

America in Song

by Tim Bailey

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original source materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary sources.

Students will read and evaluate the history and significance of several of America's most iconic songs: "The Star-Spangled Banner," "Yankee Doodle," "America the Beautiful," and "America" ("My Country, 'tis of Thee"). The students will demonstrate their understanding through class discussions and written assessment activities as directed in each lesson.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read, explain, and evaluate the lyrics of several patriotic songs ("The Star-Spangled Banner," "Yankee Doodle," "America the Beautiful," "America" ("My Country 'tis of Thee"))
- Analyze and assess the historical circumstances, events, and/or situations that are described and highlighted in these patriotic songs
- Analyze, assess, and compare the relationship and significance of each patriotic song with its historical context
- Explain and evaluate the extent to which songs reflect the history and culture of society
- Evaluate the extent to which songs can instill and increase patriotism in people

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS (OPTIONAL)

- "To what extent do songs reflect the history and culture of society?"
- "To what extent can songs instill and increase patriotism in people?"

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 3

GRADE LEVEL(S): 3–6

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2: Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.5: Compare and contrast the overall structure (e.g. chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in two or more texts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.9: Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1D: Review the key ideas expressed and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1.D: Review the key ideas expressed and draw conclusions in light of information and knowledge gained from discussions.

LESSON 1

OBJECTIVE

In this lesson the students will closely examine the national anthem of the United States, “The Star-Spangled Banner.” They will read and analyze the lyrics as well as a concise history of the events that surrounded the writing of the song. After this close reading the students will employ critical-thinking skills to demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between the song and its historical context.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1812, the United States fought a second war against Great Britain, largely for nationalistic reasons: to prevent British impressment (capture) of American sailors, protect freedom of the seas for American shipping and trade, protect the western frontier for American settlement, stop British-instigated Indian resistance, and acquire British Canada. Initially, the War of 1812 went badly for the United States, for an American invasion of Canada was unsuccessful, and British military forces captured Washington, DC, and set fire to government buildings, such as the Capitol and the White House. During the British attack on Baltimore, Maryland, the heroic resistance of the American forces to the British bombardment of Fort McHenry inspired Francis Scott Key to write the words of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which was later adopted as our nation’s national anthem in 1931.

Subsequently, US naval victories on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain, and an American victory in the Battle of New Orleans (two days after a peace treaty had been signed) prevented the British from gaining control of the Mississippi River. Although the War of 1812 ended in a stalemate without any concessions or gains on either side, the war significantly enhanced American nationalism. Many Americans viewed this conflict as a “second war for independence” whereby they had fought the mighty British Empire for a second time within thirty years and gained the respect of other nations. Moreover, the War of 1812 stimulated the growth of American industry and manufacturing, national self-sufficiency, and westward expansion. For the next century, American pride and patriotism focused on the development of the United States. These sentiments were reflected in the nation’s culture, politics, and policies.

By the 1890s, the military played “The Star-Spangled Banner” at ceremonies. In 1931, Congress designated “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the national anthem.

MATERIALS

- The War of 1812 and “The Star-Spangled Banner”
- Critical-Thinking Questions: The War of 1812 and “The Star-Spangled Banner”
- “The Star-Spangled Banner,” by Francis Scott Key (1814). Source: Transcribed from a handwritten manuscript by Francis Scott Key in the Maryland Historical Society, <http://www.mdhs.org/digitalimage/star-spangled-banner-handwritten>
- Document Analyzer: “The Star-Spangled Banner,” Verse 1

PROCEDURE

1. Divide the class into critical-thinking groups of three to five students each. Students will work with their groups for the next several days.
2. Pass out “The War of 1812 and ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’”
3. If the class is able to read text at this level, ask the students to read the text individually; if not, “share read” the document with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
4. Pass out “Critical-Thinking Questions: The War of 1812 and ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’” Ask the students the first critical-thinking question. Demonstrate to the students how to back up their answer with evidence taken directly from the text of “The War of 1812 and ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’”
5. The students should work together in their groups to develop an evidentiary answer to each question.
6. Pass out “The Star-Spangled Banner” lyrics and either watch a video performance or listen to an audio performance of the song. It would also be useful to have the students sing the song with you.
7. Pass out the Document Analyzer: “The Star-Spangled Banner.”
8. Students will closely analyze the first verse of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” one couplet at a time, and restate each couplet in their own words. For instance, the first couplet could be restated as “Can you still see this morning what made us so proud when sun was setting last night?” Some of the vocabulary will be unfamiliar, but encourage the students to use what they have learned of the Battle of Baltimore as well as other context clues to decipher their meaning.
9. Wrap-up: Use the short answer at the bottom of the page to evaluate the students’ understanding of both the song and the events it describes.

EXTENSION

Students can restate in their own words the relatively unknown last three verses of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

LESSON 2

OVERVIEW

In this lesson the students will closely examine the most famous song associated with the American Revolution, “Yankee Doodle.” They will read and analyze a concise history of the origins of the song as well as restate the text of the song in their own words.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Legend places the origin of the text of the American song “Yankee Doodle” in a nursery rhyme that ridiculed the English Civil War leader Oliver Cromwell as a “Nankee Doodle.” The melody derives from European (English, Irish, Dutch, or Hungarian) folk music. The term *doodle* is probably from the Dutch or German word *dodel*, meaning “fool” or “simpleton.” It is believed that during the French and Indian War (1754–1763) the original lyrics of “Yankee Doodle” were penned by a British army surgeon, Dr. Richard Shuckburgh (or Schackburg), after he observed the shabby appearance of American colonial troops, who dressed in buckskins, furs, and coonskin caps. According to tradition, Dr. Shuckburgh was so taken aback when he saw the poorly dressed Americans fighting alongside the British troops in 1755 that he changed and added new words and verses to the original Cromwell nursery rhyme, substituting “Yankee” for “Nankee” in the title and referring to the colonists in a derogatory manner as “doodles” (fools or simpletons).

His use of words like “dandy” and “macaroni” sarcastically criticized the uncultured, unsophisticated, and “ragtag” colonists, who supposedly believed that they would become the height of fashion by simply putting a feather in their caps (“stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni”). The Italian macaroni wig and fancy style of dress were imitated in Great Britain by young men who displayed eccentric mannerisms and extravagant attire. Therefore, the original song was a parody whose verses expressed the British perception that the American colonists believed that they were just as sophisticated and stylish as Europeans. “Yankee Doodle” became a very popular song with British troops, who enjoyed regularly serenading the American colonists as uncouth country bumpkins and yokels. Reportedly, British fifers and drummers teased the colonists with renditions of “Yankee Doodle” after their military confrontations at Lexington and Concord.

In the course of the American Revolution, the colonists adopted the “Yankee Doodle” song as a source of patriotism and pride. Numerous versions emerged and new verses (nearly two hundred) were added, changed, and removed, and the song evolved over time. For example, a verse about George Washington was added to the song when he took command of the American Continental Army in June 1775. After the colonists defeated the British army at the Battle of Saratoga (1777) and the Battle of Yorktown (1781), the Continental Army played and sang “Yankee Doodle” in celebration of their victories. Ironically, when the British army surrendered at Yorktown in final defeat, their fife-and-drum corps played the tune “The World Turned Upside Down.” Thus, “Yankee Doodle” began as a song of mockery by the British toward the American colonists, became a song of military victory among the colonists, and emerged as a humorous and upbeat celebration of American patriotism and pride. Although this song was “revolutionary” in its roots, it became “evolutionary” in its usage.

MATERIALS

- The Origins of “Yankee Doodle”
- Critical-Thinking Questions: The Origins of “Yankee Doodle”
- “Yankee Doodle” (selected verses). Source: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yankee_Doodle
- Document Analyzer: “Yankee Doodle”

PROCEDURE

1. The students should return to their critical-thinking groups from the previous lesson.
2. Pass out “The Origins of Yankee Doodle.”
3. If the class is able to read text at this level, then ask the students to read the text individually; if not, then “share read” the document with the students as described in Lesson 1.
4. Pass out “Critical Thinking Questions: The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle.’” Ask the students the first critical-thinking question. Remind the students to back up their answers with evidence taken directly from “The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle.’”
5. The students should work together in their groups to develop an evidentiary answer for each question.
6. Pass out the lyrics to “Yankee Doodle” and either listen to a performance of the song or have the students sing the song with you.
7. Pass out “Document Analyzer: ‘Yankee Doodle.’”
8. Students will closely analyze the text of “Yankee Doodle,” one verse at a time, and restate each verse in their own words. For instance, the last verse could be translated as “Captain Davis grabbed his gun and attached a bayonet.” Some of the words are archaic and it will take some interpretation to come up with the meaning.
9. Wrap-up: A question for a written answer or a group discussion is, “How did the colonists turn around an insulting song and make it into a patriotic one?”

EXTENSION

Students can research other songs used to build soldiers’ morale, such as “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” “Dixie,” “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” or a similar song of their choosing.

LESSON 3

OVERVIEW

In this lesson the students will closely examine “America the Beautiful” and “America” (“My Country ’tis of Thee”), two songs that describe the beauty, majesty, pride, and ideals of America. They will read and analyze concise histories about the writing of the songs, compare and contrast the two songs, and analyze the imagery expressed in the lyrics.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

“America the Beautiful” is often viewed as the national hymn of the United States of America. Unlike our actual national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which focuses on wartime imagery (of the War of 1812), “America the Beautiful” “paints” a picture of the nation’s natural beauty, material abundance, spacious breadth and landscape, and quest to achieve its noble principles of brotherhood, freedom, and liberty. It portrays America as a “thoroughfare for freedom,” but beseeches the Almighty to “mend thine every flaw.”

The lyrics of “America the Beautiful” were written in 1893 by Katherine Lee Bates, an English professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, who had traveled west by train across the United States to Colorado. During her trip she encountered a variety of picturesque and memorable sights, including “alabaster cities,” like the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, “spacious skies” across the heartland of the Great Plains, “amber waves of grain” in the wheat fields of Kansas, and “purple mountain majesties” from atop Pike’s Peak, which inspired her to write a poem about these recollections. Professor Bates’s poem was initially published in a weekly newspaper, the *Congregationalist*, on July 4, 1895, to commemorate Independence Day and gained widespread popularity. She published amended versions of the poem in 1904 and made final additions to the poem in 1913.

At first, “America the Beautiful” was sung to the melodies of several popular folk tunes, including the classic “Auld Lang Syne.” However, by 1910, the most popular melody for the poem was “Materna.” The tune had been composed in 1882 by Samuel Augustus Ward, a church organist and choirmaster from Newark, New Jersey. He composed “Materna” for a 16th-century hymn, “O Dear Mother, Jerusalem.” His melody first accompanied Bates’s poem in 1904 and the pairing grew steadily in popularity. Ward’s music and Bates’s poem were first published in together as “America the Beautiful” in 1910. Today, this song is immensely popular and is sung at commencements, convocations, and public events. Unofficially, many Americans have view “America the Beautiful” as a national hymn or another national anthem.

Reverend Samuel Francis Smith wrote the lyrics to “My Country ’tis of Thee” (also known as “America”) when he was a twenty-four-year-old seminary student in Andover, Massachusetts. This song was first performed in public by a children’s choir in Boston at an Independence Day celebration on July 4, 1831. Smith was inspired by the German patriotic song “God Bless Our Native Land,” which used the melody of the British national anthem, “God Save the King.” In his song Smith paid homage to the United States as a “sweet land of liberty,” and he sounded the clarion call, “From every mountainside let freedom ring.”

This patriotic song would serve as the unofficial national anthem for the next century until “The Star-Spangled Banner” was adopted as the national anthem in 1931. On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted Smith’s lyrics in his “I Have A Dream” Speech, which he delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, when he called on people across the United States to “let freedom ring!”

MATERIALS

- The History behind “America the Beautiful”
- The History behind “America” (“My Country, ’tis of Thee”)
- Critical-Thinking Questions: The History behind the Songs
- “America the Beautiful,” by Katharine Lee Bates, 1893. Source: www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/art-music-and-film/resources/“america-beautiful”-1893 and www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/bd543f97-308f-49f3-9152-364009405364
- “America” (“My Country, ’tis of Thee”), by Samuel F. Smith, 1831. Source: Handwritten copy by Samuel F. Smith in the Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05508.230.02, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/art-music-and-film/resources/my-country-’tis-thee and www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/2a858877-8281-4bf2-972f-220836878634
- Compare and Contrast: “America the Beautiful” and “America”
- Document Analyzer: Imagery

PROCEDURE

1. The students should return to their critical-thinking groups from the previous lessons.
2. Pass out “The History behind ‘America the Beautiful’” and “The History behind ‘America’ (‘My Country ’tis of Thee’).”
3. If the class is able to read these texts individually, let them do so. If not, share read the documents with the students as described in Lesson 1.
4. Pass out “Critical-Thinking Questions: The History behind the Songs.” As the students work on the documents, remind them to back up their answers with evidence taken directly from the words of the two texts.
5. Pass out the lyrics to “America the Beautiful” and “America” (“My Country ’tis of Thee”) and either watch video performances of the songs or listen to performances of the songs. It would also be useful to have the students sing the song with you.
6. Pass out “Compare and Contrast: ‘America the Beautiful’ and ‘America.’”
7. Students will closely analyze the text of the two songs. They are to list words and ideas that they find repeated in both songs and put those in the “same” column while distinct differences are listed

in the opposite column. After this analysis students must determine the central theme shared by both songs.

8. Pass out “Document Analyzer: Imagery.”
9. Students will carefully read a verse of one of the songs and use the words to create a picture in their minds. They will describe what they see in their mind’s eye and which words helped create that image. They may struggle with some of the vocabulary. Let them try to reason out the meanings, but words such as “alabaster” may have to be explained.
10. Wrap-up: Discuss the students’ different interpretations of the songs’ imagery.

EXTENSION

Students can illustrate the images that these songs inspire.

APPLICATION

Based on the knowledge and understanding acquired from Lessons 1, 2, and 3, an application activity or assignment for grades 5 and 6 would be for the students to write an essay response to *either one* of the Essential Questions. In their essays students should present a viewpoint with supporting evidence from the songs’ concise histories and lyrics.

- “To what extent do songs reflect the history and culture of society?”
- “To what extent can songs instill and increase patriotism in people?”

The War of 1812 and “The Star-Spangled Banner”

Less than thirty years after the American Revolution, the United States was once again at war with Great Britain. America declared war on Great Britain in 1812, but by the summer of 1814 neither side was winning. However, in August 1814 the British landed 5,000 soldiers near Washington, DC, the capital of the United States of America, and defeated the American soldiers who were defending the city. The British soldiers burned much of the city, including the White House, and President Madison and his wife Dolley barely escaped.

The Battle of Baltimore

After destroying much of the nation’s capital, the British soldiers began marching toward the city of Baltimore, Maryland. At the same time the British navy began moving its ships into Chesapeake Bay so that they could attack from the sea while the soldiers attacked from the land. Fort McHenry protected the city of Baltimore. If the British wanted to reach the city they had to first defeat the 1,000 American soldiers who were in the fort. The British soldiers waited for the British ships to destroy the fort and open the way into Baltimore. For twenty-five hours the British ships blasted away at Fort McHenry with rockets and cannon shells that burst into flame and showered the fort with hot pieces of metal. The fort was helpless to defend itself because its cannons could not reach the more powerful weapons on the British ships. Yet the British could not sail into Baltimore because if they got too close to Fort McHenry, the fort’s cannons could destroy them. All through the night the attack continued, but the American soldiers refused to surrender.

Meanwhile, several miles away, an American lawyer named Francis Scott Key was negotiating a prisoner exchange on a British warship. Though he was treated with respect, the British officers were forbidden to release him to Baltimore until the battle was over, fearing he knew too much about the British battle tactics. Francis Scott Key watched the battle all through the night, and as the sun rose he saw the British navy sail away from Fort McHenry. At that moment he saw a huge American flag waving over the fort as the victorious American soldiers inside began singing “Yankee Doodle.”

Francis Scott Key and “The Star-Spangled Banner”

When Francis Scott Key saw the United States flag still flying over Fort McHenry, he knew that the Americans had won the battle. He was so moved by what he had witnessed that he began writing a poem about what he had seen on the back of a letter that he was carrying. Two days later the British released him, and he returned to Baltimore, where he finished a four-verse poem that he titled “The Defense of Fort McHenry.” Many of the people who read the poem loved it. Soon it was very popular and had been set to music. In October 1814 it was publicly performed and was being sold in music stores under the title “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Over the years the song gained popularity and was sung at many patriotic and ceremonial events. In 1931 “The Star-Spangled Banner” was officially named our country’s national anthem.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Critical-Thinking Questions: The War of 1812 and “The Star-Spangled Banner”

Remember to use evidence from the text to answer the questions and write your answers in complete sentences.

1. Why did First Lady Dolley Madison have to flee Washington, DC?

2. Why did the British soldiers have to wait before they could attack the city of Baltimore?

3. Why was Francis Scott Key on a British warship?

4. How did Francis Scott Key know that the British had lost the battle?

5. How long after the song was written did it become our national anthem?

The Star-Spangled Banner

O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,
Whose broad stripes & bright stars through the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
O say does that star spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave?

On the shore dimly seen through the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream,
'Tis the star-spangled banner—O long may it wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,
That the havoc of war & the battle's confusion
A home & a Country should leave us no more?
Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling & slave
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave.

O thus be it ever when freemen shall stand
Between their lov'd home & the war's desolation!
Blest with vict'ry & peace may the heav'n rescued land
Praise the power that hath made & preserv'd us a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto—"In God is our trust."
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave!

Name: _____ Date: _____

Document Analyzer: "The Star-Spangled Banner," Verse 1

Put each of the couplets into your own words.

1. O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming,

2. Whose broad stripes & bright stars through the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming?

3. And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.

4. O say does that star spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave?

Critical-Thinking Question

What story is being told in the first verse of the national anthem?

The Origins of “Yankee Doodle”

No one is sure where the song “Yankee Doodle” came from. Some claim the melody is English, Irish, Dutch, or Hungarian, or even from New England, but the American verses are credited to a British military doctor, Richard Shuckburgh (or Schackburg). According to the story, Dr. Shuckburgh wrote the first verses during the French and Indian War in 1755 when King George III sent British soldiers to protect the American colonies from French incursions.

The song grew in popularity and was sung by British soldiers poking fun at the American colonists. By the 1770s a “Yankee” was another name for an American colonist while a “doodle” was based on the Dutch or German word for a fool or simpleton. Many of the British serving in the colonies believed the colonists were trying to be as cultured as Europeans but were failing miserably. This can be seen in the first verse of the song. For example, in the last line—“stuck a feather in his hat and called it macaroni”—“macaroni” was a term describing men who went to extremes to appear sophisticated and stylish.

British soldiers initially used the song to mock the colonists. After British troops retreated from the colonists after the Battle of Lexington and Concord, it was often reported that the Americans had sung “Yankee Doodle” to mock the retreating redcoats.

By 1777 “Yankee Doodle” had become the unofficial national anthem of America. Its tune was easy for soldiers to march to, and during the American Revolution dozens of different verses were written. It has been documented that the second verse of the song was written at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Other verses praised General George Washington, described life in the army, or poked fun at King George III. “Yankee Doodle” was played after the Americans defeated the British at the Battle of Saratoga and again when General Cornwallis surrendered to General George Washington after the Battle of Yorktown, the last major battle of the American Revolution.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Critical-Thinking Questions: The Origins of “Yankee Doodle”

Remember to use evidence from the text to answer the questions, and write your answers in complete sentences.

1. Why was the doctor who is credited with writing “Yankee Doodle” in America?

2. Why was singing this song popular with many British soldiers?

3. Why did patriot colonists begin singing “Yankee Doodle”?

4. At what occasions during the American Revolution was “Yankee Doodle” played? What did those events have in common?

Yankee Doodle (selected verses)

Yankee Doodle went to town
A-riding on a pony,
He stuck a feather in his cap
And called it macaroni.

CHORUS

Yankee Doodle keep it up,
Yankee Doodle dandy;
Mind the music and the step,
And with the girls be handy.

Father and I went down to camp,
Along with Captain Gooding
And there we saw the men and boys,
As thick as hasty pudding.

CHORUS

And there was Cap'n Washington,
And gentle folks about him;
They say he's grown so 'tarnal proud,
He will not ride without 'em.

CHORUS

And Cap'n Davis has a gun,
He kind of clapt his hand on't,
And stuck a crooked stabbing iron
Upon the little end on't.

CHORUS

Name: _____ Date: _____

Document Analyzer: "Yankee Doodle"

Put each of the verses into your own words.

1. Yankee Doodle went to town A-riding on a pony,
He stuck a feather in his cap, And called it macaroni.

2. Father and I went down to camp, Along with Captain Gooding
And there we saw the men and boys, As thick as hasty pudding.

3. And there was Cap'n Washington, And gentle folks about him;
They say he's grown so 'tarnal proud, He will not ride without 'em.

4. And Cap'n Davis has a gun, He kind of clapt his hand on't,
And stuck a crooked stabbing iron Upon the little end on't.

The History behind “America the Beautiful”

In a brief essay that appeared ca. 1925, poet Katharine Lee Bates described her inspiration for writing “America the Beautiful,” the poem that would become one of the nation’s best-loved patriotic songs, during a trip to Pike’s Peak, Colorado, in 1893. Bates was a professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts and had traveled west to teach a summer course in Colorado Springs. Bates and the other professors decided to “celebrate the close of the session by a merry expedition to the top of Pike’s Peak.” They made the ascent by prairie wagon. At the top, Bates later wrote, she was inspired by “the sea-like expanse of fertile country . . . under those ample skies,” and “the opening lines of the hymn floated into my mind.” Those opening lines—“O beautiful for spacious skies, / For amber waves of grain, / For purple mountain majesties / Above the fruited plain!”—would eventually become the lyrics of one of the best-known songs in American history.

Bates finished writing “America the Beautiful” before leaving Colorado Springs but didn’t think of publishing it until two years later. The poem was first printed in a weekly newspaper, the *Congregationalist*, on July 4, 1895. Bates’s patriotic words were soon set to music, most popularly to composer S. A. Ward’s “Materna,” the tune to which we sing it today. Celebrating “country loved” and the “patriot dream,” the song resonated with Americans from all walks of life and became enormously popular. Within twenty years, Bates (after revising some of the lyrics in 1904) had “given hundreds, perhaps thousands, of free permissions” for “America the Beautiful” to appear “in church hymnals and Sunday School song books of nearly all the denominations; . . . in a large number of regularly published song books, poetry readers, civic readers, patriotic readers . . . in manuals of hymns and prayers, and anthologies of patriotic prose and poetry . . . and in countless periodicals.”

While Bates was initially surprised by the poem’s success, she later reflected that the “hold . . . it has upon our people, is clearly due to the fact that Americans are at heart idealists, with a fundamental faith in human brotherhood.”

The History behind “America” (“My Country, ’tis of Thee”)

Samuel Francis Smith was a twenty-four-year-old Baptist seminary student in Massachusetts when he wrote the lyrics of “America” (“My Country, ’tis of Thee”), the patriotic song that would serve as an unofficial national anthem for nearly one hundred years.

In 1831, while studying at Andover Theological Seminary, Smith was asked by composer Lowell Mason to translate some German song books. Inspired by one of the German songs—“God Bless Our Native Land” (set to the tune of “God Save the King”)—Smith set out to write an original patriotic song for America set to the same melody. The result was what Smith called “America” and what would eventually be better known as “My Country, ’tis of Thee.” The song was first performed on July 4, 1831, by a children’s choir in Boston.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Critical-Thinking Questions: The History behind the Songs

Remember to use evidence from the text to answer the questions, and write your answers in complete sentences.

1. What inspired poet Katharine Lee Bates to write the opening lines to “America the Beautiful”?

2. Do you think that Bates became wealthy by selling her very popular song?

3. What song was America’s unofficial national anthem until 1931?

4. What inspired Samuel Francis Smith to write “America” (“My Country, ’Tis of Thee”)?

America the Beautiful

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!

O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved,
And mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine!

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

America (My Country, 'tis of Thee)

My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
 Of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the Pilgrims' Pride,
From every mountain side
 Let freedom ring.

My native country, thee,
Land of the noble, free,
 Thy name I love;
I love thy rocks and rills,
Thy woods and templed hills,
My heart with rapture thrills,
 Like that above.

Let music swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees
 Sweet freedom's song;
Let mortal tongues awake,
Let all that breathe partake,
Let rocks their silence break,
 The sound prolong.

Our fathers' God, to Thee,
Author of liberty,
 To Thee we sing;
Long may our land be bright,
With freedom's holy light,
Protect us by Thy might,
 Great God, our King.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Compare and Contrast: “America the Beautiful” and “America”

Use the chart below to analyze both “America the Beautiful” and “America” (“My Country, ’tis of Thee”)

Same	Different

Critical-Thinking Question: What is the main story that both songs are trying to tell?

Name: _____ Date: _____

Document Analyzer: Imagery

"America the Beautiful"

Verse 1: What image is created in your mind? Which words are creating that image?

Verse 2: What image is created in your mind? Which words are creating that image?

Verse 3: What image is created in your mind? Which words are creating that image?

Verse 4: What image is created in your mind? Which words are creating that image?

"America" ("My Country, 'tis of Thee")

Verse 1: What image is created in your mind? Which words are creating that image?

Verse 2: What image is created in your mind? Which words are creating that image?

Verse 3: What image is created in your mind? Which words are creating that image?

Verse 4: What image is created in your mind? Which words are creating that image?
