

Connecticut Explored Curriculum Lesson Plan

Topic: Mary Townsend Seymour and the Progressive Era

Article: “Audacious Alliances”, Mark H. Jones, *Connecticut Explored*, Fall 2002, Vol. 1, No. 4

<https://www.ctexplored.org/audacious-alliance-mary-townsend-seymour/>

Written by: Tracey Wilson, West Hartford town historian, retired high school history teacher, traceymwilson@gmail.com, 860-231-9836

Description: Students will use the material from Mark Jones’s article about Mary Townsend Seymour (1873 – 1957) to evaluate her accomplishments during the Progressive Era (1890 – 1925). Students will learn about her as a Progressive reformer including her work as a leader in the African American community, founder of Hartford’s chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), labor organizer, suffragist, and leader in the war effort during World War I. Students will display what they know either by writing her obituary or by writing a paragraph about her to fit into their U.S. History textbook.

State Standards Addressed

Content Standard 2: Local, United States, and World History – explain relationships among the events and trends studied in local and national history.

Content Standard 3: Historical Themes – Students will apply their understanding of historical periods, issues and trends to examine such historical themes as ideals, beliefs and institutions; conflict and conflict resolution; human movement and interaction; and science and technology in order to understand how the world came to be the way it is. *Content Standard 4:* Applying History – Students will recognize the continuing importance of historical thinking and historical knowledge in their own lives and in the world in which they live.

Essential Question: How can one person advance social justice?

Objectives: Students will be able: to explain how Mary Townsend Seymour is an example of a Progressive reformer, to use “Audacious Alliances” by Mark H. Jones in *Connecticut Explored* to define the ways Mary Townsend Seymour’s actions reflect Progressivism and how they shaped her life’s work, and to write either an obituary for Seymour or a paragraph placing her in their textbook’s unit on Progressivism.

Historical Background: Mary Townsend Seymour’s activities in Hartford between 1917 and 1920 place her squarely in the Progressive Era. The Progressive Movement included many different reforms, but all had in common the desire to fight abuses of power—in the economy, in government, and in the social and cultural spheres. Progressive issues included women’s right to

vote, city planning, social work for the disadvantaged, school reform, unionization, and government regulation. For African Americans, segregation and discrimination were important issues as well.

The Progressive Era held many challenges for African Americans. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* case (1892) gave federal support to segregated public facilities. Federal government support for equality, which had been evident during Reconstruction, disappeared. Pseudoscientific research proclaimed that blacks were intellectually inferior. State and local governments restricted black rights, freedoms, and opportunities.

As a result, many African Americans chose to migrate north looking for economic opportunity and escaping discrimination and lynching. Between 1899 and 1915, depleted soil and the scourge of the boll weevil caused black people to move out of the south. Once World War I began, the number of migrants increased as factories opened their doors to black migrants. Those African Americans who moved to cities like Hartford developed their own communities with churches, clubs, and businesses. They promoted unity and racial pride. Some tried to earn their inalienable equality by serving in World War I. African Americans continued to agitate. They supported organizations like the National Association of Colored Women, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Urban League.

African Americans had lived in Hartford since the city's founding in 1636, many—but not all—enslaved to the English Puritan settlers. But the population remained small for the next 250 years. In Hartford, the number of blacks in 1900 stood at about 1,650 and by 1910 rose to 1,745 out of a population of 79,850. At that time, the black population was distributed, though unevenly, throughout the ten wards of the city (70 percent lived in three wards, and the 7 other wards had at least 5% African Americans living there). By 1920 there were 4,199 African Americans in Hartford, an increase of 140%. At least 37% of the blacks in Hartford in 1921 were born in Georgia, a ten-fold increase from 1910. By the end of the migration, the African American population became more concentrated in the North End and on the East Side on Front Street.

The Southern blacks' arrival, spurred mostly by the surge in jobs offered by the war economy, did not always sit well with blacks who had lived in city for generations, known as Hartford's Black Yankees. The newly arrived migrants had less education, were farmers, and were much less sophisticated than those who had been living in the city. This led to tensions and to the native born reaching out to the migrants in much the same way settlement house workers reached out to European immigrants. It is in this milieu that Mary Townsend Seymour was spurred to organize Hartford's chapter of the NAACP, and work on labor and suffrage issues.

Every U.S. History textbook defines Progressivism. According to Alan Brinkley in *The Unfinished Nation* (2000, p. 557), Progressives had an optimistic vision, believed in the idea of progress, believing that growth and progress had to be controlled, believed that purposeful human intervention was necessary to solve the nation's problems, and believed that government should play a role. The Progressives' main issues included democracy, efficiency, regulation of corporations and monopolies, conservation, and social justice.

Strategies

This lesson could fit in a number of places, as Seymour was such a wide-ranging reformer. It should be taught during the Progressive Reform Era and should use her as an example of the work of reformers throughout the country.

Be sure students have a working definition of Progressive reform and know what the NAACP is. Introduce Seymour by having students read the article by Mark Jones, her obituary, and the article about her service written in 1952 (provided).

Then ask students to either write her obituary or the paragraph for their textbook using the guides provided.

Activities

Assessment #1: Read Seymour's 120-word obituary from January 14, 1957. Write a 500-word obituary in which you include Seymour's main accomplishments focusing on her work as an African American, as a woman, as a reformer, and as a community builder. Assignment sheet provided.

Assessment #2: Write a paragraph on Seymour for your U.S. History textbook to place in the section on Progressive Reform. Locate the appropriate page for your paragraph, and then write it. Pick out the information about Seymour that is most appropriate for this section of the text. Be sure to connect the information about Seymour to the previous paragraph and the paragraph that follows. Assignment sheet provided.

Rubric:

An "A" project will:

Write in the form of an obituary or a textbook paragraph Includes information about Seymour's role as:

African American Woman

Reformer

Community leader Progressive Reformer Effective alliance maker

Materials

The following two primary documents are easily accessible to students and are provided in PDF form. They can use the reading guide provided to glean the key information. They should also read Jones' "Audacious Alliances" story from *Connecticut Explored* (link provided).

“Merited Tribute to a Cultured Woman,” *Hartford Courant*, September 11, 1952. This article acknowledges Seymour’s role on the 35th anniversary of the founding of Hartford’s NAACP. It supports Seymour as a dedicated reformer and good citizen.

“Mrs. Mary T. Seymour, NAACP Leader, Dies,” *Hartford Courant*, January 14, 1957. This 120-word obituary hardly does Seymour justice. See Jones’ article.

Mark H. Jones, “Audacious Alliances,” *Hog River Journal*, Volume 1, No. 4, Summer 2003, <https://www.ctexplored.org/audacious-alliance-mary-townsend-seymour/>

Reading Guides #1 and #2 will help students find the important information in the articles. You may want to jigsaw the Jones article, depending on the age and ability of your students.

Field Trip Options: A trip to the Old North Cemetery in Hartford would be a place to visit Seymour’s grave. Seymour could be seen among the graves of members of Connecticut’s 29th Colored Regiment from the Civil War as well as the grave of Frederick Law Olmsted.

Annotated Bibliography

Normen, Elizabeth, et al. *African American Connecticut Explored*, Wesleyan University Press, 2014. This book about the long arc of the African American experience in Connecticut provides excellent context for Seymour’s life, particularly Part V Between the Wars.

Carson, Clayborne, et. al. *African Americans: The Struggle for Freedom*, New York: Pearson, Longman Press, 2005. This African American history textbook provides excellent context for Seymour’s life.

“The Colored People Who Lived in Hartford,” *Hartford Courant*, October 24, 1915. This article describes the lives of the native born “Colored People” in Hartford, with the highest-ranking men, according to *The Courant*, being janitors, butlers, and doormen.

Johnson, Charles S. “The Negro Population of Hartford, Connecticut,” 1921. This internal report of the National Urban League describes at length the migration of southern blacks to Hartford and the results for employment, education, and community churches and organizations. https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cssp_archives/15/

Jones, Mark. “‘To Tell Our Story’: Mary Townsend Seymour and the Early Years of Hartford's Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1917 - 1920.” *Connecticut History*, Fall 2005, Vol. 44, Issue 2, pp. 205-223. This article expands on the information in the *Connecticut Explored* Article.

Lewin, Ross. “The Formation of Hartford’s Black Ghetto During the World War I Period,” 1977. Typescript in author’s possession.

Martin, Daisy. "From Lecture to Lesson through 'Opening Up the Textbook'" *OAH Newsletter* 36 (November 2008).

"Merited Tribute to A Cultured Woman," *Hartford Courant*, September 11, 1952. This article acknowledges Seymour's role on the 35th anniversary of the founding of Hartford's NAACP. It supports Seymour as a dedicated reformer.

"Mrs. Mary T. Seymour, NAACP Leader, Dies," *Hartford Courant*, January 14, 1957. This 120-word obituary hardly does Seymour justice. See Jones' article.

Activity #1: Obituary Activity

1. Read “Mrs. Mary T. Seymour, NAACP Leader, Dies,” *Hartford Courant*, January 14, 1957. <https://www.ctexplored.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Mary-T-Seymour-Obit-H-Courant-1.14.57.pdf>

Record the following information:

Birth date	Age at death	Year of death
Place of death	Place of burial	Marital Status

Name three organizations to which she belonged:

- 1.
- 2.

2. Read “Merited Tribute to A Cultured Woman,” *Hartford Courant*, September 11, 1952. <https://www.ctexplored.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Mary-T-Seymour-H-Courant-9.11.52-.pdf>

1. What caused Seymour to call a meeting in 1917 to start a chapter of the NAACP?
2. Seymour dedicated herself to fighting for freedom for which other two groups?
3. Copy the quote from the *Hartford Courant* article which evaluates how her “race” has done in the past 35 years.
4. What were Seymour’s two goals in establishing the NAACP?
5. Name three people who came to her first meeting who then when on to become famous. Tell what they were famous for.
6. How does the *Hartford Courant* define being a good citizen?

3. Write an obituary for Mary Townsend Seymour.

The 1957 *Hartford Courant* obituary was short and did not capture the many accomplishments of Seymour's life. You have the chance to restore her to her rightful place in Hartford history and establish her as a leader in the African American and reformer communities. Use the information from the two newspaper articles, and the *Connecticut Explored* article to write your obituary.

Be sure your obituary follows the appropriate form. You can start with the first sentence of the *Courant* obituary. Then you need to add details of what you consider to be her main accomplishments. Evaluate what you consider to be her most important work.

Rubric:

- Is the work in the form of an obituary
- Is the information from the three sources accurate?
- Is proper grammar and spelling used?
- Does the work establish the important parts of Seymour's work, including at least four of the following:
 - NAACP
 - Women's rights
 - Workers
 - Community building
 - World War I work
 - Alliances across race

Activity #2: Write Mary Townsend Seymour Into Your History Book

1. Read “Audacious Alliances” by Mark H. Jones, *Connecticut Explored*, Volume 1, No. 4.

<https://www.ctexplored.org/audacious-alliance-mary-townsend-seymour/>

As you read, take notes in the following categories. Find details that would be important to include in an obituary that would summarize Seymour’s life. Find details that show her as a Progressive Reformer.

- Hartford’s African American Community
- Co-founded NAACP Chapter in Hartford
- Involvement with Labor Issues
- African American Women and the Vote

Go back and highlight the most important issues to use in your assessment. Write a History Book Entry

2. Mary Townsend Seymour was a quintessential Progressive Reformer and you believe people nationwide should know about her. You will write a paragraph about her that will fit into your U.S. History textbook. To accomplish this task, you should follow the steps below:
 1. Find the pages in your textbook about the Progressives. Find the spot where you think writing about Seymour is most appropriate.
 2. Pick out the issues you want to highlight in Seymour’s life and find the appropriate spot in the textbook section.
 3. Write your paragraph of 5-7 sentences summarizing Seymour’s work.
 4. Read the paragraph before and after your paragraph and be sure your paragraph is connected to that those paragraphs.

Rubric:

- Is the paragraph written in the form of textbook writing?
- Is the information from the three sources accurate?
- Did you use proper grammar and spelling?
- Does your paragraph connect to the previous and next paragraphs?
- Does the paragraph establish the important parts of Seymour’s work, including at least three of the following?
 - NAACP
 - Women’s rights
 - Workers
 - Community building
 - World War I work
 - Alliances across race