Stanley Grizzle Name Train Car Sign

- What type of artifact is it?
- What do you see? Tell students to begin their observation statement with "I see...."
- Why would Black sleeping car porters see this name sign as important?

Questions for artifact 5 - CPR Porters, Library and Archives Canada

- What type of artifact is it?
- What do you see? Tell students to begin their observation statement with "I see...."
- What can you infer about the relationship between the men in the image? Does it remind you of anything from the story you read?

Give each group a piece of chart paper or another large sheet of paper and markers. After students have explored the artifacts, ask groups to record what they have learned in a creative way. Regroup as a class. Check for understanding by asking questions. Teacher prompts may include:

1. Where was the only place Black men could find stable work during the 1900s?
2. What kinds of racial discrimination did the Black porters face? Why do you think this racism existed?
3. How did the sleeping car porters challenge the racism they faced?
4. What was the most surprising thing you learned about their job?
5. Describe how the Black porters felt about being called "George."
6. Write down one question you still have about railway jobs.

Applying: How will students demonstrate their understanding?

Write 3 - 5 diary entries as a sleeping car porter, describing a trip for work. Include where you are travelling from and where you are travelling to. Also include a description of your duties, as well as your feelings.

Materials/Resources:

See below for images of these artifacts for student handout.

- [Artifact 1](#) - A porter with two other employees at a stop during the tour of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle across Canada, 1914, Library and Archives Canada
- [Artifact 2](#) - Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Plaque at Roundhouse Park, Heritage Toronto
- [Artifact 3](#) - Railway Porters and Their Union National Historic Event Plaque in the Windsor Station in Montreal, Quebec
- [Artifact 4](#) - Stanley Grizzle Name Train Car Sign
- [Artifact 5](#) - CPR Porters, Library and Archives Canada
- *My Name's Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada*, by Stanley Grizzle with John Cooper, Umbrella Press, 1998.
- *A Long Hard Journey: The Story of the Pullman Porter*, by Patricia and Fredrick McKissack", Walker & Co., 1989.

- *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955*, by Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu, University of North Carolina Press. 2010
- *A Struggle to Walk with Dignity: The Story of a Jamaican-born Canadian*, by Gerald A. Archambeau, Dundurn, 2008.
- [The Road Taken](#), National Film Board, 1996.
- [Sleeping Car Porters](#), Black Strathcona
- [Railways: Black Porters](#)
- [Sleeping Car Porters](#), Canadian Museum for Human Rights
- [Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters](#)
- [Fighting for Fairness](#)
- ["Canada's Sleeping Car Porters Blazing The Civil Rights Trail,"](#) Complex Canada by Septembre Anderson,
- ["North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle Against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880-1920,"](#) Labour/Le Travail, 47 (Spring 2001), p.9 -41 by Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu

Extension Activity:

- Individually, or in small groups, use the suggested resources to conduct further research on the experiences of Black sleeping car porters and their participation in the struggle for labour rights and human rights. Write an editorial letter to a major newspaper explaining the views and goals of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

OR

- Use a timeline app to create a timeline that depicts the history of the sleeping car porters in Canada.

Assessment:

- Assess students' diary entries.
- Assess students' editorial or timeline.

Sleeping Car Porters Role Cards

Passengers (3 per group)

- You are taking an overnight train ride to visit your family.
 - Regularly ask the porter for anything you need to make your trip comfortable and enjoyable (serve food, fluff pillows, clean up, make beds, shine shoes).
 - Address porters only as "George."
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Porters (2 per group)

- You must take care of your passengers and ensure that they have a safe, comfortable and pleasant train ride (serve food, fluff pillows, clean up make beds).
 - Respond to passengers with "Yes, ma'am/sir" or "No, ma'am/sir."
 - Try to take a 5-minute break.
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Conductor/ Supervisor (1 per group)

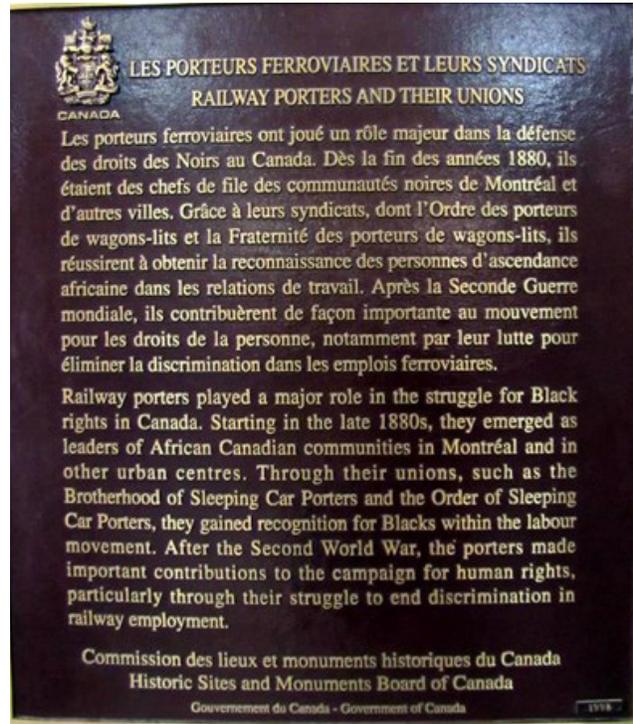
- Ensure porters are always working - instruct them to check on passengers, fill the towels, bag laundry, shine shoes, etc.
- Don't allow porters to take a break

Artifacts/Images

Artifact 1



Artifact 3



Artifact 2

BROTHERHOOD OF SLEEPING CAR PORTERS

For several decades until the late 1980s, this site was a large coach yard where sleeping car porters working for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) prepared passenger cars for travel to the United States and across Canada, which could take up to four days and nights. Black men were preferred for the job because of their long history in domestic service to whites. Porters working for Canadian railways came from Black communities in Canada, but were also recruited from the United States and the Caribbean.

Porters faced institutional racism in all aspects of their work: their pay was lower, they were barred from promotions to supervisory positions, and they were excluded from white railway workers' unions. They began to organize, most successfully in 1939, by joining forces with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), an American union created in 1925.

On May 18, 1945, the BSCP became the first Black union in Canada to sign an agreement with its employer, the CPR. Among other benefits, porters' starting salaries increased, they received pay for downtime on the road, and, after 1955, they could be promoted to sleeping car conductor.

The BSCP's organizing efforts and civil rights advocacy left a powerful legacy that influenced human rights policy and labour relations in Canada.

A CPR sleeping car porter at work, no date. Porters were expected to perform unpaid work preparing the sleeping cars before departure. During the trip, they were responsible for catering to all of their passengers' needs. Before unionization, porters slept for only three hours per night, sometimes on makeshift beds in the smoking car. Black porters were often well-educated; however, working as a porter was one of the few better paid jobs open to Black men at the time.
Canadian Pacific Railway Archives

Sleeping car porters (left to right) Shirley Jackson, Pete Stevens, Harry Gairey (Porter Instructor), and Jimmy Downes, post-1945.
Daniel G. Hill Collection, Library and Archives Canada

Ladies Auxiliary, Toronto Pullman Division, BSCP. Wives, daughters, sisters, and widows of porters formed the Ladies Auxiliary. They focused on education and fundraising initiatives.
Stanley G. Orzelle Collection, Library and Archives Canada

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Artifact 4



Artifact 5

