

## PINKSTER – AN AFRICAN CELEBRATION

### OBJECTIVES - Students will :

- learn about the Pinkster celebration, it's African origin, and it's importance to the African American community;
- create a broadside advertising a Pinkster celebration in Ulster County;
- make assumptions as to what life was like for enslaved Africans living in New York during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### LEARNING STANDARDS – See chart

### MATERIALS

- 1776 Letter of Peter Van Gaasbeek to Jacob Marius Groen
- Transcription of Letter
- Crayons
- Large drawing paper
- Vintage broadsides -  
<http://iarchives.nysed.gov/Gallery/galleryDetail.jsp?id=895&ss=EDU>
- For more information on Pinkster see- **Long Hammering** by A.J. Williams Myers – Chapter five

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Pinkster was originally a Christian feast on the seventh Sunday after Easter commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles. Pinkster was also associated with the change of season, the blooming of flowers and the rebirth of life in spring. One flower in particular with which it was associated was the beautiful azalea, which bloomed throughout the Hudson River Valley, and along the banks of the Hudson and was called “Pinkster blummachee.”

Pinkster is believed to have Dutch origins; today in Holland an ancient “Pinkstertool” is celebrated by dancing and singing around a maypole that is topped by a “Pinksterkroon” or a crown of flowers. Pinkster is also believed to have been an “African religious day” which was brought to the New World by African slaves. This African religious day was perhaps associated with a number of Old World rituals. For example, the installation of an African ruler was normally accompanied by drumming, dancing, and various games performed by the King’s subjects; the first fruits ceremony consisted of agricultural offerings of thanksgiving to the village chiefs just before harvest; a coming out ceremony was held for those youngsters newly received into adulthood after having observed a period of seclusion; the end of a long period of mourning after a funeral which was capped by a “great feast with much singing, dancing, and drinking.”

*- A.J. Williams Myers*

Pinkster may have originated in Europe with the Dutch, but, shortly after it reached the New World, it was taken over by African slaves who incorporated into it their African traditions. As a result,, some elements of African culture was able to survive within the

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institution of slavery in New York. These traditions were passed on from generation to the next, from Old World African to New World African, so that by the nineteenth century Pinkster carnival had become an African celebration. From the beginning, African slaves and early generations of African Americans adopted Pinkster and combined it with the worship of their African god, "Totau," whom they acknowledged with dance and drum during the weeklong celebration.

The Pinkster celebration would begin 50 days after Easter and continue for one week. This festival was the only time when enslaved Africans could get together to eat, drink, dance and be merry. Africans, both free and enslaved worked for months trying to earn some extra money they could use to purchase things during the Pinkster celebration. If slaves were asked to work during Pinkster, they were paid for it. In Albany, people congregated from all over the state. Whites came to watch the festivities and catch up with the news. "It was the only time blacks were allowed to publicly make connections with and express their African past." (*Celebrating the Pinkster Tradition*, May 15, 1986)

If you were to go back in time and observe a Pinkster celebration you would see King Charles (an African slave who personified the god Totau) dressed in an elegant British costume, surrounded by Black royalty. People were dancing, drumming and game-playing. A first-fruit ceremony of agricultural offerings was often conducted. When appropriate there were coming of age rituals and a period of mourning for those that passed away.

Pinkster was outlawed in 1811, by the Albany Common Council. Many historians feel there was a concern that so many slaves gathering in one area could lead to uprisings or slave rebellions.

-From *Long Hammering* – by A. J. William-Myers



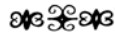
## TEACHING SEQUENCE

### 1. CLASS DISCUSSION

- a. Describe the Pinkster celebration to the class.
- b. Read excerpt from the letter of Peter Van Gaasbeek to Jacob Marius Groen Explain that Pinkster was celebrated in Kingston, Albany and other cities and towns in the Hudson River Valley.
- c. Explain where the term broadside came from (the broadside of a barn). Broad sides were signs or posters, printed on one side, used as advertisements, meeting notices, etc. and as a means of dispersing information to the public. They were posted on buildings, other structures or distributed.
- d. Hold up an example of a broadside.
- e. Discuss why broadsides were so important at this time. Students will brainstorm the main features of a broadside.
- f. Ask students to create their own broadside using the information they have learned about Pinkster. Students who wish to may work with a partner.
- g. Ask the students what they think needs to be on the poster.

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- h. Write the list on the chalkboard. You can add the following to the list if they were not included:
  - Title of the event
  - Create three illustrations that represent some aspect of the Pinkster event
  - When did the event to occur
  - In what town did the event take place
  - What special activities were planned for this event
- i. The students and teacher will compute the approximate date Pinkster would be celebrated this year. (Seven Sundays or 50 days after Easter)
- g. The students can choose a location in Ulster County for the Pinkster celebration. (Pinkster celebrations took place along the Hudson River)

Follow-up Questions

1. Which Pinkster activities would you have liked to attend? Why?
2. Why do you think this event was so important to African Americans?