



An Introduction to North Carolina Freedom Park

The North Carolina

African American

Heritage

Commission

The goal is a public art tribute to freedom as expressed through the African American Experience. It will be called [North Carolina Freedom Park] and will be located in the heart of the state capital as a continuing reminder of the struggles for freedom – and how much more we need to do to achieve equity and justice in our society.”

-Dr. John Hope Franklin

Overview

[North Carolina Freedom Park](#) is a 1-acre green space nestled and public art installation in the heart of downtown Raleigh, North Carolina. With deep reverence for the unyielding spirit of the African American struggle for freedom, this park stands as a timeless tribute to the universal ideals of liberty, resilience, and equality. It includes pathways inscribed with twenty quotes (the **“Voices of Freedom”**) that tell the story of a community's unwavering determination to overcome adversity, paying homage to the countless individuals who contributed to the advancement of civil rights and the pursuit of equality in North Carolina. An **“Arbor”** area reflects the traditions of bush arbors in the African American experience, and a 45-foot-tall, illuminated sculpture at the center of the Park, called the **“Beacon of Freedom,”** stands as a symbol of unity and strength.

The following resource introduces the concept of public art in general, with a focus on NC Freedom Park's **“Beacon of Freedom,”** as well as provides a foundation for understanding the vision and purpose of NC Freedom Park. Post-visit, students will more deeply explore the **“Beacon of Freedom”** as they share their own interpretations, as well as learn the intent of the creators behind the Beacon. With a view towards the future, teachers can then (optionally) have students continue their exploration of related themes by engaging in a [Civic Action Project](#).

Duration

30-45 minutes (time will vary depending on depth of conversation)

Grades

5th - 12th (By adapting reading materials, elementary teachers may also find the activities useful.)

Materials

- [Accompanying Google Slides](#) (optional)
- [NC Freedom Park Informational Video](#) (2 min., 30 sec.)
- [Quotes on the Purpose of Freedom Park](#)
- Architect's Statement on Freedom Park (handout attached)
- [Civic Action Project](#) (optional)
- *Additional activities for use before, during and after your visit to NC Freedom Park, as well as lesson plans for teaching about the people, history and themes of NC Freedom Park more in depth in the classroom, are available [here](#). All educational resources are aligned to the [NC Standard Course of Study/NC Essential Standards in Social Studies](#).*

Preparation

Ensuring that students get the most out of a field trip involves careful planning. See [Preparing for a Fieldtrip to North Carolina Freedom Park](#) for suggestions.

The purpose of North Carolina Freedom Park is to explore the meanings of freedom for all people, through an examination of African American struggles and triumphs throughout North Carolina's history. This includes stories of resistance, resilience, and joy; it also includes acknowledging and grappling with difficult periods of history such as enslavement and Jim Crow - the impacts of which are personal, cultural, and run deep, with connections to our lived experiences today. It is thus important that classrooms have specific community values and expectations regarding how to respectfully and empathetically discuss **“hard history,”** as well as

why doing so is important. For techniques on building such a classroom community, see Carolina K-12's [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events](#).

Specific terms/concepts students should be prepared to encounter in their engagement with NC Freedom Park include:

- Abolitionist
 - Bush Arbor
 - Civil Rights Activist
 - Colored*
 - Emancipation
 - Jim Crow
 - Negro*
 - Refugee
 - Segregation
 - Slavery
 - Suffrage
 - United States Colored Troops
- Students should be explicitly instructed before encountering historical terms such as “colored” and “Negro,” to ensure they understand that these words are no longer appropriate to use outside of discussions of historical documents.

Procedure

Introductory Discussion - What Is Public Art (15 minutes)

1. As a warm up, project an image of the “**Beacon of Freedom**,” without providing any information regarding the image at this point. (A sample image is attached; another is available in the accompanying [Google Slides Deck](#).) Ask students to take one minute to consider it and jot down their first reactions:
 - What do you notice first when examining this structure?
 - How does it make you feel and why?
 - What do you think this might be? What is its purpose? What could it represent and what evidence makes you think this?
2. Let students know that they are viewing an image of a **public art** sculpture called the “Beacon of Freedom,” the centerpiece of the newly created [North Carolina Freedom Park](#) in downtown Raleigh’s Capital area that they will soon be visiting! Tell students that before you share more information about Freedom Park and its Beacon, you first want to hear what they already know about “public art.” Discuss:
 - What is “public art?”
 - Can you think of specific examples of public art that you have seen? Are there any samples of public art in our community and/or around North Carolina?
 - Who should determine what works of public art get created/installed and how they are represented? (The government? The public? The people personally affected by a particular event in time?)
 - In what types of public spaces might we see public art? How do you think it is decided where public art is installed?
 - Why might people want to create public art? Who creates it? (Should only artists create these representations? Explain.) For whom is it created?
 - What purposes do you think public art serves?
3. As students discuss, bring them to the understanding that public art can be defined as “creative work that everyone can enjoy, even if they don’t get to a museum,” or simply “artwork located in a public space.” (*NC Arts Council*)
 - Students may be interested to know that in 1982, the NC General Assembly approved a statewide public art initiative, “Artworks for State Buildings,” reserving a portion of the construction budget for

every new state building so that an artist could be commissioned to create a work of art to enhance the building and grounds. The program operated until 1995 and resulted in 63 artworks.

4. Ask students to consider the differences in **public art**, versus **monuments** and **memorials**, which may be more familiar to them in the context of representing history. As they share their thoughts, lead them to the understanding that:
 - “Monument” usually refers to a commemorative structure or edifice, whereas “memorial” applies to almost anything—including buildings, books, roads, stadiums—that recalls the dead or an experience of profound loss. There is no universal definition, however. The National Park Service, for instance, applies the designation “monument” to any unit—whether or not it foregrounds commemoration—that is established by executive order. ([Source](#))
 - As evidenced by the variety of public art across North Carolina and the nation, including the works produced through the “Artworks for State Buildings” program, public art is more than just a monument in a town square. Rather, according to the [NC State Arts Council](#), public art has become an “art form that is integrated into the fabric of the community and defined by citizen participation. Imagine ordinary objects and places transformed into something extraordinary by the hand of an artist and you are seeing the effects of public art.” Public art may be:
 - Placed inside or out.
 - Commemorative and symbolic or just decorative.
 - Representational or abstract.
 - A single work of art or a whole plaza or park incorporating landscape design, integrated with architecture.
 - Functional, educational or interactive.
 - “Throughout North Carolina, public art is transforming the built environment. No longer limited to oil paintings in lobbies or granite sculptures in gardens, public art today may be landscaping that incorporates words formed by artfully arranged plants, or a “water wall” of hand-carved tiles made by clients of a mental health, developmental disabilities, and substance abuse center. More and more, public art in North Carolina is site-specific, with artists working alongside architects from the start of the design process in order to incorporate art into the finished project. And whereas public art once was mainly reserved for grand government structures like the capitol and the legislative buildings, it now graces locations as varied as they are commonplace—a small-town rose garden or cemetery, a police station, even a farmers’ market.” – *Popular Government, Summer 1999*
5. Teachers can project a few examples of public art around North Carolina and allow students to comment on them. (If there are any pieces of public art in your own community, include these in the discussion. For statewide examples, conduct a “public art in NC” web search.) For example:
 - <https://www.visitnc.com/story/4GR5/public-art-to-admire-in-north-carolina>
 - <https://raleighnc.gov/arts/public-art>
 - <https://www.charlottesgotalot.com/articles/arts-culture/charlotte-public-art>
6. To wrap up the general discussion of public art, project the following quotes, one at a time. Ask a student volunteer to reach each quote out loud. Label one side of the room “Agree,” one side “Disagree,” and the middle “Neutral.” Tell the students to consider the quote, then, when given instructions to do so, carefully move to the side of the room that represents how they feel about the quote. Once students have made their movement, ask them to share what they think the message of the quote is and why they agree, disagree, or are unsure. Ultimately, ask students to weigh in on whether or not public art is important and why.
 - “We express our values by what we build. And in building for future generations of students, we must find a way to include public art – to lift their spirits and feed their souls.” *James Moeser, Chancellor Emeritus, UNC-Chapel Hill*
 - “Public art is necessary, because as we alter the physical environment, we need to be careful how we create space for people. I see public art as one way to make sure there’s attention to people, to

human scale, to creativity and imagination. When public art succeeds, it challenges us to think, it sparks our imagination and stimulates our senses and our mental faculties. It is ‘provocative’ in the best sense of that word.” – *Jean McLaughlin, former director of NC Arts Council & retired director of North Carolina’s Penland School of Crafts*

An Introduction to the Purpose of Freedom Park (8 minutes)

7. With a foundation in the concept of public art, refocus students specifically on NC Freedom Park, reminding them of their exciting planned visit to the Park. Provide some background information for students:
 - [North Carolina Freedom Park](#) is a one-acre park located in downtown Raleigh’s Capital Area that honors the African American experience and struggle for freedom in North Carolina.
 - The seed for Freedom Park began in 2000 with a group of North Carolinians assembled by the [Paul Green Foundation](#) to answer the question, “What are we doing in North Carolina to celebrate emancipation and freedom?” As a result of those conversations, a non-profit organization was formed to plan and build a commemorative park in downtown Raleigh. A team of dedicated supporters raised over \$7 million for the park’s construction, including funds from foundations, businesses, individuals and the N.C. General Assembly.
 - Based on the visionary design of the late [Phil Freelon](#) (renowned architect of Washington DC’s Museum of African American History & Culture), Freedom Park includes 20 inspirational quotes from North Carolina leaders (the “Voices of Freedom”) artfully inscribed along the walls of five walkways leading to the Park’s centerpiece: an inspiring, 45-foot-tall, illuminated metal sculpture reaching towards the sky and called the “**Beacon of Freedom.**”
 - An “**Arbor**” area is located in the southeast quadrant of the park. It is a circular space with benches, harkening to the African American tradition of bush arbors.
 - A concept benefiting from the wisdom of the late Dr. John Hope Franklin (one of America’s most accomplished historians, celebrated author, and Duke professor who served as the founding chair of the Freedom Park Advisory Board), and with the support of the Mellon Foundation’s “Monuments Project,” Freedom Park was constructed by the socially conscious [Holt Brothers Construction Company](#) (founded in 2007 by NC State and NFL football stars Terrence and Torry Holt).
 - The Park opened to the public on Aug. 23, 2023, and is open daily from dawn to dusk. It is managed by the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission, with assistance from the Friends of North Carolina Freedom Park

8. Tell students that once they on-site, as well as after their visit to North Carolina Freedom Park, you will be asking them to share their interpretations of the Park’s design (including the words, the “Beacon of Freedom,” and “The Arbor.”) For now, however, you want them to gather more information about NC Freedom Park and its overall vision. Next, show the 2 ½ minute video, [available here](#), in which the lead architects of NC Freedom Park’s design, the late [Phil Freelon](#) (principal of the Freelon Group) and [Michael Stevenson](#) (in 2014 the Freelon Group was obtained by Perkins + Will) discuss the vision, purpose and design of the Park. Remind students that in public art, design specifics - such as shape, mass, material, imagery, location, text, etc. - can be strategically used to communicate a message. Instruct students to jot down any words or phrases that stand out to them as they watch the video; any questions they have; and what message they think NC Freedom Park will convey based on what they learn in the video.

9. After viewing, allow volunteers to share their thoughts and further discuss:
 - Why does Phil Freelon say that Freedom Park is so important? (“It’s important because North Carolina does not have a park or memorial dedicated to African American contributions...Some of that history is not so bright or positive...but this memorial being in our state’s Capital is really significant.”)
 - Where exactly has Freedom Park been installed and why is this particular location so significant? (“The location of the Park is very significant. It’s right across the street from the NC Legislature, it’s

right next to the NC Archives, and it's half a block from the Governor's Mansion, so it's a natural pathway connecting a lot of key destinations.")

- How might the Park's location impact or influence its meaning and interpretation?
- Who do you think is the intended audience for Freedom Park and why?
- Freedom Park's visionaries and designers have been very explicit that the park is not for any particular race. Why do you think they stress that it is for *all* North Carolinians?
- Considering what you've watched and what we've discussed thus far, what is the ultimate purpose of Freedom park?
- What are you most excited about regarding NC Freedom Park?

The Purpose of Freedom Park: Quote Exploration in Partners (8 minutes)

10. Tell students that you are going to layer some quotes into the discussion by people involved in or supportive of Freedom Park's creation. Students should partner up. Provide each pair with one of 6 quotes below. (These are also provided via the attached handout.) Students should read the quote and take around 3-5 minutes to discuss what the quote tells them about the purpose of Freedom Park and/or the significance of its location.

- "One of the most important concepts that we can ingrain in the hearts and minds of our children, is the importance of understanding, preserving, and maintaining freedom. And if we can remind them of the struggles that have led to bringing about freedom for all of us, I think we certainly stand a great chance of developing very strong and committed citizens. The Freedom Monument will be a symbol that will allow these students to not only be informed but it will introduce them to history, the concept of history, from which I hope they will learn." *Howard Lee*
- "My hope for the Park is that everyone who comes there, young and old, will be affected in some way. They will come and they will read the quotes. They will feel the ambiance of the space. And they'll leave that moment changed somehow for the better. They will learn something and be moved." *Phil Freelon*
- "I think it's important for everybody in our state to understand our history and how we got to where we are, because we're all in it together and we're all going somewhere. A place like this is going to help give everybody that deeper and broader understanding that we need to move forward together." *Michael Stevenson*
- "The goal is a public art tribute to freedom as expressed through the African American Experience. It will be called [North Carolina Freedom Park] and will be located in the heart of the state capital as a continuing reminder of the struggles for freedom – and how much more we need to do to achieve equity and justice in our society." *John Hope Franklin (1915-2009) historian*
- "Locating [Freedom Park] in our Capital City where tens of thousands of children go every year - why do this? It's terribly important...so many times young people find going to a thing like this where they can touch something or feel something catalyzes all they've been taught in school." *Dr. William Friday*
- "Our public art and public spaces proclaim what and who we value, and what we aspire to achieve. With the construction of North Carolina Freedom Park in a very prominent location in the state capital, we are reclaiming a neglected history and proclaiming through that history how much we value Freedom. The premise of the park is that the people who can speak with the greatest power, poignancy and moral authority about Freedom, are the people who were denied it most completely...the people who were enslaved and their descendants. So, words about Freedom are the 'monuments' in Freedom Park. Words that were spoken and written by Black North Carolinians of different backgrounds, and from different time periods, are artfully inscribed on the walls of five walkways that lead to the towering, illuminated sculpture at the park's center called the Beacon of Freedom. The Beacon symbolizes the flame of Freedom that lit the soul of every slave, and that must continue to inspire and guide us today. Twenty years in the making, it is the product of the vision, hard work and commitment of many people. Freedom Park will be a legacy of our times to future generations." *Dr. Reginald Hildebrand*

11. After students have had time to discuss in their pairs, bring the class back together and have students report out on each quote and what it tells us regarding the purpose of Freedom Park. Ask follow up questions to encourage deeper conversation as appropriate.

Next Steps/Homework Options (Time Varies)

12. And of the following options are well placed next steps in preparing students for their visit to NC Freedom Park:
 - **Reading & Reflections: “There Is Power & Truth in What Lies Below the Surface”** - To culminate what they have discussed thus far, provide students with the attached Architect’s Statement on Freedom Park and the corresponding questions. Students can complete this at the end of class (individually or with reading partners) or for homework.
 - **Exploring Raleigh’s Public Spaces** - You might also discuss with students that there are other public spaces throughout Raleigh’s Capital Area (use the [accompanying Google Slides #5 & #6](#) for examples of such spaces.) Ask students to share whether they have visited and/or know anything about these spaces, and/or the namesakes represented in/by the various spaces. Students can be assigned to learn about one of these spaces and its namesakes, as well as comparing/contrasting what they learn to Freedom Park and its namesakes.
 - **North Carolina Freedom Park Field Notebook** – Teachers can also move into an introduction of the concept of freedom and the [NC Freedom Park Field Notebook activity](#) provided by NC Freedom Park. This activity is designed to ensure students have a meaningful on-site experience, in which they take the time to critically consider various aspects of the Park and the people commemorated in its “Voices of Freedom” by completing the [Freedom Park Field Notes](#), a printable journal of engaging, hands-on activities to be filled out before, during, as well as after their trip to the Park.
 - **The Leaders Behind the Words: NC Freedom Park’s “Voices of Freedom”** – This activity is also well placed as a next step. In [“The Leaders Behind the Words,”](#) students will learn about one of the leaders behind the powerful “Voices of Freedom,” quotes located throughout North Carolina’s Freedom Park, as well as get a visual sense of the geographical diversity represented by the “Voices of Freedom,” by engaging in a Google Earth exploratory activity.

Post-Visit: Returning to NC Freedom Park’s “Beacon of Freedom” (15+ minutes)

13. Post-visit, remind students of their introduction to NC Freedom Park via the warm-up discussion (see #1 above) that focused on the Beacon of Freedom. Now that students have seen the Beacon, the public art centerpiece of NC Freedom Park, have them share their own interpretations of it. (If students completed [Freedom Park Field Notes](#), they might refer to pages 11 & 12 while discussing. Additional discussion questions are available in [Post-Visit Prompts & Strategies for Discussion & Reflection.](#)) Discuss:
 - What first came to mind when you saw the “Beacon of Freedom?” What emotions or feelings did the Beacon evoke in you?
 - What artistic techniques were used to create the Beacon? (Consider the shape, materials, colors, and textures used.) Why do you think these particular decisions were made by the designers and how do these techniques contribute to the overall impact of the artwork?
 - How does the “Beacon of Freedom” interact with its surroundings? Do you think there is anything significant about its specific location within NC Freedom Park? How does the environment surrounding the Beacon effect your interpretation of it?
 - Does the sculpture invite any specific actions or reactions? Can you interact with the sculpture in any way (touching, moving around it, etc.)? How does the sculpture's interactivity or lack thereof affect your experience of it?

- What do you think the Beacon represents or symbolizes? What do you think the artist was trying to convey through this sculpture? What is the Beacon’s message to us?
 - What particular quotes within NC Freedom Park do you feel most directly connect with the “Beacon of Freedom” and why? (e.g., "My father passed the torch to me which I have never go out." Lyda Moore Merrick; “There is another peculiarity about the people of North Carolina....There seems to be more of the unquenchable fire of freedom in the eyes of these people than in those of any other people we have visited.” Robert Hamilton)
14. Go over North Carolina Freedom Park’s stated interpretation of “The Beacon of Freedom,” while ensuring students understand that any of their own alternative interpretations are valid, as long as they provide evidence to back up their opinions.
- The Beacon is a 45-foot abstract metal art structure depicts a giant flame. The flame characterizes the spirit of African Americans who for generations struggled, and continue to struggle, to be free and to be treated as equal members of society, with the same rights, resources, and opportunities. Within the African American community, the desire to be free burns eternal. This feeling and the hope of one day enjoying the same rights and being treated equal to others is expressed through the Beacon of Freedom. The Beacon also serves as an indication of hope for a better and more equitable future. In addition to being a guiding light, it represents the freedom we all continue to strive for.
15. Further discuss:
- Based on this interpretation, what actions do you think the Beacon hopes to inspire in us all?
 - What are some specific ways we might ourselves, even as young people, contribute to the ongoing fight for freedom? What freedoms, current issues/problems, etc. are most important to you? How could you specifically work to improve these issues?

(Optional) Engage Students in a “Civic Action Project”

16. While NC Freedom Park provides incredible lessons in our history, it also keeps an eye towards our future, asking visitors to consider how they will keep the flame for freedom burning now and in the future. Thus, an excellent culmination to a visit for classrooms with time is having students engage in a Civic Action Project, in which they tackle an issue they care about. The [Constitutional Rights Foundation](#), a non-partisan organization, provides a detailed model in the free [Civic Action Project](#) (CAP.) CAP involves students identifying an issue or problem that matters to them, connecting it to public policy, then taking “civic actions” to try to impact their selected issue/problem. (Teachers can tailor the program as they see fit, as well as choose to thematize or limit the scale of the issues students are able to choose.) Visit their website for the detailed activities and procedures.

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