

Eighth-Grade Social Studies Exit Project: Creating a “Tree of Liberty”

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Most Americans argue that the government of the United States is based on the idea that all people are guaranteed freedom and liberty in a democratic society. This idea has been restated in famous speeches and written documents a number of times during American history. In the Declaration of Independence (1776), Thomas Jefferson wrote: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Other documents proclaiming freedom and liberty as basic rights for Americans and as important themes in United States history that you have examined during your middle school experience include: Mayflower Compact; Seneca Falls Manifesto; Gettysburg Address; Franklin D. Roosevelt’s speech declaring war on Japan and Germany; and Supreme Court’s *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision.

Despite these claims, the experience of being an American has varied for people from different backgrounds. Some famous speeches and written documents from United States history disagree with the idea that this country has always guaranteed freedom and liberty in a democratic society to all people. They also dispute the idea that the United States has stood for freedom and fairness in international issues.

Speaking for civil rights for African Americans at the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. claimed: “One hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.”

Other documents that question whether the United States has always championed freedom and liberty for all people that you have examined during your middle school experience include: William Lloyd Garrison’s editorial challenging slavery; Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I A Woman” speech; Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé statement on surrendering to American troops; Bartelemeo Vanzetti’s speech to the court when he was convicted of murder; and statements opposing United States involvement in Vietnam.

The Project: This project is an opportunity to present your view of American history by constructing a “Tree of Liberty” that shows the ideas and events that have defined this country. Your task is to create either a poster on 2’ x 3’ foot poster board or a 3-dimensional representation that summarizes what you have learned about United States history and symbolizes what it means to be an American. While your ideas are completely your own, you must refer to actual historical events, issues, people and ideas and include them in your “tree.” Your final project must be accompanied by a 500 word written description of your “tree.” Be prepared to explain your work in an oral presentation to the class.

Assessment: In order to receive full credit for your work, you must satisfy the following guidelines. The project must: a) Tell your views of the American experience. b) Have a clear theme or metaphor summarizing United States history. c) Include facts and details as examples and to support your arguments. d) Be based on accurate and relevant historical data. e) Be organized in a clearly understandable way. f) Be neat, eye-catching and visually appealing. g) Demonstrate evidence of hard work and thoughtfulness.

- Your written work must: a) Explain the all ideas and images about United States history presented in your project. b) Be typed without spelling and grammatical errors.
- Your oral presentation must: a) Explain all ideas and images about United States history presented in your project and report. b) Capture and hold the attention of your audience (it can be presented in the form of a poem, song or rap).