



FOUNDATION
AGAINST
INTOLERANCE
& RACISM

Lesson Title: Norwalk’s Heritage Wall: The Meaning of Diversity in an American Town

Recommended Grade Level: 8-11

Recommended Pacing: 120 minutes

FAIR Standards and Objectives:

HM.9-12.2, DV.9-12.10, US.9-12.11, US.9-12.12, US.9-12.13, FR.9-12.20

Era: Current

Focus Area(s): Understanding and Celebrating Diversity

Lesson Objectives:

1. Students will increase their understanding of the meaning of diversity in American communities.
2. Students will increase proficiency in debating alternative interpretations of historical and current social issues and ideas.

Teacher Instructions:

1. Give students time (in class or as homework) to read the Background Essay, look over the photographs of Heritage Wall plaques and read the entries on the Heritage Wall Timeline. If the reading is done in class, this may extend the time needed in class to complete the lesson.
2. Hand out copies of the Student Worksheet Assignment.
3. Ask students to read the two conflicting “Point of View” paragraphs and take brief notes on them in the spaces provided.
4. Have students use these notes in a guided discussion in which they are encouraged to defend their own views while listening carefully to and considering the views of others.

The Story of Norwalk’s Heritage Wall

Norwalk is a small city built along a harbor on the Connecticut shore of Long Island Sound (88,000 population as of 2020). It was founded in 1641 by English Puritans. English settlers were the main population of the town for over a century. However, in time, many groups from other lands came to Norwalk. As the city grew, a great many racial, ethnic and national groups made it their home. Members of these groups may have come as individuals. Yet each group also found ways to come together and preserve its identity and its heritage. The groups did this through churches, fraternal organizations, unions, neighborhoods, clubs and in many other ways. In this, Norwalk is like America at large. That is, it includes the entire range of America's amazingly varied group life.

Officials commonly divide people into the broad ethnic classifications of "Whites," "African Americans," "Hispanics," "Asian Americans," and "Native Americans." Yet these terms simply do not do justice to Norwalk's rich cultural diversity. Starting in 1983, Norwalkers themselves began to create a dramatic way to describe and honor this diversity. It was a way that enabled the many cultural groups to define themselves in their own terms. The groups did this at the Heritage Wall.

The Norwalk Heritage Wall is in a small park located about halfway between the city's two downtown business districts. Starting in 1983, Norwalk's ethnic, racial or national groups began placing large bronze plaques on the wall. Each three-by-four-foot plaque expressed the views of one group. As of 2020, there were seventeen plaques in all. Others were still to come. A single larger plaque is dedicated to America as a whole. The seventeen plaques were for Hungary, Italy, Native Americans, Poland, Greece, Scotland, Puerto Rico, Ireland, Costa Rica, African Americans, French-Canadians, Haiti, Germany, England, Portugal, China, and Columbia.

Each plaque represents a distinct community within the city. Few American cities this small contain such a wide range of cultural groups. Why is this the case in Norwalk? Geography may have played a part. Norwalk was an oddly divided area with about 25 distinct neighborhoods, some on each side of the Norwalk River and harbor, and others in two central downtowns in South Norwalk and Norwalk. Adding to this geographic pattern were the varying kinds of economic activity that shaped the city. From its start, Norwalk was both a farming community and a busy seaport. It didn't handle the largest merchant ships. It was ideal for smaller sailing vessels able to trade with New York city and other parts of the coast. A few also carried beef, grain and other goods to the islands in the Caribbean. From the start, oyster harvesting in Norwalk's harbor was also a major economic activity.

In the 1800s, industry came to Norwalk. Hat manufacturing was for a long time the major source of jobs. Also important were shirt factories, lock manufacturing, iron rolling and silting mills, and more. The city was a key rail stop between New York and Boston. Large factories developed, each employing hundreds of workers. They were big, but they were never on a par with the largest industrial giants of the modern era. Along with these major companies, Norwalk was home to many smaller businesses and

shops. Often located along the side streets, these employed skilled craftsmen to produce stoves, laundry machinery, furniture, carriages, and many other things.

In recent decades, the older factories have declined in importance. New, more technically advanced firms have appeared. One produces precision electronic instruments. Others focus on biotechnology, telecommunications, advertising and marketing services, and more.

The demand for skilled and unskilled labor attracted many people, and not just from other parts of the state or nation. Norwalk became a destination for newcomers during all of the three major waves of immigration America has experienced. First to come in large numbers were the Germans and Irish and others from Western Europe. They flooded in especially in the 1840s and '50s. In the late 1800s a second wave brought large numbers from Eastern Europe – Hungarians, Poles, Italians, Greeks. In time, the Italians became perhaps the largest of these groups in Norwalk's population. The third immigrant wave began in 1965. It has attracted large numbers from South and Central America, and Asia – starting with Columbia, Puerto Rico and Costa Rica. In larger cities, many immigrants moved into ethnic neighborhoods that were often largely separated from one another. Such ethnic neighborhoods existed in Norwalk. However, the city was too small for the groups to separate from one another completely. Perhaps this helped them adapt to one another and to the city as a whole. Until 1960, for example, all Norwalk students attended the city's one high school, Norwalk High on East Avenue.

The Heritage Wall plaques mainly express the hopes, achievements, and sense of gratitude these groups have experienced.

Yet this does not mean their experiences have all been positive. Norwalk's various racial and ethnic groups have certainly suffered harsh and discriminatory treatment at times in the past. African Americans came to America as slaves. By one estimate, Norwalk had 136 enslaved Africans in 1774. Even when freed, African Americans usually had to take the most menial jobs as domestic servants and general laborers. Well into the twentieth century, only a few restaurants would serve them. Most of them lived in a few very poor neighborhoods in dilapidated and cramped housing.

As for other groups, the Irish may have been the most mistreated. A reputation for strong drink and their Catholicism aroused fear and contempt for them. Just about all the newcomers have aroused suspicion and encountered unfair treatment. Many of them had to take unskilled, low paying jobs in the factories. They were often poorly paid and mistreated. Norwalk experienced a good share of labor strife at many times in its past. The hatters in particular led major strikes lasting months at a time in 1884, 1909 and 1953.

Yet over the years, conditions for these groups have improved. In part that has been because of America's growing prosperity. In part it is due to a slow and steady spirit of reform and tolerance developing within the community as a whole. Above all it has

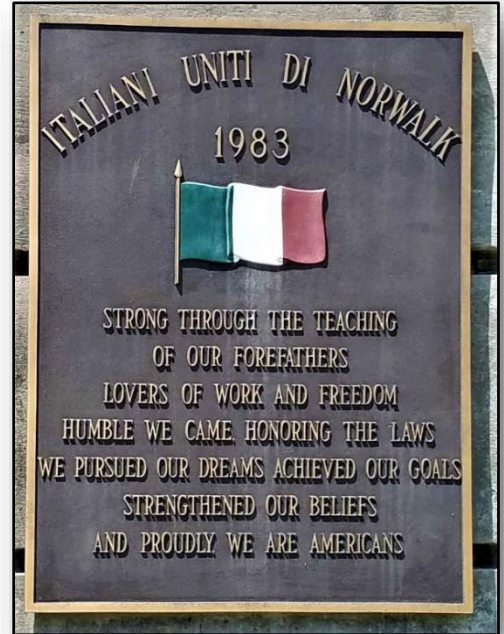
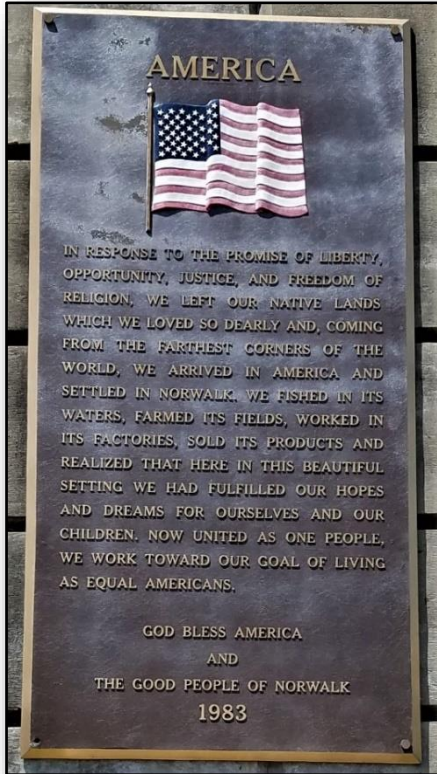
been due to each group's own determination and creativity. Through churches, schools, fraternal organizations, publications, businesses and unions, the lives of the various groups have improved. Above all a spirit of hope has prevailed. It is this spirit that comes through most strongly in the plaques at Norwalk's Heritage Wall. Each plaque celebrates its group's uniqueness, but it sees that unique identity as in harmony within the larger Norwalk community.

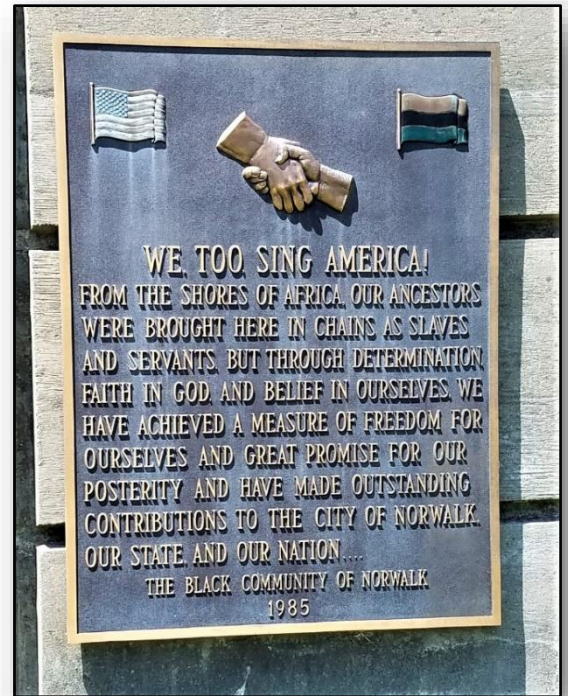
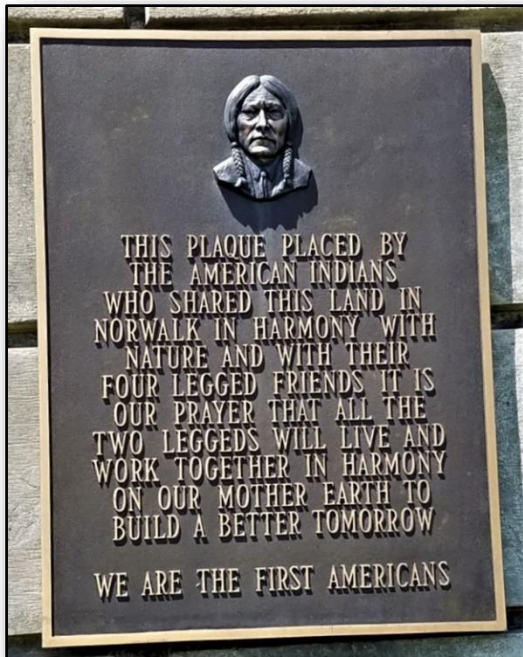
The materials for this lesson include photographs of the Heritage Wall and a Heritage Wall Timeline. The Timeline includes many Norwalk voices expressing opinions about the wall. These materials should help you discuss and debate the essential question that is the focus for this lesson.

The Heritage Wall Plaques: Some Samples

The Heritage Wall







A Heritage Wall: A Timeline of Key Moments and Many Voices

1. 1983: The First Plaque

On June 27, 1983, Mayor Thomas C. O'Connor addressed a crowd at a huge wall on West Avenue in Norwalk, Connecticut. His purpose was to unveil the first plaque to go up on Norwalk's new Heritage Wall. The three-by-four-foot bronze plaque paid tribute to Norwalk citizens who were born in Hungary or were of Hungarian descent. Here is the text on the Hungarian plaque ("Isten aldd meg a Magyar" means "Oh my God, the Magyar bless." Magyar tribes were the earliest Hungarians.)

*ISTEN ALDD MEG A MAGYART
God bless the Hungarians.
from the valleys of the Carpathians
leaving oppression and seeking freedom
they settled here.
God bless their heritage,
which they give so freely.
God bless America
who welcomes the needy.*

Many other plaques would soon go up on the wall that year. Each one was contributed by one of the many diverse groups making up the city's population. A main plaque explained the overall spirit of the display.

2. 1984: Costa Rica adds its Plaque to the Wall

In 1984, several thousand people from Costa Rican lived in Norwalk. In November of that year, a plaque honoring that community became the ninth to take its place on the Heritage Wall. Maritza Montanez, an eleven-year resident of Norwalk, said:

"I am very proud to have my country represented. . . . The young people who are born in this country are not familiar with the customs. I think it would be best for the families to speak Spanish so the children would never forget Spanish. Our people are a very happy people, and they take time to do everything. We had to change because everything is so current here, and everything is so fast."

The plaque is emblazoned with the national seal of seven stars for the country's seven provinces. Three mountains represent its three mountain ranges. The plaque includes this inscription:

*From our beloved Costa Rica we came.
A peaceful people seeking opportunity
That America offers to all.
We found a new home in this beautiful
city by the sea. We are glad to be a part
of this community and proudly contribute*

*our heritage to Norwalk, our adopted
homeland.*

We are proud to be Americans

3. 1985: The Tenth Plaque, for the Black Community of Norwalk.

In 1985, Anne G. Jones, head of the Heritage Wall Committee for the Norwalk Area Improvement League helped preside over a ceremony at the Heritage Wall. She was there to dedicate the plaque honoring the city's African American community. It was the tenth plaque to be placed on the wall. Its opening stanza reads, "We too sing America." (The plaque itself is one of those in "The Heritage Wall Plaques: Some Samples," a part of this lesson.)

At a later date, Dr. Merle Rumble, an African American teacher in a Norwalk elementary school, may have best captured the spirit of the plaque on the Heritage Wall. She toured several southern cities to increase her own knowledge and help her to inspire her third-grade students at Fox Run Elementary. She said,

"I wanted to help my students not only to dismantle the false assumptions of African Americans being relegated to slaves and protestors, but also develop their appreciation for the positive impact and contributions of those who struggled and persevered."

4. 2001: The Heritage Wall's Park Is Named for Its Founder, Mayor Thomas O'Connor

Tommy O'Connor died on January 16, 2001. On September 30 that year, the city honored him by naming the park with the Heritage Wall after him. By that time, the wall included 17 plaques to various nationalities and ethnic groups making up the city's population. At a ceremony, a plaque for O'Connor was unveiled. It reads in part: "Tommy was responsible for construction of this Heritage Wall ever mindful of recognizing the many diverse backgrounds of the citizens of this city which he loved so deeply."

Former mayor Frank N. Zullo said,

"Tom didn't ever want us to forget that the diversity of our city, state and nation is our strength not our weakness, and that all citizens of this country are part of a great American family. That's what this wall will commemorate and continually remind all future generations. All of us are bound together as Americans."

Also at the ceremony, US Representative Christopher Shays said:

"Tommy knew that when we fought World War II, it wasn't against Germans. It was against Nazi tyranny. It wasn't against people. He loved Germans. He loved Greeks. He'd be up here now saying 'Love Muslims."

Love Jews. Love Christians. We are all God's children.' This park is truly Tommy's park."

5. 2011: Norwalk's Venezuelans Celebrate 48 Hours of Independence

Not every group gathers at the wall just to put up a plaque. Norwalk's Venezuelan community was there on July 5, 2011, for a different reason. It was there to mark Venezuelan Independence Day. Norwalk Venezuelans began celebrating their nation's Independence Day at the wall in 2007. However, the celebration on July 5, 2011 was special. It was the 200th anniversary of Venezuela's independence. As Clodomiro Falcon, who left Venezuela 26 years ago, said,

"We sang yesterday, Happy Fourth of July. We sing today, Happy Fifth of July. Today is a very meaningful day. We are very proud and we're very humble at the same time."

The group said the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. They sang the Venezuelan anthem. They then raised the Venezuelan flag.

6. 2018: Celebrating Haiti's Flag Day at the Heritage Wall

Several thousand people from Haiti live in Norwalk. Haiti is a very poor nation that has seen more than its share of troubles and tragedy – terrible poverty, political corruption, major earthquakes, hurricanes, and more. The United Haitian American Society of Norwalk has done much to help Haiti deal with these problems. Yet Haiti also has a proud history, and it is this history that Norwalk Haitians chose to remember and celebrate in 2018.

Norwalk's Haitian community already had its plaque up by 2018. However, it had not held an annual parade for several years. To revive the parade, these Haitian Americans met at the Heritage Wall on May 18, 2018, and raised Haitian flag. May 18 is Haitian Flag Day, marking the day in 1803 when Haiti adopted its flag. Haiti's slaves had begun a revolution to free themselves from France in 1791. By January 1, they were completely independent. The Haitian plaque on the Heritage Wall calls attention to an earlier event in which Haitians took part. It reads,

Haiti ***A Lesson in History***

October 9, 1779 on that day 1,200 volunteer members of the black legion Santo Domingo, Haiti came to join forces with the American soldiers in battle. They defeated the British troops led by colonel Maitland who then retired to Savannah. Such endeavor was one heroic contribution of our Haitian forefathers to the cause of the American patriots in their fights to preserve the freedom rights guaranteed to all by the independence of the United States of America. Thereafter in January 1804, these brave men returned

*home where with their heroic brothers and sisters
they created the first black republic in the world
which is known today as Haiti. As Haitian Americans,
we are proud to be part of the American dream.
UNITED HAITIAN-AMERICAN SOCIETY*

7. 2019: Some Students Want More Plaques on the Heritage Wall.

Mark Jackson, a seventh-grade social studies teacher in Norwalk, had been interested in the Heritage Wall for a long time. Mark often had his Roton Middle School students visit the wall and discuss it in class. In 2019, he had a group of students who shared his passionate interest in the wall. They took on a project to learn more about its history. They especially wanted to explain how cultural groups not represented could get a plaque up on the Heritage Wall.

Many of the early plaques celebrated the European heritage of Norwalk residents at the time, along with plaques for China, Haiti, Native Americans, and African Americans. At that time, only three plaques were from South and Central America: Colombia, Puerto Rico, and Costa Rica. Yet as of 2020, Norwalk was already about 40 percent Hispanic.

One of Jackson's students was Gia Magana-Garcia, whose parents are from El Salvador and Ecuador. She said,

“When I first went to the Heritage Wall, I first took a look at all of them and my heritage wasn't there. . . . That's why I wanted to be part of this project, so that I can help other people find their countries on the Heritage Wall, so that they can be proud of who they are.”

Ella Dino, whose ancestors are from Ukraine and Russia, said,

“I've really been learning about the culture which has really been interesting, and having this project in place kind of promotes that idea of looking into your culture and your backgrounds and seeing where you come from.”

Roshni Yousuf, whose parents come from Bangladesh, also commented,

“We're in Norwalk, but my mom's and my dad's origins are in Bangladesh. We're the next generation, we have to keep some of it so we can teach future generations.”

8. 2020: The Columbus Controversy at the Heritage Wall

Until 2020, a statue of Christopher Columbus stood in front of the Heritage Wall. It was placed there in 1983 by Italian American groups in Norwalk. Columbus was Italian, and many Italians admire him as an explorer and sailor. One member of the Sons of Italy in Norwalk said of Columbus,

“He was an engineer, he was a scientist, and he had that spirit to go out and explore the unknown.”

However, many Native Americans regard Columbus as the first of many conquering Europeans who brought disease, slavery and death to the indigenous peoples of the Americas. A petition to remove the statue from the front of the Heritage Wall stated,

“What this statue represents to our community as well as many other colonial monuments is violence, racism, marginalization, and the continued denial of the genocide of indigenous people.”

In June, 2020, the statue was removed to avoid violent protests. But it was not destroyed. Instead, it was given to St. Ann’s Club, an Italian social club. A ceremony for it was held there on Columbus Day. At the ceremony, Antonio Cappuccia, the club’s Vice President said,

“A dream came true for me. I’ve been to many Columbus ceremonies since I was a kid, and as an adult I kept going because it was important to my father and because I realized it’s part of my legacy. The heritage is not chosen, the heritage chooses us and no one can take it away from us.”

This solution did not fully satisfy either side of the conflict. It was a compromise. Yet perhaps it is this spirit of compromise that explains how the people of Norwalk have learned to accept and honor the diverse cultures making up their community.

Notes for the Timeline Items

1. “First Plaque in Place,” *The Norwalk Hour*, June 27, 1983.
 2. Don Rully, “Ninth Plaque Is Added to Heritage Wall,” *The Norwalk Hour*, November, 1984.
 3. “Black Heritage Celebrated,” *Norwalk News*, March 7, 1985, p. 3.
- The Fund for Teachers, “Seeing Ourselves in Others | Black History Month, February 12, 2018. Available online at: <http://www.fundforteachers.org/blog/ffidentity/>
4. Francis X Fay, Jr., “Native son honored in park at wall he created,” *The Norwalk Hour*, September 30, 2001.
 5. Nancy Guenther Chapman, “Norwalk Venezuelans Mark Independence Day – Twice,” *The Norwalk Daily Voice*, July 6, 2011. Available online at: <https://dailyvoice.com/connecticut/norwalk/news/norwalk-venezuelans-mark-independence-day-twice/427597/>
 6. R.A. Schuetz, “Haitians celebrate flag day in Norwalk,” *The Norwalk Hour*, May 18, 2018. Available online at: <https://www.thehour.com/news/article/Haitians-celebrate-flag-day-in-Norwalk-12926054.php#taboola-6>
 7. From Justin Papp, “Roton Students Push Diversity on Heritage Wall,” *The Norwalk Hour*, March 13, 2019. Available online at: <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-norwalk-hour/20190313/282037623484107>
 8. Robert Koch, “Vandalized statue has storied past,” *The Norwalk Hour*, October 14, 2017. Available online at: <https://www.norwalklib.org/DocumentCenter/View/4472/NPL-Columbus-Statue-Norwalk-History-Room-Library-Ralph-Bloom-The-Norwalk-Hour-101417-A1-A9>
- Alfonso Panico, “Saving Columbus: How a Removed Statue Found a New and Safe Home in Norwalk,” *VNY, La Voce di New York*, October 14, 2020. Available online at: <https://www.lavocedinyork.com/en/news/2020/10/14/saving-columbus-how-a-removed-statue-found-a-new-and-safe-home-in-norwalk/>

Student Assignment

Student Instructions

Please read the Background Essay for this lesson. Also read the entire set of eight entries for the Heritage Wall Timeline. Finally, read the two “Point of View” paragraphs below. Then write out brief answers to the questions asked about these paragraphs. Use your answers to help you take part in a class discussion about the Heritage Wall and the meaning of cultural diversity in America. In the discussion, share varying responses to the following question.

Essential Questions: Is the Norwalk Heritage Wall’s way of looking at cultural diversity unique to Norwalk? Or is it typical of the way most American communities look at it?

Point of View I: “No. Norwalk’s unusually positive experience with diverse racial, ethnic and national groups is not typical.

The Heritage Wall plaques are uplifting and inspiring, it is true. However, they do leave out the harsh truths about the way racial and ethnic minorities have often been treated in America. The many ethnic groups in Norwalk did not escape the forms of discrimination many have faced elsewhere. However, Norwalk is unique in some key ways. Its huge numbers of people in these various groups gave them a sizable role in Norwalk’s political and social life. Norwalk was lucky, also, in the social responsibility of many of those with wealth and influence. In part, that may be because its businesses were strongly rooted in the community itself. Here is what one historian wrote about Norwalk in the 1930s: “Its many small manufacturing companies benefited the local economy in ways that larger corporations failed to do. Owners and executives often lived in Norwalk, felt a sense of responsibility and local loyalty, and did not simply regard the community as an area to be drained to make profits for shareholders.” (From *Norwalk*, by Deborah Wing Ray and Gloria P. Stewart, Norwalk Historical Society, Inc., 1979, p. 192.) It was easier in a small town for groups to adjust. In the larger cities, and in America as a whole, ethnic and racial minorities faced a harsher reality. The Heritage Wall plaques paint a picture of harmony, but it is not a picture typical of all American communities.

Point of View II: Yes. Norwalk’s Heritage Wall reflects the mostly positive attitudes widely shared by the various groups that make up American society.

Yes, the Heritage Wall plaques are very positive and upbeat. Yet it is not true that they ignore the negative aspects of each group’s history. The plaque for the Black community, for example, states clearly, “From the shores of Africa, our ancestors were brought here in chains as slaves and servants.” Some plaques do speak of oppression, but often it is the oppression they were fleeing in coming to America. Hence, the Hungarian plaque says, “From the valley of the Carpathians, leaving oppression and seeking freedom they settled here.” The statements on the plaques come from church groups, fraternal groups and others in close touch with the people in the neighborhoods. Above all, these statements express a sense of America as a land of hope. Thus, the plaque for the Black community goes on to say “We have achieved a measure of freedom for ourselves and great promise for our

posterity.” The plaques don’t define their groups by skin color or other personal characteristics. Instead, they see themselves in terms of the places they come from and the traditional cultural heritages they wish to preserve. Finally, they stress how their own group identities are in harmony with the larger community. In all these ways, they reflect views broadly held by similar groups elsewhere in America. It is why in this land of immigrants, so many millions of them still dream of coming here.

In-Class Discussion: Clarify Your Views and Discuss Them with Others

Take a few brief notes in response to each of the following questions. Use your notes to help you take part in an all-class discussion about Norwalk’s Heritage Wall.

1. Of the eight items in the Heritage Wall Timeline, list two that best support “Point of View I.”

2. Why did you choose those two items?

3. Of the eight items in the Heritage Wall Timeline, list two that best support “Point of View II.”

4. Why did you choose those two items?

5. For Homework: Write a paragraph stating which of the two points of view you agree with most and why. Make specific references to the two items you chose here. As a class share some of these paragraphs and discuss them.

Extension Activity:

The Heritage Wall: A Document Based Question (DBQ) Essay

Why has the Heritage Wall been important to the people of Norwalk, and in what ways, if any, has its meaning for them changed over time?

Instructions:

1. Read the background essay for this assignment. Look at the photographs of the plaques available with this lesson. Then read through the eight items on the Heritage Wall Timeline. Note the date for each item, its purpose, the point of view of the author or authors and other relevant details.

2. Write a thesis statement. This is a brief (one or two sentences) answer to the question for the assignment.
3. Write an opening paragraph providing relevant historical context (use the lesson's background essay for this). End this paragraph with your thesis statement.
4. In two or three paragraphs, present a logical argument supporting your thesis statement. Back up your points by referring specifically to as many of the sources as you think are needed to make your case. Do not merely list the sources, use them in meaningful ways to support your thesis.
5. Write a concluding paragraph restating the thesis and any further thoughts you have as to its broader historical significance.