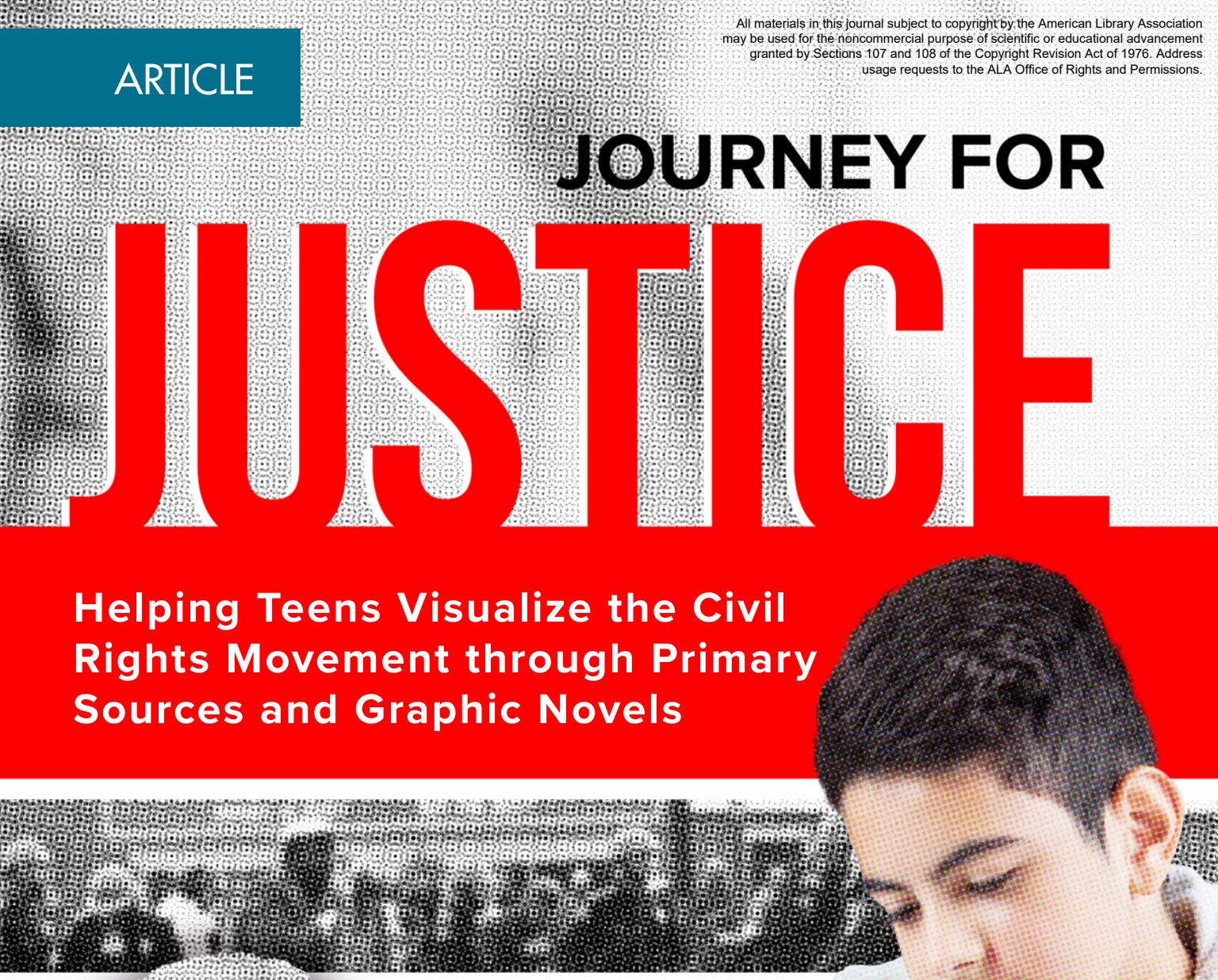
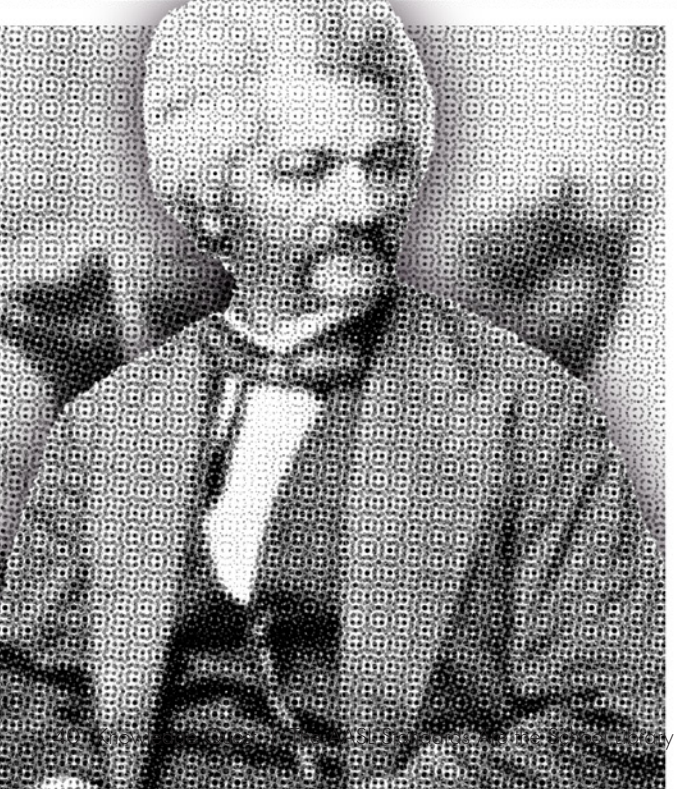
ARTICLE

JOURNEY FOR JUSTICE

Helping Teens Visualize the Civil Rights Movement through Primary Sources and Graphic Novels





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Carl Sagan stated, "You have to know the past to understand the present" (1980). The quote is especially relevant today, given the recent racial unrest and protests occurring across our nation. Educating our learners about the history of the civil rights movement and painful racial issues can help them understand current events and explore ways to address racism.

Primary sources, such as those found on the Library of Congress website, can provide students with a deeper understanding of historical events like the civil rights movement. Lee Ann Potter, director of educational outreach at the Library of Congress, identified six benefits to using primary sources to teach difficult topics. Primary sources:

- serve as points of entry into difficult subjects to start a conversation
- allow students to draw important conclusions
- allow discovery of important details about horrific events of the past, especially the often-overlooked human response
- uncover little known facts and different perspectives
- help students to consider the origins of prejudice and stereotypes
- allow the learning community to confront ghastly topics that feed contemporary fears with the benefit of a buffer created by the passage of time (Potter 2011)

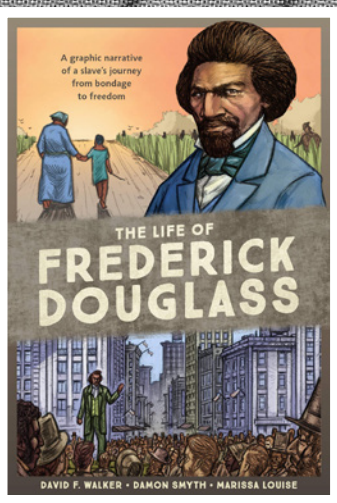
Pairing primary sources with graphic novels about the civil rights movement provides an engaging point of entry to teach learners about this period in our nation's history. These different formats can serve as windows to the past and heighten learners' awareness of the significant and historical contributions of African Americans. Finally, the events, settings, and emotions portrayed through the lens of graphic novels and primary sources can help learners comprehend challenging concepts such as bigotry and racism.

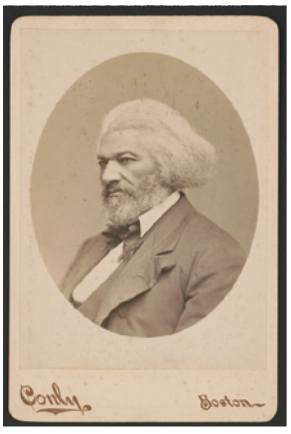
Engaging Learners with Primary Sources

School librarians can collaborate with classroom teachers to incorporate graphic novels and primary sources into lessons taught across the K–12 curriculum. For example, the Library of Congress has a wealth of primary sources available for educators of all grade levels to use. The Library of Congress teachers page provides easy access to selective primary source sets on a variety of topics. These sets, available at <www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/?fa=partof_type:primary+source+set&q=civil+rights+primary+source+sets>, provide historical background information on topics, as well as teaching ideas and tools to guide student analysis.

Educators can learn how to use primary sources effectively with their students on the "Getting Started with Primary Sources" site, located at <www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/getting-started-with-primary-sources>. In addition to topics such as "Why Use Primary Sources" and "Citing Primary Sources," the site provides downloadable primary source analysis tools that learners can use to examine and analyze any type of primary source and record their responses.

The Library of Congress's Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) Teachers Network is an excellent social media platform for sharing ideas regarding how to select and use primary sources with learners. This community of peers is a forum for educators to support one another in their use of primary sources to teach K–12 standards. Registration is available at <https://tpsteachersnetwork.org/registration>.





Photograph of Frederick Douglass from Library of Congress.

Visualizing the Civil Rights Movement

Graphic novels that depict historical events and individuals can lead learners to a deeper understanding of a period in time. The combination of text and images in graphic novels can illuminate experiences and emotions in ways that textbooks and other materials do not. As an American civil rights–era photographer, Charles Moore wrote, "Pictures can and do make a difference. Strong images of historical events do have an impact on society" (Baker 2017).

Visual storytelling through graphic novels and primary sources can help learners unpack and understand the complex and difficult history of the civil rights movement in the United States. The three graphic novels presented in this article provide readers with unique perspectives about the movement. The titles, *The Life of Frederick Douglass, March: Book One*, and *Showtime at the Apollo*, offer snapshot moments into different civil rights eras and approaches. Using these graphic novels together with primary sources can provoke critical conversations about the history of racial oppression and allow learners to reflect on current racism and racial issues relevant to themselves, their community, and the world.

The Journey from Slave to Statesman

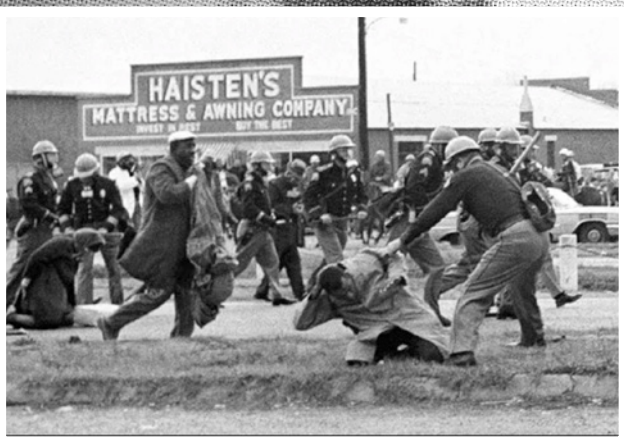
The graphic novel *The Life of Frederick Douglass: A Graphic Narrative of a Slave's Journey from Bondage to Freedom* by David F. Walker (2018) is told through Douglass's eyes. The graphic narrative portrays his incredible life as an escaped slave, abolitionist, freedom fighter, and public speaker. The book, largely based on his writings and speeches, also describes the events that led to Douglass learning how to read, which eventually resulted in his freedom.

Douglass's fame was largely a result of his strong writing and oratory skills. It is extraordinary that Douglass acquired these literacy skills since, at the time, many states had laws prohibiting slaves from reading and writing. As stated in the graphic novel, "One of the most effective weapons for keeping a slave in their place is to deny them education—to limit their ability to think and reason beyond that which their master deems necessary" (Walker, Smith, and Louise 2018, 32).

An effective way to teach students about Douglass's noteworthy literacy skills is to have them examine the graphic novel along with some primary texts. First, read the previous quote to students. After they have read the graphic novel, refer them to pages 22 and 23 and 32 through 42. Once they learn about the challenges and consequences that Douglass faced while learning how to read and write, learners should review some of the documents he wrote. The collection of Frederick Douglass papers at the Library of Congress includes approximately 7,400 items (38,000 images) chronicling Douglass's body of work: <www.loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-papers/about-this-collection>.

Before the lesson begins, school librarians may want to select specific documents for students to review, since the collection is so large. For example, the collection includes the *North Star* papers, an abolitionist newspaper that Douglass started in 1847. A description about Douglass's decision to start the newspaper is available in the graphic novel on pages 104 and 105. Copies of the *North Star* papers are available at <www.loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-newspapers/about-this-collection>.

Students will likely be surprised to learn that Frederick Douglass was the most photographed American in the 19th century. He sat for more portraits during the 1800s than even Abraham Lincoln (NPR 2015). After learners view pictures of Douglass on the Library of Congress website, such as the one above, ask them why they think he posed for so many pictures.



John Lewis (foreground) is beaten by a state trooper in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965. The future congressman suffered a fractured skull. AP Photo.

Next, have students speculate as to why Douglass rarely smiled in the pictures. Then, share with them that Douglass believed that the camera's "truth value" was an effective tool for overcoming racial prejudice. He did not want the public to view him as a happy slave. Instead, by not smiling in his pictures, Douglass felt that the images would more effectively communicate his anti-slavery agenda (NPR 2015).

Marching for Voters' Rights

Congressman John Lewis's recent death, along with months of racial unrest, has resulted in a renewed interest in the life of this civil rights icon. The award-winning *March* graphic novel series (books 1–3) highlights his experiences throughout the civil rights movement. The series portrays the struggles and pains encountered by the "Boy from Troy" and other pioneer civil rights icons in their quest for civil rights.

March: Book One (Lewis and Aydin 2013) features the voters' rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, on March 7, 1965, a day that infamously became known as Bloody Sunday. Lewis, along with the Reverend Hosea Williams and others, led approximately 600 civil rights marchers from Selma to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Like his mentor, Martin Luther King, Jr., Lewis believed in nonviolent civil rights strategies. As the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he was actively involved in helping black people register to vote and training demonstrators to prepare themselves for frequent occurrences of violence.

The protestors' demonstrator trainings were tested that day when they were clubbed, spat on, tear-gassed, and whipped for simply demanding the right to vote. Lewis was struck by an Alabama State Policeman's nightstick, fracturing his skull. The images that day shocked the nation, and within forty-eight hours, there were demonstrations in eighty cities nationwide in support of the marchers. Eventually, Congress responded to the events by passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Little did Lewis know that Bloody Sunday that he, the son of an Alabama sharecropper, would eventually serve for thirty-three years as a U.S. Congressman from Georgia.

School librarians and their teaching partners can enhance students' understanding of the civil rights movement and John Lewis's life by having them read *March: Book One*, followed by viewing the six-minute *USA Today* video of the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, in which Congressman Lewis emotionally reflects on the beating he received at the hands of the Alabama state police: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-DrYRXEqZY>.

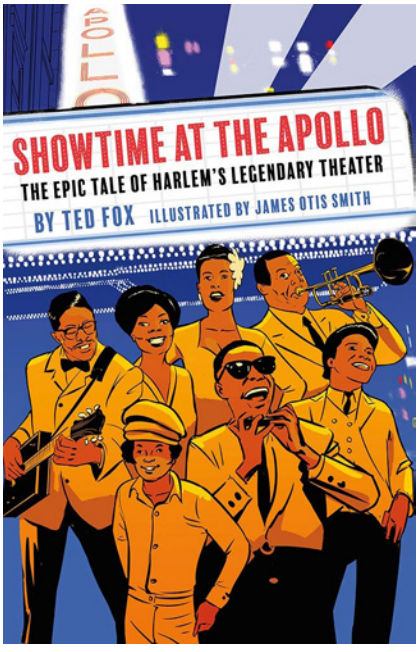
If time allows, have learners view another video of the authors of the *March* series discussing Lewis's life and the novel at the 2014 National Book Festival: <www.loc.gov/item/webcast-6413>. After the video, ask students how it contributed to their understanding of John Lewis's life and the civil rights movement. Have them discuss what Lewis means by "good trouble" in his National Book Festival talk, some of the adversity he faced, and how a comic book influenced the congressman's life.

Next, provide corresponding civil rights primary sources for learners to review. Websites with images and other resources are located in the "Sources of More Information" list that appears at the end of this article. Have each student select one image from these resources, and print it and post it in the school library with a post-it note explaining why they selected it. Then, conduct a gallery walk where students walk around the room and write and post their thoughts about the images. After the gallery walk, have learners discuss the exhibit. Then, leave the exhibit up for the school community to view.

Additional ideas for using *March: Book One* are located on the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund website. The document "Using Graphic Novels in Education: *March: Book One,*" is available at <http://cbldf.org/2014/02/using-graphic-novels-in-education-march-book-one>, and the book publisher's teaching resources are available at <www.topshelfcomix.com/march>.

It's Showtime!

The graphic novel *Showtime at the Apollo* (Fox and Smith 2019) shines the light on key characters and events that were part of the famous Apollo Theater in New York City. The legendary African-American theater, a cultural icon in New York, has played a significant role in music and dance history and African-American history. In addition to featuring music such as swing, jazz, gospel, funk, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop, the Apollo featured the latest in comedy and dance. Whether it was comedians such as Red Foxx,



dancers such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Gregory and Maurice Hines, big bands such as Count Basie and Duke Ellington, or singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, and Michael Jackson, thousands of entertainment legends have performed at the Apollo since it opened in Harlem in 1934. In addition to illustrating the camaraderie and excitement that takes place behind the scenes at the theater, *Showtime at the Apollo* effectively portrays the bias, hatred, and prejudice that often made the performers' lives challenging.

Consider collaborating with a theater and/or music teacher to incorporate theater arts lessons about performers and events at the Apollo that you can use along with the graphic novel with students. When learners read the book, they can even listen along to a Spotify playlist inspired by the graphic novel that features artists in the order that they appear in the book. The playlist is available at <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0NutlPET6hPMEpYYYRyBcp?si=TDw_AcHCQn6uGaTiAb72EQ>.

After students finish reading the book, give them time to review primary sources featuring the theater and some of the legendary artists who performed at the Apollo. Pictures from the Library of Congress website help humanize the African-American entertainers and introduce students to the environment that they lived in when performing at the Apollo. Other resources include the following pictures:

- "Apollo Theater, 253 W. 125th Street, Apollo Theater, Harlem": <www.loc.gov/item/2020703837>
- "[Dancer on Stage] at the Apollo Theater, Harlem, New York City": <www.loc.gov/item/2020703106>
- "[Portrait of Cab Calloway, New York, N.Y. (?) ca. Oct. 1946]": <www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.01021>
- "[Portrait of Hot Lips Page, Apollo Theatre, New York, N.Y., ca. Oct. 1946]": <www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.06701>

After the students read chapter 4, "Amateur Night and the Apollo Audience" (pages 70–91), have them review "Amateur Night," which describes an event pertaining to racial prejudice that occurred on amateur night at the Apollo in November 1938 (West 1938). The document was the result of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) through which writers and millions of other American workers obtained jobs funded through Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program. The purpose of the WPA was to provide useful work for millions of people during the Great Depression. The Library of Congress's American Memory Project houses more than two thousand WPA interviews, such as "Amateur Night": <https://memory.loc.gov/mss/wpalh2/25/2506/25061308/25061308.pdf>.

After students read the WPA article, encourage discussion with questions such as:

- What does this event suggest about race relations in the late 1930s?
- What is the author's view of the actions of the audience and the emcee?
- What would you have done if you were the emcee? In the audience?

Next, show learners the image at <www.loc.gov/resource/vrg.08336> and ask them, How do you think amateur night in 1938 differed from amateur night in 2013, depicted in the image? From 2020?

Students can learn more about legendary artists who performed at the Apollo through the engaging "Walk of Fame Legend Guides" available on the Apollo Theater website at <www.apollotheater.org/education/resources-2/apollo-walk-fame-guides>.

The Apollo Theater also has a guide for educators available on its website <www.apollotheater.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ShowtimeGuide_e.pdf>.

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In addition, the document "March On! The Apollo Theater and Activism in the 1960's" includes an image of a telegram from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Frank Schiffman, manager of the theater from 1935 to 1974: <http://apollotheater.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MarchOnGuide_Feb-2018.pdf>.

Finally, the "Showtime at the Apollo Theatre Guide" shares additional activities, several incorporating primary sources, to use with Fox and Smith's graphic novel: <http://apollotheater.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/EducatorGuide2014_f.pdf>.

Conclusion

The civil rights movement in the United States is one "of hopes and dreams, of challenge and change. It is an American story" (National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel n.d.). Pairing primary sources with graphic novels can help students learn about this complex and compelling American story by helping them interpret historical milestones and introducing them to civil rights pioneers. Working in tandem, the text and images in graphic novels and primary sources can make the civil rights movement realistic and memorable—a journey for justice. Finally, it can deepen students' understanding of difficult racial issues occurring across our nation—a journey well spent.

Sources of More Information

Lesson Plans and Other Educational Resources

Social Justice Graphic Novels Website (funded by an AASL Carnegie Whitney Grant): <https://sjgn.uofsccreate.org>.

University of South Carolina TPS Civil Rights Project Website (funded by the Library of Congress University of South Carolina TPS Grant): <https://scloccivilrights.com>.

"Using Graphic Novels in Education: *Kindred*" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund): <http://cbldf.org/2020/02/using-graphic-novels-in-education-kindred>.

"Using Graphic Novels in Education: *King*" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund): <http://cbldf.org/2014/02/using-graphic-novels-in-education-king>.

"Using Graphic Novels in Education: *March: Book One*" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund): <http://cbldf.org/2014/02/using-graphic-novels-in-education-march-book-one>.

"Using Graphic Novels in Education: *March: Book Two*" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund): <http://cbldf.org/2015/02/using-graphic-novels-in-education-march-book-two>.

"Using Graphic Novels in Education: *March: Book Three*" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund): <http://cbldf.org/2017/07/using-graphic-novels-in-education-march-book-three>.

"Using Graphic Novels in Education: *Nat Turner*" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund): <http://cbldf.org/2014/02/using-graphic-novels-in-education-nat-turner>.

"Using Graphic Novels in Education: *The Silence of Our Friends*" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund): <http://cbldf.org/2013/08/using-graphic-novels-in-education-the-silence-of-our-friends>.

Websites That Contain Civil Rights Pictures

"African American Odyssey – The Civil Rights Era" (Library of Congress): <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aaohtml/exhibit/aopart9.html>.

"A Day Like No Other – Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington": <www.loc.gov/exhibits/march-on-washington>.

"Civil Rights in America" (National Park Service): <www.nps.gov/subjects/civilrights/index.htm>.

"Jim Crow and Segregation" (Library of Congress Primary Sources Set): <www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/jim-crow-segregation>.

John Lewis—Get in the Way (PBS Special): <www.pbs.org/show/john-lewis-get-in-the-way>.

"The NCAACP: A Century in the Fight for Freedom" (Library of Congress Primary Sources Set): <www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/naacp-a-century-in-the-fight-for-freedom>.

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