EDUCATION PRESENTS

Oh Freedom!

Originally written by Virginia Opera with adaptations by Cincinnati Opera & Jocardo Ralston

New adaptation for Kentucky Opera By Deanna R Hoying & Brian Robertson

Study guide written by Deanna R Hoying, Director of Education
The OH FREEDOM! school tour and kick-off concert are designed to introduce new audiences to the operatic art form by celebrating the African-American experience through song. From pre-slavery to modern times, OH FREEDOM! takes audiences through the cultural history of African-Americans. The OH FREEDOM! kick-off concert will feature the world premiere of a new composition written specifically for Oh Freedom!. This new vocal work (A CHORUS OF HOPE) was written by local Louisville composer, Harry Pickens, and will be performed by the Kentucky Opera Studio Artists. Other groups and organization that will be included in this free concert are the River City Drum Corps, Arts Reach musicians and dancers, the choir of the Louisville Central Community Center singing CELEBRATE YOUR DREAM, Keith McGill for Walden Theatre with a portion of his one act play NATION IN CRISIS, VOICES and members of the Louisville Youth Orchestra. The concert will be hosted by Keith McGill and performed at St. Stephen Church at 4:30 on Sunday, January 17, 2010.

For the OH FREEDOM! touring program, the musical journey begins in Africa and follows a chronological path through the Middle Passage to songs of slavery to the Civil Rights movement and finally to the election of the first African-American President of the United States. Audiences will learn how the drums and songs of West Africa became the call and response songs of slavery and how codes were hidden in the songs to help slaves to freedom. The journey continues to New York and the Harlem Renaissance as well as the world of opera with Gershwin’s PORGY AND BESS. We recognize the importance of the great African-American opera star Marian Anderson and her role in the Civil Rights movement. And we honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The musical journey ends with the performance of A CHORUS OF HOPE composed by Harry Pickens that celebrates the country’s first African-American President.

This study guide will follow the order of songs performed in OH FREEDOM! elaborating on the history of the songs as well as other interdisciplinary materials. All materials enhance Core Content assessments, especially in Social Studies and Arts/Humanities.

Chapters include:

- Songs of Africa, the origins of slavery and Kum ba ya
- The Middle Passage and Amazing Grace
- The Songs of Slavery and the Underground Railroad: Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child, Wade in the Water, Follow the Drinking Gourd, Swing Low Sweet Chariot
- She never lost a passenger; Harriet Tubman
- Follow the Drinking Gourd—using the sky as a map
- The Ohio River and its impact on slavery, music and Kentucky
- The Civil War—Emancipation, Battle Hymn of the Republic and John Brown’s Body
- Songs of Joy—The end of the Civil War and Reconstruction (Down by the Riverside and Slavery chain done broke at last)
- Secret Songs—the Fisk University Jubilee Singers (This Little Light of Mine)
- Songs of the Harlem Renaissance (I, too, Summertime and I got plenty o’ nuttin’)
- Songs of the Civil Rights Movement (My Country ‘tis of thee, We Shall Overcome)
- Song of today and tomorrow (CHORUS OF HOPE)

Let’s begin the journey.
Slavery has existed as long as there has been organized cultures, the need for a cheap (or free) work force (primarily agricultural workers), and a drive for human beings to conquer each other then harness the labor of the defeated group. For our purposes, we begin in Africa. Slavery was not unknown throughout the African continent with evidence of an Egyptian slave trade more than 3500 years ago. Early slavery was often in the form of captives taken during raids or warring among villages. These captives were traded far away from their homes (it helped to keep them from running away back home). But these slaves were also a means for the common person to gain wealth. Wealth was measured in the amount of land owned and the lands of a typical village were allotted to those who had the labor to cultivate and work the land. Female slaves played an important role in early slavery as they handled many of the domestic chores.

Two groups in particular greatly effected African slavery, Arab-Muslims and Europeans. Both the ancient Greeks and Romans relied heavily on slaves, many from North Africa, particularly in agriculture, mining and as gladiators. Under Roman law, slaves were not considered people but property. The Third Servile War (73-71 BC), led in part by the slave/gladiator Spartacus, pitted 120,000 slaves against the Roman armies. By 71 BC, Spartacus and his followers were finally defeated and 6,000 of them were executed and displayed along the Appian Way.

In Medieval Europe, slavery was rampant and was commonplace for all cultures and religions. The Slavic areas (central and eastern Europe) were hit particularly hard with as many as 10,000 slaves sold in Venice, Italy. Even though England outlawed chattel slavery in 1102, the “slave” system evolved into serfdom which focused more on tying the serf to the land and lord but they were not considered chattel.

At this point, it’s important to define the word “chattel”. The word comes from the late Latin word “capitalia” meaning heads of cattle. Middle English and Old French called it “chatel” and it means an article of movable personal property. The word “slave” also comes from the Middle English and medieval Latin term for the Slavic people. Chattel slavery is a forced labor where people are considered to be the property of others.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade began in earnest in mid 15th century primarily in Portugal and Spain with imported slaves from Africa. By the end of the 16th century, the trade had focused on the new territories in the Americas including Cuba, Hispaniola, Brazil and what would become the United States. The first known Africans (Angolans) in the United States came to Virginia in 1619 aboard the Dutch ship White Lion. These twenty captured Africans were considered indentured servants (a laborer under contract for a certain period of time), not slaves, and were released after their contract had ended (typically seven years). In 1654, John Casor became the first officially recognized slave for life in the United States. His owner was Anthony Johnson, one of the original twenty aboard the White Lion. By 1662, Virginia passed a law that stated children of an enslaved mother were also slaves, regardless of the status of their father. The 1705 Virginia Slave Code further defined slaves as “All servants imported and brought into the Country...who were not Christians in their native Country...shall be accounted and be slaves. All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves within this
dominion...shall be held to be real estate." By the late 1600s, workers were needed to farm the thousands of acres primarily in the south. Much of this work was back breaking with clearing of virgin lands and preparation for planting crops like cotton, indigo and rice. The Sea Island plantations were ideal for these crops. Thousands of slaves were brought to this area and became known as the Gullah people (or in Georgia, the Geechees). Their culture has been directly linked to West Africa, primarily Angola. Because much of the cultivated land was on islands off of South Carolina and Georgia, the Gullah were extremely isolated until the 1950s when bridges were built to connect some of these islands to the mainland.

And while the song Kum ba ya has somewhat blurred origins, many feel that because it was heard among the isolated Gullah people, it may have its beginnings in West Africa.

If you’d like to learn more about the Gullah people and their history, check out this web site: http://www.knowitall.org/gullahnet/

The Middle Passage and Amazing Grace

The Middle Passage refers to the route from Africa to the new world aboard the slave ships. This was part of the Atlantic Slave Trade that began in Europe with ships loaded with commercial goods. These ships would travel to Africa and trade the goods for kidnapped Africans. These Africans would be transported to either North or South America and sold for either money or raw materials that would be transported back to Europe. Many of these Africans began the journey as captives who were marched to one of the many European forts along the African coast. Once at one of these forts, these captives would be sold to either European or American slave traders. Once sold, these slaves would be shackled together and put aboard a slave ship for up to six weeks depending on the weather.

Conditions aboard these slave ships were appalling and millions of African died along the way. Diseases like small pox, dysentery, and scurvy were rampant, mostly due to poor sanitation and close living quarters along with poor nutrition. Since healthy slaves meant more money at market, many were forced to dance above decks both for physical activity and likely to entertain the crew. Male slaves were often shackled right leg to the next man’s left leg so there was very little room to move. Women and children had a little more room for movement but conditions were deplorable. Some slaves chose not to eat or would throw themselves overboard rather than continue in a life of slavery.
In 1807, British Parliament outlawed the slave trade and the United States followed suit in 1808 with outlawing the importation of slaves. This did not change the status of the slaves already in the United States but did end the participation in the overseas slave trade. Both countries had interceptor vessels patrolling the Atlantic and on one such vessel was Reverend Robert Walsh. In 1829, Walsh’s ship intercepted a slave ship and below is his first hand account of what they found.

“Some, however, hung down their heads in apparently hopeless dejection; some were greatly emaciated, and some, particularly children, seemed dying.

But the circumstance which struck us most forcibly was how it was possible for such a number of human beings to exist, packed up and wedged together as tight as they could cram, in low cells three feet high, the greater part of which, except that immediately under the grated hatchways, was shut out from light or air, and this when the thermometer, exposed to the open sky, was standing in the shade, on our deck, at 89°. The space between decks was divided into two compartments 3 feet 3 inches high; the size of one was 16 feet by 18 and of the other 40 by 21; into the first were crammed the women and girls, into the second the men and boys: 226 fellow creatures were thus thrust into one space 288 feet square and 336 into another space 800 feet square, giving to the whole an average of 23 inches and to each of the women not more than 13 inches. We also found manacles and fetters of different kinds, but it appears that they had all been taken off before we boarded.”

If you’d like to read more of Rev. Walsh’s account, check out the following web site: http://www.eyewitnesshistory.com/slaveship.htm

John Newton (1725-1807) was born in the Wapping district of London to a shipping merchant and his wife. Newton’s mother died of tuberculosis when he was six and he spent the next few years cheating death and by age eleven was an apprentice aboard ship with his father. He was press ganged into service with the Royal Navy and John’s insubordination and profane language became legendary. He renounced the gospels repeatedly and deserted more than once. Eventually he was offered a trade from the Royal Navy to the Royal African Company (a company started in 1660 by the Duke of York to control the English slave trade) aboard the ship Greyhound bound for Guinea. Thus Newton became a slave trader. In March 1748, the Greyhound encountered a terrible storm that almost swept Newton overboard. Desperately trying to save the ship from capsizing, he said “if this will not do, then the Lord have mercy upon us!” Having been critical of the gospel, John continued to think about these words uttered in a moment of desperation and crisis. It did not stop him from continuing in the slave trade where he eventually became a captain. By 1750, he married his long time love Polly and by 1756 had given up the slave trade for good and became a customs agent in Liverpool, England. He and Polly became very involved in their local church and John’s passion led him to seek ordination within the Church of England.
By 1764, he was granted the curacy (or care of) a parish in Olney, Buckinghamshire. This was granted by the Earl of Dartmouth who was most impressed with John’s story of his life in the slave trade and his eventual salvation. In Olney, John met William Cowper (1731-1800), a gifted writer who also had a similar conversion as Newton. Together, they began a weekly prayer meeting. They tried to create a poem or hymn for each one of these meetings and so Amazing Grace (originally titled Faith’s Review and Expectation) was born in late 1772. The poems created for the weekly prayer meeting were bound in 1779 under the title Olney Hymns. Other melodies had been associated with Amazing Grace beginning in 1829 but it wasn’t until composer William Walker paired Amazing Grace with the tune from New Britain, that the Amazing Grace we are familiar with today was created in Walker’s book Southern Harmony. It wasn’t long before Amazing Grace began pervading the popular culture including references in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin. With the advent of recording, Amazing Grace has been recorded more than 5,500 times.

During the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Amazing Grace again became a rallying cry with singers from Mahalia Jackson to Judy Collins, Joan Baez to Arlo Guthrie. In 1990, Johnny Cash commented that “For the three minutes that song is going on, everybody is free. It frees the spirit and frees the person.”

In 1972, the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards recorded a version of Amazing Grace based on the Judy Collins recorded version. It begins with a single bagpipe that eventually swells into the full bagpipe ensemble with pipes and drums. This recording is one of the most popular instrumental recordings in the world and has made Amazing Grace synonymous with bagpipes.

The United States Library of Congress Amazing Grace collection has more than 3,000 recorded versions of Amazing Grace including the recordings of the Alan and John Lomax (who toured the country in 1932 recording regional variations of the song), Sam Cooke, Willie Nelson and Elvis Presley, to name a few.

For more information on Amazing Grace, check out these resources:

http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/html/grace/grace-home.html
http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/html/grace/grace-timeline.html
Bill Moyer's Amazing Grace
In 1641, Massachusetts becomes the first colony to recognize slavery as legal and by 1750, all thirteen British North American colonies have some legal form of slavery. By the time of the American Revolutionary War, about 25% of the population owned slaves in some capacity with pockets in farming areas of New York and New Jersey. A vast majority of African slaves were in the southern colonies of Maryland and Virginia working the tobacco fields and in South Carolina and Georgia working the rice fields. By the time of the Revolutionary War, a majority of the black population had been born in America rather than Africa and had become Christian.

Two prominent black citizens, both born in Africa, came to the forefront as they began to tell their stories of enslavement (first in Africa then to America), their journeys across the Middle Passage, and then eventual freedom: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) and Venture Smith.

Olaudah Equiano was born in Benin and was captured at the age of 11. He was taken to the west coast of Africa then across the Atlantic to Barbados. But there was no buyer for him so he then went to Virginia where he eventually became the property of Michael Henry Pascal, a lieutenant in the British Royal Navy. For seven years, Equiano traveled with Pascal, and worked on his ships. He eventually moved to England and was able to educate himself. He was able to buy his freedom and began working in the trade business, first in the West Indies, then in London where he became a staunch abolitionist (anti-slavery activist). In 1789, he published his autobiography The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. He died in 1797.

Venture Smith was also born in Africa (Guinea) and was captured at the age of 8. He was brought to America where he grew in stature and legend in New England. It was reported that he was extremely tall and well over 300 pounds. He was able to purchase his freedom in 1765 and continued to work to free his entire family. In 1798, his autobiography (as told to a local school teacher) was published: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself.

Another prominent African who became an American was Phillis Wheatley. She was born in West Africa and came to Boston aboard a slave ship in 1761. She was purchased by John Wheatley as a servant for his wife. However Phillis was a quick study and learned to speak English and read the Bible quickly. The Wheatleys encouraged her to study theology and literary classics. Phillis published her first book of poetry in 1773 and was emancipated by the Wheatleys the same year. She married in 1778 and died in 1784 before she could publish her second book of poetry.
Tensions between Britain and America spilled over in the 1770 Boston Massacre. Those killed in the massacre included the first black man to die in the Revolutionary War, Crispus Attucks. The eventual second President of the United States, John Adams, defended and successfully acquitted the British soldiers accused of firing on the crowd without provocation. For more information on the Boston Massacre and Crispus Attucks, check out this link: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p25.html

With the Declaration of Independence (1776), America was officially at war with Britain. Britain actively recruited slaves to fight and since freedom was often more important than the ideology behind the war, many slaves did fight on the side of the Crown. However at least 5,000 fought in the Continental Army under the command of George Washington including Prince Hall and Agrippa Hull. Over the next six years, it is estimated that thousands African Americans died in the conflict. In 1782, a provisional treaty was signed by Britain and America giving the colonists their freedom and ending the war. One of the sticking points of this treaty was the return of American “property” that included the slaves who had joined the British cause (also considered Loyalists). Some of these former slaves were returned to slavery in the Caribbean. Others were able to evacuate from New York to Canada, Jamaica and Britain through the efforts of Brigadier General Samuel Birch. He was able to create a list (The Book of Negroes) of three to four thousand black Loyalists who were allowed to leave New York when the British evacuated the city.

The Founding Fathers worked on the new Constitution of the United States of America but ran into the slavery problem when dealing with the southern states. Many in the north now felt that slavery was wrong but the southern states continued to assert the importance of slavery to maintain the large agricultural tracts of tobacco, cotton and rice. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 was a concession to the southern states: "An act respecting fugitives from justice, and persons escaping from the service of their masters," that authorized the arrest or seizure of fugitives and empowered "any magistrate of a county, city or town" to rule on the matter. The act further established a fine of $500 against any person who aided a fugitive (from Africans in America, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h62.html). This did not sit well with many of the Founding Fathers including George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Adams in particular found slavery abhorrent. His sentiments on the subject of slavery are well known. They are well summed up in the language of a letter to Robert I. Evans, June 1819: "Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States. I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in such abhorrence, that I have never owned a negro or any other slave; though I have lived for many years in times when the practice was not disgraceful; when the best men in my vicinity thought it not inconsistent with their character; and when it has cost me thousands of dollars of the labor and subsistence of free men, which I might have saved by the purchase of negroes at times when they were very cheap."—Works of John Adams, vol., p. 380. (from on-line World Book From Africa to America, http://www.worldbook.com/wb/Students?content_spotlight/aajourney/africa.

Northern states like Massachusetts adopted new state constitutions that borrowed language from the Declaration of Independence stating that “all men are created equal”. Some slaves in these states were able to sue for their emancipation based on this language. For those in the south, slavery flourished with almost one million still in bondage and the numbers kept growing as the new country spread west.

By the turn of the 19th century, the groundwork for the Civil War was laid and the path towards freedom for many slaves became the dangerous journey north.
The music of this period continued to develop as part of the work day. According to Frederick Douglass, “Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers. This may account for the almost constant singing heard in the southern states. There was, generally, more or less singing among the teamsters, as it was one means of letting the overseer know where they were, and that they were moving on with the work.” (From Sinful Tunes and Spirituals, Black Folk Music to the Civil War, Epstein, pg. 162).

One of the many ways owners controlled their slaves was to sell off the children to other plantations. Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile became not only a song of sorrow yearning for family but perhaps even yearning for the home in Africa or a home in heaven. By 1830, there were an estimated 2 million slaves in the United States, almost one sixth of the population of the United States at the time.

This song is part of a vast collection of music considered to be a “spiritual”. The word “spirituals” has become more closely associated with African American song but originally meant a spiritual person or thing, not necessarily a genre of music. The origin of the African American spiritual can be traced to the intentional conversion of the enslaved African population in America. Many of the slave owners felt that by converting the Africans to Christianity, this would not only break their ties to African tradition but would teach them to be long suffering and obedient. However it was the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt (crossing the Jordan river to escape slavery under the Pharaoh) that had resonance among the new Christians. And by using a Biblical analogy in song, slaves were now able to communicate with each other about the way to freedom.

As slavery grew, so did the anti-slavery movement (Abolition). Even as early as the 1680s, Pennsylvania Quakers were vehemently anti-slavery claiming it wrong on moral grounds. As mentioned earlier, many of the Founding Fathers, including those who owned slaves like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, spoke out against slavery. It should be noted that George Washington noted in his will that his slaves would be freed after his wife, Martha, died and he also left provisions in his will for the continued care and education of his former slaves (http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/meet_george/index.cfm/ss/101/).

In 1820, the Missouri Compromise tried to regulate slavery in the western territories and prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Territory north of parallel 36º 30' north. This also included the inclusion of Maine as a free state and Missouri as a slave state. Henry Clay, a representative from Kentucky, is often credited with this compromise. This compromise remained in existence until it was undone in 1854 with the Kansas-Nebraska act. Politicians were split on the Kansas-Nebraska act and opponents of the act from the Democratic and Whig parties created a new party; the Republican.
Near the end of the 18th century, an organized group of abolitionists began helping slaves run away from their masters, typically from the south to the north. By 1831, this system was dubbed The Underground Railroad after the emerging steam engines. It is estimated between 1810 and 1850, over 100,000 slaves made the journey via the Underground Railroad. Since most slaves could not read or write, they had to communicate information in other ways. Code hidden in songs and quilts became the most popular way for slaves to communicate with each other about the best way to escape.

For code songs, Biblical phrases, characters or places were used to communicate ways for the slaves to escape and find their way to the promised land. Wade in the Water and Swing Low Sweet Chariot were favorites of perhaps the most famous of all the Underground Railroad conductors, Harriet Tubman.

She never lost a passenger; Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman (born Araminta Ross) was born in Maryland around 1820. As a child, she worked the plantation, both in the house and the fields. As a teenager, she received a traumatic blow to the head (while protecting another slave) that plagued her for the rest of her life. She married John Tubman (she took his last name and changed her first name to Harriet in honor of her mother) in 1844 and by 1849 had decided to run away for fear that she was going to be sold. She set out on her journey at night, aided by a friendly white woman, and eventually made her way to Pennsylvania and to Philadelphia where she worked and saved her money. By 1860, she had made 19 trips into the south to rescue members of her family and other slaves longing for freedom. She often used the code songs like Wade in the Water and Swing Low Sweet Chariot as a way to communicate. Wade in the Water told slaves to use the water as a means of throwing off their scent to tracking dogs. Swing Low Sweet Chariot told slaves that the Underground Railroad (or Chariot) would be coming soon to take them to freedom.

Harriet became known as "Moses" and Frederick Douglass said, "Excepting John Brown -- of sacred memory -- I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than [Harriet Tubman]."

And John Brown, who conferred with "General Tubman" about his plans to raid Harpers Ferry, once said that she was "one of the bravest persons on this continent" (these quotes and pictures from PBS' Africans in America). During the Civil War, Harriet worked as a nurse, a cook and even a spy for the Union. After the war, she settled in Auburn, New York where she died in 1913.

For more information on Harriet Tubman, check out these web sites:
The Library of Congress: http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/aa/tubman
Harriet Tubman.com
National Underground Railroad Freedom Center: http://www.freedomcenter.org/
Follow the Drinking Gourd—using the sky as a map

Information on this page is from NASA Quest (http://quest.nasa.gov/ltc/special/mlk/gourd2.html)

The song and its translation are as follows:

When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

"When the sun comes back" means winter and spring when the altitude of the sun at noon is higher each day. Quail are migratory bird wintering in the South. The Drinking Gourd is the Big Dipper. The old man is Peg Leg Joe. The verse tells slaves to leave in the winter and walk towards the Drinking Gourd. Eventually they will meet a guide who will escort them for the remainder of the trip.

Most escapees had to cross the Ohio River which is too wide and too swift to swim. The Railroad struggled with the problem of how to get escapees across, and with experience, came to believe the best crossing time was winter. Then the river was frozen, and escapees could walk across on the ice. Since it took most escapees a year to travel from the South to the Ohio, the Railroad urged slaves to start their trip in winter in order to be at the Ohio the next winter.

The river bank makes a very good road,
The dead trees show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

This verse taught slaves to follow the bank of the Tombigbee River north looking for dead trees that were marked with drawings of a left foot and a peg foot. The markings distinguished the Tombigbee from other north-south rivers that flow into it.

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

These words told the slaves that when they reached the headwaters of the Tombigbee, they were to continue north over the hills until they met another river. Then they were to travel north along the new river which is the Tennessee River. A number of the southern escape routes converged on the Tennessee.

Where the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom if you follow the Drinking Gourd.

This verse told the slaves the Tennessee joined another river. They were to cross that river (which is the Ohio River), and on the north bank, meet a guide from the Underground Railroad.

From Parents' Choice: http://www.parents-choice.org/article.cfm?art_id=107&the_page=consider this
The Ohio River and its impact on slavery, music and Kentucky

The Ohio River is the largest tributary of the mighty Mississippi River. At approximately 981 miles long, some of the largest Midwest and upper south cities lie along its banks. The Ohio River begins in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as a confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. The river journeys along the borders of West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois. The river joins the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois. Its name comes from the Iroquois word “O-Y-O” meaning “great river”.

All the way back to 13,000 BC, people have lived along the Ohio River. Outside of Native Americans, the “discovery” of the Ohio River is given credit to René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, a French explorer. He named the river “la belle riviere” or “the beautiful river”. In approximately 1669, La Salle reached the Ohio River and followed it to present day Louisville, Kentucky where he encountered the only physical barrier issue along the Ohio River, the Falls of the Ohio (a series of rapids where the river drops by 26 feet over 2 miles). He also found the Mississippi River and claimed the entire basin for the King of France.

Because the Ohio River flows west towards the Mississippi, it became used by pioneers as a means to move westward out of the Appalachians into the new territories. Many chose to settle along the river founding the modern cities of Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville to name a few. Settlers were not the only ones to use the Ohio River as a means of transportation. Merchants (and eventually pirates) used the river to move cargo from Pennsylvania down to the Gulf of Mexico at New Orleans, Louisiana via the Ohio and Mississippi. Folk tales grew along the Ohio River beginning with the keelboaters and Mike Fink. Fink makes numerous appearances throughout literature but is perhaps best known for his appearance in two of the Disney Davy Crockett series opposite Fess Parker. Pirates like Samuel Mason and his gang also became legendary as they became known for stealing, murder and scuttling boats. These pirates used chains at narrow parts of the river like Cave-in-rock, Illinois (near Paducah, Kentucky) to raid the boats.

In 1787, the invention of the steamboat by John Fitch changed transportation in America. Every waterway was now available for transportation of goods and some passengers. Until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1868, the cheapest way to move goods was via these waterways including the Ohio River. This increased the need for a port at New Orleans which led to the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. That same year, explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark began organizing their expedition at the Falls of the Ohio. The Ohio River also became the boundary between slave states in the south and free states in the north although Kentucky remained technically neutral and never seceded from the Union. But there were slaves in Kentucky and runaway slaves were not considered free or safe until they had crossed the Ohio River. The river is often referred to as the “River Jordan” in many spirituals and code songs.
The expression “sold down the river” came into being as the slave trade, like other commodities, made use of the Ohio River and its access to the Mississippi. In fact, by the 1820s, nearly 26% of Kentucky’s population were slaves. By the beginning of the Civil War, this percentage decreased dramatically to about 7% but up through the 1850s between 2500 and 4000 slaves were sold annually through Louisville. Being “sold down the river” literally meant being sold and transported down the Ohio to the Mississippi to the slave markets in New Orleans. Today in Louisville at Second Street and Main, there is a plaque discussing the slave trade from the Louisville wharf.

In 1841, Abraham Lincoln saw one such transaction and relayed his dismay to his longtime friend, Joshua Fry Speed. In a letter from 1855, Lincoln tells Speed “In 1841 you and I had together a tedious low-water trip on a steamboat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were on board ten or a dozen slaves shackled together with irons. That sight was a continued torment to me, and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio or any other slave border. It is not fair for you to assume that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable. You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the Constitution and the Union. I do oppose the extension of slavery because my judgment and feeling so prompt me, and I am under no obligations to the contrary.” (from http://www.classicreader.com/book/3331/85/). Many believe that this encounter in 1841 led Lincoln to write the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

By the early 1900s, steamboats became known more as passenger vessels as the tugboats did the heavier work. The Belle of Louisville, the last of her kind left in the United States, was built in 1914 (originally named the Idlewild) as a short excursion boat. She has a 5 foot draw which means she can navigate any waterway that is at least 5-6 feet deep. The steamboat musical culture revolved around these short excursions often advertised as “Moonlite at 8:30” cruises for dinner and dancing. While there was still some racism aboard ship (many black musicians experienced this), once the band started playing, it didn’t matter the race as long as the music was good. And it wasn’t just good, it was great! Louis Armstrong began his career playing cornet aboard a steamboat and for three summers earned $50 per week to support his family.

In addition to the districts and neighborhoods in and around New Orleans, early jazz also developed aboard steamboats sailing out of the city. On the Mississippi River, the S.S. Capitol and the Sidney were among the best-known riverboats to feature jazz, and the S.S. Mandeville and the Susquehanna used jazz to entertain passengers on excursions on Lake Pontchartrain (information from The National Park Service web site).

Today, almost 180,000 tons of freight is moved along the Ohio River every month. The Belle of Louisville continues its short excursions and every once in a while, you can hear her calliope playing along the banks of the Ohio.
By the time Abraham Lincoln took the office of the President in March 1861, seven southern states had seceded from the Union. By April, hostilities broke out with the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter signaling the beginning of the American Civil War. Lincoln asked for volunteer troops from other states to march to Fort Sumter, prompting another four southern states to secede. The seeds of this Civil War began in the earliest days of America with many of the Founding Fathers disagreeing with slavery. But to pass the necessary documentation for liberty, they had to concede to the southern state representatives on the topic of slavery. By Lincoln's election 85 years later, the seeds had grown to a full blown contentious disagreement on the subject of slavery in America.

One year after the attack on Fort Sumter, Lincoln signed the Abolition of slavery in Washington D.C. law. This freed 3,000 slaves in the District of Columbia and paid one million dollars in compensation to their owners.

On July 22, 1862, the first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation was read by Lincoln to his cabinet. This historic event was captured by painter Francis Bicknell Carpenter and now hangs in the U.S. Capitol over the west staircase in the Senate wing.

On September 22, 1862, a revised Emancipation Proclamation was issued and published by several Northern newspapers the next day. In this version, it was stated “That on the first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any state, or designated part of a state, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the executive government of the United States [including the military and naval authority thereof] will recognize [and maintain the freedom of] such persons, and will do not act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.” The final version was enacted on January 1, 1863 (information and text from the book Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation by The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History).

After the Proclamation and with some prompting from black leaders like Frederick Douglass (two of his sons served during the Civil War), black recruitment and volunteers soared. The government established the Bureau of Colored Troops to manage these new soldiers. These soldiers still faced discrimination within the military and were not as heavily used in combat although there were many who fought in major campaigns. Perhaps best known are the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts volunteers who lost two-thirds of their officers and half of their troops on the July 1863 assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. This heroic assault was captured in the movie Glory with Denzel Washington (in his Oscar winning role), Morgan Freeman, Matthew Broderick and Cary Elwes. By the end of the Civil War, over 179,000 black men served in the U.S. Army (about 10% of the total number of soldiers) with another 19,000 serving in the Navy. Nearly 40,000 died in battle or of disease. Black women served in non-combat capacities like nursing, scouting or as spies (Harriet Tubman being the most famous).
The Battle Hymn of the Republic has its origins in the 1856 with William Steffe who collected and edited a camp meeting song with the “Glory, glory, hallelujah” refrain. The original lyrics started with “Say, brothers will you meet us on Canaan’s happy shore?”. The Union Army soon took up the song but added different lyrics. In fact, there have been several sets of lyrics prior to Julia Ward Howe’s most famous version. The first set of lyrics for John Brown’s Body came courtesy of the 2nd Infantry Battalion of the Massachusetts militia. There was a Scot- man named John Brown in this militia (the famous John Brown of Harper’s Ferry had died two years earlier) and the lyrics were meant as a joke. But as the song became more popular and many used the more famous John Brown as a rallying cry, the lyrics changed again to reflect that. Many black soldiers sang the song as they marched.

Hearing this song during a public review of the troops, Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) was told by her friend, Reverend James Clarke, that she should write new lyrics for the song. That evening Mrs. Howe went to bed and in her own words “I went to bed that night as usual, and slept, according to my wont, quite soundly. I awoke in the gray of the morning twilight; and as I lay waiting for the dawn, the long lines of the desired poem began to twine themselves in my mind. Having thought out all the stanzas, I said to myself, 'I must get up and write these verses down, lest I fall asleep again and forget them.' So, with a sudden effort, I sprang out of bed, and found in the dimness an old stump of a pen which I remembered to have used the day before. I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper. At this time, having completed my writing, I returned to bed and fell asleep, saying to myself ‘I like this better than most things I have written.’” (from Reminiscences by Julia Ward Howe 1819-1899).

In 1862, the Atlantic Monthly published Mrs. Howe’s version and its fame has only increased through the years. Dr. Martin Luther King often referred to the lyrics in many of his speeches, John Steinbeck took the title of THE GRAPES OF WRATH from the song, both political parties have used the song at their conventions and it is often played at Presidential inaugurations. Mrs. Howe’s words continue to inspire future generations.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:

His truth is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

Glory, glory, hallelujah!

For more information on Julia Ward Howe, check out the following web sites:
http://www.juliawardhowe.org/
By 1864, the Civil War had been raging for three years. The bloodiest battle of the war at Gettysburg (1863) had been narrowly won by the Union army who now had not only momentum but also new leadership. President Lincoln made Ulysses S. Grant the Commander of all Union armies. Grant had led the western front of the war and many credit his tactical skills (and victories) at Shiloh and Vicksburg as turning points of the war. With these victories, Grant was able to secure control of the Mississippi River as well as driving Confederate forces out of Tennessee, thus opening a route to Atlanta and eventually to the Atlantic. With Grant in charge of the Union armies, he appointed Major General William Tecumseh Sherman as leader of the western Union army. Their new strategy was called “total war” meaning that in addition to civilian casualties, all possible resources for the Confederacy would be destroyed (homes, farms, crops, machinery, etc.). Sherman began his “March to the Sea” from Chattanooga, Tennessee making his way through Georgia with the new “total war” policy. By the time he reached Atlanta, almost 20% of Georgia’s farmland was destroyed. Atlanta fell on September 2, 1864 and Sherman continued his march to Savannah, reaching the city in December 1864. He and his army turned north to approach the Confederate line in Virginia, thus trapping Robert E. Lee’s soldiers in between branches of the Union army.

On April 9, 1865, Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia at the McLean House in the village of Appomattox Court House. The war was over! But the country would not be able to celebrate for long. On April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln at Ford’s Theatre in Washington DC (Lincoln died on the 15th from his injuries). Wilkes Booth was not alone as two other conspirators were supposed to assassinate the Vice President, Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State, William Seward. Seward sustained severe injuries but survived the attack. Johnson’s assassin never showed up for the attempt. American poet Walt Whitman captured Americans’ profound sense of loss in his poem O Captain, my Captain.

There was a long way to go to re-build America. Total loss in life due to the war and disease was over 1 million (both military and civilian). The south was in complete disarray and recovery from the “total war” campaign waged by the Union Army seemed impossible. The Reconstruction period (1865-1877) resulted in three new Amendments to the Constitution. The Thirteenth Amendment (December 6, 1865) officially abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment (July 9, 1868) defined citizenship, due process and equal protection under the law, and the Fifteenth Amendment (February 3, 1870) prohibits each government in the United States from denying citizens the right to vote based on their race, color or previous condition of servitude (if they were slaves). These three amendments are known as the Reconstruction Amendments and became the basis for future landmark legal decisions such as Brown v. Board of Education (1954) as well as overturning unjust decisions like Dred v. Sandford (1857) that had excluded slaves and their descendants from Constitutional rights.
Songs of Joy—the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction (Down by the River-side and Slavery chain done broke at last)

Even though these landmark amendments were passed after the Civil War, there was still a long way to go in truly securing equal rights for all. And Reconstruction was not as simple as it seemed. The South needed to be re-built as well as brought back into the government. Lincoln had tried his idea of the Ten-percent plan as early as 1863, but not all members of the government were on-board. The Ten-percent plan was designed to re-admit a state to the Union as long as 10 percent of its voters would take an oath of allegiance to the Union and agree with emancipation. With Lincoln’s assassination, the North became even more embittered towards the South (as Wilkes Booth was a Confederate sympathizer from Maryland) and moving the country towards reconciliation was beyond President Andrew Johnson. He sided strongly with the more moderate Republicans (and Lincoln’s plans for Reconstruction) but the more radical elements of the party were not about to forgive the South. There were two attempts to impeach Johnson with the second being successful and he was removed from office in 1868. His successor was Ulysses S. Grant, the great Union hero of the Civil War.

To learn more about the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction:
http://www.history.com/content/civilwar
http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/
http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/abrahamlincoln
http://www.alplm.org/
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/

Secret Songs—The Fisk University Jubilee Singers (This Little Light of Mine)

In 1866, Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee opened its doors to offer a liberal arts education to “young men and women irrespective of color.” But by 1871, the university was on the verge of bankruptcy. Then treasurer and music professor, George L. White, decided to create a nine member choral ensemble made up of students (some of whom were former slaves) to tour the country and hopefully earn money for the university. Their first tour began in Cincinnati, Ohio and was met with less than enthusiastic audiences. But at their performance at Oberlin College in Ohio, they began to sing spirituals like “Steal Away”. Eventually their first U.S. tour made $40,000 for the University. By 1872, the singers were performing for President Grant and in 1873, they toured Europe and sang for Queen Victoria. A second European tour ending in 1878 made more than $150,000 for Fisk University. This allowed the University to build Jubilee Hall, now listed as a historic landmark. Even though they met with racism on their tours, their enthusiasm and musicianship won over many audiences who had never before heard these songs of slavery. Today, Fisk University celebrates every October 6th as Jubilee Day to commemorate the anniversary of the first Jubilee Singers tour.

To learn more about the Jubilee Singers, check out: http://www.fiskjubileesingers.org/
The early 20th century saw great changes to the United States. The industrialization of America was drawing more people from rural areas to the larger cities. The South continued to struggle with the oppression of African-Americans, going so far as to pass the Jim Crow laws, “separate but equal” essentially disenfranchising many African-Americans by putting restrictions on voting (requiring literacy or comprehension tests) and providing separate, and often inferior, accommodations, schools, etc. These laws were somewhat different that the Black Codes of the 1860s but essentially had similar effects by restricting access to citizenship, education and voting.

With few opportunities in the South, many African-Americans found themselves drawn to the northern cities of Chicago and New York with the promise of work in new industries founded during and after World War I. This Second Great Migration to many northern cities like New York, in particular the Harlem area, produced a new and expanding middle class of African-Americans. And with the people came the culture. The music of the South like Jazz and Blues now had a home in the nightclubs of New York City (i.e. The Cotton Club, The Apollo Theater). Artists and playwrights had works shown, published and produced. Before long, white artists and patrons took notice and began to support the work.

Ridgely Torrence, a white playwright, created a series of plays for a “Negro theatre”; Granny Maumee, The Rider of Dreams and Simon the Cyrenian. This new style of play rejected the “black face” and “minstrel show traditions” in favor of more realistic characters and modern problems. Jazz was also evolving. The Harlem Stride Piano was developed during World War I in the clubs in Harlem as many pianists were required to play every night. The Stride took the popular ragtime music and changed both the melody and the bass lines to have a more improvisational feel as well as showing off the virtuosity of the players. The name “stride” comes from the left hand movement on the piano with the rocking back and forth of intervals up and down the keyboard—a “striding” motion using 6ths (Jelly Roll Morton) and 10ths (Fats Waller).

The first African-American lyric tenor to gain recognition as an artist was Roland Hayes (1887—1977), a former Jubilee Singer with Fisk University. Mr. Hayes, the son of former slaves, sang at Carnegie Hall and performed with orchestras in Boston and Philadelphia. From the New Georgia Encyclopedia: Hayes then moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where he found a job singing at a silent movie theater. He had to sing offstage so that people could hear his voice but not see his skin color. While Hayes was in Louisville, the president of Fisk University invited him to be the lead tenor for the Fisk Jubilee Singers' tour in Boston, Massachusetts. He accepted the invitation, and the trip changed his life. For more information on Roland Hayes, check out: http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1671

On January 26, 1914, the Apollo Theater opened its doors and continues to this day to be one of the symbols of African-American culture. The careers African-American singers Bessie, Smith, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan (to name a few) as well as white artists like Buddy Holly, owe much to the Apollo Theatre. More modern artists ranging from James Brown to Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson to Lauryn Hill have all graced the stage at the Apollo Theater. For more on the Apollo Theater, check out: http://www.apollotheater.org/
Perhaps the best known of the writers from the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes. Born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, James Langston Hughes was the second child of Carrie Langston and James Hughes. His parents divorced when he was young (his father left the U.S. and his mother traveled looking for work), so Langston was raised by his maternal grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. At 13, he moved to live with his mother and her new husband, first to Lincoln, Illinois then to Cleveland, Ohio. His childhood was not a happy one and Langston would use these early memories to fuel his creative writing. While in high school, Langston started writing short stories, poetry and plays with his influences including Paul Dunbar, Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman. Langston briefly attended Columbia University but eventually left due to racial prejudice and found odd jobs while still writing. He ended up as a seaman aboard the S.S. Malone that allowed him travel to Europe where he found many black expatriates, especially in Paris. He left the sea to continue working odd jobs until finally finishing his degree (a Bachelor of the Arts) from Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) in 1929. He moved to New York and in 1930, his first novel, Not without laughter, won the Hamon gold medal for literature.

From the Poetry Archive: 'I, Too' written just before his return to the States from Europe and after he'd been denied passage on a ship because of his color, has a contemporary feel in contrast to the mythical dimension of 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'. It is no less powerful however, in its expression of social injustice. The calm clear statements of the 'I' have an unstoppable force like the progress the poem envisages.

Langston Hughes died in 1967 from complications related to prostate cancer. He was 65.

For more information on Langston Hughes, check out:
http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/83
http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=1552

Margaret Allison Bonds was born in Chicago in 1913. She quickly showed an aptitude for composition with her first at the age of five (Marquette Street Blues). During her younger years, she studied composition with Florence Price and William Dawson. After high school, she became one of the few black students at Northwestern University, earning both a Bachelor's and Master's degrees in music. In 1932, she won the Wanamaker prize for her composition Sea Ghost. She performed as a pianist for a variety of organizations, and also taught piano. She and Langston Hughes crossed paths in New York and became great friends. In fact, Margaret's best known pieces were set to poems by Langston Hughes (her Three Dream Portraits was published in 1959). She also wrote a musical theatre piece, Shakespeare in Harlem, with a libretto by Hughes. In the late 1960s, she moved to Los Angeles and taught music. She died in 1972 at the age of 59.

For more information on Margaret Bonds, check out:
http://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/Bonds.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Bonds
George Gershwin (born Jacob Gershowitz) was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1898 to Morris and Rosa Gershowitz, who were Russian Jews. The family piano had been purchased for lessons for George’s older brother, Ira (later his writing partner), but it was George who took to it. George studied piano with Charles Hambitzer until 1918. In his teens, George was playing and composing for Tin Pan Alley including ragtime music and his first hit, Swanee. By the early 1920s, he collaborated with Buddy DeSylva creating the one act experimental jazz opera, Blue Monday, set in Harlem (many credit this piece as the forerunner to Porgy and Bess).

In 1924, George wrote Rhapsody in Blue (orchestrated by Ferde Grofe) and went to Paris where he was inspired to write An American in Paris. In 1935, he completed his most ambitious work, Porgy and Bess. Based on the DuBose Heyward novel, Porgy, Porgy and Bess was set entirely in Catfish Row (Charleston, South Carolina). George’s brother Ira worked closely with DuBose Heyward to create the libretto while George fused the popular music of the day (blues and jazz) with operatic conventions like recitatives and leitmotifs to create his American folk opera. Although it didn’t really gain in popularity until the mid 1970s, Porgy and Bess is considered a landmark in American opera.

George died on July 11, 1937 of a brain tumor at the age of 38.

To learn more about George Gershwin, check out: http://www.gershwin.com/
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/george-gershwin/about-the-composer/65/

Marian Anderson was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1897. Her father sold ice and coal at the Reading Terminal in downtown Philadelphia and her mother cared for small children. Her family was actively involved in the Union Baptist Church in south Philadelphia and young Marian began singing in the junior choir at the age of six. As a teenager, Marian was able to earn some money singing around town for community events. Her Aunt Mary would also take the young Marian to concerts in and around Philadelphia. Marian’s father died of heart failure after suffering a trauma to the head at the age of 34. Marian was 12. She and her family moved in with her paternal grandparents (Benjamin and Isabella—Benjamin was a former slave who had been emancipated in the 1860s).

Marian continued to sing and was able to study voice privately through donations from her church. She was denied admission to the Philadelphia Academy of Music because she was black. Her break came in 1925 when she won a competition sponsored by the New York Philharmonic, eventually performing with the orchestra in August of that year. Her performance was a triumph and launched her into a touring and recital schedule that would take her across the United States and to Europe. In the 1930s, she met famed conductor Arturo Toscanini who said that “she had a voice only heard once in a hundred years.” By the end of the decade, Marian was performing more than 70 recitals a year in the United States.

Songs of the Harlem Renaissance (Summertime and I got plenty o’ nuttin’)

Songs of the Civil Rights Movement (My Country ‘tis of thee, We Shall Overcome)
In 1939, Marian was refused the opportunity to sing to an integrated audience at Constitution Hall in Washington D.C. by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Many members of the DAR, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, resigned from the group in protest. President Franklin Roosevelt, Mrs. Roosevelt, Walter White (NAACP) and Anderson’s manager, Sal Hurok, persuaded Interior Secretary Harold Ickes to allow Marian to perform on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. On April 9, 1939, Easter Sunday, Marian sang before a crowd of 75,000 people. Her first selection was My Country ‘Tis of Thee.

In 1943, she finally sang at Constitution Hall for an integrated audience at the invitation of the DAR. She said “When I finally walked onto the stage of Constitution Hall, I felt no different than I had in other halls. There was no sense of triumph. I felt that it was a beautiful concert hall and I was very happy to sing there.” She continued to break color barriers in 1955 when she became the first African-American opera singer to perform with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. She sang the role of Ulrica in Verdi’s Un Ballo in Maschera (The Masked Ball). She performed at the inaugurations of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy (1957 and 1961 respectively) while touring the world as a goodwill ambassador. In 1963, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She retired from public performances in 1965. Marian Anderson died in 1993 at the Portland, Oregon home of her nephew, renowned conductor, James dePreist. She was 96 years old. Her impact on the world of opera continues today with the Marian Anderson scholar awards (sponsored by the Marian Anderson Historical Society) for young opera singers. Her performance at the Lincoln Memorial on that cold Easter morning in 1939 was captured on film and the documentary was selected for preservation by the United States National Film Registry as being culturally significant.

For more information on Marian Anderson, check out:
http://www.mariananderson.org/home/index.html
http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/anderson/

While Marian was breaking color barriers in the world of opera, Jackie Robinson was doing the same for Major League Baseball. In 1947, he became the first African-American to play on a major league team when he made his debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers. On stage, Paul Robeson (an opera singer as well as actor) became the first 20th century black actor to portray Shakespeare’s title character, Othello. In 1943-45, Robeson’s Othello production played on Broadway and it still holds the record for the longest running Shakespeare play on Broadway. Anderson, Robinson and Robeson were all exceptional artists and helped to pave the way towards the Civil Rights Movement.

For more information about Jackie Robinson and Paul Robeson, check out:
http://www.jackierobinson.com/
http://www.jackierobinson.org/
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/paul-robeson/about-the-actor/66/
http://prcc.rutgers.edu/Robeson/biography.htm
On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Louise McCauley Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger. Her refusal and subsequent arrest sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. For 381 days, African-Americans refused to ride the segregated bus system, crippling the system but also leading to a United States Supreme Court decision stating that the Alabama and Montgomery segregation policies were unconstitutional. Little did she know that her act of defiance would be considered one of the most important moments in the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Parks is considered to be the “mother” of the modern day Civil Rights Movement. And the Montgomery Bus Boycott brought another major figure in the fight for equal rights to the forefront; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Rosa McCauley Parks was born in 1913 in Tuskegee, Alabama. She attended Alabama State Teacher College High School but was unable to graduate due to her grandmother’s illness and subsequent death. She eventually received her high school diploma in 1934 after she was already married. She and her husband, Raymond Parks, were deeply involved with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and at the time of her arrest, she was preparing for a youth conference. She eventually moved to Detroit in 1957 and the 1960s found her at marches across the country including the March on Washington (1963) and Selma to Montgomery March, Alabama (1965). In 1987, she founded the Rosa and Raymond Park Institute for Self Development and in the 1990s, she published Rosa Parks; My Story (1992) and Quiet Strength (1995). Rosa Parks died on October 24, 2005 at the age of 92. She was given the honor of lying in state at the Capitol Rotunda, the first woman and second African-American to receive this honor. Her many awards included the NAACP Spingarn Award, The Martin Luther King Jr. award, and the Peace Abbey Courage of Conscience award to name a few.

To learn more about Rosa Parks, check out:
http://www.rosaparks.org/
http://teacher.scholastic.com/rosa/

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia to Rev. Martin Luther King Sr. and his wife Alberta. He attended Booker T Washington High School but ended up skipping two grades and enrolled at Morehouse College without officially graduating from high school. He graduated from Morehouse in 1948, then attended Crozer Theological Seminary (Chester, Pennsylvania) for his Bachelor of Divinity degree (1951). He married Coretta Scott in 1953 and in 1955 he received his Doctor of Philosophy (in systematic religion) from Boston University. By the age of 25, he was the pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. King was inspired by the non-violent resistance of Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi. In 1963, he delivered his I have a dream speech at the Lincoln Memorial (March on Washington). This speech was honored by the Library of Congress in 2002 by adding it to the United States National Recording Registry. A popular story about this speech is that he departed from the original text after noted gospel singer Mahalia Jackson shouted to him “Tell them about the dream, Martin!”. And he did.

"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"
In 1964, Dr. King was the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Dr. King continued to march for civil rights and preach non-violence protest through civil disobedience. During this time, President Lyndon Johnson and the United States Congress were able to pass landmark legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (a carry over from the Kennedy administration) that outlawed most racial segregation and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that outlawed discrimination in voting.

Even while Dr. King continued to work towards civil rights, he also waged a war against poverty with his Poor People’s Campaign (early 1968). He was anti-Vietnam war and felt that the money going towards the war would be better spent on helping poor Americans.

On April 4, 1968, Dr. King was shot and killed at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee by James Earl Ray. He was 39 years old. His legacy continues to this day with a federal holiday in his honor (signed by President Reagan in 1983 with the first observation in January 1986) and his posthumous awards and honors range from numerous honorary degrees to a Grammy nomination to any number of city streets named after him. He has become an icon of human rights.

For more information on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., check out:

We Shall Overcome has its origins as far back as the mid 19th century during the Civil War. From the song "No more auction block for me" (also known as Many Thousands Gone). Some say that the melodic origins go even further back with the Catholic hymn "O Sanctissima" and possibly the popular Italian song "Caro mio ben." At the turn of the 20th century, "I'll Overcome Someday" was published by Charles Tindley of Philadelphia. By 1947, the song became published as "We Will Overcome" in the People's Songs Bulletin; folk singer Pete Seeger was the director at the time. Seeger has said that he changed the word "will" to "shall" because "I think I liked a more open sound; 'We will' has alliteration to it, but 'We shall' opens the mouth wider; the 'i' in 'will' is not an easy vowel to sing well." (from Where have all the flowers gone? 1993 by Pete Seeger and Peter Blood (editor)).

The song gained in popularity among union workers as well as folk singers including Joan Baez. National Public Radio has listed We Shall Overcome as one of the top 100 most important American songs of the 20th century.

Song of today and tomorrow (CHORUS OF HOPE)

After passage of the landmark legislations in 1964 and 1965, true equality seemed within the grasp of all Americans regardless of race, creed or gender. The post-Civil Rights decades have seen strides made in all walks of American life change to become more inclusive. Jesse Jackson ran for President in 1984 and 1988. In 1989, the state of Virginia elected Douglas Wilder as the first African-American governor. Carol Moseley Braun was elected to the United States Senate from the state of Illinois in 1993, the first African-American elected to the Senate and, to date, the only African-American woman United States Senator.
Other areas of government also saw big changes. In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson nominated Thurgood Marshall to the United States Supreme Court. As a lawyer and then Chief Counsel for the NAACP, Marshall won the landmark decision in the 1954 case, Brown v. Board of Education. This case changed the face of the American public schools to be more inclusive and stated that the previous policy of “separate but equal” was, in fact, separate is not equal. Justice Marshall would serve on the U.S. Supreme Court for 24 years. He died of heart failure in 1993.

In 1989, Colin Powell became the first African-American to hold the office of Chairman of the U.S. Armed Forces Joint Chiefs of Staff then in 2001, he was named Secretary of State by President George W. Bush. In 2005, Condoleezza Rice became the first African-American woman to hold the office of Secretary of State (2005-2009).

In entertainment, actors like Sidney Poitier paved the way for future generations. In 1963, Poitier became the first African-American to win an Academy Award for his role in Lilies of the Fields. Poitier was also a political activist and in 2009 was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States. Oprah Winfrey is one of the world’s richest people with her media empire, HARPO. She is consistently ranked in the Forbes 400 of the wealthiest people in the country.

In November 2008, Americans elected the first African-American to the highest office in the land; President of the United States. In 2008, Barack Obama became the first African-American presidential nominee of the Democratic Party and was elected the 44th President of the United States on November 4, 2008.

CHORUS OF HOPE was commissioned by Kentucky Opera as a new addition to OH FREEDOM! that would celebrate the election of the first African-American President. Louisville composer, educator and jazz musician Harry Pickens composed CHORUS OF HOPE using Barack Obama as the inspiration.

“...What began as hope’s soft whisper in the heart of just one man has swelled to a chorus of millions calling for change. It began as a promise of freedom in the creed of this hallowed land, now a movement for justice, millions crying: Yes, we can! It’s a chorus that can’t be ignored, a chorus that won’t be denied ringing out across this land as a hymn that heals our nation. It’s the shackled crying for freedom. It’s the laborer breaking his chains. It’s the soldier fighting for justice. It’s the song of America. A chorus of hope.” from A CHORUS OF HOPE by Harry Pickens (Copyright © 2009 Harry Pickens. All rights reserved. Reproduction without express permission not permitted.)
Resource materials

This study guide should be the beginning of the dialogue regarding African-American history. There is a wealth of information available on the history, people and places.

In addition to all of the on-line sites listed throughout this study guide, there are several books that were helpful in the creative process.

No man can hinder me; the journey from slavery to emancipation through song
Velma Maia Thomas

Sinful Tunes and Spirituals; Black folk music to the Civil War
Dena J Epstein

The Sounds of Slavery; discovering African American history through songs, sermons and speech
Shane White and Graham White

The Power of Black Music; interpreting its history from Africa to the United States
Samuel A. Floyd, Jr.

American Negro Songs; 230 folk songs and spirituals, religious and secular
John W. Work

Slave Songs of the United States (originally published in 1867)
Compiled by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison

Other web sites of interest:

http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/tm/black.html
Sojourner Truth history site
The African-American Odyssey at the Library of Congress