Black History at UVM

Documented by the UVM Cynic

A Resource for Vermont's Classrooms

*This document is a basic resource for teachers, suggesting some simple ways to use the Cynic's Black history collection in the classroom. The Cynic's articles could be appropriate for students as young as middle school, but they require some historical context—they are best suited for students who have learned something about the history of segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, etc. The articles describe situations involving racism, and the Kake Walk story includes racist images. Teachers should provide whatever scaffolding is necessary to create a meaningful and safe learning environment for all of their students, including students of color.

For Part One: The Black experience at UVM

A. There are four historical profiles of Black student at UVM:

1. The real story of Andrew Harris
2. The story of George Washington Henderson
3. Edna Hall Brown, UVM’s first Black female grad
4. Richard Dennis: athlete and first Black board chair

For a simple "jigsaw" discussion: Count off students into four groups, one for each article. Give students about ten minutes to read. Ask them to pull a few striking facts from their story—what stands out about this Black student’s experience? Then ask the students to spend a few minutes researching: what was the historical backdrop for these students' experiences? What was going on while they were at UVM, in terms of the broader history of civil rights? Can you make connections from this UVM student’s experience to their historical context? There are many resources you might provide the students, including timelines like [this one](#), from the Library of Congress.

Then in small groups (with one student for each article), each student can summarize their assigned article, referencing a few specific details that stood out to them, and then share what they learned about the larger historical backdrop of the time. As a group the students can look for connections and patterns across the four stories: What do these four stories tell us as a group, about the experience of Black students at UVM? How have Black experiences been portrayed in UVM’s official history?

You could follow up with [The history of UVM’s Black Student Union](#). How has the Black Student Union supported Black students at UVM? What are its specific purposes, and how have they evolved? Are their student groups like this in your own school community (not just for students of color—QSA’s, etc)? What are the keys to a student affinity group’s success / longevity / impact?

B. Kake Walk: Alumni, faculty and students reflect on 73-year tradition

The Kake Walk is a complex and difficult part of UVM’s history, involving [blackface minstrelsy](#), a topic that requires a good deal of unpacking for students. The Cynic article could be a great jumping off point for a Document Based Question (DBQ) in an A.P. U.S. History course. There are many excellent primary sources in UVM’s [digital collections](#)—students could select a handful of items, each distinct from the others, and consider them together: What were the purposes of the Kake Walk, as a social ritual? What were the specific racist ideas embedded in the performances? Why did it take so long for the UVM community to abandon this tradition? Etc.
For Part Two: Student Activism

These collections document two specific junctures in UVM's complex history of student activism, and are best suited for high school or college students. One approach would be to assign students homework, to read one or both of these collections before class, and to use class time for further research and discussion.

A. The 2018 Waterman Takeover

Day 1: Students call for administrators to resign over handling of bias incidents

Day 2: Student racial justice protesters take over Admitted Students Day

Protests force change

Three years of protest: a look at NoNames for Justice and their future

B. The Black Lives Matter flag

UVM students stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter

BLM flag thief identified

Writing While Black

(For more on the BLM flag in Vermont's Schools, the Underground Workshop's six feature stories and a collection of student commentaries from 2021 are here.)

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A few discussion questions:

What were the specific causes for these protest actions? Evaluate the tactics / strategies / decisions made by the student activists: how do they compare with earlier activism, in the Civil Rights Movement?

What were the specific questions / debates / dilemmas these events raised for the UVM community?

What was the official response from UVM? How did these events affect the relationship between UVM’s students and its administration?

What were the outcomes? What did the student activism accomplish? What is the evidence for change?

How were these events treated in the larger media? In VTDigger? What was the public response?

What were the specific challenges UVM’s student journalists faced in covering these events?

How do these events compare with examples of student activism in your own school community?