

# WOMEN OF THE WEST



## HOW CHARACTER SHAPED THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

### RECOMMENDED SUBJECT/GRADE:

American History, Grade 8

### OVERVIEW

Students will identify and draw conclusions about the impact of ethical principles and character traits exemplified by women of the early American West, using primary and secondary accounts of extraordinary historical figures.



### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will be able to explain the relationship of "ethics" and "character" using examples of women who helped shape the American West.
- Students will be able to analyze typical challenges faced by women on the frontier and the character traits necessary to survive, as well as thrive.
- Students will apply their understanding of historical examples of character to contemporary relevance and personal decision-making.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

Why does character matter?

### SUPPORTING QUESTIONS:

- What is the difference between ethics and character?
- What common ethical principles and character traits did women of the American West exhibit?
- How did the ethics and character of women influence the development of western communities?

### INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES

- "Women of the West" Imagery Set (one per student group)
- "Women of Character" Primary Source packet (one per student group)
- The Story of Stagecoach Mary (one per student)
- Congressional Resolution template (one per student)
- Chart paper and markers



## THE 5-E LESSON FORMAT

The five steps of a "5E lesson" are: Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate. This model encourages active student learning by first sparking interest, then allowing student-centered exploration, followed by teacher-led explanation, further application of new understandings by students, and finally assessment of understanding.

## ENGAGEMENT

*The "Engagement" phase is designed to capture students' attention with relevant questions, real-world scenarios, or brief interactive experiences to activate prior knowledge and elicit curiosity about the topic.*

1. Begin by presenting a hypothetical scenario and asking students to silently reflect upon it: Imagine it is the 1840s and your family decides to move West to start a new life. You're traveling with other families via wagon train, far from any town or readily available resources. Another family's wagon breaks down; they have little food or water remaining. Your family has just enough to make it to the next settlement. Sharing with them is a humane option but it might very well mean that your own family will go hungry for a day or two. What do you do? What principles guide your decision?
2. Guide students into considering the focus of the lesson by posing the following statement, "The choices we make, especially in difficult situations, are often guided by two important ideas- ethics and character." Share that they will be exploring how the concepts of ethics and character were essential for women of various backgrounds living in the early American West. Ask students to consider the extent to which all humans, regardless of our backgrounds, recognize and value a common set of traits known as "good character."
3. Inform students that they will be examining the definitions of ethics and character by explaining how these concepts influenced women of the West
4. Ask students in pairs or small groups to define "ethics" and "character" in their own words and provide a contemporary example for each. Invite students to share definitions, guiding them to common understandings:  
Ethics: Moral principles that govern a person's behavior; a system of moral principles (e.g., honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility).  
Character: The moral qualities distinctive to an individual; the way someone behaves. It's *who you are* when no one is watching, determined by your choices (e.g., courageous, resilient, compassionate, determined, resourceful).  
Emphasize that ethics are the rules or principles and character is the practice or demonstration of those principles. In other words, good ethics often lead to good character.

## EXPLORATION

*The "Exploration" phase provides students with opportunities to work collaboratively by actively exploring a concept, gathering information, and making observations from evidence.*

1. Provide a brief overview of the American West as a vast, challenging environment with limited infrastructure, populated by diverse populations of Native Americans and increasing migration by Euro American settlers, both groups forming self-reliant communities.
2. Assign students to pairs or groups, allowing time for them to examine the set of images depicting women of the early American West. Challenge students to brainstorm a list of skills, talents, attitudes and/or characteristics women would have needed to survive and thrive within different environments depicted in the images. Ask students to note their thoughts on chart paper with markers.
3. Encourage students to engage in a "walkabout" to silently review the brainstormed lists of other groups. Using their own markers, ask students to place a checkmark on similar characteristics other groups identified. Does the class seem to agree upon common strengths women of the West possessed?

## EXPLANATION

*During this phase, the teacher provides in-depth explanations and clarifies key concepts related to the topic, often incorporating student-generated observations from the exploration phase.*

1. Conduct a whole-class discussion to arrive at common understandings. Use the following questions to focus the discussion:
  - A. What common ethical principles or character traits did you observe across these different women of the American West?  
(Likely answers: resilience, courage, determination, resourcefulness, generosity, faith, community-mindedness, honesty).
  - B. How did the ethics and character of these women influence their own survival and the development of their communities?  
(Likely answers: establishing social norms, caring for others, building trust, overcoming immense hardship, educating children, sharing resources, creating stability where there was none).
  - C. How were ethics and character essential for adapting to a life on the frontier?
2. Inform students that they will be examining the life and experiences of an unusual and exceptional woman of the American West who left few records in her own words, but whose story is told by those who knew her. Share the story of "Stagecoach Mary" pausing frequently to engage students in analyzing additional character traits

exemplified by Mary. How was she driven by her own personal set of ethics? As the story unfolds, create a class T-chart noting how Mary's traits were similar or different from women depicted in the set of images.

## ELABORATION

*Students during the "Elaboration" phase are expected to return to partnerships or group collaborations, as they apply their deeper understanding of the topic, making connections and formulating answers to essential and supporting questions.*

1. Ask students to consider the question, "In the environments of the early American frontier, why would a woman's individual ethics and character be vitally important?" Brainstorm possible responses, such as survival, community building, raising families, maintaining order, etc.
3. Divide students into four groups with a set of primary sources reflecting the experiences of four typical women of the West. Conduct a brief discussion to remind students of the advantages of examining primary sources as historical evidence.
4. Provide time for student groups to read each excerpt carefully, discuss the guided questions and note their conclusions. Challenge student to explain how ethics and character influenced each woman and the choices they needed to make.

## EVALUATION

*The "Evaluation" phase assesses individual student learning, which can be achieved through multiple formats beyond traditional tests or quizzes.*

1. Ask students to assume the role of a United States congressperson who has decided that the role of women in the West should be recognized with a national holiday.
2. Provide students with the Congressional Resolution template and review the tips for writing a resolution. Using the knowledge and understandings they have gained, challenge students to compose a resolution, comprised of four sound reasons why women of the West should be recognized with a national holiday.
3. Invite student volunteers to share their resolutions with the class. What are common character traits identified in the resolutions? Do students generally agree that women of the West deserve such recognition?

## OKLAHOMA STATE ACADEMIC STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

8.9.1 Examine how the concept of Manifest Destiny was used as a motivation and justification for westward movement.

B. Define the concept of Manifest Destiny including its belief in the inevitable spread of American institutions (e.g., religion, government, culture)...

C. Explain how the idea of Manifest Destiny influenced migration by identifying push and pull factors impacting the settlement of western territories.

E. Examine multiple perspectives regarding the justification for westward migration and territorial expansion

8.9.2 Analyze the territorial growth of the United States.

C. Compare the motivations and experiences of individuals and groups who seized opportunities of the West, including those engaged in the California Gold Rush, the settlement of Oregon, and the Mormon migration.

D. Describe the consequences of westward expansion, including the impact on American Indian culture, homelands, and Tribal sovereignty...

## NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES

D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

D2.Civ.8.9-12. Evaluate social and political systems in different contexts, times, and places, that promote civic virtues and enact democratic principles.

D2.Civ.10.9-12. Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.