



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2001 Volume V: Bridges: Human links and innovations

The East River Bridges of New York: An Expression of American Industrial Expansion

Guide for Curriculum Unit 01.05.01
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The great challenge of teaching a survey course like U.S. History is to cover the vast amount of material required while still going into enough depth to make the subject meaningful and to engage a wide range of skills beyond simple retention and repetition of information. This unit of study on the design and building of New York City's East River bridges in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries (with particular focus on the Brooklyn Bridge) accomplishes this end by pulling together the numerous threads which run through American history at the peak period of industrial growth. It incorporates the issues of urban growth and the resulting changes in transportation needs that provided the impetus to build more bridges of higher quality. It includes consideration of innovations in industrial processes and the introduction of new materials for building such as the mass production of steel and the introduction of steel cable. The availability of these materials combined with the needs of an urban industrial society led to exciting innovations in design. The issues of immigration, social class and the experience of workers in the new industrial economy are also a critical part of the story. These patterns of innovation, invention, immigration, and social change were repeated throughout American society during this era.

The high point of the unit is a culminating field trip to New York to see the bridges themselves. As a teacher at the Sound School, I have access to the Schooner Quinnipiack which provides me with an opportunity to view the bridges from the water. All of the East River Bridges are in fairly close proximity, however, and many can be accessed on foot from the shore so a trip by bus would certainly be practical. These colossal structures are impressive to behold and will give students a powerful connection with the late industrial era.

(Recommended for U.S. History, grades 9-12.)

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