

America's Journey

Tri-Valley: Grades 11–12

Length: Year long

Core disciplines: American History, Government, Civics, Geography, ELA

America's Journey is a year-long Expeditionary Learning expedition in which TVS students investigate how the United States has defined liberty, freedom, democracy, citizenship, and belonging across time. Through close reading, primary-source analysis, fieldwork, case studies, and historical research, TVS students examine both celebrated and overlooked stories connected to Washington, DC; Harpers Ferry; Gettysburg; Monticello; and New York City.

This expedition is designed for TVS students who discover history and government through original source documents. The Declaration of Independence and Constitution are foundational texts that students will return to repeatedly throughout the year. Understanding the Founding Fathers—their ideals, contradictions, historical context, and the world they inhabited—is essential to this journey. TVS students will grapple with how these founding documents of the “great experiment” have been interpreted, challenged, and expanded across American history.

The expedition emphasizes that history is not simply a collection of dates and famous individuals. It is an ongoing conversation shaped by evidence, memory, power, place, and perspective. Our students will ask whose voices are represented, whose voices have been excluded, and how Americans have worked to expand the meanings of liberty and freedom.

Standards Alignment

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and social-studies literacy practices, including:

- **W.11-12.1:** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- **W.11-12.2:** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately.
- **W.11-12.7:** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate.
- **W.11-12.8:** Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, assess the strengths and limitations of each source, and integrate information while avoiding plagiarism.
- **W.11-12.9:** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

- **RI.11-12.6:** Determine an author's point of view or purpose and analyze how rhetoric advances that point of view or purpose.
 - **RI.11-12.7:** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats.
 - **SL.11-12.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
 - **SL.11-12.3:** Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
 - **RH.6-8.2:** Determine the central ideas of a primary or secondary source.
 - **RH.11-12.2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
 - **RH.11-12.6:** Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.
 - **RH.11-12.9:** Integrate information from diverse sources into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.
- WHST.11-12.1:** Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Immersion Activity

“Celebrating America’s Journey”

Transform the classroom into an “American Heritage Celebration.” Create an inspiring, patriotic atmosphere that honors the nation’s founding ideals, remarkable achievements, and the courage of Americans throughout history.

Display:

- The Declaration of Independence in full
- The United States Constitution in full
- The Bill of Rights
- The Gettysburg Address with images of the battlefield
- Photographs of the monuments in Washington, DC

- Images of Monticello and Jefferson's writings on liberty
- The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island
- Historic photographs of Harpers Ferry
- Maps showing the five expedition sites students will visit
- Inspiring American speeches and quotations
- Images of American innovation, achievement, and perseverance

Play patriotic music as students enter?

Students participate in a gallery walk, recording their observations and responding to:

What makes you proud to study American history?

What freedoms and opportunities has America provided?

What courage did Americans show in building this nation?

After the gallery walk. Show a slideshow of the five historic sites students will visit at the end of the year. Build excitement about walking where the Founders walked, standing on the Gettysburg battlefield, visiting Jefferson's Monticello, and experiencing the nation's capital.

Frame the expedition question:

How have Americans worked to build a nation founded on liberty, equality, and opportunity for all?

Guiding Questions

1. What did the Founding Fathers establish in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and how have Americans interpreted and challenged those founding principles?
2. How do Americans define liberty, freedom, republic, democracy, equality, and citizenship?
3. How have people challenged laws, institutions, and traditions that denied their liberty or freedom?
4. Whose stories are told—and whose stories are untold—in America's monuments, museums, and landmarks?
5. How do geography and place shape the movement of people, ideas, conflict, and power?

6. How should Americans remember difficult histories and respond to unfinished promises?

Long-Term Learning Targets

Content Knowledge

I can:

1. Explain how the Declaration of Independence and Constitution established American founding principles, and how major events and movements have challenged, interpreted, and expanded those principles.
2. Analyze how slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, immigration, and civil-rights movements influenced the meaning of liberty and freedom.
3. Locate and interpret the geographic significance of Washington, DC; Harpers Ferry; Gettysburg; Monticello; and New York City.
4. Explain how monuments, museums, memorials, and historic sites shape public memory.
5. Analyze contradictions between American ideals and the lived experiences.

Reading and Analysis

I can:

1. Cite specific evidence from primary and secondary sources to support an interpretation.
2. Identify an author's purpose, audience, perspective, assumptions, and use of evidence.
3. Compare how multiple sources represent the same historical event or issue.
4. Evaluate whether evidence is relevant, credible, sufficient, and consistent with other sources.
5. Analyze how literary and informational texts develop themes such as liberty, freedom, identity, justice, courage, and belonging.

Writing and Communication

I can:

1. Write an evidence-based argument that includes a claim, logical reasoning, relevant evidence, and a response to an opposing perspective.
2. Write informative texts that organize historical information clearly and accurately.

3. Revise my writing for clarity, precision, organization, evidence, style, and audience.
4. Present historical findings through effective speaking.
5. Participate in respectful discussions by listening carefully, asking questions, building on others' ideas, and disagreeing with evidence and care.

Research and Inquiry

I can:

1. Develop focused research questions that can be answered through investigation.
2. Gather, organize, cite, and synthesize information from multiple reliable sources.
3. Use field notes, interviews, maps, photographs, artifacts, and archival sources as evidence.
4. Distinguish between fact, interpretation, inference, and opinion.
5. Revise my thinking when new evidence challenges my original assumptions.

Character

I can:

1. Collaborate responsibly and contribute to the success of my class.
2. Approach difficult histories with courage, empathy, humility, and intellectual honesty.
3. Consider historical events from multiple perspectives without excusing injustice.
4. Produce high quality work for an authentic audience.

Promises, Places, and Public Memory

Focus sites: Local community; Washington, DC preparation

Essential focus

- What is a nation?
- How do places tell stories?
- What do American founding documents promise?
- How should we evaluate historical sources?

Key activities

- Local monument and investigation

- Introduction to primary-source analysis
- Mapping the expedition sites
- Deep, sustained close reading of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution
- Seminar on “What makes a democracy?” “What makes a republic?”
- Draft of “What America Promises” analytical paragraph

Democracy on Display

Focus site: Washington, DC

Essential focus

- How do democratic institutions work?
- What stories do national monuments tell?
- Whose contributions are visible in Washington, DC?
- How do citizens influence government?

Key activities

- Continued deep study of the Constitution and Bill of Rights in full, plus analysis of key amendments (13th, 14th, 15th, 19th) as they connect to the evolution of American democracy.
- Analysis of the Capitol, White House, Supreme Court, National Archives, National Museum of African American History and Culture, National Museum of the American Indian, and major memorials

Freedom, Resistance, and Civil War

Focus sites: Harpers Ferry and Gettysburg

Essential focus

- How did slavery shape American history?
- Why did people resist slavery?
- How did the Civil War change the nation?
- How should the nation remember war and sacrifice?

Key activities

- Study of slavery, abolition, resistance, and sectional conflict
- John Brown source set
- Underground Railroad mapping
- Comparative analysis of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, John Brown, and enslaved people's narratives
- Civil War cause-and-effect investigation
- Close reading of the Gettysburg Address
- Socratic seminar on whether John Brown was a hero, terrorist, freedom fighter, or something more complex
- Gettysburg Address annotation

Ideals, Contradictions, and Movement

Focus sites: Monticello and New York City

Essential focus

- Can a person advance democratic ideals while denying freedom to others?
- How do people move in search of opportunity?
- What is the American Dream, and who has access to it?
- How do cities transform national identity?

Key activities

- Jefferson's writings compared with the history of enslaved people at Monticello
- Study of Sally Hemings, Elizabeth Hemings, and other enslaved families connected to Monticello
- Analysis of the Declaration of Independence alongside records of slavery
- Immigration and migration case studies
- Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty

- Oral-history or family migration project
- Seminar: “Is the American Dream an ideal, a promise, a myth, or a work in progress?”
- Contradictions essay

Anchor Texts

Historical fiction

The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara

Memoir

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass by Frederick Douglass

Historical Documents

Founding and democratic institutions

Students will study the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in their entirety, returning to specific passages as they investigate how these founding documents have been interpreted across different historical moments.

- Declaration of Independence
- United States Constitution
- Bill of Rights
- Federalist No. 10 or selected excerpts
- Anti-Federalist writings
- Thomas Jefferson’s writings on liberty
- Abigail Adams’s “Remember the Ladies” letter
- George Washington’s Farewell Address
- James Madison’s notes from the Constitutional Convention
- Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death” speech
- Thomas Paine’s Common Sense (excerpts)
- Benjamin Franklin’s speech at the Constitutional Convention
- The Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions

- Marbury v. Madison excerpts
- Alexander Hamilton's Federalist writings on executive power

Slavery and abolition

- Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"
- Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?"
- Harriet Tubman accounts and biographical records
- John Brown's declaration and trial testimony
- Fugitive Slave Act excerpts
- Dred Scott v. Sandford excerpts
- Abraham Lincoln's debates with Stephen Douglas
- William Lloyd Garrison's writings from The Liberator
- The Compromise of 1850 documents
- Kansas-Nebraska Act excerpts
- Bleeding Kansas newspaper accounts from multiple perspectives
- Charles Sumner's "The Crime Against Kansas" speech
- Roger Taney's full Dred Scott decision
- Benjamin Curtis's dissent in Dred Scott
- Auction records and bills of sale

Civil War and Reconstruction

- Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address
- Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address
- Emancipation Proclamation
- General Orders No. 3
- Reconstruction Amendments
- Black Codes and selected testimony from Reconstruction-era hearings
- Letters from soldiers and civilians
- Battlefield maps and casualty records

- South Carolina's Declaration of Secession
- Alexander Stephens's "Cornerstone Speech"
- Jefferson Davis's inaugural addresses
- Confederate Constitution excerpts
- Union and Confederate soldiers' letters and diaries (multiple examples)
- Clara Barton's Civil War writings
- Walt Whitman's hospital journals
- Robert Gould Shaw's letters
- Susie King Taylor's memoir excerpts
- William Tecumseh Sherman's correspondence and Special Field Orders No. 15
- Andrew Johnson's veto messages
- Thaddeus Stevens's speeches on Reconstruction
- Testimony from Freedmen's Bureau records
- Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871
- Slaughterhouse Cases excerpts
- United States v. Cruikshank excerpts
- The Compromise of 1877 documents

Civil rights and citizenship

- Plessy v. Ferguson and Brown v. Board of Education excerpts
- Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
- Civil Rights Act excerpts
- Ida B. Wells's anti-lynching pamphlets and editorials
- W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Souls of Black Folk" excerpts
- Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise speech
- Du Bois's response to Washington
- Marcus Garvey's speeches
- Thurgood Marshall's oral arguments in Brown v. Board

Immigration and American identity

- Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus”
- Immigration photographs and oral histories
- Immigration Act of 1924
- Contemporary immigration policy documents and debates

Jefferson, Monticello, and the Enslaved Community

- Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia (excerpts on slavery and race)
- Jefferson’s correspondence with Benjamin Banneker
- Jefferson’s Farm Book and financial records
- Memoirs of Madison Hemings (1873 interview)
- Memoirs of Israel Jefferson
- Isaac Jefferson’s oral history
- Archaeological reports from Monticello enslaved quarters
- Advertisements for runaway enslaved people from Monticello
- Manumission records
- Sally Hemings family genealogical research

Women’s Rights and Suffrage

- Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s speeches and writings
- Susan B. Anthony’s “On Women’s Right to Vote” speech
- Ida B. Wells’s writings on suffrage and racial justice
- 19th Amendment debates and ratification documents

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Washington, DC — Democracy on Display

Driving question

How does Washington, DC represent American democracy, and whose stories are missing or newly being included?

Key content and skills

Students investigate:

- The structure and purpose of the federal government
- Founding ideals and constitutional limits
- The role of monuments and memorials
- The relationship between public memory and political power
- Black history, Indigenous sovereignty, women's citizenship, military service, immigration, and civil rights
- Monument design, audience, symbolism, and language
- Comparison of official narratives and community histories

Students practice:

- Close reading
- Monument and image analysis
- Perspective comparison
- Research and synthesis
- Civic discussion
- Argument writing

Texts and resources

- Constitution and Bill of Rights
- Declaration of Independence
- Federalist Papers (selected numbers relevant to structure of government, representation, and checks and balances)
- Anti-Federalist writings (to provide contrasting perspectives on the Constitution)

- “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”
- Selected speeches by Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Fannie Lou Hamer
- National Archives documents
- Smithsonian museum materials
- National Museum of African American History and Culture resources
- National Museum of the American Indian resources
- Memorial photographs and inscriptions

Fieldwork components

Students:

- Conduct a monument audit
- Compare two memorials that represent different groups or historical periods
- Visit a federal institution
- Ask: “What does this site expect visitors to feel, believe, or remember?”

Assessment

- Exit reflection: “What makes a national story democratic?”
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Case Study 2: Harpers Ferry — Resistance and the Road to Civil War

Driving question

How did slavery and resistance at Harpers Ferry expose the nation’s conflict over freedom?

Key content and skills

Students investigate:

- The institution of slavery
- Abolitionism and resistance
- John Brown’s raid

- Black resistance and abolitionist organizing
- The relationship between individual action and historical change
- The geography of Harpers Ferry
- The causes and consequences of sectional conflict
- The limits of judging historical actors using only modern categories

Students practice:

- Corroborating conflicting accounts
- Evaluating motive and context
- Distinguishing explanation from justification
- Constructing historical arguments
- Conducting respectful discussions about violence and resistance

Texts and resources

- John Brown's writings and trial testimony
- Frederick Douglass's accounts of John Brown
- Newspaper reports from different regions
- Slave narratives
- Fugitive Slave Act excerpts
- Maps of Harpers Ferry and transportation routes
- Accounts from African American communities affected by slavery and resistance

Fieldwork components

Students:

- Map the physical geography of Harpers Ferry
- Investigate why the location mattered strategically
- Examine how the town interprets John Brown
- Compare historical markers and museum narratives
- Analyze the relationship between geography, industry, transportation, and military action

- Write a field-based response to: “What can a place reveal that a textbook cannot?”

Assessment

- Position paper addressing the complexity of John Brown’s legacy

Case Study 3: Gettysburg — War, Union, and Memory

Driving question

How has Gettysburg shaped the way Americans understand the Civil War, sacrifice, equality, and national unity?

Key content and skills

Students investigate:

- Causes and major consequences of the Civil War
- The Battle of Gettysburg
- The Gettysburg Address
- Emancipation and the changing purpose of the war
- Civilian experiences
- Black soldiers and United States Colored Troops
- Battlefield preservation
- The politics of commemoration and reconciliation

Students practice:

- Rhetorical analysis
- Writing concise, evidence-based explanations

Texts and resources

- Gettysburg Address
- Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address
- Emancipation Proclamation

- Soldier letters and diaries
- Battlefield maps
- Gettysburg National Military Park materials

Fieldwork components

Students:

- Follow a battlefield route
- Analyze terrain and strategic decisions
- Visit Soldiers' National Cemetery
- Compare battlefield interpretation signs
- Study the relationship between sacrifice and national purpose

Assessment:

Historical explanation: "Why Gettysburg still matters"

Case Study: Monticello — Ideals and Contradictions

Driving question

How should Americans understand the contradiction between Jefferson's ideals of liberty and the realities of slavery at Monticello?

Key content and skills

Students investigate:

- The Declaration of Independence
- Enlightenment ideas
- Jefferson's political philosophy
- Enslaved labor and family life at Monticello
- Sally Hemings and the Hemings family
- The relationship between individual beliefs and systems of power

- Historical interpretation and ethical memory

Students practice:

- Comparing words and lived realities
- Evaluating evidence about historical people

Texts and resources

- Declaration of Independence
- Jefferson's letters and political writings
- Monticello records
- Hemings family histories
- Archaeological and material-culture evidence
- Enslaved people's narratives
- Monticello interpretive materials
- Historians' competing interpretations

Fieldwork components

Students:

- Compare the main house with enslaved workers' quarters
- Analyze how the site presents Jefferson and the enslaved community
- Examine artifacts, architecture, and landscape
- Record evidence of wealth, labor, hierarchy, and resistance
- Revise their definition of liberty

Assessment

Personal reflection on historical responsibility

Case Study: New York City — Immigration and the American Dream

Driving question

How have immigrants shaped New York City and expanded or challenged the meaning of the American Dream?

Key content and skills

Students investigate:

- Ellis Island and federal immigration policy
- The Statue of Liberty
- Urban labor and housing
- Cultural exchange and neighborhood formation
- Contemporary immigration debates

Students practice:

- Comparing public ideals with lived experiences

Texts and resources

- Ellis Island passenger records
- Immigrant letters and diaries
- Contemporary immigrant narratives
- Naturalization documents
- Census and migration data

Fieldwork components

Students:

- Visit Ellis Island
- Analyze the Statue of Liberty as a national symbol
- Document language, architecture, foodways, and cultural institutions

Assessment

Argument: "What makes a city belong to everyone?"

America's Journey is most powerful when our students leave the expedition with more than historical knowledge. They should understand that the "great experiment" is an unfinished project, that public memory requires evidence and responsibility, and that their own questions and actions can contribute to the nation's continuing journey.