

Oliver Otis Howard: Crusader for Justice

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can you follow Oliver Otis Howard's example and pursue justice in your life?
- **Virtue:** Justice
- **Definition** – Justice is the capacity to determine and preserve our common rights.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about how Oliver Otis Howard fought for justice for recently freed African-Americans following the Civil War. They will also discuss ways that they can promote justice in their lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze the actions of Oliver Otis Howard and how he promoted justice.
 - Students will apply their knowledge of justice to their own lives and determine ways that they can promote justice.
- **Background**
 - Oliver Otis (O.O.) Howard was born in Leeds, Maine in 1830. The man who civil rights pioneer W.E.B. Dubois once referred to as, "an honest and sincere man," whose life was marked by a quest for justice. Howard would fight for justice for those who had seen the least of it. His idea of justice came from a strong faith in God and of God's justice.

Howard studied at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, graduating fourth in his class in 1854. He was an earnest young man who did not drink, swear, or smoke. He was influenced by the speeches of William Seward and came to believe, even as a young man, that slavery was wrong. However the cadets were very much divided over slavery, with many coming from the South, so Howard kept his views to himself to avoid controversy.

Howard's faith was important to him throughout his life. Eventually he would become known to many as the, "Christian General." While stationed in Tampa, Florida during the Third Seminole War, Howard underwent a religious awakening. While attending a Methodist tent meeting he decided to answer the alter call after observing some young men mocking a disabled woman who had taken the call:

"I asked myself, which would you rather be, on the side of those who were trying to do God's will, or on the side of the scoffers?"

His increased faith led to an increased sense that the institution of slavery was unjust. Howard would refer to slavery as a "gigantic evil," and could not understand how anyone could support it. He believed it was impossible to reconcile Christianity and slavery:

"I do not learn in any of the Commandments or in the Gospel of Christ, that black men are excepted...As Christians our first duty towards them is to recognize their manhood."

Upon his return from Florida he considered the ministry, but instead took a position teaching math at West Point. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Howard accepted a commission as a colonel in a Maine militia and saw much action. At the Battle of Seven Pines, during the Peninsula campaign, he was wounded, leading to the loss of his right arm. His valor in that battle would be recognized some thirty years later with the Medal of Honor. Reflecting on his loss in 1869, he thought it a worthwhile sacrifice:

"Whenever I feel a returning throb from an old wound, I thank God I lost what I did in procurement of practical liberty. I thank God it was done in opening up a chance for the colored people..."

After a three month recuperation, he was promoted to Brigadier General in the fall of 1861. Howard went on to serve in many of the major battles of the war, and in all three major theatres. During the Atlanta, Georgia, and Carolinas campaigns, Howard became part of General William T. Sherman's inner circle. Sherman valued his expertise as an administrator and organizer for the Army. It was while in Georgia that Howard first observed what would come to define his postwar life, the attempt to educate former slaves. On the Georgia Sea Islands, where Sherman had allowed freed blacks to settle, he observed volunteers who had come south to set up schools, and, "took an active interest in their humane work."

- **Vocabulary**

- Sincere
- Quest
- Cadets
- Alter
- Institution
- Commission
- Colonel
- Militia
- Peninsula campaign
- Valor
- Medal of Honor
- Sacrifice
- Recuperation
- Expertise
- Freedmen's Bureau
- Crusade
- Sprung
- Reputation
- Humanitarian
- Herculean
- Singular
- Grapple
- Genuine
- Homogeneous
- Integrate
- Testimony
- Opposition
- Lamented
- Missionary
- Zeal
- Vocational
- Tirelessly
- Advocate

- **Introduce Text**

- Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the "Walk-In-The-Shoes" question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**

- As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Oliver Otis Howard? Why is his life significant?
 - What was Howard's purpose?
 - What did Howard do to accomplish his purpose?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - "Freedmen's Bureau." The Social Welfare History Project. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/eras/freedmen%E2%80%99s-bureau/>
 - "The Freedman's Bureau 1865-1872." National Archives. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/>
 - Dubois, W.E.B. "The Freedmen's Bureau." *Atlantic Monthly*, 1901, 354-65.
 - Howard, Oliver. *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard: Major General of the Army*. New York, NY: Baker and Taylor Company, 1907.
 - Muller, John. *Frederick Douglass in Washington, D.C.: The Lion of Anacostia*. The History Press, 2012.
 - "Oliver O. Howard | Biography - United States Military Officer." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Oliver-O-Howard>
 - "Oliver Otis Howard Papers Online." Bowdoin College Library. Accessed June 17, 2015. <https://library.bowdoin.edu/arch/oliver-otis-howard/>
 - Richardson, Anne. "Oliver Otis Howard - General in the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Indian Wars." Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission. 2002. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.ochcom.org/howard/>

Handout A: Oliver Otis Howard: Crusader for Justice

Background

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Narrative

Following the end of the Civil War, O.O. Howard was named to be the commissioner of the new Freedmen’s Bureau whose mission was to provide aid and justice to former slaves and to help rebuild the American republic. It would become, in Howard’s words, “A struggle for what I have called the manhood of the black man in labor, justice, suffrage, and the schools.” To Howard, it would be a crusade for justice:

“The rights of the freedmen...are the direct reverse of the wrongs committed against him...I never could detect the shadow of a reason why the color of the skin should impair the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Howard’s quest for justice sprung from his faith, but also from his belief in the American Founding as the best chance for man to see justice on Earth. He recognized that in 1865, the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution had not been realized, but their goals gave him hope and optimism:

“We do not recognize that Declaration today. On the next Fourth of July...I can say: Liberty now, union now, liberty and union, one and inseparable...it will not be long before the revolution will be completed and we shall realize the blessings.”

Howard’s reputation as a war hero and as a humanitarian made him a logical choice to lead this crusade for justice. It required a herculean effort and would not always be successful. However, it was, as W.E.B. Dubois reflected in 1901, “One of the most singular and interesting of the attempts made by a great nation to grapple with the vast problems of race and social condition.”

Under O.O. Howard’s leadership, the Freedmen’s Bureau divided the slave states into ten districts with the goal of re-establishing the constitutional order. Theirs was an attempt to make a truly more perfect union, establishing justice for the freedmen, and providing for their general welfare. Howard looked to truly secure the blessings of liberty:

“...It requires the genuine, practical spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ to make our people agree, to reconstruct our government, to make us what we ought to be—a united, homogeneous people with homogeneous institutions...I hope that these wrongs will all be righted and full justice secured to the freemen by our Government”

Howard had the challenge to integrate four million former slaves into southern society. He believed that humanitarian assistance could help uplift these people. The first order was to provide basic needs and trainloads of food and clothes were given to both former slaves and white refugees. Between its founding in 1865 and 1869, the Freedmen’s Bureau distributed some 21 million meals at a cost of over \$4 million. By June 1869 over half a million patients had been treated by the Bureau’s doctors and surgeons.

O.O. Howard’s Freedmen’s Bureau also set up informal tribunals to assist with legal matters since the southern courts refused to allow sworn testimony from blacks. The Bureau solved civil matters for African Americans when they were discriminated against by whites. It issued hundreds of marriage certificates for black couples between 1861 and 1869, helping correct one of the many injustices of slavery.

The Bureau was able to successfully resolve issues of back pay for black soldiers who had served in the Union Army. They were able to distribute over eight million dollars to over five thousand claimants; both giving those men their just rewards of their service and helping many families get a foothold in society.

Howard was not without opposition however. President Andrew Johnson became an enemy of the Freedmen’s Bureau almost as soon as he created it because he was in constant struggle with the “Radical Republicans” in Congress (who sought to punish the South for slavery and the war) over its funding. Howard was criticized for lack of attention to administrative detail, but he thought it was most important to travel throughout the South to get a sense of the problem, observe progress, and explain to people what goals they were trying to accomplish. He lamented in 1866 that many southern whites did whatever they could to stop the bureau, acting, as Howard saw it, against their long-term interest as justice for blacks was necessary for there to be justice for all:

“If the simple truth could at once break into the minds of all classes of the south, that elevation of their common people to a higher plane of knowledge and skill would be a positive advantage to the whole.”

With forces working against him, Howard was determined to make the most of his opportunity while he could.

Howard's plan was to focus on education, as it was the one thing that could never be taken away. In its first six years, the Freedmen's Bureau spent over five million dollars on education. Howard made elementary education a priority, building over a thousand schools and staffing them with qualified instructors. In 1901, W.E.B. Dubois remembered their missionary zeal fondly, "They came seeking a new life work in planting New England Schoolhouses among the white and black of the South. They did their work well. That first year they taught 100,000 souls and more."

By 1870, there were over 150,000 children enrolled in schools founded by the Freedmen's Bureau. In addition to elementary education, the Bureau worked on vocational training, and even higher education. Howard University in Washington, D.C., named for Oliver Howard, was founded to train the nation's black lawyers, doctors, dentists, and teachers. Most of the major traditionally black universities, such as Howard, Hampton, and Fisk, can trace their roots back to the Freedmen's Bureau. Howard worked tirelessly for justice through education. In a letter in 1873, Frederick Douglass remembered that on one Fourth of July, he and Oliver Howard were the only members of the Howard University Board of Trustees to show up for a scheduled meeting.

Howard's time with the Freedmen's Bureau came to a close in 1874, as he was transferred to a command in the West during the Indian Wars. He never lost his reputation as an advocate for education however. In 1882, despite having never met him, Booker T. Washington wrote to Howard, asking him to serve on the Board of Trustees for his new Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Washington wrote, "My boldness in writing you is that I believe you are the one to do us good."

After serving in various commands his military career came to a close with his retirement in 1894. It didn't end his crusade of fighting for justice through education. In June of 1896, the Reverend A.A. Myers convinced Howard to help him raise money for a new college in the Cumberland Gap area of Kentucky. He was able to use his connections to raise thousands of dollars for the school, which had its charter issued in 1897. Because of Howard's suggestion it was named Lincoln Memorial University. Howard remembered Abraham Lincoln talking about how much he valued the loyalty of the Appalachian people during the Civil War and thought it an appropriate tribute. In 1899 he was elected to be the President of its Board of Trustees. According to Professor John A. Carpenter, "The College for the mountain folk is not only a memorial to Lincoln; it is also a living monument to the one-armed soldier."

Oliver Otis Howard lived a life devoted to justice. To divine justice, to human justice, to republican justice. He helped save the republic with his heroism, and to secure the blessings of its liberty to all Americans, and to their posterity. In 1866, in the early days of the Freedmen's Bureau, he was able to get a sense of the work his life would come to be defined by:

"I hope I may be permitted to live to a good old age...That I may tell my children's children of the times when the American people put forth their strength, saved a Republic, broke the chains of four million slaves, and inaugurated genuine, universal, unqualified liberty."