Reverend James Preston Poindexter: 
His Life and Legacy in Columbus Ohio

High School Lesson in Local History
EdP&L 863
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Purpose
The purpose of this lesson is to encourage high school students to use local resources and explore and research community history. In this particular case, the lesson centers on the history of a notable individual who lived in the Columbus area during the turn of the century.

Learning Targets
Beyond focusing on the biography of an individual, this lesson emphasizes expository and creative writing, interview skills, small group discussions, critical thinking and analytical reading skills.

Biographical Sketch: Reverend James Preston Poindexter
Reverend James Preston Poindexter, born in Richmond Virginia, was a leading African American political and social justice leader in Columbus Ohio during the later half of the nineteenth century. The history of this great man, though not widely known in the city he called home, is that of a progressive leader that fought for racial equality and lived his life as an example for others to follow.

The Reverend Poindexter was born in Richmond Virginia in 1819 where he received
formal education until the age of sixteen at which time he was apprenticed as a barber. In 1937, Poindexter and his wife moved to Columbus around the time of their marriage and settled in the area now known as Dublin (BlackPast.org). Once in Columbus, he joined the Second Baptist Church in Columbus, however he and several other Black families left this church when it was found that a Black member once owned slaves in Virginia. With the support of other families who had left the church, they established the Anti-Slavery Baptist Church until 1858. During this time he settled his differences with his previous church and became an ordained minister with the Second Baptist Church in the city.

In his role as a minister, this also meant that he became a voice in the Black community and was viewed as a community leader. Reverend Poindexter became an active supporter of the Underground Railroad in Columbus. According to a publication by the Ohio Freedom Center, of the 100,000 slaves that traveled to freedom in Canada, 40,000 are believed to have traveled through Ohio and many made temporary stops for aid in Columbus (Underground Railroad). The free men and women of Columbus who worked assisting escaped slaves and shielding them from the Fugitive Slave Laws were aided by abolitionists such as the Kelton family.
(Kelton House) of Columbus and the Hanby family of Westerville (Ohio Historical Center). Poindexter described the support of runaway slaves to freedom by stating, "Ever since I have been here I must say that Columbus has always given its sympathies and protection to the colored men who were worthy of it – even better than Boston, I believe."

Reverend Poindexter began his political career in the city when the state of Ohio ratified the 15th Amendment to the Constitution allowing Black men the right to vote within the state. According to Ohio History Central, during Abraham Lincoln’s Presidency, Congress passed the 15th Amendment, which stated:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

Ohio was a state divided on the issue of suffrage for African American men and state ratification of the amendment passed by two votes in the House of Representatives and by a single vote in the
Senate during Rutherford B. Haye’s Governorship in 1870. During the City’s celebration of the passage of the 15th Amendment many dignitaries including then Governor Hayes shared ceremonial duties and made speeches to jubilant crowds.

Active in Ohio’s Republican Party, Poindexter was later appointed as the first African American to serve as state delegate to the National Republican Party. In 1873, Poindexter won the nomination of the state’s Republican Party for a seat in the Ohio House of Representatives, which he later lost. However, this event marked the beginning of his political leadership in the City of Columbus. He held many political offices in city life, such as a seat with the Columbus Public Schools Board of Education for over ten years, and two terms on the Columbus City Council (BlackPast.org).

Poindexter’s tenure on the Columbus Board of Education exhibited his progressive ideas for education and integration. His support for education and political influence set a foundation for limited desegregation within the city school system. During his tenure nine schools within the district employed both White and African American schoolteachers providing instruction to students of both races. In 1881, the Reverends James Preston Poindexter and Washington Gladdon of the Second Baptist Church sued the school district over desegregation (Second Baptist Church, Columbus Public Schools), which became the first desegregation case against the Columbus Public Schools, a full
ninety-eight years before U.S. Supreme Court case Columbus Board of Education v. Penick which ended de facto segregation in 1979 (Jacobs):

In 1871, pursuant to the requirements of state law, Columbus maintained a complete separation of the races in the public schools. .. The Ohio Supreme Court ruled in 1888 that state law no longer required or permitted the segregation of schoolchildren. Board of Education v. State, 45 Ohio St. 555, 16 N. E. 373. Even prior to that, in 1881, the Columbus Board abolished its separate schools for [443 U.S. 449, 456] black and white students....

During his lifetime, Reverend Poindexter served as a trustee for the Ohio State School for the Blind, was nominated for a trusteeship for Ohio University however his nomination was blocked by Democrats in the Ohio legislator, and an academic building at Wilberforce University, where he also served as a trustee, and the now condemned low-cost housing village for the elderly known as Poindexter Village both bear his name (Ohio Historical Society).

James Poindexter died of pneumonia in 1907 and his funeral was reported by the local newspapers as having the largest attendance of any other public funeral in the city to date with over 2,000 mourners in attendance to pay their final respects (BlackPast.org). He was laid to rest in Green Lawn Cemetery in southeast Columbus where other prominent city leaders and industrialist, such as P.W. Huntington, Eddie Rickenbacker, the Kelton family and James Rhodes also rest (Green Lawn Cemetery).
Class, Small Group, and Individual Student Activities

The purposes of these activities are to reinforce the history of a local personage of note. The activities are developed to encourage critical thinking, practice different types of writing, research skills, and enhance a student’s ability to engage in small group discussions and interviews.

1. Attend the dramatic play “Martha’s Journey” at the Kelton House. It’s the story of 10-yearold Martha Hartway, a runaway slave, who was found with her sister by the Kelton family in Columbus.

Small Group Discussions:

- After the play, imagine what it would have been like to travel through Columbus as an escaped slave and a child. Ask yourself how you would know where to get help.

- Imagine yourself a Black leader in Columbus during the mid-19th century, what social networks and connections would you make in order to help escaped slaves reach Canada? Would you be concerned for your own wellbeing and that of your family?

Creative Writing:

- Write a journal entry from both the perspective of one of the Kelton children and of Martha Hartway and describe your hopes and fears as a child and your involvement with the Underground Railroad.

To make a reservation for “Martha’s Journey,” please call Kelton House Underground Railroad Educational Coordinator Mary Oellermann at (614) 464-2022 or email us at keltonhouse@cs.com.
2. Visit Green Lawn Cemetery and go on the walking tour of the cemetery where you will find the gravestones of Reverend James P. Poindexter and his wife Adelia.

Imagine a funeral procession of over 2,000 people attending the burial of Reverend James P. Poindexter.

Creative Writing:

- After reading about his life how would you write his epitaph?

Timelines and History in Context

- Make a tombstone rubbing of Reverend James P Poindexter’s burial marker and create a timeline of the major legislative and historical milestones that he would have experienced during his lifetime. Reflect on how his activities affected him and his family during this time

For visitor’s information:
http://www.greenlawn columbus.org/about/tours/visitor_info.php

3. Read about the state of Ohio’s history of support for the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments.

Small Group Discussions:

- Describe and discuss with classmates the arguments made for and against each of these amendments.

4. What were the major political differences between the Republican and Democratic Parties of this time? How did these parties compare on issues of racial equality, voting rights, and women rights? How do they compare in their current forms today?
Expository Writing:

- Prepare a brief document that describes your findings.

Resources:
Republican National Committee: http://www.gop.com/index.php
Democratic National Committee: http://www.democrats.org/

5. Interview a historian or civic leader and ask them about whether they are aware of the historical significance of Reverend James P. Poindexter. Are there other tributes to his life throughout in the city in either the historical records of the Columbus City Council or the Columbus Board of Education?

Interview Skills:

- Record your interviews and document your findings.
Bibliography


Dabney, W. “Colored School History to 1902, by Shotwell – Teachers in Colored Schools, 1925.”


Second Baptist Church of Columbus. Retrieved from:
http://secondbaptistcolumbus.com/history.html

