

**EXPLORING SALLY THOMAS AND LAUNDRY PAST AND PRESENT**

A LANGUAGE ARTS LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

**Overview**

In this lesson, students learn about Sally Thomas, a nineteenth-century African American laundress. Operating a laundry business was one of the few occupations open to nineteenth-century black women. Students will compare and contrast doing laundry today with doing laundry in the past. After learning about Sally Thomas, students pair up to collect data from tags in the back of their clothing. They will record the fabrics from which the garments were made, the countries in which the garments were made, and the cleaning instructions. Students then share the data with the class and also share personal experiences about doing laundry, including mishaps like mixing dark clothes with light. Next, they examine what was involved in doing laundry across historical periods. While there have been great technological changes from century to century, basic human needs (like having clean clothes) have not changed. Through this lesson, students will appreciate that being a laundress, required Sally Thomas to have both business and technical skills. The lesson culminates with students writing a historical fiction story about doing laundry or having laundry done by a laundress in the nineteenth century.

**Learning Objectives**

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Discuss the life of Sally Thomas.
- Define the term "laundress."
- Compare and contrast the work of a laundress with the work of a modern "laundry" or dry cleaning shop.
- Demonstrate knowledge of various types of fabric.
- Recall that in the nineteenth-century South, many black women cleaned other people's clothes for a business.
- Explain why clothing-cleaning businesses will always be in demand.
- Recall basic facts about doing laundry across historical periods.

**Guiding Questions**

Was Sally Thomas a skilled person? Will there always be laundry businesses? Technology changes what people do, but does it change people?

**Suggested Time**

2 class periods

## Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. If you are already familiar with the history of Sally Thomas, skip to step 2. If you are unfamiliar with Thomas, you can read Teacher Tool 1, which contains a brief biography. You can also read *In Search of the Promised Land: A Slave Family in the Old South* by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schwenger to get a complete biography of her life. Reading this book is not necessary to teach this lesson.
2. View the short video, *So, You Want to Do Laundry Work?*, which features an actor portraying a nineteenth-century black laundress who has her own laundry business. Be prepared to show this video to your students.
3. Review Teacher Tool 2, which contains an overview of virtual freedom.
4. Review Student Handout 1, which is an excerpt from *In Search of the Promised Land: A Slave Family in the Old South* by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schwenger. The excerpt explains the tasks involved in the business of doing fine laundry for others and reveals some details about Thomas's life in virtual freedom.
5. Review and print Student Handout 2: Sorting the Laundry Data. Student Handout 1 will be used to guide a classroom activity that engages students in learning about the garments they are wearing by reading and recording information on the tags in the back of shirts, blouses, or coats.
6. Collect several examples of different kinds of fabrics to bring in to class for students to touch and view. Items made of velvet, silk, cashmere, cotton, linen, wool, and polyester make good examples.
7. Review the animation titled "History of Washing" from [http://www.scienceinthebox.com/en\\_UK/publications/how.html](http://www.scienceinthebox.com/en_UK/publications/how.html). For a quick overview of how laundry was done throughout history, you can click on each of the six time periods (Prehistory, Ancient Times, Middle Ages, Renaissance, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, and 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries) listed then click the picture of the washing machine at the top of the animation. You should be familiar with how to navigate the animation so that you can help your students when they view it.
8. Review Student Handout 3, which contains information to help students with their historical fiction writing assignment.

## Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. Using the information in Teacher Tool 1, provide students with an overview of Sally Thomas.
2. Show the short video, *So, You Want to Do Laundry Work?* to engage your students and enhance their understanding of the processes involved in doing laundry in the nineteenth century.
3. Distribute Student Handout 1 and ask students to read it, paying attention to the details about how Sally Thomas ran her laundry business. Be sure to highlight some of the steps involved in Sally Thomas's laundry business including: collecting the garments; sorting the garments for cleaning; making different soaps to use when laundering different kinds of fabrics; hand washing the garments and drying them; pricing her laundry services; making bills for each customer; re-sorting the garments based on customer; and returning garments to the customers. Ask students if they think being a laundress in the nineteenth century was a "skilled" job?
4. Pass around your fabric examples for students to touch and see.

5. Pair the students in your class in groups of two and give them Student Handout 1. Ask them to record data from the tag in the back of their partner's shirt, dress, sweater, or blouse.
6. Once each pair has recorded the information, go around and ask students to share their data. Ask students to discuss their personal experiences doing laundry, especially mishaps like shrinking garments or other memorable laundry experiences.
7. Discuss how Thomas's methods of doing laundry in the nineteenth century differ from how laundry is done today. Also discuss the similarities in how laundry is done, including sorting on the basis of different criteria such as type of fabric and color, giving special care to certain fabrics, using specific water temperatures for different loads, etc.
8. Using a computer lab or in-class computers for student use, have students review the "History of Washing" animation. Have students read the segments and take notes under each historical era on how laundry was done through the ages.
9. Distribute Student Handout 2 and ask students to complete an historical fiction writing assignment based on laundry. Provide a brief overview of writing historical fiction and ask students to work alone or with their partner to create a story about doing laundry or having laundry done in Sally Thomas's era.

### **Extending the Lesson**

- Have students put all class data collected about the types of garments, the origins of the garments, and how to wash the garments into a spreadsheet. Ask them to make charts and graphs of the data and discuss what can be learned from the garments worn in the class. You might ask them, "Are the majority of garments made in the United States? If not, why do you think they are made elsewhere?"
- Have students write a historical fiction story about doing laundry in any past historical era referring to the following site:  
[http://www.scienceinthebox.com/en\\_UK/publications/chronology\\_en.html](http://www.scienceinthebox.com/en_UK/publications/chronology_en.html).
- To appreciate the skill of Sally Thomas and other nineteenth-century laundresses, lead a soap-making activity. The following is one of many websites with directions for making soap: <http://www.teachsoap.com>.
- Invite a person who owns a laundry mat or dry cleaning business to come to class. Have him or her explain what is involved in a twenty-first-century laundry business.
- Bring examples of various types of fabric that Sally Thomas laundered to class. Ask students to do online research to learn how to properly launder the different kinds of fabrics. If they need to be dry cleaned, for example, students should research what dry cleaning is and describe the process. Students should present the results of their research in a short research report.

*Teachers may use and reproduce the material on the Crafting Freedom website for instructional purposes.*