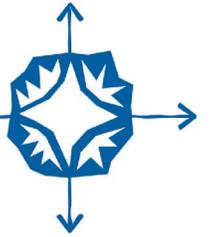


# NORTH STAR



## LESSON

Grade Level: 6-8

Subject: History and Social Studies

Time needed: 1 to 2 class periods

### MATERIALS

The *North Star* Video is highly recommended, but not required. This lesson uses the *North Star* segment about George Bonga titled “Bonga”

Copies of handouts and primary sources

## NORTH STAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS

### GEORGE BONGA: THIS IS HIS PLACE

#### OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students analyze sources to uncover what George Bonga’s life and character were like. As they uncover inconsistencies, students are challenged to weigh the value of different sources and question their own assumptions about historical concepts of race. As a final project, students create a skit that illustrates what they have discovered.

#### BACKGROUND

From the arrival of Africans in North America, blacks have intermarried and intermingled with Native American Indian populations. Some escaped African slaves sought freedom in Indian villages. Some blacks were captured and enslaved by Indians. Other were bought by Indians within the normal processes of the slave trade. Some free blacks married and lived with Indians as they followed the frontier west. In Florida, the Seminole Indian tribe bought black slaves and took in run-away slaves. By the early 1800s, they had become a mixed African-American-Indian tribe. In the Northern Great Lakes Region and along the western frontier, blacks often encountered Indians through the fur trade.

George Bonga was half black and half Ojibwe. During his lifetime, there were a great many children of fur traders and Indian women. Initially, the fur trade companies prohibited white women from entering the interior, and fur traders often took Indian wives “in the fashion of the country.” This brought a financial and social advantage to both the man and woman. The fur traders secured the trade of his wife’s family, and the Indian woman secured the better goods and deals for her family’s goods. Though these marriages were not always permanent, the familial bonds often were. Usually, the children were raised by their mothers in Indian villages. The fathers would visit seasonally, and wealthier fur traders would often secure formal education and special treaty provisions for their children.

These “mixed-blood”, “Métis”, or “half-breed” children held special roles within the fur trade. Bilingual and comfortable within both European and Indian cultures, mixed-blood sons often became traders, clerks, or translators. Mixed-blood daughters became the wives of traders. These positions offered greater access to fur trade wealth and increased the person’s status.

Later, as the fur trade began to die and settlers entered Minnesota, the role and social dynamic of the mixed-bloods began to change. With the availability of white women, fewer white men took Indian wives, and once the fur trade economy ended, there was no financial or social incentive to form alliances between whites and Indians. Eastern settlers also brought more strict and severe concepts of race with them. Though mixed-blood children continued to marry both whites and Indians (George Bonga himself married an Ojibwe woman), the growing division between these cultures, both through the physical distance of reservations and through social practices, meant that most mixed-blood descendants eventually blended more into one culture or the other.

For more information about events during this time period, see the *North Star* website's timeline at <http://www.tpt.org/northstar/Timeline.html>

For suggested resources on George Bonga and this era, see the *North Star* website's Resources section at <http://www.tpt.org/northstar/Resources.html>

For background on George Bonga, visit the George Bonga section of the *North Star* website at [http://www.tpt.org/northstar/MakingChange.html?quick\\_link=george\\_bonga](http://www.tpt.org/northstar/MakingChange.html?quick_link=george_bonga)



## OBJECTIVES

- To analyze primary source accounts for evidence of Bonga's history, character, and attitudes.
- To compare and contrast the information learned from the sources to uncover historical inconsistencies and develop theories to judge which sources are more reliable.
- To become aware that concepts of "race" have shifted over time.
- To develop a short skit that demonstrates what students have learned about Bonga.

## A NOTE ON DIVERSITY

As you lead your class through this lesson, remind them that people thought and acted very differently in the past than they do today. Judge Flandreau speaks frankly about the darkness of Bonga's skin. Bonga calls the Indians fidgety. At the time they said these things, such comments were not considered inappropriate or rude. Today, George Bonga is a strong example of the blurred boundaries and concepts of race during the end of the fur trade. However, keep in mind that we do *not* know how Bonga felt about his race, nor whether he truly felt he "belonged" to any particular group. Remind the students that these questions belong much more to our times than they do to the past.

## CONTENT CONNECTIONS

This lesson fits well within the teaching of Minnesota’s early fur trade era and a discussion of changing historical concepts of race. Bonga illustrates well how class, profession, and culture can be much greater influences on identity than race.

## CONNECTIONS TO MINNESOTA ACADEMIC STANDARDS IN HISTORY AND SOCIAL STUDIES

Minnesota History Grades 4-8; II. Minnesota History, B. Contact and Fur Trade 1600-1810, “The student will demonstrate knowledge of early explorers and fur traders in Minnesota and the impact of the fur trade on both European and Native societies,” II. Minnesota History, C. Early Settlement and Statehood 1810-1860, “The student will know and understand the factors that led to rapid settlement of Minnesota in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the changes the new Minnesotans brought with them,”; Historical Skills grades 4-8, IV Historical Skills, B. Historical Resources, “The student will begin to use historical resources,”; C. Historical Inquiry, “The student will analyze historical evidence and draw conclusions,” C. Historical Inquiry, “The student will present and explain the findings of a research project.”

## INTRODUCTION

### Connecting to Students’ Experiences

Ask students to spend a minute brainstorming a list of adjectives that describe who they are. Once they have completed that, tell them to cross out half the words, then more words, then more, until they have only one word left. What is that word? Does it describe them physically, mentally, or characteristically? If you took all the students’ words and read them aloud, could the rest of the class accurately guess who that word was describing? How would they feel if other people had reduced their descriptions down to one word? Discuss how people have many different sides and how race is just one of them. As students learn about George Bonga, help them search for a more complex understanding of him than “black fur trader,” and help them identify how history can flatten individuals into one-word descriptions.

Note: biracial and multiracial students may have unique perspectives on this issue. George Bonga himself was biracial (half Ojibwe and half African-American) and he married an Ojibwe woman. As our culture becomes more interracial, questions of racial identity become “murky” again, as they were in Bonga’s time. Maria Roots’ “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People” (<http://www.webcom.com/~intvoice/rights.html>) may be a good spring board for this conversation.

### Connecting to Minnesota History

Ask students what they know about the fur trade. What did fur traders do? Usually, what was their background? If they were to create a want ad list of the kinds of qualities a successful fur trader should have, what would they include? What kinds of strength (beyond physical strength) would it take to be a successful fur trader? What were some of the challenges that fur traders faced?

### PROCEDURE

This lesson works best before showing the segment. Divide the class into four groups, and give each group one of the primary sources. Ask the students to use their student worksheets to help guide their analysis (you may want to give them fresh copies of the worksheet for each source, or have them record their findings in a notebook). As they finish analyzing each source, move the source around so that every group gets a chance to analyze each source. As you move about the room, use the following questions to help guide each group's analysis, or after the groups are done, use the questions below to guide a class discussion of their findings.

### PRIMARY SOURCE 1 ANALYSIS: GEORGE BONGA PHOTOGRAPH

This photograph was taken around 1870 when George Bonga was about 68 years old. This was around the time he wrote the letters included in the lesson. Since the photograph was likely taken in St. Paul where the photographer Alfred Zimmerman had his studio, it is evidence that Bonga continued to travel down to the cities even later in life. He died just a few years later, in 1874. Discuss the following questions with your students:

- When was this photograph taken? Where was it taken? Who took it? Why might he have taken it? What does it show?
- What sort of clothing is Bonga wearing? How does it show his status?
- Why might Bonga be wearing moccasins?
- What can you tell about Bonga's character or emotions at the time this photograph was taken?

**PRIMARY SOURCE 2 ANALYSIS:****CHARLES FLANDRAU'S REMINISCENCES**

Judge Charles Flandrau visited George Bonga on Leech Lake in August 1858, while traveling to see the source of the Mississippi River. He wrote about the experience in his diary, then recalled it forty years later in a speech he made at the Minnesota Historical Society. (He mistakenly refers to this visit as occurring in 1856.) Flandrau was a significant legal character in Minnesota's early history. He acted as an Indian agent for the Dakota, led volunteers to protect New Ulm during the Dakota War, and served on the State's Supreme Court. Flandrau's reminiscences offer a unique perspective on Bonga, though he makes several errors in Bonga's personal history. Historical records show that George Bonga and his brother Jack were the sons of Pierre Bonga, a black fur trader, and an Ojibwe woman. Pierre's parents were Jean and Marie Jeanne, who lived in Michilimackinac (Mackinac), where Jean worked under the British commandant Daniel Robertson, who served there from 1782-1787. Discuss the following questions with your students:

- What is this document? When was it created? Who created it? Why was it created? What is it about?
- In what ways is this source inaccurate? Compare it to Bonga's letter to Rice.
- What does this document tell us about Bonga's character?
- What does Bonga mean when he says he was one of the "first two white men" to live in this area?
- How does Flandrau feel about Bonga? What evidence is there that he admires Bonga?
- Is this a valuable source for studying Bonga? Why or why not?

**PRIMARY SOURCE 3 ANALYSIS:****GEORGE BONGA'S 1866 LETTER TO BASSETT**

Throughout his life, George Bonga made his living by trading with the Indians. Early in his life, he was most likely a voyageur who carried trade goods. Later on, he helped translate and negotiate treaties. After the treaties with the Ojibwe were made, Bonga made money by trading with the Indians, who used their yearly annuities of money and goods to pay him. In the 1860s, George sought to get trading licenses for himself and his sons, so that they could trade on the reservations. In this 1866 letter to Joel B. Bassett, an Indian agent, Bonga complains about the behavior of the local Indian agent, Major Clark, who is refusing to approve any trading licenses beyond a few favored traders.

As your students read this and the next letter, they may notice some of Bonga's non-standard spellings and his use of abbreviations. Bonga was highly educated for his time. Like many letter writers, he used abbreviations to save on paper and ink. Help students focus on the content of his letters, not his punctuation, grammar, or spelling. Discuss the following questions with your students:

- What is this document? When was it created? Who created it? Why was it created? What is it about?
- In what ways does Bonga appear to be allied with the Indians and Indian culture? In what ways does he appear to be allied with the traders and white culture?
- What does this document tell us about Bonga's character?

**PRIMARY SOURCE 4 ANALYSIS:****GEORGE BONGA'S 1872 LETTER TO HENRY RICE**

In this 1872 letter, George Bonga writes to Henry Rice, an early political leader who was Minnesota's second delegate to congress. Bonga is clearly responding to a query from Rice about Bonga's history. In this letter, Bonga theorizes that his grandfather, Jean Bonga, may have been stolen from Missouri and sold to Indian traders at Mackinac. This may be true, but there are no other historical sources to corroborate that. Discuss the following questions with your students:

- What is this document? When was it created? Who created it? Why was it created? What is it about?
- What do we learn about Bonga's own history and education?
- What do we learn about Bonga's family history? How does it compare to what Judge Flandrau recalled? Which source do you trust more? Why?
- What does this document tell us about Bonga's character?
- What other issues do you wish Bonga had written about?

 **FINAL ACTIVITY AND EVALUATION**

Ask students to consider the multiple sources they have studied, including the documentary, and to create a short skit about the life of George Bonga. A successful skit will:

- Address what Bonga did for a living.
- Describe Bonga's family background.
- Express some of the strong character attributes Bonga possessed.
- Show how Bonga may have related to the Ojibwe and white cultures.
- Be creative, well-prepared, and easy for audiences to understand.

**PRIMARY SOURCE 1:  
GEORGE BONGA PHOTOGRAPH**

George Bonga, ca. 1870

Photographer: Charles Alfred Zimmerman (1844-1909)



 **PRIMARY SOURCE 2:****CHARLES FLANDRAU'S REMINISCENCES**

Reminiscences of Minnesota During the Territorial Period

By Hon. Charles E. Flandrau

Read before the Minnesota Historical Society on April 25, 1898.

Charles Flandrau: *The original population of all this country was of course the Indians. The next people to arrive were the whites, who were either traders or soldiers, and in referring to the inhabitants they were always designated either as white men or Indians. At quite an early period an officer of the army from the South was stationed at Mackinac, or some other northwest post, and brought with him two black servants, George and Jack Bonga. When he was ordered away, these two men remained behind and took service in the American Fur Company as voyageurs. They married into the Chippewa [Ojibwe] tribe, and George became quite a prominent trader and a man of wealth and consequence. I was his guest for two weeks at Leech Lake just forty-two years ago, when I made a canoe voyage to the Mississippi. He was a thorough gentleman in both feeling and deportment, and was very anxious to contribute to my pleasure during my stay with him. He loved to dwell upon the grandeur of the chief factors of the old Fur Company, and, to show me how royally they traveled, he got up an excursion on the lake, in a splendid birch bark canoe, manned by twelve men who paddled to the music of a French Canadian boat song, led by himself. George was very popular with the whites, and loved to relate to the newcomers his adventures. He was the blackest man I ever saw, so black that his skin fairly glistened, but was, excepting his brother Jack, the only black person in the country. Never having heard of any distinction between the people but that of Indians and white men, he would frequently paralyze his hearers when reminiscing by saying 'Gentlemen, I assure you that John Banfil and myself were the first two white men that ever came into this country.*

## PRIMARY SOURCE 3:

## GEORGE BONGA'S 1866 LETTER TO BASSETT

N. B. Bassett Esqr  
 Respected Sir

Leech Lake August 29<sup>th</sup> 1866

As Mr Whitehead expects to see you I thought I would drop you a line to let you know, that your kindness to us, while you was in our midst, has & I believe will always occupy much of my thoughts—

I have nothing worth your attention to write about. The Inds seems a little more feisty then they were, the first part of the Summer— But this I have expected all along, for it is the character of the Inds, when he thinks (real or imaginary) that his rights are encroached upon—

I am really sorry to have to say that I have lost all hopes, in Major Clark, to act the part of a good Agent. It seems to me that he is so much under the yoke of these traders, that is impossible for him to act, as he would wish

Respected Sir, I have requested Mr Whitehead to call on a friend of mine & get his assistance if he can, for my 2 Sons to get lisenche to trade, James for this place, Peter at Red Lake or wherever the Red Lake Inds will be paid—any advice or opinion you could give Mr W. in the Matter, I should certainly feel thankful to you for the trouble I would give you—Whenever any thing occurs worth your Notice I will write you. I am fully convinced that your charatible heart aches for us all, who are under the tyranny of the Agent, threu the selfishness & racity of a Set of traders—Respected Sir, Hoping that the Great Spirit will So guide our ways, that we May Meet again & have another good Camp fire talk as I call it

With Sentments of the Most Sincere respect I remain Yours &c  
 G. Bonga

PRIMARY SOURCE 4:  
 GEORGE BONGA'S 1872 LETTER TO HENRY RICE

Hon. H. M. Rice  
 Respected Sir

Leech Lake Dec 1872

...As to My self, I was born, somewhere near where (Duluth now is... pretty near 90 Years ago, at that time there was a great rivalrie, between the 2 fur Companys the old North west & the Hudson Bay Co. My father was in the employ of the former there head quarters was a Fort William Lake Superior. I left there when I was a little boy, as I have no recollection, of the place & went to School in Montreal, as there was no one, to take any particular interest about me. I did not get as good an education, as I might have had.... I have always been sorry, that I did not ask my father while living, if he knew where he immigrate from. I am now inclined to think, that they must have come, from the new State of Missouri, as he did not Speak any thing but french. I presume at that time, Very few inhabited that out Skirts State, Iowa, Illinois, & Michigan except those connected with the fur trade. the North west company had, what was Styled, the South west Division that division had its head quarters at Mac Kinac. My grand father & his family of 5 or 6 children, might have been taken Prisoner by the Inds & Sold to the Ind<sup>n</sup> traders. that is the only way I can guess at it. I understood my father to say, that all his fathers family came to Mac Kinac, this I am certain of, for I had one Uncle & 2 Aunts, who went to Montreal with the Ind traders. My father came to Lake Superior with a Chippewa trader, it must be upwards of 100 years ago. at that time I believe there was, no traders in the interior. the North west Co. had there a trading Post at a place between, were Duluth now is & Superior City...

With Sentiments of the Most Sincere respect Yours &c  
 Hon. H. M. Rice

G. Bonga

P.S. Our horses are all laid up, with the disease is the reason, that the rice does not reach you

**GEORGE BONGA :  
THIS IS HIS PLACE**  
**Student Worksheet**

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**STEP 1: ANALYZE THE SOURCES**

**1. What is the source?** Describe what the source is, who created it, when it was created, and where it was created.

**2. What does this source tell us about George Bonga?** What do we learn about Bonga's background or personality? How did he relate to the Ojibwe with whom he worked? How did he relate to the white people?

**3. What questions do we have about this source?** Do you trust this source? Does the information in this source match the information you learned about Bonga in other sources? What other things would you like to know about Bonga?



**STEP 2: CREATE A SKIT ABOUT BONGA**

Share what you have learned about Bonga with the other students in your group. Compare answers and go back to the source to see what other information on Bonga you can find. With your group, create a short skit that illustrates the life of George Bonga. A successful skit will:

- Describe what Bonga did for a living.
- Describe Bonga's family background.
- Express some of the strong character attributes Bonga possessed.
- Show how Bonga may have related to both Ojibwe and white cultures.
- Be creative, well-prepared, and easy for audiences to understand.