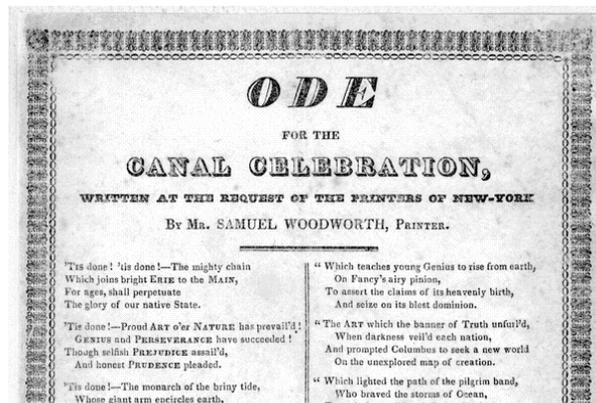


## THE STORY IN THE SONG: TEACHING THE ERIE CANAL THROUGH MUSIC

Most American schoolchildren who have studied the Erie Canal are familiar with the song “Low Bridge” (aka “15 Miles on the Erie Canal”). A picture of life on the New York waterway for canaller and mule, Thomas Allen’s Tin Pan Alley piece reveals the canal’s original route in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as its role in hauling goods from New York to the newly settled Great Lakes region. Though the song was written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, long after the railroad had become the nation’s major form of transport, the catchiness of its tune and the details of its lyrics have helped many students and teachers retain a few historic facts about the Erie Canal. While “Low Bridge” is one of a number of songs written about the waterway, there are also many written by those who once worked on it. Several collections on the Library of Congress’ *American Memory* website enable teachers to access sheet music, songsheets, and audio recordings of this music which can be used to offer new perspectives on this important subject in American history.

Begun in 1817, the Erie Canal was a pioneering public works project in the new republic of the United States. Built at a time when most canals were less than 2 miles long and the longest 27, and at a cost of an unprecedented 6 million dollars from the New York legislature (more than ¾ of the federal budget at the time), the canal eventually ran for 363 miles with 83 locks and 18 aqueducts, including an 800-foot waterbridge across the Genesee River. After its opening in 1825, the waterway rapidly changed the area’s geography, shipping, and the price of commodities; the cost of moving a ton of goods from New York City to Buffalo fell by 90% from 1817 to the mid-1830s. <sup>1</sup> It reduced the travel time from east to west, and in ensuing decades, communities such as Rochester, Syracuse, and Buffalo grew up along the canal. New York City, its connection to the Atlantic, usurped from New Orleans the position of the nation’s preeminent port. <sup>2</sup> At the same time, the Erie Canal developed a musical culture



*A close up of the broadside of “The Meeting of the Waters” from An American Time Capsule (Library of Congress)*

of its own composed of songs sung by those who worked on the canal as well as music that resulted as a by-product of the canal's development.

Music first came to the Erie Canal with the workers who dug the ditch. A mix of freed slaves, native born Americans, and immigrants from the British Isles, some of them came to New York in search of the \$12 per month jobs.<sup>3</sup> Work songs such as "The Ballad of Johnnie Troy" were introduced to break the tedium in places like the malaria-ridden Montezuma Swamp. As the work continued and the canal grew, songs popular in taverns and inns in the area also began to enter the repertory.<sup>4</sup>

When the first portion of the canal was completed, a different variety of song entered the oeuvre: "The Meeting of Waters/ Ode for the Canal Celebration," a piece written for the opening day of the canal—October 26, 1825—when Governor De Witt Clinton symbolically poured waters from Lake Erie into New York harbor. Whereas previous canal songs were often sung to pass time during hard labor, this adaptation of "The Vale of Avoca," celebrated the accomplishment and ingenuity of America's free men and held up the canal as an example of progress:

*'Tis this which call'd forth the immortal decree,  
And gave the great work its first motion;  
'Tis done! by the hands of the brave and free,  
And Erie is link'd to the Ocean.*

*Then hail to the Art which unshackles the soul,  
And fires it with love of glory,  
And causes the victor who reaches the goal,  
To live in deathless story.*<sup>5</sup>

Irish immigration increased significantly after the canal's opening. When an enlargement was begun in 1835, so many of those new arrivals worked on the construction that they were immortalized in "Paddy on the Canal," found in the songsheet collection *America Singing*:

*When I came to this wonderful empire,  
It filled me with the greatest surprise.  
To see such a great undertaking,  
On the like I never opened my eyes.  
To see a full thousand brave fellows,  
At work among mountains so tall.  
A dragging a chain through the mountains,  
To strike a line for the canal...*<sup>6</sup>

As time passed, more and more people made their livelihoods on the waterway. Songs and shouts including "Canawler, Canawler" accompanied boatmen as they waited in line at locks or loaded and unloaded cargo. They came in contact with sailors, and sea shanties like "The Dark-Eyed Sailor" became "The Dark-Eyed Canaller."<sup>7</sup>

*As I roved out one evening fair  
It bein' the summer to take the air  
I spied a fair maid with a sailor boy  
And I stood to listen  
And I stood to listen to hear what they might say.*<sup>8</sup>

*It was a comely young lady fair,  
Was walking out to take the air.  
She met a canaler upon the way,  
So I paid attention, so I paid attention,  
To hear what they did say.*<sup>9</sup>

Songs were passed along the towpath orally, and in print newspapers would often publish the lyrics of new canal songs with notes on adapted melodies. As a result canal music spread throughout the New York region.

Mid-century, music on the Erie Canal took on an additional dimension as theaters and music halls were built in cities like Buffalo to entertain passengers travelling on packet boats as well as the canallers themselves. The demands of the canal and lake trade shaped performances, contributing to the development of an entertainment circuit that featured Edwin Christy's minstrel shows, based on the prejudicial stereotypes of the day, and paved the way for vaudeville. Virginia Minstrel Dan Emmett's composition "The Boatman's Dance" offered an idealized rendering of the life of canallers on the Ohio River while Stephen Foster's music broadened the appeal of minstrelsy by transforming and softening some of the bawdier elements of the form. Still accessible through sheet music on sites like *Music for the Nation*, Foster's music at its best reflects prevailing issues of the day like perceptions of antebellum plantation life and the cycles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century boom and bust economy represented in "Hard Times Come Again No More":<sup>10</sup>

*While we seek mirth and beauty and music light and gay,  
There are frail forms fainting at the door.  
Though their voices are silent, their pleading looks will say  
Oh! hard times, come again no more...*

*Let us pause in life's pleasures and count its many tears,  
While we all sup sorrow with the poor.  
There's a song that will linger forever in our ears,  
Oh! Hard times, come again no more.*<sup>11</sup>

By the time the Erie Canal's enlargement was completed in the 1860s, the canal had become a way of life. It contributed to the prosperity and cultural development of New York City, Buffalo, and many cities along its route. It was a catalyst for canal construction in other parts of the country like Pennsylvania and Ohio. It carried most of the freight for New York State and encouraged immigration to the Midwest. It even spawned its own mini-epic, "The Raging Canal," which later inspired Mark Twain's 1872 poem "The Aged Pilot Man."<sup>12</sup>



*Nye family boats from Captain Pearl R. Nye: Life on the Ohio and Erie Canal (Library of Congress)*

The competition from railroads, however, slowly eroded the significance of the Erie Canal in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although some improvements were made on the waterway (1884–94) and tolls were abolished, faster,

more efficient trains attracted the canal's passengers and later its profitable long-haul cargo. The early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about the renovation and subsequent conversion of the Erie Canal into a large, modern barge canal. Incorporating canalized rivers and lakes, major course changes were made and most of the original channel was abandoned, except in Western New York. In 1918 the New York Barge Canal was opened. <sup>13</sup>

The final stage of the canal's glory days is represented in *Captain Pearl R. Nye: Life on the Ohio and Erie Canal*, the Library of Congress' collection of music and memorabilia from one of the last of its boat captains. Born on the canal boat *Reform* in Ohio in 1872, Pearl Nye spent 40 years navigating the Erie and Ohio Canals. When the "Big Ditch" closed in Ohio, he devoted considerable time and energy to preserving its songs and stories. This body of work, along with many of his own reminiscences, was recorded by the Lomax family of ethnomusicologists in the 1930s as they researched the roots of American music. "The Dark-Eyed Sailor" and English ballads like "Barbara Allen" were recalled easily by Nye and alluded to America's British heritage. He also shared occupational songs that recounted seasonal work patterns on the canal such as "We're Going to Pump Out Lake Erie:"

*The portage lake sometimes fail us,  
And often are somewhat slow.  
Oh it's then for rain we would have to wait,  
For loaded we cannot go.*

*We will watch our gates and paddle,  
Yes, the tumbles and waves too.  
They will help us along with their merry song,  
And we'll see that we get through.*

*So we're going to pump out Lake Erie,  
We're going to begin next June.  
And when we get done you can tell by the sun,  
They'll be whiskers on the moon. <sup>14</sup>*

He penned several songs too including the 76 verse "The Old Canal," which detailed the geography of the Ohio and Erie Canal and his way of life, which has nearly vanished from the American landscape.

The ballads, shouts, and canal songs of the Erie Canal reveal a century of American experiences on the waterway as well as the social change that followed its development. Primary source documents from *America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets*, *Captain Pearl R. Nye: Life on the Ohio and Erie Canal*, and *Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, 1870-1885*, as well as other online collections like those at the American Folklife Center can greatly enrich students' understanding of the canal and its important role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the United States transformed from an agrarian society to industrial one.

## Notes

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- 2 Wallace, Mike and Edwin G. Burrows, *Gotbam*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.450.
- 3 Bernstein, Peter L., *Wedding of the Waters: the Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), p. 207.
- 4 Wyld, Lionel, D. *Low Bridge! Folklore and the Erie Canal*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1962), p.77.
- 5 Library of Congress, "Ode for the canal celebration, written at the request of the printers of New-York. By Mr. Samuel Woodworth, Printer ... Created/Published New York, 1825." from *An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera*, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/rbpehtml/>.
- 6 Library of Congress, "Paddy on the Canal" Imprint: H. De Marsan, Publisher, 38 & 60 Chatham Street, NY from *America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets* <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amsshtml/amsshhome.html> .
- 7 Wyld, *Ibid*.
- 8 Traditional /Christy Moore, "The Dark-Eyed Sailor" from *Prosperous* (Tara Records, 1972).; lyrics accessed online at <http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk> .
- 9 Nye, Pearl R. "The Dark-Eyed Canaller" *Captain Pearl R. Nye: Life on the Ohio and Erie Canal*. <http://memory.loc.gov:8081/ammem/collections/nye/index.html> .
- 10 Snyder, Robert, "Popular Culture and the Erie Canal" transcript from an unpublished lecture CUNY Graduate Center, July 10, 2008.
- 11 Foster, Stephen, "Hard Times Come Again No More" Imprint New York, NY; Notes: Music published by Firth, Pond, & Co., New York. from *America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets* <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amsshtml/amsshhome.html> .
- 12 Wyld, pp. 129-30.
- 13 New York State Erie Canal at <http://www.nycanal.com/history/eriecanaltimeline.html>
- 14 Nye, "We're Going to Pump Out Lake Erie," *Ibid*.

## ERIE CANAL TIMELINE

**1800** In the early 1800s, while in prison, a miller named Jesse Hawley in the Town of Geneva, N.Y., conceived the idea of a Canal stretching from west to east across New York State from Lake Erie to the Hudson River. Between 1807 and 1808 he authored 14 essays on the virtues of a Canal across the State. President Thomas Jefferson thought the idea "a little short of madness," but the idea was fully supported by then-New York City Mayor DeWitt Clinton.

At that time there was no simple way to transport people, raw materials or manufactured goods from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. Overland transportation was arduous and expensive. New York State was covered with mile upon mile of wilderness, swamps, mountains, waterfalls, great inland lakes and only a handful of brave settlers.

**1817** When Clinton became governor of the State, he made sure the legislature quickly appropriated funds for the Canal's construction. When construction began, the project was known as "Clinton's big ditch" and "Clinton's Folly." The naysayers stubbornly clung to the manifesto "in the big ditch would be buried the treasury of the state to be watered by the tears of posterity."

It was constructed by crews of untrained men, without the aid of a single professional engineer. The men who designed and engineered the Canal were highly skilled surveyors and very intelligent, capable people. They studied the publications and completed works of the legendary French and English Canal builders such as Paul Riquet, James Brindley and Thomas Telford. The French Canals, which began in the early 1600's, were the model for all the Canals, including the English and American Canals such as the Erie. (The locks that operated the canals, especially the mitre gate mechanism, were invented by Leonardo da Vinci.)

With the exception of a few places where black powder was used to blast through rock formations, the Canal was entirely built by the muscle power of men and animals who pulled a new type of plow called the slip scraper (a high-tech 19th century version of what today is a bulldozer). They also invented a unique device that pulled giant tree stumps out of the ground almost effortlessly.

**1825** The waterway, now world famous, opened October 26, 1825.

It was 40 feet wide and 4 feet deep, with 18 aqueducts to carry its waters across rivers and 83 locks to raise and lower boats a total of 682 feet from one end to the other.

The first fleet to travel all 363 miles of the Erie Canal was headed by Governor Clinton's boat the "Seneca Chief" which had on board several distinguished citizens and dignitaries. The boat took sail on October 26 from a commercial slip in Buffalo, along with a flotilla of two other boats.

Nine days later it arrived in New York harbor and was greeted by almost 150 vessels and thousands of New Yorkers. Generally referred to as the "Wedding of the Waters," Governor Clinton emptied two barrels of water from Lake Erie into the Atlantic Ocean in New York at a formal ceremony thereby commemorating not only the completion of the Canal, but the uniting of Lake Superior with the Atlantic Ocean.

The Erie Canal transformed New York State as cities blossomed almost overnight along the corridor and settlers flocked westward. The boomtowns had come to America. The cost to ship goods by Canal

dropped to \$10 per ton, as compared to \$100 per ton by road. In 10 years, the Canal tolls more than recouped the entire cost of construction and maintenance. It showed a profit so large that it offset the state budget by two-thirds.

After the completion of the Canal System, statewide shipping costs were reduced by 94% and the first great westward movement of American settlers began, making New York City the busiest port in the U.S., surpassing Philadelphia as the nation's chief seaport.

**1836** The Canal was rebuilt between 1836 and 1862 and was known as the enlarged Erie. It was widened to 70 feet and deepened to 7 feet; 72 double locks were added and minor course changes were made mostly by straightening the many sinuous bends (or curves).

**1862** The enlarged Erie Canal reached a depth of 7 feet and could now handle freights carrying up to 240 tons. The earlier Canal could only hold boats with a 70-ton capacity.

**1882** Tolls were abolished on the Canal, which already raised funds in excess of \$113 million above its original cost.

**1895** The State launched the second enlargement of the canal, called the "Nine Million Dollar Improvement," deepening the canal to nine feet.

**1898** Work suddenly stopped on the partially completed "Nine Million Dollar Improvement" due to insufficient funds. The Canal was on the verge of abandonment.

**1899** Governor Theodore Roosevelt appointed the Committee on Canals to study New York's Canal System and make recommendations as to a future course of action. This eventually resulted in the birth of the Barge Canal System.

**1905** Between 1905 and 1918, an entirely new enlarged Canal, the Barge Canal System, was created to accommodate the large barges. Major course changes were made and most of the original channel was abandoned, except in Western New York, and rivers that were originally avoided became part of the system. Nearly 100 years after the beginning of its original construction, the Canal took on the structure it is today: an average width of 125 feet, a depth of at least 12 feet and 35 locks. Some of the old locks have been preserved as historic sites. The engineers changed the Barge Canal's western and eastern terminus from Buffalo to Tonawanda and from Albany to Waterford.

Today's Barge Canal System consists of the Erie Canal and three major branches - the Champlain, the Oswego and the Cayuga-Seneca Canal.

The Mohawk, Hudson, Seneca, Oswego, Clyde and Genesee Rivers were canalized by the Barge Canal construction through a system of fixed and moveable dams, locks reservoirs and dredged channels.

**1918** All branches of the Canal System were finished and opened for traffic.

**1991** The people of New York State ratified an amendment to the State's constitution allowing long-term leasing of Canal System lands to encourage development along the Canal.

**1992** Legislation known as "Thruway 2000" was enacted transferring responsibility for the New York State Canal System from the New York State Department of Transportation to the New York State Thruway Authority.

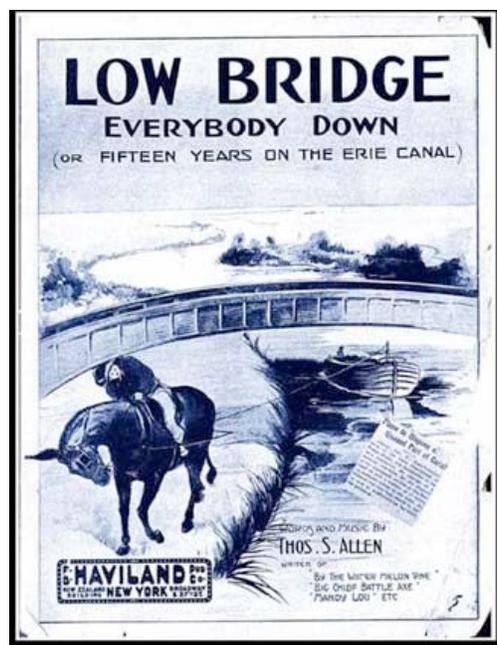
**1995** The Canal Recreationway Commission was created, a 24-member body to advise the Thruway Authority on its canal-related activities. The Commission finalized the Canal Recreationway Plan in September.

**1996** A \$32 million, five-year Canal Revitalization Program was developed in 1996 to serve as a realistic approach to Canal System development. The overall goals of the Revitalization Program are to preserve and rehabilitate the Canal infrastructure so that it is safe, accessible and available for future use; to enhance recreational opportunities; and to promote and foster economic development throughout the Canal Corridor.

**2000** The New York State Canal System celebrated its 175th anniversary. The year-long celebration marked the tremendous historic, cultural and economic contributions of the New York State Canal System to New York State.

**Present** Today, the mule-towed barges have given way to pleasure boats, hikers and cyclists as the waterways of the 524-mile New York State Canal System have evolved into a world-class tourism and recreation destination. 73.5 percent of New York State residents live within two miles of the waterways. The Canal System continues to produce dramatic growth for the state and the nation, creating an inland trade route and propelling economic development.

From <http://www.nycanal.com/history/eriecanaltimeline.html>



*The sheet music for Thomas Allen's "Low Bridge" (New York State Archives)*

## FEATURED LESSON: THE STORY IN THE SONG: TEACHING THE ERIE CANAL WITH ONLINE SONG COLLECTIONS

### Workshop Overview:

This workshop models ways for teachers to use folk music and songwriting to enhance student learning in social studies. The songwriting process that the workshop models takes students to the next step of adapting and interpreting folk songs with the goal of expressing similar experiences of their own through the lyrics and music of an original song. These models can be adapted to students in grades K–12.

### Student Learning Goals:

- Students will practice skills of observation and inference by analyzing folk songs as primary source documents associated with the Erie Canal.
- Students will enhance their understanding of the history and culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Erie Canal through the study of folk songs.
- Students will practice shaping personal experience into narrative form with a beginning, middle, and end.

### Materials:

- Text of the song “Low Bridge” (aka “Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal”—see below)
- Access to the internet sites and lyrics of the folk song sets mentioned in Procedures
- Audio recordings of folk songs to provide tunes for songwriting activity

**Content Vocabulary:** lock, barge, trot, stall, rigging, reef a sail, pick, spade, towpath, portage lake, tumbles, mire, muck, schooner

### Activity #1: Song as Primary Source Document

**Grouping:** Whole class

**Description:** Begin by asking students to name or perform Erie Canal songs that they have previously been exposed to. Then share the words to the following song with them: “Low Bridge” (aka “15 Miles on the Erie Canal”) by Thomas S. Allen, 1905. Play an audio recording of the song (There are several—tracks by George Ward, Pete Seeger, and Bruce Springsteen; please see the resources list at the end) and ask the students to discuss the following questions:

- Who is the author/singer of this song?
- What information about canal life can you discover from the song’s lyrics?
- How do you think the author/singer feels about the Erie Canal? Why?

### “Low Bridge” (aka “15 Miles on the Erie Canal”)

*By Thomas S. Allen*

*I've got an old mule and her name is Sal  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal  
She's a good old worker and a good old pal  
Fifteen years on the Erie Canal  
We've hauled some barges in our day  
Filled with lumber, coal, and hay  
And every inch of the way we know  
From Albany to Buffalo*

*Chorus:*

*Low bridge, everybody down  
Low bridge for we're coming to a town*

*And you'll always know your neighbor  
And you'll always know your pal  
If you've ever navigated on the Erie Canal*

*We'd better get along on our way, old gal  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal  
'Cause you bet your life I'd never part with Sal  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal  
Git up there mule, here comes a lock  
We'll make Rome 'bout six o'clock  
One more trip and back we'll go  
Right back home to Buffalo*

*Chorus*

*Oh, where would I be if I lost my pal?  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal  
Oh, I'd like to see a mule as good as Sal  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal  
A friend of mine once got her sore  
Now he's got a busted jaw  
Cause she let fly with her iron toe  
And kicked him in to Buffalo*

*Chorus*

*Don't have to call when I want my Sal  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal  
She trots from her stall like a good old gal  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal  
I eat my meals with Sal each day  
I eat beef and she eats hay  
And she ain't so slow if you want to know  
She put the "Buff" in Buffalo*

*Chorus*

Review students' answers to the questions. They may have noticed geographical details, the canaller's close relationship with his mule (Information about mules on the early canal can be found here: [http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/ec\\_1830.shtml](http://www.archives.nysed.gov/projects/eriecanal/ec_1830.shtml) ; mules which had finished their shifts would kept on the boat while the working mules towed the boat.), or need an explanation of how a canal lock works (An animated demonstration of a lock can be found here: <http://www.eriecanal.org/locks.html> ). What inferences can they make about the work on the canal—e.g. is the work boring if a person has to sing? What story does this song tell?

(Note: The popular song “Low Bridge” (aka “15 Miles on the Erie Canal”) was written in 1905 by a professional songsmith and entertainer, Thomas S. Allen. Penned after Erie Canal barge traffic was converted from mule power to engine power, raising the speed of traffic above fifteen miles per day, the song memorializes the years from 1825 to 1880 when the mule barges made boomtowns out of Utica, Rome, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo, and transformed New York into the Empire State. According to George Ward, the variation from “fifteen years on the Erie Canal” to “fifteen miles on the Erie Canal” comes from the text collected and published by Carl Sandburg in his book of American folksongs: *The American Songbag* (1927).)

## Activity #2: The Story in the Song

**Grouping:** Groups of 5-6

**Description:** Building on the process of observation and inference from the previous activity, students will each analyze two Erie Canal songs, comparing and contrasting the information they find.

### Procedure:

- Divide the class into six groups. Each member of the group will receive the same two primary source documents. There are a total of four different documents.
- Explain to students that they will now analyze songs sung by people who built and worked on the Erie Canal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Hand out the pairs of documents listed below. Students will use Venn diagrams to analyze their songs: facts from the first song on the left hand circle, facts from the second on the right hand circle, and similarities in the shared space in the middle.
- Each student works individually to decode the facts. When the students are finished, they will compare and discuss their results in their group. Suggested themes to investigate:
  - Who is the author?
  - When was the song written? How do you know?
  - What can you understand about:
    - Home
    - Work day
    - Skills or talents needed for work
    - Attitude toward others or toward the work

Board the results of the investigation and discuss findings. What details do the songs provide about the history of the period on the canal? (e.g. “Song of the Diggers” tells us men dug the canal in the mud.)

### Song Set #1

“Paddy on the Canal” [audio can be found on George Ward’s *Ob! That Low Bridge!*]  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amsshtml/amsshhome.html> [search by keyword]

“Song of the Diggers” [audio can be found on George Ward’s *Ob! That Low Bridge!*]  
<http://www.archive.org/details/SongOfTheDiggers> [see Appendix for lyrics]

### Song Set #2

“We’re Going to Pump Out Lake Erie” [accompanied audio files on the Library of Congress’ site]  
[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/afcnyc:@field\(DOCID+afc1937002t25a\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/afcnyc:@field(DOCID+afc1937002t25a))

“Down the River” [accompanied audio files on the Library of Congress’ site]  
[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/afcnyc:@field\(DOCID+afc1937002t25b\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/afcnyc:@field(DOCID+afc1937002t25b))

## Activity #3: Writing One’s Own Story in Song

**Grouping:** Whole Group and Individual

After analyzing the songs, students will write songs from their own experiences. City Lore’s teaching artist, Leo Schaff, has students write both the lyrics and the music, but teachers new to songwriting may feel more comfortable with having students write lyrics using an existing melody. Many folk songs share melodies, and some songwriters, such as Woody Guthrie, often borrowed traditional melodies for his songs.

### Leo’s Songwriting Process

In writing songs with students, it is important to keep the process fun and interesting. It’s also important to be flexible and open to whatever happens in the room. These are some of the steps he uses in songwriting with children, although the order may change and often he moves back and forth between steps, such as writing melody and lyrics.

**Generate Ideas** - Songwriters get ideas from many places: from their own experiences, from news stories, from signs they see on the street. Many songwriters keep a notebook to write down ideas, phrases or titles to use later for songwriting, and he encourages students to start a songwriter's journal. For this workshop we will write a song based on the songs analyzed in Activity #2.

**Select Key Words, Phrases, Images** - From what you read or heard in the songs, or from notes you wrote down, let's list some words and/or phrases you remember; include images or feelings of your own that may have come to mind while reading.

**Organize and Categorize** - Organize words/phrases into groups based on a particular aspect of the interview: an event, a description, a story, a feeling, a memory, etc.

**Analyze and Interpret** - Is a theme emerging — struggle, journey, longing, the old and the new, hardship, hope, loss, the importance of family ties, etc.? Is there a story we want to tell? We can start a list of possible themes.

**Add Rhyme** - Transform phrases into lines that rhyme. Take one of the groups of phrases and try to transform them into two or four lines that rhyme. (This can be done as a whole group, incorporating individual suggestions; or it can be worked on individually or in small groups, each then reporting to the whole.)

**Select a Musical Style or Form** - What kind of music would be appropriate to the theme, mood, or cultural identity of our subject? What mood should the music convey – spirited and energetic, quiet and peaceful, somber and sad, comical, or inspirational? Should we try to write music in a traditional style or work with more contemporary music?

**Add Melody and Rhythm** - As rhyming sections emerge, would someone like to try to sing a couple of the lines (i.e., make up a melodic phrase)? Or, would someone like to say this section a couple of times over, but give it a beat as you say it (i.e., make up a rhythm)? If not, let's play a chord or two on the guitar, and see if that helps us come up with a melody or rhythm. [OR: Take an existing song — either traditional to the students' native countries, or a song they like, or a song the class (and the teacher!) are familiar with — and use it as a template upon which to write a new lyric.]

**Give It Structure and Form** - Do we have a section that sounds (lyrically and/or musically) like a verse — sections that move the story along? Or, do we have a chorus — a section that repeats and that captures or sums up the theme of the song? Or, do we have a section that can work as a bridge — a section that crosses the song over from the main part of the story to a new and culminating part?

**Put It All Together** - In groups (or as a class), let's work on the sections and bring them together.

**Keep It Interesting** - Just as a story needs to move to different places, so, the music has to move out of its loop of melodic verse repetition into a chorus that sounds different, and that usually lifts the song – in melody and spirit. A bridge or even a spoken word section is another way to move the story along, change the melody and/or the rhythm, and keep it interesting.

**Give It a Title** - Do we have a title? The title helps define the message of the song.

**Edit and Revise** - The process of writing a song is like a journey to an unknown country: exploring new combinations of words, new feelings and images, new ways of telling and re-telling a story, new melodies and rhythms. But have we taken on too much baggage? Do we have too many verses or too many subjects or words in the lyric? Have we kept to our theme or themes, or have they been lost along the way? Have we gotten a bit carried away in our journey and are we beginning to feel a little lost? Do we need to return to the familiar roots of the song: the catchy phrase or melody that repeats (i.e., the “hook”); the central story line; the central image or feeling? Do the melodies of the different sections work and flow together?

**Perform It and Pass It On** - Once the pieces begin to fit, the song comes to life – when we sing it. And it takes on a life of its own when it's then sung and played in new and different ways – by other people!

### Extension/Evaluation Activity:

**Grouping:** 5 groups

**Description:** Take 5 images or photographs associated with the Erie Canal and the themes discussed in this lesson, such as a picture of a canal boat, and tack it to the wall with a piece of chart paper. Instruct each group that they have 1 minute to write everything that they see in the picture as well as know about the picture on the chart paper. At the end of each minute, each group moves to the next image until all 5 have been examined by all the groups. Evaluate and discuss results as a class.

### Appendix: *Song of the Diggers*

*We are digging a ditch through the mire;  
Through the mire the muck and the mud, by heck!  
And the mud is our principle hire;  
In our pants, up our sleeves, down our neck, by heck!*

*We are digging a ditch through the gravel;  
Through the gravel across York State, by heck!  
So the people and the freight can travel,  
Can travel across York State, by heck!*

*We are digging a ditch through the mire;  
Through the mire the muck and the mud, by heck!  
And the mud is our principle hire;  
In our pants, up our sleeves, down our neck, by heck!*

### Library of Congress Web Links:

**American Folklife Center** On this Web site you will find not only an introduction to the activities of the American Folklife Center and its Archive of Folk Culture but also news about programs and activities, online presentations of multiformat collections, and other resources to facilitate folklife projects and study. The American Folklife Center aims to be the national center for folklife documentation and research, and this Web site offers a virtual destination for those who cannot visit the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>

***America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets*** For most of the nineteenth century, before the advent of phonograph and radio technologies, Americans learned the latest songs from printed song sheets. Not to be confused with sheet music, song sheets are single printed sheets, usually six by eight inches, with lyrics but no music. These were new songs being sung in music halls or new lyrics to familiar songs, like "Yankee Doodle" or "The Last Rose of Summer." Some of America's most beloved tunes were printed as song sheets, including "The Star Spangled Banner" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Song sheets are an early example of a mass medium and today they offer a unique perspective on the political, social, and economic life of the time.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amsshtml/amsshhome.html>

***Captain Pearl R. Nye: Life on the Ohio and Erie Canal*** captures the culture and music of the men, women, and children who worked and lived along the Ohio and Erie Canal. Nye, who was born and raised on a canal boat, never lost his love of the "Big Ditch." After the canal closed permanently in 1913, he devoted considerable time and energy to preserving its songs and stories.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/nye/index.html>

***Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, 1870-1885*** consists of over 47,000 pieces of sheet music registered for copyright during the years 1870 to 1885. Included are popular songs, piano music, sacred and secular choral music, solo instrumental music, method books and instructional materials, and music for band and orchestra.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/smhtml/smhome.html>

## Other Web Links

**Alan Lomax Database**, a multimedia archive of documentation and scientific research by folklorist and musical anthropologist, Alan Lomax.

<http://lomaxarchive.com/index.html>

**Archive of Popular American Music at UCLA**, sheet music from the UCLA Music Library's Archive of Popular American Music

<http://digital.library.ucla.edu/apam/>

**The Erie Canal**, a site devoted to the history of the Erie Canal in general, but focuses to some extent on the western portion of the canal and particularly on the area around the City of Rochester

<http://www.eriecanal.org/>

**History of the Erie Canal at the University of Rochester**, a site with content written by University of Rochester on the history of the Erie Canal and its successor, the New York State Barge Canal

<http://www.history.rochester.edu/canal/>

**Traditional Music Library** A large traditional and folk music library of songbooks, tune-books, sheet-music, lyrics, midis, tablature, plus music theory, chord diagrams, scales and other music educational & academic reference materials.

<http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/>

## Additional Resources

*Always Know Your Pal: Children on the Erie Canal*, Debbie J. Stack and Donald A. Wilson, ed. (Erie Canal Museum, 1993).

*American Favorite Ballads, Volume 3*, Pete Seeger (Smithsonian Folkways, 2004).

*The Canaller's Songbook*, William Hullfish (The American Canal and Transportation Center, 1984).

*Erie Canal Museum: Photos from the Collection*. (Erie Canal Museum, 1989).

*Growing Up on the Erie Canal* (Appleseeds: a Cobblestone Publication, Vol 4, #5, January 2002).

*Low Bridge! Folklore and the Erie Canal*, Lionel D. Wyld (Syracuse University Press, 1962).

*Oh! That Low Bridge!* CD of Erie Canal Songs researched and performed by George Ward, (Mulesong Music, 2000).

*We Shall Overcome: the Seeger Sessions*, Bruce Springsteen (Sony, 2006).

*Wedding of the Waters: the Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation*, Peter L. Bernstein (W.W. Norton & Co., 2005).

*City Lore is a cultural organization, located on Manhattan's Lower East Side, whose mission is to document, preserve and present the living cultural heritage of New York City. Education is central to our mission and informs all of our programs, both school and community-based. For more information about City Lore's education programs, contact Schools Program Director Anika Selhorst, at 212-529-1955 ext. 303, or [anika@citylore.org](mailto:anika@citylore.org). Partial funding for this newsletter was provided by a Teaching with Primary Sources grant from the Library of Congress, administered Waynesburg University.*

## NEW YORK CITY & THE NATION PARTNERS

*The New York City & the Nation e-newsletter and the Gotham Fellows Program are part of American Citizen, a Teaching American History grant awarded to New York City Community School District 28 from the U.S. Department of Education.*

**Brooklyn Historical Society** ([www.brooklynhistory.org](http://www.brooklynhistory.org)) is a museum, library, and educational center dedicated to encouraging the exploration and appreciation of Brooklyn's rich heritage. Using Brooklyn as a backdrop, BHS curriculum materials and programs explore the building of America from Revolution to modern day by studying the people, places, and events that shaped its growth. Contact: Amy DeSalvo, Education Coordinator, 718-222-4111, x237, [adesalvo@brooklynhistory.org](mailto:adesalvo@brooklynhistory.org).

**City Lore** ([www.citylore.org](http://www.citylore.org)) is a cultural organization located on Manhattan's Lower East Side whose mission is to document, preserve, and present the living cultural heritage of New York City. Education is central to our mission and informs all of our programs, both school and community-based. Contact: Anika Selhorst, Schools Program Director, 212-529-1955, x303, [anika@citylore.org](mailto:anika@citylore.org).

**Gotham Center for New York City History** ([www.gothamcenter.org](http://www.gothamcenter.org)) sponsors programs to make the city's rich history more accessible to a broad public, and Gotham's educational programs take that mission to the city's public schools. The Center's educational website GothamED ([www.gothamed.org](http://www.gothamed.org)) pools the talent and energy of teachers and scholars, as well as educators from the city's cultural institutions, to promote and support quality history instruction. Contact: Julie Maurer, Director of Education, 212-817-8467, [gothamed@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:gothamed@gc.cuny.edu).

**Henry Street Settlement** ([www.henrystreet.org](http://www.henrystreet.org)), one of the nation's oldest settlement houses, is an important social and educational service provider to residents of the Lower East Side and the city at large. The Abrons Arts Center's Arts-in- Education Program provides students with hands-on experiences in the creation and appreciation of the visual, performing, literary, and media arts. The program's team of educators and teaching artists collaborate with the New York City Department of Education to integrate the arts into the school curriculum. Contact: Nellie Perera, Director of Arts in Education, [nperera@henrystreet.org](mailto:nperera@henrystreet.org).

**Historic House Trust** ([www.historichousetrust.org](http://www.historichousetrust.org)) operates in tandem with the City of New York/Parks & Recreation to support houses of architectural and cultural significance spanning 350 years of NYC history. Education programs at Trust houses are designed to reinforce in-school instruction in a variety of curriculum areas for a wide range of grades and are directly linked with NYS Learning Standards. Contact: David Mandel, Director of Education, [david.mandel@parks.nyc.gov](mailto:david.mandel@parks.nyc.gov).

**Community School District 28's** Teaching American History project staff includes Dr. Gus Hatrimiditriou, American Citizen's Project Director, and Coordinators, John Rooney and Bob Dytell. For more information, contact [jrooney@schools.nyc.gov](mailto:jrooney@schools.nyc.gov) or [bdytel@schools.nyc.gov](mailto:bdytel@schools.nyc.gov).