Before the War: Teaching Queer History Pre-1861

There's a great deal of information and documentation about queer history in the 20th and late 19th centuries. However, it's harder for historians, and as a result for history teachers, to find evidence of queerness in the more distant past. This document identifies important queer stories from the first three Eras identified in the New Jersey Social Studies Student Learning Standards—Colonization and Settlement (1585–1763), Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1820s), and Expansion and Reform (1801–1861)—and provides ideas for incorporating them into history classrooms. Corresponding Learning Standards are listed for each activity, but they can be adapted for a variety of ages.

Era 1: Colonization and Settlement (1585–1763)

- As a class, read Chapter 1, "Native Peoples: Different Gender, Different Sexualities" from *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* by Michael Bronski and Richie Chevat, and then create a chart comparing and contrasting the gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation/behavior, terminology, and social status of queer people in indigenous societies before and after colonization. (6.1.12.HistoryCC.1.a: Assess the impact of the interactions between native groups and North American settlers.)
- Provide students with information from Chapter 2, "Thomas Morton: Free Love Among the Puritans?" from *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* by Michael Bronski and Richie Chevat, and prompt student discussion with the following questions: how did the British, the Puritan British North American colonies, and the colonists at Merrymount view individual rights? How did their governmental structures reflect these views? How did the Puritans' treatment of Merrymount relate to their ideas about individual rights? (6.1.12.CivicsPI.1.a: Explain how British North American colonies adapted the British governance structure to fit their ideas of individual rights.)
- Hold a mock trial simulating any of the sodomy cases that occurred during this era in the United States, and hold a discussion afterward about whether the principles of due process, rule of law, and individual rights were upheld for the men on trial. (6.1.12.HistoryUP.2.c: Explain why American ideals put forth in the Constitution have been denied to different groups of people throughout time.)

Era 2: Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1820s)

- Share information in Chapter 3, "Jemima Wilkinson: The Surprising Life of Publick Universal Friend" from *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* by Michael Bronski and Richie Chevat, argues that Jemima Wilkinson/Publick Universal Friend challenged gender roles at the time of the American Revolution, which were exemplified by Daniel Boone. Quoting from primary sources found through the Library of Congress Chronicling America project to support your argument, describe whether you agree or disagree with this proposition. (6.1.12.HistoryCA.2.a: Research multiple perspectives to explain the struggle to create an American identity.)
- Review the information in Chapter 4, "Deborah Sampson: Patriot, Soldier, Gender Rebel" from *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* by Michael Bronski

and Richie Chevat and "Deborah Sampson" by Debra Michals from the National Women's History Museum. Make a list of the primary sources mentioned in each secondary source and what information each primary source provided, then compare the two lists. Based on this exercise, reflect on the reliability of primary sources. Finally, read "Abner Weston's Daybook" from the Museum of the American Revolution. Write a brief paragraph describing whether you think the information in this source is reliable, and if you think the source is valuable, based on your earlier reflections. (6.1.2.HistoryUP.1: Use primary sources representing multiple perspectives to compare and make inferences about why there are different accounts of the same event.)

- Read about the Revolutionary War soldier Frederick von Steuben. Create a timeline of his life that demonstrates how his experiences in Germany led him to the United States, and how he contributed to the American Revolution. (6.1.8.HistorySE.3.b: Analyze a variety of sources to make evidence-based inferences about how prominent individuals and other nations contributed to the causes, execution, and outcomes of the American Revolution.)
- Read an excerpt from the diary of Ellis Hughes and identify excerpts that demonstrate Hughes's relationship with Christianity. Briefly summarize what you know about the role of Christianity in the founding of the United States. Based on this information, how do you think Hughes's relationship to Christianity developed? How has the connection between Christianity and the United States, and Christianity and queerness, changed since Hughes's time? (6.1.12.HistoryCC.3.a: Evaluate the role of religion, music, literature, and media in shaping contemporary American culture over different time periods.)

Era 3: Expansion and Reform (1801–1861)

- Research the activists Julia Ward Howe, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Charles Sumner and create a three-part Venn diagram comparing their three main social justice concerns: disability rights, women's rights, and abolition. Include Ward Howe, Gridley Howe, and Sumner's feelings about each issue; accomplishments and failures in the progression of each movement; and overlapping themes in between these concerns. Read about these three activists in Chapter 7, "Julia Ward Howe, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Charles Sumner: Complicated Relationships and Radical Social Change in Very Proper Nineteenth-Century Boston" from *A Queer History of the United States for Young People* by Michael Bronski and Richie Chevat. Discuss how their relationships and sexualities may have influenced their social justice work, and in your Venn diagram, circle any themes that will also apply to queer rights movement that emerges later in the United States. (6.1.12.CivicsDP.3.a: Compare and contrast the successes and failures of political and social reform movements in New Jersey and the nation during the Antebellum period.)
- Review the gender norms in the Expansion and Reform Era, then read about the life of Charley Parkhurst during westward expansion. Ask students to compare and contrast gender norms in the eastern and western United States. Was Parkhurst able to express his gender identity because the West was more accepting of the transgression of norms, or did those gender norms go along with Western settlement? (6.1.12.GeoSV.3.a:

Evaluate the impact of Western settlement on the expansion of United States political boundaries.)

- Ask students to write a brief reflection on their experiences as children, discussing what rights and opportunities they had, what their limits were, and how expectations about gender were communicated to them. Describe the way that children's status was changing during the reform period, and share the primary sources instructing children about gender roles during this time period. After students have reviewed the sources, guide discussion with the following questions: are the methods of communicating messages about gender and the messages themselves similar or different to what students experienced? What do these sources tell us about childhood and gender in the age of reform? (6.1.8.CivicsHR.4.a: Examine sources from a variety of perspectives to describe efforts to reform education, women's rights, slavery, and other issues during the Antebellum period.)
- Review the background on the Underground Railroad from the National Parks Service and the role of gendered disguises in many escapes. (This can also be paired with clips from the 2019 film *Harriet*, which portrays Harriet Tubman in gendered disguises.) Break students into groups and provide each with an advertisement from the NPS and ask them to identify how escaping enslaved people may have used disguises to assist their escape, then reflect on what this tells us about gender during the Expansion and Reform Era and the connection between race and gender. (6.1.8.HistoryCC.4.b: Explain the growing resistance to slavery and New Jersey's role in the Underground Railroad.)

In addition to these lesser-known figures, there are dozens of queer figures whose names may already be in your teaching materials. Consider adding information about the queer lives of figures such as:

- Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens
- James Buchanan
- Jane Addams
- Susan B. Anthony

General Resources

- Timelines: Native American LGBTQ+ History, Transgender U.S. History Timeline, Working-Class LGBTQ+ U.S. History
- Historiography of queer history, with extensive information on secondary sources: "The History of Queer History" by Gerard Koskovich
- OutHistory's Guide to Looking at Historical Images