

# IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

## The Bordentown School

Target Age: Middle School/High School  
Time Period: 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries  
Featured County: Burlington  
NJ 350<sup>th</sup> Theme: Diversity

### Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.2- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

R.CCR.3- Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

W.CCR.9- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### NJ Common Core Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.A.13.a, 6.1.12.A.13.b  
Language Arts Literacy: 3.1 Reading, 3.2 Writing  
Social Studies Skills: Chronological Thinking, Critical Thinking

**FOCUS QUESTION:** Is separate always unequal when it comes to education?

### **BACKGROUND:**

It was called the “Tuskegee of the North,” although it was formally known as the New Jersey Industrial and Manual Training School for Colored Youth. Eventually, it was best known simply as the Bordentown School, a leader in black education from Reconstruction until the 1950s. Founded in 1876, Bordentown was a boarding school for boys and girls in grades 6 through 12. With its 400-acre Georgian style campus, Bordentown could be mistaken for an elite private boarding school. But it was actually a co-educational public school operated by the State of New Jersey which, in addition to studying traditional academic subjects, taught students how to operate farm equipment, maintain buildings, prepare meals, and work in the beauty industry.

Bordentown formed a self-contained community where students and faculty lived and worked together. In order to graduate, a student had to complete the academic curriculum as well as master a vocation or trade. Surveys were taken of students to demonstrate the institution’s efficacy to the state, which owned and operated Bordentown, and most show that a high proportion of graduates became gainfully employed in the field for which they had trained—even during the Great Depression.



Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State

In 1947, following the adoption of the new state constitution, and just a few years before the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education* which held that "separate but equal" school facilities were unconstitutional, the New Jersey State Board of Education attempted to integrate the Bordentown School. Renamed as the "Manual Training and Industrial School for Youth," the school reopened in 1948 to all students regardless of race. But the recruiting effort failed, and the school remained segregated in practice if not in principle. In December 1954, the State Board of Education voted to close the institution the following June. But the school's legacy continued long afterward, as alumni used the lessons they learned at Bordentown to help construct a more just society, not just in New Jersey, but throughout the nation.

**ACTIVITY:**

Bordentown's curriculum was shaped by the personalities and pedagogical philosophies of its leaders. The founding principal, the Reverend Walter A.S. Rice of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was a former slave who initially modeled the school on Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute and its focus on training in the industrial and manual trades. James Gregory, former professor and dean of Howard University, served as principal from 1897-1915 and was a follower of W.E.B. Du Bois' "talented tenth" philosophy, which held that: "the Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races." As a result, academic achievement received more attention.

The most influential was Dr. William R. Valentine, who served for over 30 years, and sought to create a balance between Dubois and Washington. His curriculum required graduates to fulfill a "talented tenth" curriculum and to master a trade. And all students were expected to help run the school, no matter what their major.

The trades students learned were based on expected gender roles of the time. Girls were trained in the domestic arts and cosmetology, and were taught "plain sewing, dressmaking, laundering, housekeeping." The curriculum for boys included auto mechanics and building trades, woodworking, farming, and smithing (you might wish to use the four images of the school included at the end of this lesson to help students visualize these activities).

Print out copies of background information on Du Bois and Washington, and the Tuskegee Institute (this information comes from resource materials provided for the PBS documentary "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow"):

W.E.B Du Bois: [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_people\\_dubois.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_people_dubois.html)

Booker T. Washington: [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_people\\_booker.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_people_booker.html)

Tuskegee Institute: [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_events\\_tuskegee.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_tuskegee.html)

Ask students to read these materials and look for relationships between Washington and Du Bois, and Tuskegee and Bordentown (consider philosophies, curriculum, and institutional histories). A graphic organizer is provided on page 9 of this activity for students to organize their thoughts. Graphic organizers guide learners' thinking by focusing on specific points of comparison or contrast within a broad topic. Students should be able to identify places of overlap or difference as they outline key ideas

in Du Bois' and Washington's philosophies, as well as how these ideas translated into the structure of Tuskegee and Bordentown schools. Some ideas for comparison and contrast might be (there are many others):

- Who should receive an education?
- What kind of education is best (academic or trade-oriented)?
- Where should students live?
- Should African Americans have their own schools or be incorporated into public schools?

After examining this information, ask students to reflect on contemporary education. What elements of this nineteenth-century training would they like to see included in modern classrooms? What elements still exist? What elements no longer seem relevant for the twenty-first learner?

**FOLLOW-UP:**

Necessary term: *Anachronism*

1. Something (such as a word, an object, or an event) that is mistakenly placed in a time where it does not belong in a story, movie, etc.
2. A person or a thing that seems to belong to the past and not to fit in the present.

PBS produced a document about the Bordentown School entitled "A Place Out of Time." Ask students to consider what this title might mean and to provide evidence. Possible responses might include:

First, the school provided education to African American students in a time when education was often subpar or entirely denied for the majority of African Americans. Such students were protected from the discrimination and racism of white teachers and students, and also knew that "teachers gave students a hard time because they cared, not because the students were black."

Second, the school, once a cutting edge of education and training for black students, fell behind because of its focus on nineteenth-century skills, rather than the twentieth-century skills necessary for their graduates to be successful in the world.

Third, in 1947, New Jersey outlawed segregated education, and in 1954, the federal government outlawed it. How could an all-black school continue in a segregated world?

Fourth, the school that was once seen as a "symbol of Negro achievement, of pride in the race" now was seen as as an "archaic example of Jim Crow segregation."

Finally, the school was literally out of time, since in 1955 New Jersey Governor Robert B. Meyner vetoed the legislature's one-year extension for the school. The veto happened when the state legislature was out of session, so not enough lawmakers were able to return to override Meyner's veto. Time was up for the school and its doors were closed.

Next, ask students to consider the following:

Is it fair to close a school that had such a positive impact upon its students?

Does the fact that the school was created as a response to racism and Jim Crow, and that African Americans separated themselves by choice and not by law affect your students' opinions about the impact of segregation?

Do students think Bordentown should be included in the description of segregated schools? The Supreme Court ruling, outlawing school segregation, states:

*We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does... Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.*

### **WANT TO LEARN MORE?**

#### **Places to Visit**

Bordentown School, Bordentown Township, NJ:

<http://www.delrivgreenway.org/heritagetrail/Bordentown-School.html>

Brown v. Board of Education Historic Site, National Park Service: <http://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm>

#### **More Classroom Activities**

Brown v. Board of Education Historic Site, National Park Service (includes an extensive collection of teacher resources about Brown v. Board of Education and school segregation and desegregation more generally): <http://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm>

*The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, a four-part PBS documentary series (each episode is 60 minutes; includes has interactive maps, tools and activities, and historical information, including a substantial collection of lesson plans, activities, and resources): <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/education.html>

Sahra Ahmed, *Bordentown Manual Training and Industrial School—The Tuskegee of the North* (available online through Google.books; in addition to a history of the Bordentown School, there is a student activities section that includes projects, dramatic activities, historical documentation and games):

<http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCQQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpeople.ehe.osu.edu%2Fbgordon%2Ffiles%2F2012%2F06%2FSahra-Ahmed.pdf&ei=QIU93mMaP40gGA5IDACg&usg=AFQjCNEHfmLecXzNhnsQh7iEbwnE5gV0Q>

#### **For More Information**

*A Place Out of Time—The Bordentown School*, PBS documentary about the history and impact of the school, as told through the stories of the 1955 graduation class (57 minutes):

<http://www.pbs.org/programs/place-out-of-time/>

James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South 1860-1935* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

James Haskin, *Separate but Not Equal: The Dream and the Struggle* (New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 2002, designed for ages 9-12).

Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African-American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

“Supreme Court History Expanding Civil Rights,” PBS website: includes summaries of major cases regarding education and desegregation, as well as links to primary documents:

[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/supremecourt/rights/landmark\\_brown.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/supremecourt/rights/landmark_brown.html)

The Supreme Court’s landmark decision abolishing “separate but equal” schools in public education.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/eisenhower-brownboard/>



Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State





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Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State



<b>Du Bois</b>	<b>Washington</b>	<b>Tuskegee</b>	<b>Bordentown</b>

## **CREDIT INFORMATION:**

Pg. 1: Bordentown Beauty School Training, Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

Pg. 5: Vocational Training- Beauty Shop (2), New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

Pg. 6: Vocational Training- Laundry, New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

Pg. 7: Vocational Training- Auto Shop, New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

Pg. 8: Vocational Training- Print Shop, New Jersey State Archives; Department of State.

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