Florida Pioneer Homes
By Lance Corlew & Ron Miller

Summary
Florida pioneer homes were simple, with few luxuries. Life was very difficult in the 1800s compared to today. In this lesson, students will have the opportunity to learn about how different life was for Florida's pioneers and plot out their own wilderness homestead.

Objectives
Students will:
1.) describe a typical pioneer home;
2.) compare modern homes with pioneer homes.

U.S. History Event or Era
The American Pioneer Expansion of the early-mid 19th century.

Grade Level
This lesson can be implemented into the middle school classroom.

Materials
Retractable measuring tape, handouts

Lesson Time
This lesson will take one to two class periods to complete.
Lesson Procedures

**Procedures**

1. The night before the lesson have students measure their bedrooms and their entire homes. Calculate the square feet for each.
2. At the start of the lesson have four students stand in the corners of the classroom. Using the measuring tape, have those students form a 15 by 20 foot rectangle. Tell the students that this space represents a typical Florida pioneer home. Ask the students to calculate the square feet in this space. Spend a few minutes on any class discussion that would compare the pioneer’s home to his or her own homes.
3. Assign the handouts as reading assignments. After the students have completed the reading, allow the students to compare and contrast the homes and lives of the pioneers to their own homes and lives.
4. Have students design the floor plan of their own pioneer home! Have them follow the directions given on the "Design a Florida Pioneer Home" assignment in the "Activities" section.
The McNair-Black house is typical of houses built by pioneers in nineteenth century Florida. Each pioneer family built its own house. The McNair-Black house is small – not much bigger than a Seminole chickee. The house has only one room about 15 by 20 feet. The room has doorways on several sides for cross-ventilation. A wide porch wraps around three sides of the house.

The house is raised above the ground on wooden piers (support posts driven into the ground). The frame of the house was built of pine logs. The logs probably came from trees cut down to clear the land for farming. The logs are squared off roughly and notched at the ends to interlock and hold the frame together.

The roof, which covers both the house and the porches, is tall. It lets the warm air rise above the living area and the slope of the roof lest the rain run off. This roof is covered with wood singles.

The McNair-Black house has only one chimney; this is made of mud and bricks. It leans away from the house slightly so it could be knocked over if it caught fire.

(“What Buildings Tell Us,” Florida Heritage Education Program, Series 1, Number 6)
Life on a Pioneer Farm

Building a Farmhouse

When pioneers began coming to Florida in the early 1800s, they staked out small homesteads in the wilderness. Their first task was always to clear some land to build a house.

Pioneers built their houses mostly of materials found on their farms, so they were self-sufficient and not dependent on purchased goods. The pioneers used pine trees cut down in clearing the land to build a house. Because sawing the logs into lumber was difficult without a sawmill, the earliest pioneers left the logs round or squared them off roughly. As sawmills sprang up, settlers began using sawed lumber to build their houses.

The floors of these little cabins were sometimes of dirt, but often the cabin was raised of the ground to protect it from water in the rainy season and to help keep the air circulating. If cedar or cypress trees were available, shingle were made from them for the roof. If not, the roof was covered with palm fronds. The area around the house was cleared of trees and underbrush, so if lighting struck a tree there was less chance damage to the house (from fire or a failing tree).

What a Pioneer Farmhouse Looked Like

The farmhouse was usually small, often only one room about 15 by 20 feet. Florida farmhouses were very well suited to their environment. They had steep roofs so the rain could run off, and so the heat inside would rise above the living space. Porches on all sides shaded the house form the Florida sun and provided extra living space. The houses always had several doors and windows so air could flow through. If there was a threat of Indian attack, however, the doors and windows would be closed and shuttered no matter how hot it was.

The house usually had one chimney; this was made of clay and sticks and often leaned out slightly from the house, so if it caught fire, it could be knocked over and the fire put out.

Farmhouse Furniture

Furnishings for the new farmhouse were often homemade rather than bought. Barrels and crates salvaged from nearby towns were made into tables and chairs. Some farmers made mattresses by splitting palmetto fans, drying them in the sun, and stuffing them into cloth covers. One pioneer woman said this “made the bed as sweet smelling as new mown hay.” Other farmers collected Spanish moss, scalded it in boiling water, hung it out to dry, and picked it apart to make it fluffy before filling mattress covers.

Most people had kerosene lamps or candles for light, but others made do with fat pine torches.

Entertainment

Living before the age of electricity, Florida farm families had to make their own entertainment. Because most farms were several miles from their nearest neighbors, visitors were always a welcome sight. Since the roads were rough and travel was difficult, visitors would frequently stay for several days at a time.

If there was a town nearby, the family would go to a Friday evening square dance and enjoy the dancing and fiddle music played there. Church socials, picnics, fish fries, hog killing, sugar cane grindings, and log rolling were other sources of entertainment.

("Farm Life in the Early 1800s," Florida Heritage Education Program, Series 1, Number 3)
The average Florida pioneer house was 15 by 20 feet. Based on this information, your task is to design the inside of a Florida pioneer home. Assume that there are eight people who need to live and sleep in this house. First, make a list of items that need to be included in your house. (Use your handout for ideas) Remember that we are dealing with a time period in dealing with a time period in the early 1800s. Draw the items on the floor plan below. Try to keep everything in scale. Each inch on this drawing is equal to 3 feet. For example, an average bed is about 7 feet long, or almost 3 inches on the drawing. When you are finished, you can also earn extra credit. Using this same drawing put as many items from the house that you currently live in into the drawing. Items can be anything that you feel is necessary for your survival and pleasure.
Using the handout on Florida pioneer life, compare and contrast the entertainment of today with the entertainment that took place during the pioneer era in Florida.
FLORIDA HOMES

Florida pioneer homes were adapted to the harsh Florida climate. Give at least three ways that the Florida pioneer houses were well suited for the environment of Florida. Use specific details discussed in the reading.
Using the handout on Florida pioneer homes and life as a reference, describe what you feel would be your reaction if you were required to move into a pioneer home with seven other people. Use examples from the handout to help you explain your potential reaction.
Resources

