



# SPHERE

Teaching Civic  
Culture Together

## The Slave Who Changed the Course of American Medicine

### Lesson Overview

*Featured article: "The Slave Who Changed the Course of American Medicine" by Paul Meany*

In this lesson, students will learn about the history of an enslaved man, Onesimus (pronounced *oh NESS ih mus*), who helped introduce inoculation to the American colonies in the early 1700s.

Unfortunately, as with many contributions by enslaved people, his role was downplayed or deliberately excluded from the historical record for hundreds of years. As history educators, we must work to rectify this. Read Onesimus's story and learn how he was instrumental in advancing public health in the colonies.



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## Warm-Up

Before germ theory was developed in the late 1800s, people did not know the mechanisms that made people sick. Nevertheless, societies implemented effective measures to combat the spread of disease, including quarantine, inoculation, and vaccination. Do you know what each of these terms means? How does each of those practices help to protect our health?

Unfortunately, Watch the following short videos about quarantine, inoculation, and vaccination. After watching each video, answer the questions.

### Quarantine Explained by Writer Lisa Hilton

- What is the origin of the word “quarantine”?
- Where and when did quarantine first develop?
- What were the effects of the Venetian quarantine policy?

### Inoculation and Vaccination Explained by Dr. Josefa Steinhauer

- What is the dictionary definition of “inoculation”?
- In your own words, explain the Chinese practice of insufflation against smallpox.
- When did variolation become common in Europe?
- Describe how Edward Jenner vaccinated people against smallpox.
- What have been some objections to vaccines since they were first used?
- Why do doctors and public health officials recommend vaccination?

## Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

Read the article, and then answer the following questions:

- Slavery was legal and common worldwide until the 1800s. In Boston in the early 1700s, Europeans enslaved Native Americans and Africans. How did Cotton Mather come to be the owner of Onesimus?
- It appears that Cotton Mather did not know Onesimus's wife. The writer suggests that Onesimus and his wife may have lived in separate households. If true, what does this situation teach us about the institution of slavery in New England at the time?
- Cotton Mather discussed inoculation with Onesimus, a man he had enslaved. Mather then promoted the practice among other Bostonians, not hiding that he had first learned the procedure from an African. What does this fact tell us about the character of Cotton Mather?

- How did the inoculation method described by Onesimus help the people of Boston during the smallpox epidemic of 1721?
- George Washington's order to inoculate the troops of the Continental Army against smallpox was unpopular. How do such anti-vaccination sentiments represent a historical pattern?
- Use your knowledge from the warm-up activity. Why did Jenner's vaccination method replace Onesimus's inoculation procedure?
- The F. A. Hayek quote in the penultimate paragraph says that the human ability to innovate and communicate—not the availability of resources—is the driver of economic progress. Do you agree? Why or why not?

## Extension Activity/Homework

### Make a Video about a Historical Place

With the advent of YouTube, there's been an explosion in videos documenting how ordinary people changed history. Often the video creators are not professional historians but teachers, history buffs, and advocates for social change and inclusiveness.

Self-described hobby historian Jazz Dottin is a YouTuber who unearths history gems in her home state of Massachusetts. Jazz's videos usually feature her in front of a historical marker or plaque presenting a subject about black history that has been overlooked by mainstream historians and museums.

Watch Jazz's [video about Onesimus](#). Think about why Jazz's presentation is compelling. For example, she's genuinely excited to tell the story, she's personable, and she uses a touch of irony and sarcasm.

Your task is to make a three-minute video about a historical place in your community. You can choose a well-known location or a "hidden gem" (as Jazz calls these spots).

### Instructions

- Research your local history. Find a location that played a crucial part in your community's history. A good way to begin your search is to Google "historical markers in \_\_\_\_\_." Another place to look is the local history museum or historical society. Ask your teachers, parents, or other adults for suggestions. Many people are interested in history and will be happy to help you.
- After choosing your location, research what happened at that spot. Make sure you know the answers to the following questions:
  - What significant event happened at this location? Provide specific details, including the historical patterns or events leading up to the event, relevant dates, and the names of important people involved.

- What were the effects of the events that occurred at this location? Think about long-term impacts, such as how institutions, social practices, and laws changed as a result.
- What connections, if any, do you see between this event and current trends?
- Imagine a counterfactual history. How would history differ if the event had not occurred or had occurred elsewhere?
- Write a 500-word script about the history of the place. (A speaker with an average speaking speed will say about 500 words in three to four minutes.)
- Fact-check your information and include a works-cited page with links to your sources.
- Use your phone to film a video at the location of the historical marker or plaque. Use Jazz's video as your model. Look at the camera and tell the story as if you were explaining it to a friend.
- Follow your teacher's instructions on how to submit the video. One easy way is to [upload your video](#) to YouTube and send the link to your teacher. Submit the script and works cited to your teacher for evaluation.