



NOOSE INCIDENTS AND THEIR HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The noose, also known as the “hangman’s noose,” has been in the news lately because there have been several noose-related incidents. Recent examples include nooses being found in K-12 public schools and colleges, the U.S. Mint, a construction site and ironically, an exhibit on segregation at the National Museum of African American History & Culture (NMAAHC). The hangman's noose has come to be one of the most powerful visual symbols directed against African American people and evokes racial history, hatred and bigotry. Its origins are connected to the history of lynching in America, particularly in the South after the Civil War, when violence or threats of violence replaced slavery as one of the main forms of social control that white people used against African American people. The surge in recent incidents is disturbing and reflects a general increase of hate symbols.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to understand the historical and current day use of the hangman’s noose, reflect on the context of the history of lynching in the U.S., consider the increase of these hate symbols and explore what can be done about it.

See these additional ADL resources: Lesson plans “[Swastikas and other Hate Symbols](#)” and “[Confederate Monuments and their Removal](#),” [Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice](#), [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#) and [Hate on Display: Hate Symbols Database](#).

[**NOTE:** Since this lesson focuses on the noose as a hate symbol that targets African American people, it is important to be mindful that seeing and discussing the noose and lynching could be upsetting for some or many of your students. Some students may feel comfortable or interested in discussing these issues in class and others may feel nervous, uncomfortable or angry talking about a topic so close to home. Prior to teaching the lesson, assess the maturity of your students in being able to handle this challenging content, review your classroom guidelines for [establishing a safe learning environment](#) and provide opportunities for students to share their feelings as the lesson proceeds.]

Grade Level: grades 9–12

Time: 45-60 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Speaking and Listening, Language

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand the historical and current day use of the hangman’s noose as a symbol of racial hatred and bigotry.

- Students will reflect upon the historical context by learning more about the history of lynchings in the U.S.
- Students will consider what should be done about nooses (and hate symbols in general) and will work collaboratively on a project to raise awareness.

Material:

- “Hangman’s Noose, Symbol of Racial Animus, Keeps Cropping Up” article (*The New York Times*, July 5, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/us/nooses-hate-crimes-philadelphia-mint.html, one copy for each student)
- *Uprooted* video (2017, 7 mins., Equal Justice Initiative, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/watch>)
- “Lynching in America” audio stories (2017, 4–6 mins. each, Equal Justice Initiative, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/listen>)

Compelling Question: Why are we seeing an uptick in nooses and what can we do about it?

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s “[Glossary of Education Terms](#).”)

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| • advocacy | • hangman’s noose | • prosecuted |
| • animus | • hate crime | • retaliation |
| • bigotry | • Ku Klux Klan | • segregation |
| • chilling | • lynching | • subordination |
| • coarsening | • manifestation | • surge |
| • deluged | • outraged | • surveillance |
| • execute | • pervasive | • symbolism |

INFORMATION SHARING

1. Ask students: *What is a noose or a “hangman’s noose?” What have you been hearing about the noose in the news recently? What do you know about the history of the noose and lynching?*
2. Share the following information:
 - The hangman’s noose has come to be one of the most powerful visual symbols directed against African American people. Its origins are connected to the history of lynching in America, particularly in the South after the Civil War, when violence or threats of violence replaced slavery as one of the main forms of social control that whites used against African American people.
 - According to the [Equal Justice Initiative’s \(EJI\)](#) report *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*: “During the period between the Civil War and World War II, thousands of African Americans were lynched in the United States. Lynchings were violent and public acts of torture that traumatized black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials. These lynchings were terrorism. Terror lynchings peaked between 1880 and 1940 and

claimed the lives of African American men, women, and children who were forced to endure the fear, humiliation, and barbarity of this widespread phenomenon unaided. Lynching profoundly impacted race relations in this country and shaped the geographic, political, social and economic conditions of African Americans in ways that are still evident today. Terror lynchings fueled the mass migration of millions of black people from the South into urban ghettos in the North and West throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Lynching created a fearful environment where racial subordination and segregation was maintained with limited resistance for decades. Most critically, lynching reinforced a legacy of racial inequality that has never been adequately addressed in America.” (To engage your students in more learning about the history of lynching, see the EJI resource above.)

- The EJI researchers documented 4,075 racial terror lynchings of African Americans in 12 Southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) between 1877 and 1950, at least 800 more lynchings of black people in these states than previously reported in the most comprehensive work done on lynching to date.
 - The noose quickly became associated with Ku Klux Klan groups, who advocate white supremacy, white nationalism, and anti-immigration positions and sentiment. In the early twentieth century, when the rise of the Second Ku Klux Klan coincided with the height of lynching incidents (most of the victims of which were African American), the noose became cemented as a key hate symbol targeting African American people. The noose may appear as a drawing or rendering, but also quite common is the use of actual nooses to intimidate or harass African American people (or sometimes other people of color) – for example, by leaving one at someone's home or at their workplace.
 - There have been several reports of an increase of hate symbols over the past several years, including an uptick in noose-related incidents. Three recent examples include:
 - **American University:** In May 2017, bananas were found hanging from nooses on the campus of American University, the same day a black woman took office as the student government president for the first time in the institution’s history. Several pairs of bananas were discovered, each strung together with a thin black rope fashioned to resemble a noose.
 - **National Museum of African American History & Culture:** In May 2017, a noose was discovered inside the museum at an exhibition on segregation. Five days earlier, police found a noose hanging from a tree near the Hirshhorn Museum, also part of the Smithsonian Institution.
 - **High school in North Carolina:** In May 2017, a black teddy bear hanging by a noose was discovered at a North Carolina high school. The noose was hung next to a sign that read “Make Wakefield TRIPP again #smartlunch.” According to students, this referred to bringing back their former white principal Tripp Crayton, who was replaced in 2015 by Malik Bazzell, who is black.
3. After sharing this information, engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
- What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
 - What surprises you about this information?
 - Why are symbols important?
 - Why do you think this is happening now?

READING ACTIVITY

1. Distribute one copy of this article "[Hangman's Noose, Symbol of Racial Animus, Keeps Cropping Up](#)" to each student. Give students 10–15 minutes to read the article silently. (You may also want to assign this for homework the evening before.)
2. After reading, engage the students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - How do you think the U.S. Mint employees, and specifically the African American employee who was confronted with the noose, felt after seeing it?
 - In what other places and spaces have there been nooses found?
 - Why do you think there has been an uptick in noose cases?
 - When nooses are directed at specific people, as is referenced in the article, how do you think those people feel? What should be done?
 - What is meant by the quote, "I think we're in a historical moment where people feel like they have permission to be hateful?"
 - How did you feel while reading the article?

VIDEO: "UPROOTED"

1. Watch the 7-minute video, [Uprooted](#). Explain to students that the video is about the family of Thomas Miles Sr., who was lynched in Shreveport, LA more than one hundred years ago. In the video, his family members travel to the South for the first time to seek answers about his murder.
2. After watching the video, have students turn and talk to someone sitting near them and share their initial reactions to the video, allowing one minute per person.
3. Convene the students and engage them in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:
 - How did you feel while watching?
 - What words or images stood out for you?
 - Why do you think Shirah Dedham, the narrator and great-granddaughter, starts by saying, "I always hated doing family tree projects?"
 - Why do you think Thomas Miles Sr.'s wife fled after the lynching?
 - Why do you think the family avoided talking about Thomas Miles, Sr.?
 - What did the family find when they went back to Shreveport and looked at the records?
 - How do you think the family felt when they went to the tree where he was lynched? Why did they dig up dirt around that tree?
 - "You can read something or hear it second-hand but it's not the same as when you see it and feel it" is stated when the family is in Shreveport. What does this mean? Have you ever had an experience like that?
 - Why do you think the video is called "Uprooted?"
 - What connections does the narrator make and can you make to the current day criminal justice system as it impacts the African American community?

4. As an additional option or for homework, have students listen to one of the six audio recordings in [Lynching in America](#), stories of generations affected by lynching in the United States. Most of the audio recordings are about five minutes in length. If assigned for homework, have students listen to the recordings and write personal responses and reflections about what they heard.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT HATE SYMBOLS LIKE THE NOOSE?

1. Ask students: *What should we do about hate symbols and the hangman's noose specifically?* Brainstorm a list of ideas which may include some or all of the following:
 - Educate others (i.e. students or community) about the history, origins and current day incidents of nooses being used to express racial bias and hatred (e.g. hold a student assembly, create a video or show the *Uprooted* video).
 - Write letters to the school or local newspaper.
 - Find out if there have been any recent incidents in our local community and draw attention to them.
 - Discuss issues of bias and racism in our school and community and explore what we can do about it.
 - Launch a social media campaign about nooses and other hate symbols.
2. Depending on where the most energy is, decide whether to (1) work on one of these as a whole class and divide the project into parts, assigning small groups each of the parts or (2) have students work in small groups on the project of their choice, using the list of brainstormed ideas for inspiration.
3. To assist students in executing these projects, use the next several class periods to give students time to complete them or assign the project as a homework assignment over the next several days or weeks, depending on the scope of the project.

CLOSING

Do a go round and have students say aloud a word or phrase to express their reaction to learning more about noose-related incidents and the history of lynching—this can be about their thoughts, feelings or actions.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [Frequency of Noose Hate Crime Incidents Surges](#) (Southern Poverty Law Center, June 5, 2017)
- [“Google Just Released An Interactive Map Of Lynchings In The US”](#) (BuzzFeed News, June 13, 2017)
- [“History of Lynchings in the South Documents Nearly 4,000 Names”](#) (*The New York Times*, February 10, 2015)
- [“Is The Noose, A Symbol Of Racial Terrorism, Returning?”](#) (WBUR, July 17, 2017)
- [Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror](#) (Equal Justice Initiative)
- [Legacy of Lynching](#) (PBS)
- [“Noose Found in National Museum of African American History and Culture”](#) (Smithsonia.com, May 31, 2017)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
<p>Reading</p> <p>Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</p> <p>Standard 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.</p>
<p>Speaking and Listening</p> <p>Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</p> <p>Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally.</p>
<p>Language</p> <p>Standard 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.</p> <p>Standard 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.</p>