

**NJS Presents****Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****Using Primary Sources to Teach the Lives of Black Americans in New Jersey*****By Robert Fenster****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i1.311>**

*The New Jersey Studies Academic Alliance (NJSAA) was founded to encourage the teaching of New Jersey studies and to help teachers more efficiently and thoroughly present the study of the state to their students. In the spring of 1999, the alliance initiated awards to recognize innovation and creativity in teaching New Jersey studies on the elementary, middle, secondary, and college level. The 2022 high school educator selected for recognition by the NJSAA was Robert M. Fenster, Hillsborough High School. Mr. Fenster has created a pair of lessons focused on the lives of Black Americans in New Jersey, as told through an examination of primary documents, conversations around agency, and student-centered activities. His lesson plans highlight the roles of Black Americans in the American Revolution and the significance of gradual emancipation in New Jersey. The following is a modified version of the inspiring remarks made by Mr. Fenster at the October 2022 meeting of the NJSAA, in which he discusses his work—and how it’s never to late to start teaching New Jersey history, in its full and unvarnished form.*

It’s an honor to receive this award and to have the somewhat humbling and daunting task to present before this august panel. In some ways, I think I’m the scourge of this committee, or I was for a big part of my career. I’m thirty years into my career, but it was really only about five years ago that I started really focusing on making New Jersey connections in my classes. I suppose

I had a macro-version approach to history in my teaching, but I was neglecting the history happening in my students' backyards.

My focus on New Jersey history actually began in New York state when I took a program through the National Endowment for the Humanities called "Slavery in the Colonial North," held at Phillipsburg Manor, Sleepy Hollow. Although I was aware of the existence of slavery in New Jersey, no one I knew taught it. The typical high school teacher is going to cover slavery at one time during a U.S. history course, in two or three classes, and that's it for slavery. The image that students get is a caricature of the Southern version of slavery. Phillipsburg Manor really opened my eyes, helping me better understand the existence and dynamics of slavery in the North. As part of that program, I dug into New Jersey history and learned an awful lot of disturbing information that I knew needed to be part of what my students learned.

When I came back from that program, I went to my county clerk's office and for the first time in my career did historical hands-on research of local history, looking at manumission records and birth certificates. My rationale was twofold. I wanted to make sure that my Black students would actually see themselves in the curriculum. And I wanted all of the students in Hillsborough to understand that slavery existed in Somerset County. I specifically found primary sources of enslavers and enslaved in Hillsborough.

I use some of those documents in a lesson plan about New Jersey's checkered past with slavery, including the examination of the 1804 Gradual Abolition Act and the so-called Act of Abolition of Slavery in 1846, which of course did no such thing, instead converting the existing enslaved people into apprentices for life. My students reflect on the creative vocabulary and make connections between what was going on in New Jersey and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. New Jersey's law made it legal for visitors to the state to bring enslaved people with them even after

1846. That particular lesson ends with the unfortunate action by the state legislature to un-ratify the Fourteenth Amendment, surely one of the most mortifying moments in our state's history. It wasn't until 2003 that New Jersey rectified that terrible decision.

My students used to think in terms of "us vs. them" when it came to the Civil War. They identified with the North and thought of themselves as the good guys. One of my major themes as a history teacher is to explain to students that history is not binary or black and white. Before the phrase was co-opted by a certain author, I always talked about there being many shades of gray. I suppose my students no longer know that pop culture reference, so I guess I can reclaim it now.

Just last year I worked on a grant through the New Jersey Council for the Social Studies and the New Jersey Historical Commission called "Telling Our Story: Living in New Jersey Before and During the American Revolution," and did some research on Black people during the American Revolution—which again was something that I wasn't doing much of in my classroom. I am ashamed of my lack of coverage there, but that's forever changed. The second lesson plan I've provided for teachers is one that many would be familiar with: a structured academic controversy where students have to take on a position, whether they agree with it or not, and make the best argument they can, knowing that no one thinks that this is their view. They've been assigned that particular role, and I deliberately use confoundingly vague wording about whether or not Black people were better off fighting for the British during the American Revolution. It is a very conscious decision, because I want my students to debate the meaning of the question itself. What does "better off" mean? Better off than what? Listening to my students have those discussions, I don't ultimately care what they come up with as the answer to the question. It's grappling with the content that matters.

If I could be self-indulgent for just a moment, I have a second hat that I wear. I am the Educational Program Assistant for Revolution NJ, and one of the programs that we're doing is called "Our Town," a sort of takeoff on History Day, but specifically focused on the 250th anniversary of our country. Students are going to be conducting research on local history. We are hoping to foster a collaborative effort between universities, libraries, teachers, and the students themselves. I'm counting on everyone here to help play a role in making that a reality.

Once again, I thank you for this honor.

*A 30-year veteran of teaching, Robert (Bob) Fenster is currently a social studies teacher for tenth through twelfth graders at Hillsborough High School. He was inducted into the National Teachers Hall of Fame in 2022—only the fifth teacher from New Jersey to receive that honor. Fenster earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in history/political science in 1991 from Rutgers University, followed by his Master of Education degree in social studies education in 1993, also from Rutgers. In addition to his classroom work, he also sponsors Mock Trial, Model United Nations, Model Congress, the Podcasting Club, and Amnesty. He is a member of the National Education Association, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the National Council for History Education and has received numerous research fellowships and awards over the years. You can see the two lesson plans discussed in this talk at the following link at the time of this publication: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/15Mg-Jim5aUXpw1ikPHBBQkkzBGXdVRq9>. For more about Bob's work generally, see: <https://fensteroneducation.home.blog/>.*

*For more about the NJSAA's teaching award, see:*

*<https://sites.google.com/site/njstudiesacademicalliance/awards/njsaa-teaching-award>.*