



Coal Oil Johnny: Titusville, PA and the Oil Boom Social Studies Lesson Plan



Lesson Focus:

In 1859, in search of a cheaper, more efficient fuel for generating light, Colonel Edwin Drake drilled the first successful oil well and by the end of that year, oil wells popped up throughout the Oil Region. These early wells produced almost 5,000 barrels in 1859. In 1860, oil wells in northwestern Pennsylvania increased production to several hundred thousand barrels, and by 1862 production skyrocketed, reaching three million barrels. The oil boom had begun, and fortunes would soon be made.

With Drake's success, Titusville, Pennsylvania boomed. The year Drake drilled his first oil well, Titusville only had approximately 250 residents. However, by 1865 the population had increased to close to 10,000. Nearby Pithole City, now a ghost town, had over fifty hotels during the oil boom's peak in the mid-1860s. The Titusville Herald even proclaimed Pithole as having "probably the most productive wells in the oil region of Pennsylvania." Unfortunately, the oil boom was short-lived as competition between drilling companies and excess production lowered oil prices and depleted the field. Companies went elsewhere almost as quickly as they had appeared. While Titusville and Pithole City boomed and busted, the oil industry itself continued to grow due to the demand for oil as a lubricant for engines and other machines, a source for heat, and as a refined fuel for motorized vehicles.

John Washington Steele, more commonly known as "Coal Oil Johnny", inherited the 200-acre Culbertson 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.

This lesson focuses on the use of visual images as part of historical research and the reading of historical texts, to give a more complete picture of the conditions in Titusville, Pennsylvania, and the surrounding area at the height of the oil boom.

Lesson Synopsis:

Teaching students to analyze visual images and historical text encourages them to think and work as historians by drawing meaning from the image and/or text and connecting their analysis to a larger historical landscape. By engaging in critical analysis of an image or text, students develop and enhance observational, interpretative, and critical thinking skills, which can then be combined with additional resources to provide a more complex understanding of historic relevance. There are both strengths and weaknesses in using visual images such as photographs as primary source documents. Capturing a moment in time for posterity is a definite strength of visual images such as photographs. In addition, visual images provide information that is often difficult to convey through other formats and can record details of the everyday life of people that are not captured in written records. Visual images also evoke memories and emotions that other mediums do not. Two main weaknesses of using visual images as primary sources include the fact that the image may reflect bias on the part of its creator and may not identify important information such as people, dates, and places represented in the image. In addition, the creator of the image may not be identified.

Teaching students to read critically requires that students become investigators of history. By understanding that time, place, audience, and purpose matter, and by asking questions of the image or text, students are given the opportunity to learn how to identify ambiguity and weigh evidence to make reasonable judgments regarding the validity of an author's claim.

In this lesson, students will travel back in time to the Pennsylvania Oil Boom in the late 1800s. Here they will investigate John Washington Steele's connection to the oil industry and how he came to be known as Coal Oil Johnny. In addition, students will use primary source documents such as photographs and maps to gain an understanding of what Titusville, Pennsylvania, and the surrounding area were like during the oil boom.

Grade Level:

Grades 7 - 12

Time Requirement:

Two 80 minute class periods plus time for presentations

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.
 - Primary sources are firsthand accounts or direct evidence of an event or period under study. Primary sources include letters, interviews, photographs, cultural artifacts, everyday objects, and works of art.
 - By studying primary sources, students have the opportunity to learn about what was important to the people who lived at that time, discover what life was like, and consider ways these sources connect to our lives today.
 - As the birthplace of the modern petroleum industry, Titusville is one of the most historically significant towns in Western Pennsylvania.
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Objectives:

Students will:

- Observe and identify relevant details within visual images, allowing for an interpretation of past events.
 - View and discuss photographs/images of the Pennsylvania Oil Boom in the Titusville, PA region.
 - Compare/contrast historical topics/periods using visual images and text.
 - Establish a purpose for reading.
 - Practice analyzing, questioning, and interpreting the information contained in primary sources.
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Anticipated Outcomes:

Students will be able to:

- Demonstrate the ability to interpret historical events/time periods by identifying details/evidence in visual images and text.
 - Critically read and summarize historical texts.
 - Use evidence from the text to show understanding of historical events/time periods.
 - Make inferences and predictions from visual images and text.
 - Analyze how multiple documents address similar historical topics to build a better understanding of events/time periods.
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Content Standards:

PA History Standards

- 8.1A Evaluate patterns of continuity and rates of change over time, applying context to events.
- 8.1B Evaluate the interpretation of historical events and sources, considering the use of fact versus opinion, multiple perspectives, and cause and effect relationships.
- 8.1C Analyze, synthesize, and integrate historical data, creating a product that supports and appropriately illustrates inferences and conclusions drawn from research.
- 8.3A Evaluate the role groups and individuals from the U.S. play in the social, political, cultural, and economic development of the world.
- 8.3B Evaluate the impact of historical documents, artifacts, and places in U.S. history that are critical to world history.

PA Geography Standards

- 7.1A Use geographic tools to analyze information about the interaction between people, places, and the environment.
- 7.1B Assess how physical changes to a region may have a global impact.
- 7.2A Analyze the physical characteristics of places and regions including the interrelationships among the components of Earth's physical systems.

PA Economics Standards:

- 6.1B Evaluate the economic reasoning behind a choice. In addition, evaluate the effective allocation of resources for the production of goods and services.
- 6.1D Predict how changes in incentives may affect the choices made by individuals, businesses, communities, and nations.

PA Civics and Government Standards:

- 5.2B Examine the causes of conflicts in society and evaluate techniques to address these conflicts.
- 5.2D Evaluate and demonstrate what makes competent and responsible citizens.

Pennsylvania Core Reading Standards for History:

Reading Informational Texts

- 8.5A Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- 8.5B Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- 8.5G Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
- 8.5I Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Writing in the Social Studies

- 8.6A Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.
- 8.6C Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.
- 8.6E Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.
- 8.6 F 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.

Lesson Activities:

Introductory Activity: The Pennsylvania Oil Boom

- Examining and interpreting visual sources is a critical skill in history. 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 photography 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(s).
 - 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 photographs?
- 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.

- Student groups will 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 Coal Oil Johnny and the Titusville, Pennsylvania Oil Boom

- 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
 - 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/sn83025294/00212476882/1902070501/0628.pdf
 - Brennen French, "Coal Oil Johnny"
<http://nwpaheritage.org/items/show/28>
 - Abigail Watson-Popescu, "Preserving Titusville: The Birthplace of The Oil Industry Finds A Path Towards Saving Its Historic Architecture"
<https://pahistoricpreservation.com/preserving-titusville-birthplace-oil-industry-finds-path-towards-saving-historic-architecture/>
- Students will use an Evidence/Interpretation Chart to organize the information gathered in the provided resources with a focus on what it was like in Titusville during the Oil Boom and how this time period turned John Washington Steele into Coal Oil Johnny.
(See Appendix A for Evidence/Interpretation Chart)

Activity Three: Then and Now: A View of Titusville Through Mapping Resources

- Maps tell a story. They are not simply representations of geographic features, they are primary source texts, created by individuals and groups who decide the subject of a map, the purpose, the point of view, what is included, and what is left out.
- Student groups will use the mapping resources below to determine what Titusville was like during the Pennsylvania Oil Boom. Groups should divide the mapping resource so that each group member has an equal amount to work with. Using the Map Analysis handout from the National Archives, (https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/worksheets/map_analysis_worksheet.pdf) students will complete one handout for each map resource.
 - Titusville, PA in 1896 (Library of Congress)
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3824t.pm008610/?r=-0.322,-0.055,1.711,0.692,0>
 - Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Titusville, Crawford County, Pennsylvania - Set of 10 (Library of Congress)
https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn08005_001/
 - Titusville, Pennsylvania - Beers, 1865 (Maps of the Past)
<https://www.mapsofthepast.com/titusville-pennsylvania-landowner-1865.html>
 - Titusville, Pennsylvania (City-Data.com)
<http://www.city-data.com/city/Titusville-Pennsylvania.html>

- Titusville, PA 16354 - Accessibility Map (Smart Site Plan)
<https://experience.smartsiteplan.com/explore/Titusville,PA-16354-Accessibility-Map?s=<=41.62495967&ln=-79.67727581&z=16.12106778958194>
- Section three of the Map Analysis handout from the National Archives asks students how the historical map compares to a current map of the same place. Below is a resource for students to use for comparison.
 - Titusville, PA Google Street View Map
https://street360.net/usa/pennsylvania/titusville_crawford-county.php

Note: These maps are available for all local areas/communities.
- In a whole-class discussion, discuss student responses.

Activity Four: Pulling it all Together

- Student groups will use the information they have gathered in this lesson, from photographs, texts, and maps, to prepare a presentation about what it was like in Titusville, Pennsylvania during the Pennsylvania Oil Boom and how people like Coal Oil Johnny made and lost fortunes during this time.

Resources:

Lesson Resources

Beers. "Titusville Pennsylvania - Beers 1865." *Maps of the Past*, 1865,

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Myers, Valerie. 'Carousing' Coal Oil Johnny Spent Some of His Quick Cash in Erie." *Erie Times-News* [Erie, PA], 9 Jan. 2021,

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- "Titusville, PA 16345." *Smart Site Plan*, 2021, experience.smartsiteplan.com/explore/Titusville,PA-16354-Accessibility-Map?s=<=41.62495967&ln=-79.67727581&z=16.12106778958194.
- "Titusville, Pennsylvania." *City-Data*, 2021, www.city-data.com/city/Titusville-Pennsylvania.html.
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Document Analysis Resources

- "Document Analysis Worksheets." *National Archives*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 2 Aug. 2021, www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets.

Evidence/Interpretation Chart

<p>Evidence I read in the article... (You must include at least 10 items on you about in the article)</p> <p>NOTE: This evidence will be part of your notes for this section.</p>	<p>Interpretation I wondered, I made a connection, I thought...</p> <p>**Ask at least three questions, make at least three connections, and include at least five insights.</p> <p>NOTE: An insight statement is a discovery of understanding that helps to explain why something is happening the way it is. It is being able to see and understand a situation clearly or gaining a new perspective. Think of it as an "aha" moment.</p>



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.

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