

Bass Reeves | Lesson Plan

How did Bass Reeves contribute to westward expansion, and why is his legacy important to understanding American history?

Students will understand how Bass Reeves's role as a lawman during westward expansion upheld justice and embodied values like resilience, integrity, and ingenuity. They will evaluate his contributions to law enforcement in the Wild West and his enduring legacy in shaping American ideals of fairness and equality.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify and explain the who, what, where, when, and why of Bass Reeves's life, including his journey from enslavement to legendary lawman.
- Summarize key ideas and details from the text about Reeves's early life, career as a deputy marshal, and his role in upholding justice in the Wild West.
- Analyze how Bass Reeves's actions supported law and order in the frontier and contributed to the safety and success of westward expansion.
- Evaluate the significance of Bass Reeves's traits, such as resilience, integrity, and ingenuity, in shaping his legacy and influencing American values.
- Create a visual or written representation of Bass Reeves's legacy using key details from the text, such as his notable arrests, strategies, and contributions to law enforcement.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Abolish:** To formally put an end to a practice, system, or law.
- **13th Amendment:** Ratified on December 6, 1865, this amendment to the U.S. Constitution abolished slavery nationwide, making the practice illegal.
- **Indian Territory:** A region designated for Native American tribes during the 19th century, primarily located in what is now Oklahoma.
- **Posseman:** A member of a posse, a group organized to assist a law enforcement officer in maintaining order or capturing criminals.
- **Wild West:** A term used to describe the American frontier during westward expansion, characterized by its lawlessness and rugged environment.
- **Warrant:** An official legal document granting authority to make an arrest, search premises, or carry out other acts of justice.
- **Emancipation Proclamation:** An executive order issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, declaring freedom for all slaves in the Confederate states.

Educational Standards: CCRA.R.1, CCRA.R.2, CCRA.R.7, CCRA.R.10, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.W.7, CCRA.W.8, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.SL.4, CCRA.SL.5, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.L.6

Academic Subject Areas: Language Arts, History, Westward Expansion

What You'll Need

- PragerU Kids *Trailblazers of America: Bass Reeves* book (Download [Here](#))



- Worksheets: *Trailblazers of America: Bass Reeves* (Click [Here](#))
- Optional: Purchase the book from Amazon (Click [Here](#))
- Index cards for formative assessments

Pre-Lesson Preparation: Reading the Book

For Teachers:

1. Teachers should assign the entire *Trailblazers: Bass Reeves* book as a pre-reading activity.
 - Depending on the schedule and grade level, this can be done as an in-class activity or as a take-home assignment.
 - Use this pre-reading time to introduce students to the themes of justice, resilience, ingenuity, and Bass Reeves's contributions to law enforcement and westward expansion in American history. An *Introduction for Pre-Reading* is included below.
 - Optional Pre-Reading Activities:
 - Vocabulary Preview: Introduce the key vocabulary terms (e.g., abolish, 13th Amendment, Indian Territory, posseman, Wild West, warrant, Emancipation Proclamation) using visual aids or an interactive activity like matching terms to their definitions. Discuss how these terms set the stage for understanding Bass Reeves's story and his role in maintaining law and order in the Wild West.
 - Anticipation Guide: Provide students with a list of thought-provoking statements to agree/disagree with before reading, such as:
 - *Bass Reeves's achievements make him one of the most legendary lawmen in U.S. history.*
 - *Maintaining law and order in the Wild West was nearly impossible.*
 - *Justice always requires bravery and ingenuity.*

After reading, revisit these statements to see if students' perspectives have changed, using examples from the text to support their views.

For Students:

1. As they read the *Trailblazers: Bass Reeves* book, encourage students to:
 - Highlight or underline key events, challenges, and achievements in Reeves's life.
 - Note surprising facts or write down any questions they have about Reeves's journey.
2. Optional Student Task:
 - Ask students to jot down a list of personal qualities they think a lawman like Bass Reeves would need to succeed. This will help them connect Reeves's story to broader values like resilience, integrity, and ingenuity.

Introduction for Pre-Reading (10 minutes)

1. Introduce Bass Reeves:
 - Share the following key points about Bass Reeves:
 - Bass Reeves was born enslaved in Arkansas in 1838. As a young man, he escaped to freedom during the Civil War after a confrontation with his enslaver.

- He found refuge in the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), where he lived among Native American tribes, learning their languages and customs.
 - After slavery was abolished, Reeves became one of the first Black deputy U.S. marshals in history. He served for 32 years, enforcing the law across 75,000 square miles of the Wild West.
 - Reeves was known for his incredible skills as a tracker, marksman, and master of disguise. He arrested over 3,000 criminals during his career and brought them to justice, embodying resilience and integrity.
 - Reeves's life and accomplishments intersected with pivotal moments in U.S. history, including:
 - The Civil War (1861–1865)
 - Abolition of Slavery (13th Amendment, 1865)
 - Westward Expansion and the Indian Territory
 - The Lawless Wild West Era
 - Ask students the following questions:
 - *What do you already know about Bass Reeves?*
 - *Why do you think enforcing law and order in the Indian Territory during the late 1800s was so challenging?*
 - *What kind of qualities or skills do you think Bass Reeves needed to succeed as a deputy marshal in such a dangerous and lawless region?*
2. Explore the Geography of Bass Reeves's Time:
- Display the "America in the Time of Bass Reeves" (pages 10-11 in the book).
 - Highlight the vast area Reeves patrolled as a deputy U.S. marshal, including Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) and surrounding regions.
 - Note major locations such as Fort Smith, Arkansas (his base of operations), Wetumka, Muskogee, and the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad, also known as the "dead line."
 - Discuss the challenges of traveling in Reeves's time through regions that included:
 - Lawless Terrain
 - Wildlife
 - Cultural Barriers
 - Extreme weather conditions
 - Ask students:
 - *Why do you think it was so difficult to maintain law and order in the Indian Territory?*
 - *What specific geographic challenges do you think Reeves faced while patrolling such a vast area?*
 - *How might Reeves's familiarity with the land have helped him succeed as a lawman?*
 - Brainstorm as a class:
 - List possible motivations for exploring the frontier on the board (e.g., protecting communities, capturing outlaws, enforcing laws, strengthening federal authority, etc.).
3. Conclude with the Context of Reeves's life during Westward Expansion:

- Explain that during Bass Reeves's lifetime, westward expansion brought rapid growth and change to the United States.:
 - The abolition of slavery (13th Amendment, 1865) created new opportunities for freedmen like Reeves to shape the future of the expanding nation.
 - The Wild West, particularly Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), became a haven for outlaws and fugitives, creating the need for law enforcement to bring order to lawless regions.
 - Reeves's career as a deputy marshal symbolized the spirit of westward expansion: resilience, integrity, and a commitment to justice in the face of immense challenges.
- Reading Focus:
 - Encourage students to think about this question as they read: What qualities do you think Reeves needed to succeed as a lawman during one of the most dangerous and lawless periods of American history?

Post-Reading Lesson Plan (one 60-minute class period)

Warm-Up: (10 minutes)

1. Re-engage students with the subject matter and transition into the post-reading analysis with a Rapid Recall and Connect Activity:
 - Prompt: Ask students to write down or share aloud:
 - One thing they remember about Bass Reeves.
 - One challenge he faced.
 - One reason why he is remembered in American history.
2. Interactive Brainstorm:
 - Write students' responses on the board under three headings: Key Events, Challenges, and Legacy.
 - Encourage students to build on each other's ideas.
3. Transition:
 - Explain that the day's lesson will explore Reeves's life more deeply by organizing key information into two graphic organizers: the **5 Ws Chart** and the **Pioneer Legacy Profile**.

5 W's Chart: (15-20 minutes)

1. Hand out the 5 Ws graphic organizer to each student. Explain that the purpose of this activity is to analyze the key elements of Bass Reeves's life and accomplishments by answering the five key questions.
2. This activity is designed to build a strong foundation of knowledge about Reeves's journey, which students will use later to analyze his contributions and legacy in more depth.
3. Go over each section of the 5 Ws Chart to ensure students understand what is expected. Provide examples to guide student thinking:
 - **Who:** Identify who the book is about, including those who played significant roles in Reeves's journey.
 - Examples: *Bass Reeves, Isaac Parker (the "Hanging Judge"), possemen, notable outlaws like Belle Starr, Jim Webb, and Greenleaf.*
 - **What:** Describe what Reeves accomplished during his career as a lawman.

- Examples: *Arrested over 3,000 criminals, used disguises to capture fugitives, protected settlers.*
 - **Where:** Identify the places where Reeves lived, patrolled, or carried out his duties as a deputy marshal.
 - Examples: *Fort Smith, Arkansas; Indian Territory; Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad; Van Buren, Arkansas; Muskogee and Wetumka, Oklahoma.*
 - **When:** Record the time periods and important events in Reeves's journey.
 - Examples: *1838 (Reeves's birth), 1861-1865 (Civil War), 1865 (Slavery abolished), 1875-1907 (Reeves served as a deputy U.S. marshal).*
 - **Why:** Explore Reeves's motivations and reasoning behind his journey.
 - Examples: *Desire for justice and lawfulness, Commitment to public safety, Duty to serve his country, Opportunity for personal independence, etc.*
4. Model Expectations:
- Choose one or two sections to model for students. For instance:
 - Who: Write "Reeves - Lawman, U.S. Marshal, Master of Disguise." Discuss how Reeves played multiple roles—not just lawman, but also a tracker, detective, and master of disguise.
 - What: Write: "*Captured criminals and upheld the law in the Wild West.*" Ask students to come up with other accomplishments he made from the book.
5. Guide Student Work:
- Encourage students to use evidence from the book, class discussions, and notes to complete their chart.
 - Allow students to work in small groups or pairs, brainstorming together before filling out their charts.
 - Circulate the room, answer questions, and offer prompts.
6. Class Discussion and Sharing:
- After students complete their charts, facilitate a class discussion to share their findings.
 - Create a master chart on the board, asking students to contribute ideas for each section.

Pioneer Legacy Profile: (15-20 minutes)

1. Hand out the Pioneer Legacy Profile graphic organizer to each student. Explain that the purpose of this activity is to understand Bass Reeves's contributions to westward expansion and their relevance to American history.
2. Define and explain the three sections of the organizer to ensure students clearly understand what is expected. Provide examples to guide their thinking:
 - **Values & Traits:** Students should identify the personal qualities and values that enabled Reeves to succeed as a leader and explorer. Encourage them to consider how these traits helped him overcome challenges and accomplish his mission.
 - Examples: *Resilience, Integrity, Courage, Justice & Fairness, etc.*
 - **Impact on History:** Students will evaluate the long-term significance of Reeves's career and how his actions influenced the development of the United States. Encourage students to think beyond *what he did* and focus on *why his accomplishments mattered* in shaping history and westward expansion.
 - Examples: *Brought law and order to the Wild West, helping to make frontier towns safer for settlers, businesses, and travelers.*

- *Set a precedent for equal justice under the law, proving that a Black lawman could be as effective as his white counterparts, breaking racial barriers in law enforcement.*
 - *Helped enforce federal authority in Indian Territory, reducing crime in a region that had become a haven for outlaws and fugitives.*
 - *Challenged racial stereotypes in the 19th century, showing that Black Americans could serve in leadership roles and contribute to the stability of the growing nation.*
 - *Inspired American ideals of resilience and justice, with his legacy continuing to influence how the Wild West is remembered in books, films, and law enforcement history.*
 - **Lessons for Today:** Students will reflect on the relevance of Reeves's story in the modern world. This section encourages students to consider what we can learn from his experiences and how his legacy continues to inspire values such as justice, resilience, and integrity in law enforcement and society.
 - *Examples: Perseverance in overcoming obstacles, Integrity and fairness in leadership, Bravery in the face of danger, Ingenuity in problem-solving, Equality and breaking racial barriers, etc.*
3. Model Expectations:
 - Use one example for each category to demonstrate how to fill out the organizer effectively. For instance, under "Values & Traits," write "*Integrity*," explaining that Reeves upheld the law fairly and without bias, even when it was difficult. He arrested criminals regardless of their race or status and even brought in his own son for murder, proving his unwavering commitment to justice.
 4. Guide Student Work:
 - Encourage students to use evidence from their reading, class discussions, and notes. Allow them to brainstorm individually, in pairs, or in small groups before completing the organizer independently.
 5. Class Discussion and Sharing:
 - After students complete the organizer, facilitate a class discussion where they share their responses. Write key ideas on the board for each category to reinforce understanding and encourage collaboration.

Wrap-Up: (10 minutes)

1. Begin wrapping up the lesson by posing the following reflective questions to the class. Encourage students to share their thoughts and connect their answers to what they wrote in their Pioneer Legacy Profile organizer:
 - *Why do you think Reeves is still remembered today?*
 - *What do Reeves's actions teach us about justice and integrity?*
 - *How might the United States' westward expansion have been different without Reeves's contributions?*
 - *What values from Reeves's life—like justice, integrity, or resilience—do you think are still important in today's world?*
2. Reflection Exit Ticket: Distribute an index card or have students complete a short journal entry answering one of the following prompts:
 - *What is one thing about Reeves's legacy that is most important for people to remember, and why?*
 - *How does learning about Reeves help you better understand the challenges of law enforcement and justice during westward expansion?*

- *If you were inspired by Reeves's story, what actions or values would you embrace to make a difference in the world?*
- 3. Wrap up the discussion by connecting Reeves's legacy to larger themes such as integrity, perseverance, justice, and ingenuity. Highlight how these values not only helped bring law and order to the American frontier but also continue to inspire leadership, fairness, and problem-solving in today's world.
 - Example Closing Statement: Bass Reeves embodied the spirit of the American West—courage, resilience, and a commitment to justice. His integrity and ingenuity brought law and order to a lawless frontier, proving that fairness and perseverance can shape a nation. His legacy continues to inspire the American values of justice, hard work, and leadership.

Enrichment Activity Options

These activities are designed to extend learning by exploring the natural and technological aspects of Bass Reeves's time using the *Field Guide to Indian Territory & the South Plains Animals and Plants* and *Field Guide to Indian Territory & the South Plains Weaponry & Technology* sections of the book. Teachers can use these options to encourage creativity, critical thinking, and hands-on exploration of how Reeves survived, enforced the law, and navigated the challenges of the Wild West.

1. A Field Guide to Indian Territory & the South Plains Animals and Plants:

- **Wildlife & Survival: Skunk, Cattle, and Horse**
 - Students can research how skunks survive in the Wild West and compare their defense mechanisms to other animals. Allow them to make a presentation with images and explanations.
 - For instance, compare skunks with porcupines and armadillos.
 - Students explore how cattle were essential to the economy of the American West and how Reeves encountered cattle rustlers.
 - Research how cattle drives worked during the time of Westward Expansion. Investigate cattle rustling. Create a "Wanted Poster" for a fictional cattle rustler.
 - Students can research and discover why horses were so vital for law enforcement in the Wild West.
 - Research different horse breeds. Compare horses to modern police transportation. Draw a lawman's horse - choosing breed, color, and abilities that would best serve a U.S. marshal in the Wild West.
- **Wild Plants of the American West**
 - Students can do a deep dive into how plants helped settlers in the Wild West. Discover how plants like prairie sunflowers, prickly pear cactus, and mesquite trees were used for food, survival, and daily life.
 - Research and describe how pioneers and Native Americans used sunflowers for food, oil, and dye. Learn how people ate the fruit of the prickly pear cactus, used it for medicine, and even as a water source. Discover how the mesquite tree was used for firewood, fence posts, and even making flour from its pods.

- Students can design a survival kit for a U.S. marshal, listing how these plants would help on long journeys.
 - **Wild West Apothecary: Medicine & Healing Plants**
 - Students build a small diorama of how plants from Reeve's time had medicinal and practical uses. Research how prickly pear cactus pads were used to treat wounds and burns. How mesquite gum was used for stomach issues, and its leaves for antibacterial treatments. Students can research other plants common to the Southwest plains that were used for medicine and add them to their diorama.
- 2. **A Field Guide to Indian Territory & the South Plains Weaponry & Technology**
 - **Design a Deputy Marshal Badge:**
 - Students can design their own star-shaped marshal badge using paper, foil, or cardboard. Have them research why badges were star-shaped and what they represented.
 - Students can create a motto or slogan for their badge.
 - **The Impact of Barbed Wire:**
 - Students build a mini-fence model using yarn, pipe cleaners, or string to simulate barbed wire (without the sharp edges). Then, they research and compare open-range cattle ranching before and after barbed wire.
 - Students can debate: Was barbed wire good or bad for the West?
 - **Lance STEM Exploration:**
 - Students create mini-lances using straws, dowels, or paper tubes, adjusting weight, length, and launch angle to explore how these factors affect distance and accuracy. They test their designs by gently throwing them and measuring the results. Afterward, they analyze how weight distribution, balance, and shape influence a lance's flight path.
 - Students construct small-scale lances from materials like paper, straws, craft sticks, or cardboard to test strength and durability. By applying weight or gentle pressure, they compare how different materials hold up and discuss how Indigenous engineers selected materials for both flexibility and strength. The activity helps students understand historical design choices and how materials impact function.
 - Students balance a model lance on their finger to locate its center of gravity, then shift weight using clay or paper clips to observe changes in stability. This experiment demonstrates how weight distribution affects movement and control, much like how warriors adjusted their lances for better accuracy in hunting or battle.
- 3. **Cross-Sectional Project: Map Your Neighborhood Journey.** Combine both field guides into a larger project:
 - **Journey:**

Send students on a "Deputy Marshal's Journey" to map a familiar area (e.g., school grounds, a park, or their neighborhood). Their map should reflect how Bass Reeves patrolled vast territories by including:

 - Compass directions to navigate rough terrain.
 - Key landmarks for strategic law enforcement (e.g., hiding spots, vantage points, or safe zones).
 - Scale drawings to understand distance and travel challenges, just as Reeves planned his routes.

- **Expedition Supplies Packing List:**

Ask students to create their own "Deputy Marshal Survival Kit," selecting modern tools and supplies they'd need to patrol and survive in the Wild West. They must justify their choices by comparing them to the challenges Reeves faced, such as:

- Tracking outlaws – Would they rely on binoculars, or, like Reeves, use keen observation and knowledge of the land?
- Faced with extreme weather, would they prefer modern insulated clothing or endure the elements with Reeves's rugged gear?
- Finding food and water – Would they carry bottled water and packaged food, or learn survival skills like using prickly pear cactus for hydration?