



## **Coal Oil Johnny: Man, Myth, Legend English/Language Arts Lesson Plan**



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### **Lesson Focus:**

John Washington Steele, more commonly known as “Coal Oil Johnny”, inherited the 200-acre Culberston McClintock farm along Oil Creek in 1864 at the age of 20. The farm had twenty oil wells that yielded almost \$3,000 in royalties daily at the time. In addition to the farm, Steele also inherited \$24,500 in cash. Coal Oil Johnny was a moniker coined by journalists and referred to his custom carriage painted with black oil derricks sprouting dollar symbols that Steele rode through the streets of Philadelphia. According to the New York Times, “In his day, Steele was the greatest spender the world had ever known. He threw away \$3,000,000 in less than a year.” Steele wrote in his autobiography, “I spent my money foolishly, recklessly, wickedly, gave it away without excuse; threw dollars to street urchins to see them scramble; tipped waiters with five and ten dollar bills; was intoxicated most of the time, and kept the crowd surrounding me usually in the same condition.” The life of extravagance and loss of a fortune in such a short amount of time made the story of Coal Oil Johnny a cautionary tale of the oil era and has kept people interested in his rags to riches to rags story for more than a century.

In the late 1860s, music often retold the stories of the Civil War. However, with the post-war return to everyday life, music also looked to the future. By the end of the Civil War, the oil boom in Pennsylvania was generating a great deal of money and attention, which provided a war-torn nation with the hope of a prosperous future. Oil songs allowed people to express this newfound hope. Although oil tunes were originally written in the oil region, starting out as ditties sung around the oil derricks in the region, the sheet music found a wider audience when the compositions were sent to publishers in New York City and Philadelphia.

This lesson focuses on the life of John Washington Steele and legend of Coal Oil Johnny told through primary and secondary sources including Steele’s autobiography, newspaper and magazine articles, and music.

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### **Lesson Synopsis:**

Music is a common language that societies share. Using music in the classroom can provide students with the context needed to understand and empathize with a historical figure or setting, setting the tone for the exploration of a topic. Period music allows students to explore a period in history, to better understand the culture, politics, economic activity, etc. of a group of people. Music also allows students to experience primary sources from a time period. Studying music compositions serves as an oral history and allows for the past to speak to students.

Lyricists and musicians are like poets and historians in that their creations often come from the heart and reflect the world around them. If we want students to think like authors and historians in the classroom, they must have opportunities to evaluate multiple explanations and perspectives of historical events, including those of ordinary people of the period. Using music as a springboard for conducting research focused on evaluating claims about the past allows students to make connections and analyze relationships between past and present.

In this lesson, students will be tasked with exploring the life of John Washington Steele by comparing factual information about his life during the Pennsylvania Oil Boom and music compositions that focus on the legend of Coal Oil Johnny.

Students will use the resources in this lesson to ask critical questions that will assist them in piecing together a plausible story of the life and times of Coal Oil Johnny.

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**Grade Level**

Grades 7 - 12

**Time Requirement:**

Two 80 minutes periods

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**Essential Understandings:**

- In 1859, Edwin Drake drilled the first successful oil well in Titusville, Pennsylvania.
  - After Col. Edwin Drake's success, an influx of oil prospectors, business tycoons, and laborers swarmed the area.
  - Coal Oil Johnny's name has become synonymous with lucking into a tremendous fortune and then frittering it all away.
  - The successful oil wells in Northwest Pennsylvania made many common people rich beyond their wildest dreams, at least for a short period of time.
  - After only a few decades, the boom ended and while the first U.S. oil region continued to play a part in the oil industry, it was at a much smaller scale.
  - Coal Oil Johnny became a larger-than-life character, with journalists often embellishing the details of his life for decades after Steele had squandered most of his fortune.
  - Music has been used by most cultures to accompany and enhance activities such as worship, storytelling, mourning, and social criticism.
  - Music compositions are primary documents that focus on a specific time and place and can be used to illustrate points about culture, politics, and economic life.
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**Objectives:**

*Students will:*

- View and discuss photographs/images of the Pennsylvania Oil Boom in the Titusville, Pennsylvania region.
  - Identify historical events referenced in pieces of music.
  - Listen to songs about the oil boom and Coal Oil Johnny and analyze the lyrics to gain an understanding of the time period and legend of Coal Oil Johnny.
  - Compare the life of John Washington Steele and the legend of Coal Oil Johnny through the use of primary and secondary sources.
  - Explore ways music is used to shape public opinion.
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**Anticipated Outcomes:**

*Students will be able to:*

- Explain how song lyrics represent the culture and times of an historical era.
  - Define relevant vocabulary associated with the oil boom era.
  - Compare and contrast primary and secondary source accounts of the life of John Washington Steele and the legend of Coal Oil Johnny.
  - Create lyrics for an original song illustrating the oil boom era and/or Coal Oil Johnny.
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**Content Standards:****Reading Standards**

- 1.2B** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as inferences and conclusions based on and related to an author's implicit and explicit assumptions and beliefs.
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- 1.2G** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

### Writing Standards

- 1.4B** Write with a sharp, distinct focus identifying topic, task, and audience.
- 1.4C** Develop and analyze the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic; include graphics and multimedia when useful to aid comprehension.
- 1.4Q** Write with an awareness of the stylistic aspects of writing.
- 1.4S** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and literary nonfiction.
- 1.4U** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments and information.
- 1.4V** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

### Speaking/Listening Standards

- 1.5C** Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitative, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

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## Lesson Activities:

### *Introductory Activity:* The Pennsylvania Oil Boom

- Examining and interpreting visual sources is a critical skill in history. This is not always an easy process as visual images are often difficult to understand due to unfamiliar people, events, and/or symbols. In addition, the meaning of things included in the image might have changed over time. It takes time and practice to become proficient in successfully analyzing visual images.  
The following video is a great reference for understanding what visual literacy is and why it is important. The first half of the video is a classroom demonstration of analyzing a photograph in a social studies classroom.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xF2amnCwuHA>
- According to a 2016 article by Joshua Sterling in The Titusville Herald, the history of Titusville's oil boom is a well-documented one, with many surviving photographs from the 1860s - 1900s that show the rise and fall of Edwin Drake's discovery of oil. Through historical photographs taken primarily by photographers John Mather and J.C. Macurdy, we can look back at the time where trees were replaced by oil derricks on the hillsides, men chasing wealth descended on the area, communities were erected virtually overnight, and fires and floods destroyed lives and livelihoods.
- Thanks to a project by the New York Public Library's Digital Collections Department, many of Mather's and Macurdy's photographs can be viewed free of charge at:  
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?utf8=%E2%9C%93&keywords=titusville#>
- Another excellent resource on John Mather's photograph and the Pennsylvania oil boom is Brian Black's article, "Recasting the Unalterable Order of Nature: Photography and the First Oil Boom". This article also has several of Mather's photographs depicting the oil boom. <https://journals.psu.edu/phj/article/view/25385/25154>
- Using John Mather's, J.C. Macurdy's, and possibly others' photographs found in the NYC Public Library Digital Collection, partner groups will complete a tour of the Pennsylvania Oil Boom Era by "jumping in" to the photos.

- Ask students to carefully view one or several of the photographs and complete the following:
 

Questions to ask while looking at a photo:

  - What do you already know about the photo?
    - Photographer?
    - Location?
    - Date?
  - Look at the entire photograph
    - What is the subject matter? (Portrait, building, event, etc.)
    - What is happening in the photo?
  - Look at individual parts of the photograph:
    - What is in the foreground? The background?
    - Where is your eye drawn first? What less-obvious things do you notice?
    - Examine people, objects, signage, setting, time, etc...
  - What does the photo say to you? To others?
    - Are the people in the photo expressing certain emotions?
    - Does it evoke certain emotions in the viewer?
  - Why was the photograph taken and who is the audience?
    - For a documentary or journalism purpose?
    - For sale (as a postcard, poster, etc.)?
    - To advertise something?
    - As an artistic expression?
  - What decisions did the photographer make when taking this picture?
    - Why did they take the photo at that exact moment? What happened right before the photo was taken? Right after?
    - Why did the photographer make the choices he/she did (perspective, focus, angles, etc.)?
    - Was the photo edited, cropped, or colorized? What did that change?
  - Give an inventory of what you see in the photograph.
    - What do you see in the photograph that is similar to what you would see today?
    - What do you see in the photograph that is different from what you would see today?
  - What questions do you have after viewing the photograph(s)?
- In a whole-class discussion, discuss student responses.

### *Activity One: Images as Historical Evidence*

Using the answers provided by students in the introductory activity above, student pairs will now be working to analyze and draw conclusions about the photographs.

- Partner groups should begin by summarizing the scene/time period the photographs depict.
- Next, partner groups should complete the following:
  - What do the photographs tell us about the time period in which they were taken?
  - What questions do you have about the photographs?
  - How do the photographers impact your interpretation of the photographs?
  - How/where might you get more information about the photographs and the time period that would help to further understand the images?
  - Which features stand out in each image?

*Activity Two: Using Text Evidence to Interpret Historical Events: An Introduction to John Washington Steele and Coal Oil Johnny*

- Divide students into groups of 2 - 3.
- Provide student groups with resources about the life of John Washington Steele, better known as Coal Oil Johnny.
  - John Washington Steele, *Coal Oil Johnny: His Book*  
[https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7205126M/Coal\\_oil\\_Johnny](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7205126M/Coal_oil_Johnny)
  - Alexis C. Madrigal, "The Legend of Coal Oil Johnny, America's Great Forgotten Parable"  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/10/the-legend-of-coal-oil-johnny-americas-great-forgotten-parable/64475/>
  - Valerie Myers, "Carousing" Coal Oil Johnny spent some of his quick cash in Erie"  
<https://www.goerie.com/story/opinion/2021/01/09/erie-remembered-coal-oil-johnny-fortune-oil-titusville/4125139001/>
  - The Jasper Weekly Courier, "Coal Oil Johnny, King of the Spendthrifts" (Article on Page 3)  
<https://newspapers.library.in.gov/?a=d&d=JWC19060126.1.3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->
  - The Butte Inter Mountain (newspaper), "Coal Oil Johnny - His Book"  
[https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/mthi\\_goldeneye\\_ver01/data/sn83025294/0021247688\\_2/1902070501/0628.pdf](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/mthi_goldeneye_ver01/data/sn83025294/0021247688_2/1902070501/0628.pdf)
  - Sid Richardson Museum, "Millie Ringgold and "Coal Oil Johnny""  
<https://sidrichardsonmuseum.org/millie-ringgold-coal-oil-johnny/>
  - Brennen French, "Coal Oil Johnny"  
<http://nwpaheritage.org/items/show/28>
- Students will use a Venn Diagram or other similar graphic organizer to compare/contrast the life of John Washington Steele and the legend of Coal Oil Johnny.

*Activity Three: Music and the Pennsylvania Oil Boom*

- As an introduction to the music of the oil boom era, students will read "Music and the Pennsylvania Oil Boom".  
<https://studylib.net/doc/8718907/music-and-the-pennsylvania-oil-boom>
- Students will listen to songs about Coal Oil Johnny and the oil boom.
  - Some songs about Coal Oil Johnny include:
    - Coal Oil Johnny by Red Foley (Remastered 2018):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEmsv8yWRg8>
    - Coal Oil Johnny by Session Americana (2005):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csbA7HWcLgA>
    - Dumb as Dirt and Slick as Oil: Coal Oil Johnny's Lament by Rand Hubiak Band (from Franklin, PA) (2018 3rd place American Songwriter Contest winner):  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7jkQRN2Fe8&list=OLAK5uy\\_nb1mb5A1W61k03S-9SUHpRrVQztOlldqk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7jkQRN2Fe8&list=OLAK5uy_nb1mb5A1W61k03S-9SUHpRrVQztOlldqk)  
Find lyrics at: <https://americansongwriter.com/lyric-contest-winners-januaryfebruary-2018/>
- Discuss with students John Brougham's play, "The Lottery of Life" and its connection to Coal Oil Johnny (See the Sid Richardson Museum article "Millie Ringgold and "Coal Oil Johnny" at <https://sidrichardsonmuseum.org/millie-ringgold-coal-oil-johnny/>). Use the sheet music and lyrics to the song, "Coal Oil Tommy" to illustrate the connection. <https://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/collection/046/068>

- Working in small groups, students will use the information they gathered in this lesson (photographs, texts, and music) to write their own song (or poem) about the Pennsylvania Oil Boom, John Washington Steele, and/or Coal Oil Johnny.

*Lesson Extension:* Student groups can perform their songs (or recite their poems). This can be done as a live performance, or groups can record their work and it can be listened to in class.

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**Resources:**

American Songwriter. "Lyric Contest Winners: January/February 2018." *American Songwriter*, 8 Dec. 2017, [americansongwriter.com/lyric-contest-winners-januaryfebruary-2018](http://americansongwriter.com/lyric-contest-winners-januaryfebruary-2018).

Black, Brian. "Recasting the Unalterable Order of Nature: Photography and the First Oil Boom." *Pennsylvania History*, vol. 64, no. 2, 1997, pp. 275–99, [journals.psu.edu/phj/article/view/25385/25154](http://journals.psu.edu/phj/article/view/25385/25154).

Brougham, John. "Coal Oil Tommy. | Levy Music Collection." *Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries and University Museums*, Gray's Music Store, 1868, [levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/collection/046/068](http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/collection/046/068).

"Coal Oil Johnny." *YouTube*, uploaded by Session Americana, 27 Oct. 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=csbA7HWcLgA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csbA7HWcLgA).

"Coal-Oil Johnny, His Book." The Butte Inter Mountain, [Butte, MT], 5 July 1902, [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/mthi\\_goldeneye\\_ver01/data/sn83025294/00212476882/1902070501/0628.pdf](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/mthi_goldeneye_ver01/data/sn83025294/00212476882/1902070501/0628.pdf).

"Coal Oil Johnny;" King Of Spendthrifts." *Jasper Weekly Courier* [Jasper, IN], 26 Jan. 1906, [newspapers.library.in.gov/?a=d&d=JWC19060126.1.3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-----](http://newspapers.library.in.gov/?a=d&d=JWC19060126.1.3&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-----).

"'COAL OIL JOHNNY,' ONCE-GREAT SPENDER, DEAD." *The New York Times*, 2 Jan. 1921, [www.nytimes.com/1921/01/02/archives/coal-oil-johnny-once-great-spender-dead-john-w-steele-of.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1921/01/02/archives/coal-oil-johnny-once-great-spender-dead-john-w-steele-of.html).

"Coal Oil Johnny (Remastered)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Red Foley, 4 Apr. 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEmsv8yWRg8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEmsv8yWRg8).

"Dumb as Dirt and Slick as Oil: Coal Oil Johnny's Lament." *YouTube*, uploaded by Rand Hubiak Band, 28 June 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7jkQRN2Fe8&list=OLAK5uy\\_nb1mb5A1W61k03S-9SUHpRrVQztOlldqk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7jkQRN2Fe8&list=OLAK5uy_nb1mb5A1W61k03S-9SUHpRrVQztOlldqk).

French, Brennen. "Coal Oil Johnny." *NW PA Heritage*, 29 Sept. 2021, [www.nwpaheritage.org/items/show/28](http://www.nwpaheritage.org/items/show/28).

"Millie Ringgold and 'Coal Oil Johnny.'" *Sid Richardson Museum - Fort Worth, Texas*, 17 Jan. 2020, [sidrichardsonmuseum.org/millie-ringgold-coal-oil-johnny](http://sidrichardsonmuseum.org/millie-ringgold-coal-oil-johnny).

"Music and the Pennsylvania Oil Boom." *Studylib.Net*, 12 Feb. 2018, [studylib.net/doc/8718907/music-and-the-pennsylvania-oil-boom](http://studylib.net/doc/8718907/music-and-the-pennsylvania-oil-boom).

Myers, Valerie. 'Carousing' Coal Oil Johnny Spent Some of His Quick Cash in Erie." *Erie Times-News* [Erie, PA], 9 Jan. 2021,  
[www.goerie.com/story/opinion/2021/01/09/erie-remembered-coal-oil-johnny-fortune-oil-titusville/4125139001](http://www.goerie.com/story/opinion/2021/01/09/erie-remembered-coal-oil-johnny-fortune-oil-titusville/4125139001)

"NYPL Digital Collections - Titusville." *New York Public Library Digital Collections*, 2016,  
[www.digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?utf8=%E2%9C%93&keywords=titusville#](http://www.digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?utf8=%E2%9C%93&keywords=titusville#).

Steele, John Washington. *Coal Oil Johnny: Story Of His Career As Told By Himself*. New York, Hill Publishing Company, 1902.

Sterling, Josh. "Incredible Historic Photos of Region Included in Massive Online Collection." *Titusville Herald* [Titusville, PA], 18 Jan. 2016,  
[www.titusvilleherald.com/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/article\\_88c6953a-bb43-11e5-ae0c-e7b9941d09c8.html](http://www.titusvilleherald.com/arts_and_entertainment/article_88c6953a-bb43-11e5-ae0c-e7b9941d09c8.html).

"The Importance of Visual Literacy in Today's Classrooms." *YouTube*, uploaded by Tribe TV, 26 Aug. 2016,  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=xF2amnCwuHA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xF2amnCwuHA).

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Lesson plan developed for the Oil Region Alliance for Business, Industry, and Tourism by Sara Jones, Social Studies teacher at Titusville High School in Titusville, PA. 2021. [sjones@gorockets.org](mailto:sjones@gorockets.org)

Oil Region Alliance for Business, Industry, and Tourism, 217 Elm Street, Oil City, PA 16301. <https://oilregion.org>



The mission of the Oil Region Alliance of Business, Industry & Tourism is to manage the Oil Region National Heritage Area and to increase the prosperity of the Oil Region by enticing all people to live, work, learn and play in “the Valley that Changed the World” through the preservation, promotion, development, and support of historical, educational, natural, recreational, residential, commercial and industrial destinations.

The Oil Region Alliance manages the Oil Region National Heritage Area, which is also a Pennsylvania Heritage Area. The Area encompasses Venango County and the City of Titusville, Borough of Hydetown, and Oil Creek Township of Crawford County. More information is available at [OilRegion.org](http://OilRegion.org).

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