



## Connecticut Folklore: Fact or Fiction

Curriculum Unit 87.04.05  
by Carolyn F. Stephenson

Even as early as 6th grade, the subject of history begins to take on an unpleasant reputation of being dry and boring. Yet our children deserve better than to be offered the old fashioned container approach to learning: they sit there and we fill them up with information.

The study of Connecticut history for the sixth grade student may be expanded and enhanced by reading folklore of people, places, and events. Interwoven in Connecticut's past are colorful characters, famous people and strange or unexplained events.

By using legends, we can offer children stories about the past which are more interesting than learning the facts and dates contained in the text. Legends also hold values that parallel those we hope to teach, such as patriotism, a love of freedom, respect for character, respect for nature.

Through legends the students are able to discover in a fun way information about the people in the past, how they lived, and what their customs or settings were. But legends are not just general stories: they usually center around one specific deed, such as an important contribution.

This unit is written for my sixth grade social studies classes. However, it may be adapted to suit the needs of a fifth grade class by examining regional legends and folk heroes. Seventh and eighth grade teachers may examine areas of legends covering more extensive geographic areas.

### The Background of Legends

Some questions that might be asked such as "Is a legend really true?" or "How much of the legend has been changed from the original event?" Many legends have been changed through the transmission process or enhanced to make the person or event just a little more exciting or colorful. Each time a story is retold, it takes on meanings beyond the original facts and is elaborated or embellished to enhance the event or character, so that the story, though based on a factual happening, now has taken on a fancier wrapping.

What is folklore? That has a variety of answers, but one definition which I like states that folklore is material that is passed on by tradition, either by word of mouth or by custom and practice. It may be folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, or other materials preserved in words. Although today the media also transmits lore, the best forms are those that are oral, because they retain their freshness. Each telling is a new one, unlike those versions which are confined in print.

What is the origin of folklore? Currently there are several theories which explain how folklore arose. Some of these theories are favored over others. In his book *The Study of Folklore*, Alan Dundes speaks about two theories that have attempted to deal with it one way or the other: (1) multiple existence and (2) irrationality. Multiple existence refers to the fact that an item of folklore appears at more than one time and place. Irrationality refers to the fact that some items in folktales are not found in nature, in objective reality, their origin must be related to the origin of human fantasies.

More closely related to the subject of this paper is the discussion of the distinction between historical and psychological origins of folklore. The historical origin of an item of folklore tells when and where an item may have arisen and perhaps how it has spread. It does not, however, explain why the item arose in the first place. In contrast a proposed psychological origin of an item of folklore may claim to explain why the item came into being, but the how and when may be ignored. Different questions are being answered, although the answers are both called origins, and both types of explanations are limited by the amount of data available. Historical records go back only so far in the evolution of man. Without some concrete historical evidence, it is difficult, if not impossible, to provide a plausible explanation for the existence of an item of folklore in a particular place. Psychological explanations are usually based upon speculative assumptions about modern man (Dundes, 1965).

Another way of viewing the historical versus the psychological approach to origins is through turning to a literal-symbolic interpretation. Those who interpret folklore literally feel there is historical truth underlying folklore. What appears to be irrationality is simply rationality distorted or history misremembered.

One example that the children can read about and discuss can be found in the July 1983 edition of *Cobblestone*, a history magazine for young people. The article is "The Life and Lore of George Washington" by Brandon Miller. The famous cherry tree story is retold and the readers are introduced to Parson Weems, a country parson and book peddler who created the cherry tree story. Weems wrote pamphlets against drinking, gambling, and murder. However his most popular writings were historical biographies of famous men. His greatest contribution was his book on George Washington. Weems' book stretches and adds items about George and himself in order to sell copies of his book. This book, which was a combination of fact and fiction, is not well researched by the standards of historians, but did create a lasting picture of George Washington. For example, the Washington that Weems writes about has no sense of humor. In reality, Washington's diaries and letters show that he enjoyed stories and jokes.

Parson Weems was largely responsible for creating the bigger-than-life story of George Washington. But the many stories created by Weems that are still remembered and told today prove that folklore and history often are accepted as one and the same. We can see how a legend can be kept alive by constantly repeating it, thus creating it anew with each time it is told. This is evidenced by the cherry tree story and the story of Abe Lincoln studying by candlelight, which probably has some element of truth, but may not be true in its entirety. Nevertheless, the story has been repeated so many times that its validity is not questioned. This may be because the fact of the story is not as important as its intention is: the story represents the building of strength of character needed to be set forth by men of importance in our country's heritage.

There are several types of legends. Some are based on generic characters such as the village idiot or town drunk. Some legends stem from greatness of past figures such as Washington and Lincoln. A legend may grow out of romanticized outlawry like Jesse James. A legend may grow out of stupidity or evil, the deeds magnified heroically, the evil and stupidity softened with time and telling. A legend may grow out of great disaster such as the sinking of the Titanic or the blizzard of 1888.

“Legends are everywhere and the chief touchstone to them is that they relate or are presumed to relate to actual persons, events, and places. They are, in effect, for the folk, historical accounts, even though the folk in the telling or hearing of them may be aware that the historical facts are being embroidered upon or are even dubious in origin. The presumption is that there is truth somewhere in the telling.” (Emrich p. 287). Therefore, using legends in the classroom is a valid and interesting way to teach history to young students.

Richard M. Dorson, the father of American folklore, writes of the changing role of the historian in his book, *American Folklore and the Historian*. This book contains essays and addresses he has written over the past 25 years.

The term folklore came into being in 1846, and historians were reluctant to put much validity into the area of legends of any given period. Yet, Dorson theorizes that legends of a certain period in American history reflect the main concern and values, tensions and anxieties, goals and drives of the period. He also believes that through legends we can find a “Statement of the common man’s outlook denied us in conventional documents.”

Dorson coined the term “Folklore” in 1950 in response to the misrepresentation of the subject of folklore, which would include falsifying and distortion of cultural materials. The Paul Bunyan tales would fall into the category of folklore because as Dorson states, Bunyan tales were not collected in the field, but were rewritten from earlier literary and journalistic sources in an endless chain of repetitive tales or themes.

Yet Dorson realizes that the Bunyan tales filled a Nationalistic need after World War I, when America needed her own folk heroes, instead of depending on folklore and mythology from Europe.

Dorson recognizes the importance of the written documents to both the historian and folklorist. He tells of the numerous bodies of colonial writings available. These would include accounts of voyages and explorations, promotional tracts, diaries and journals, providential histories, Indian captivities, and descriptions of the savages and inhabitants of the New World.

“The American folklorist who is exploring research opportunities must seek for raw materials in two directions: printed (or manuscript) sources and field collections. Both avenues offer many inviting leads.

Because printed sources can provide him with texts for the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries before field collecting was consciously undertaken, certain printed media are valuable and necessary to the worker in American folklore.” (Dorson, 1971)

Connecticut is rich with folklore from the past, present and will continue to create legends in the future. We often think of legends in the past, but a new area of folklore, the stories of the city folk, is being researched as this paper is being written. Jan Brunvand is the author of several books on the subject of urban legends which will be used in the later stage of the unit.

### **Folklore in the Classroom**

Four legends from our state that I will be teaching in this unit will be (1) The Regicides, (2) The Charter Oak, (3) The Black Dog of West Peak, and leading into the study of the urban legends, (4) Midnight Mary.

Using these legends as a basis for the unit, I plan to lead the students to look for answers to specific questions relating to the amount of fact or fiction contained in each legend. Next we will explore the methods that a historian would use to verify the validity of the legend. This would include tracing back to original sources as

far as possible. We will learn where to go to find the answers and the importance of doing your own research. Lastly we will discuss the location within our state where each legend has taken place. Field trips to locations inevitably excite the student and will give a concrete experience to the unit.

I would like to note that several versions of each of these legends exist. I particularly like and have chosen to use the versions found in *Legendary Connecticut* by David E. Philips and *Folk Tales of Connecticut* by Glenn E. White for my classroom use.

## The Regicides

Whalley and Goffe in Massachusetts make their home;

Then to Quinnipiac in haste pursue their way.

Nor know they where to rest nor where to roam,

Until in Hadley concealed and lonely they stay.

The regicides, Whalley and Goffe were Puritan judges who voted to sentence King Charles I to be beheaded in 1649. When Charles II returned to England he wanted to capture the judges who had sentenced his father to death. So Goffe and Whalley fled to the Puritan colonies for protection. They hid in homes and a cave on the top of West Rock, a mountain overlooking New Haven. The soldiers were constantly searching for them so they fled to Guilford and to Milford, where they hid for three years in a cellar. The soldiers had an idea they were hiding in the cellar but would not enter a private house. One cold evening when the soldiers were not looking Goffe and Whalley left along Indian paths to the Quinnipiac River, which they followed northward. They passed through many towns on their way to the wilderness in the north. It was believed that the men vanished until Indians attacked the village of Hadley, Massachusetts, when an old white-bearded man came out to help, then quickly disappeared. Was it Goffe? No one knows for sure.

The Charter Oak

Safe in the hollow of the ancient oak,

That centuries had looked for this bold stroke,

Our Royal Charter hidden lay,

And so Andros was foiled that fateful day.

Lydia B. Newcomb

On April 26, 1662, King Charles II granted the Colony of Connecticut a Charter which allowed it to run its own affairs. All was well until 1687, when King James II wanted to place all the colonies under royal rule and combine for defenses against the French in Canada. James II appointed Edmund Andros to govern all of New England. Andros tried to get Connecticut to give up its Charter. It did not. So, Andros came to get it himself. A meeting was set, and after much discussion, the Charter was not surrendered. The meeting house grew dark as evening approached. Candles were lit. Andrew Leete got up and spoke. Suddenly he lost consciousness and fell across the table, knocking the candles over. The room was in total darkness. When the candles were relit,

the Charter was gone. Andros was furious. The room and all persons were searched. The Charter had disappeared.

In reality, the Charter had been handed out through an open window to Captain Wadsworth who hid the Charter in the hollow of an old oak tree on the property of Samuel Wyllys. Which is now the city of Hartford. The tree kept its secret until a later time.

The size of the tree was about 33 feet in circumference and was estimated to be about 800 years old. The Indians and Puritans both used the protection of its boughs to hold councils and hear the word of God.

The Charter Oak was blown down during a great storm on August 21, 1856. The entire state mourned the loss of the beloved tree. An honor guard was placed around it. The wood from the tree was preserved and the Governor's chair in the Capital in Hartford is but one of many items made from the cherished wood. A tablet marks the place where the great oak stood.

The Black Dog of West Peak

“And if a man shall meet the Black Dog once, it

shall be for joy; and if twice, it shall be for

sorrow; and the third time, he shall die.”

The Black Dog of West Peak, is a dog which people have described as having a short black coat, sad eyes, does not bark, and leaves no footprints in snow or dirt. Many people have seen him and enjoyed his company. The most famous stories of the Black Dog were written by a man named W.H.C. Pynchon. Pynchon was a geologist from New York. He met and spent a wonderful day with his new friend, a stray black dog. As dusk set in, the dog disappeared into the woods.

Pynchon returned to Meriden a few years later with a friend, who had been in the West Peak area numerous times and mentioned seeing a black dog two times. The men were planning a hike the next day.

The men climbed the cliffs, which were a little icy in the February chill. As they climbed higher the black rocks were sticking out of the snow and looked as Pynchon stated like the “Valley of the Shadow of Death.”

When they approached the top, they looked up and saw a black dog on the top of the cliff. They continued to climb higher, when Pynchon's friend slipped and fell to his death on the rocks below. He had seen the Black Dog for the third time. Pynchon saw him a second time. And he was truly sad.

A few years later, Pynchon died a similar death as his friend. Did he see the Black Dog for the third time? Who knows. But he was the fifth man to lose his life there in twenty-five years.

The legend still goes on. A young climber fell to his death on Thanksgiving Day in 1972. Had he seen the Black Dog a third time?

Midnight Mary

AT HIGH NOON—JUST FROM, AND ABOUT TO RENEW-HER DAILY WORK, IN HER FULL STRENGTH OF—BODY AND MIND  
MARY E. HART—HAVING FALLEN PROSTRATE:-REMAINED UNCONSCIOUS, UNTIL SHE DIED AT MIDNIGHT OCTOBER 15,

Mary Hart's tombstone can be found in the Evergreen Cemetery in downtown New Haven. It bears the inscription above. Part tells the tale of her death and the other may serve as a challenge or warning.

The legend of Midnight Mary is probably one of the most liveliest of Connecticut's supernatural legends, spread in the oral tradition.

Historically, Mary was a hard working woman, born and lived in New Haven. She died at the age of forty-seven of apoplexy (the Victorian term for a "stroke"). The legends that surround Mary include those that claim she was buried alive, and that she gets a ride at night and the driver checks to see if she is well the next day, only to find out that she is dead and her grave is across the street from where she was left off. (see the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" in Brunvand)

The greatest number of legends about Midnight Mary stem from the consequences of defying the curse that was inscribed on her tombstone.

We will examine the above legends to discover a purpose for telling it or hidden meaning. The Charter Oak and Regicides are based on historical events: although there are many versions of each, the meanings are not changed. Each story embraces and keeps alive the value of independence and belief in freedom and democracy.

The Black Dog is not a historical folktale, but it has a supernatural quality and setting that makes you want to see the place for yourself, yet the fear of seeing the Black Dog may hold you back. The meaning may be that of man's relationship to new territory and recognizing his limits. He must always keep in mind the respect and honor that nature deserves. He must watch his step at all times.

Midnight Mary is a legend that most New Haven school children may be familiar with. I am sure they have heard or passed some version of the story themselves. The purposes found in the Mary tales seem to warn of changes in society and fear of death. Changes in customs that allowed a person to be buried without the usual 3 night vigil may have spurred the buried alive stories. And thus arise stories of the strange happenings in the grave yards to anyone who dares to test the midnight curse.

Midnight Mary could also lead us into the study of urban legends. Urban legends are those stories about our own time that reflect our current beliefs, fears, and values. They often deal with mistrust of new technology ("The Poodle in the Microwave"), a dislike of emerging social mores ("The Philanderer's Porsche"), and xenophobic beliefs ("The Snake in the Blanket"). New inventions were met with resistance, or fear of the unknown; this apprehension created a climate for urban legends such as "Room For One More." The story is told of a woman who dreams she is looking out her bedroom window when she sees a fancy coach filled with people. The coachman says there is room for one more person. The woman declines and he coach drives off. The woman awakens and is puzzled by the dream but soon puts it out of her mind. The next day she is shopping in a large department store, her arms loaded with bundles. She approaches a recently installed elevator. She sees many people and the operator says he has room for one more person. The woman remembers her dream and says she'll take the stairs. The elevator door closes and descends. Suddenly the cable snaps and the elevator car plunges to the bottom of the building, killing all aboard.

Was the dream a warning against the new invention of the elevator? Decide for yourself!!

Jan Brunvand, a folklore scholar in Utah, has set himself the task of collecting modern legends of both people and things. These are related to what is happening to us (the folk) now. Many of these are quite scary, but we have different fears from those people years ago. It is important for students to understand how even historical legends arose from the concerns and beliefs of the people, just as they do today. A study of urban legends will help establish that principle.

For example, the growing mistrust of people has been the basis for modern legends. One such legend that has numerous versions and settings is called "The Hook." It is told that a couple are parking in a secluded lover's lane. The radio music they were listening to is interrupted and the announcer reports that a maniac with a hook for one hand has escaped from a nearby mental institution and is extremely dangerous. The girl gets scared and begs her boyfriend to take her home. Angrily the boy jerks the car out of the lane. When he arrives at her house he gets out to open the door for her, when to his shock he sees a hook caught in the door handle!

Urban legends continue on with many themes such as Classic Automobile Legends, Dreadful Contaminations, Purloined Corpses and Fear of The Dead, Dalliance, Nudity, and Nightmares, Business Ripoffs, and Urban Legends in the Making.

Legends exist in the past, present, and future. It is interesting to see that themes and purposes have not changed much. Only the settings and characters are different. School children will enjoy sharing legends they have heard and learn about significant events in Connecticut's legendary past. It is important that the children realize that we continue to create legends today to explain our world. Legends do not belong only to the past. People of all ages need to understand their world. By looking at the spirit of the legend, rather than just its historical facts, we can tell much about the actual day-to-day feelings and attitudes of the past. The Black Dog, for example, shows fear of the unknown and untamed nature. We do not hold this same fear today in Connecticut, but we do fear other things, as our own legends show.

The 6th grade students in my class are indeed fortunate to be attending an arts magnet school, which integrates and arts and traditional curriculum. Therefore, not all lessons for this unit are designed for historical information, but a blending of a number which will help the students gain interest. Thus the following lessons include creative writing, visual arts, oral history and collecting, and research.

## **LESSON 1**

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### **OBJECTIVES**

1. The students will work with the teacher to complete a legend worksheet after each legend has been read and discussed in class.
2. Students will keep the worksheets and use for future activities.

### **MATERIALS**

legend worksheet (see below)

pens

### **PROCEDURE**

1. After each legend has been read, the students will complete one worksheet per story in class with the teacher assisting as needed.

## **LEGEND WORKSHEET**

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NAME OF LEGEND

LOCATION OF LEGEND

WHO OR WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE LEGEND?

LIST TRUE FACTS IN THE LEGEND-CAN THEY BE PROVEN? IF SO WHERE?

ANY FALSE OR MISLEADING INFORMATION? IF SO, WHAT IS MISLEADING?

DATE OF LEGEND

YOUR REACTION AFTER READING THE LEGEND

ON THE BACKSIDE OF THIS PAPER, USE YOUR IMAGINATION TO DRAW A SCENE FROM THIS LEGEND

## **LESSON 2**

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### **OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will read 3 versions of the Charter Oak Legend to discover historical facts common in those versions.



2. The students will chart and compare fact and fiction items in each story.

### **MATERIALS**

Copies of the Charter Oak story found in:

1. *Legendary Connecticut*
2. *Cobblestone CT History*
3. *Folktales of Connecticut*

### **PROCEDURE**

1. Read each version in class.
2. Research the true facts in other sources such as text books, reference books, and Connecticut history books.
3. Make a chart for each version of the Charter Oak with 2 sections, 1 for facts and the other for fiction.
4. Fill in each side with information contained in the legends.
5. Compare each chart to determine how many factual events actually occurred.
6. Choose a student to retell the story using only the facts. Is it as interesting? Why or why not?

## **LESSON 3**

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## MAP SKILLS

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### **OBJECTIVES**

1. To use stories to create interest in map skills.
2. We will use this map and the details of the stories to learn map skills. (see map below)

### **MATERIALS**

Outline map of Connecticut

Colored pencils or thin markers

### **PROCEDURE**

1. After each folktale has been read, each student will put a \* and the name of the tale in a different color, approximately where the legend took place on his copy of the map.
2. Using the distance scale on the map, the students can measure the distances between towns where each legend has taken place in order to see how far apart each location was from each other
3. Oral or written questions such as, How many miles is it from New Haven to———? or If the Regicides walked from Meriden to Hartford, how many miles did they walk?
4. Using the compass rose, the teacher can teach lesson using the cardinal directions in which the students ask the questions such as:  
New Haven is——— of Hartford.  
What direction did the Regicides travel when they left New Haven?

*(figure available in print form)*

## LESSON 4

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### WRITING SKILLS

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#### **OBJECTIVES**

1. To use the legends to encourage creative writing.
2. The child will be able to write another ending to a folktale of his own choosing.

#### **MATERIALS**

paper

pens

#### **PROCEDURE**

1. Each child will choose a folktale that we have read in class and read it. Then on paper the student will create another ending to the story and share it with the class.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

1. The child will be able to write and illustrate a legend based on a factual experience in their own life.

#### **MATERIALS**

paper

pens

crayons or markers

#### **PROCEDURE**

1. Each student will use some event or element in his life thus far and turn it into a legend. He may expand it, but some element of truth must be the basis of his tale.

2. When the stories are completed, the students will share their legends with classmates. The classmates will then try to determine which parts are factual and what parts are fictitious.

## LESSON 5

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### WRITING SKILLS AND RESEARCH

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#### **OBJECTIVES**

1. The students will compile a class booklet on folklore from their own lives.
2. The students will collect folklore from family members

#### **MATERIALS**

paper

pens

tape recorder

crayons or markers

#### **PROCEDURE**

1. The students will ask parents and relatives for family customs, sayings, holiday traditions, family stories or characters. An example from my own life would be that my grandmother baked thousands of cookies at Christmas time to give as gifts to teachers, friends, and other special people. She continued this until her death in 1976.
2. Some other areas of collection may be as follows: Historical: such as memory of a parent, holiday foods, story about time before TV., Fourth of July celebration or crafts from the past (did grandmother quilt?). Current areas of folklore might include a jump rope rhyme, jokes, scary story or a mythic person.

When all data is completed, the students will share with classmates, then each bit of folklore will be entered

into a booklet as a final project from this unit. The booklet will be reproduced so it can be shared with others.

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