

Connecticut Explored Curriculum Lesson Plan

Topic: Connecticut Spiritualists and Social Reform

Article: “The Spirits of Reform” by Dawn C. Adiletta, *Hog River Journal*, Volume 7, No. 1
(attached in separate document)

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Description: Students will use the material drawn from Dawn C. Adiletta’s “The Spirit of Reform” and Susan Campbell’s “A Tribute to Isabella Beecher Hooker” to evaluate the contributions made by Connecticut spiritualists to social reform. Connecticut spiritualists, as their counterparts elsewhere, were active in many reform movements in Antebellum America including health reform, the abolition of slavery, temperance, and women’s rights. A spiritualist was someone who refused to see death as final. Rather, death was another stage. Some spiritualists, called mediums, claimed to possess the powers to communicate with the dead and conducted séances, or meetings, to make contact with loved ones who had died.

Students will demonstrate their knowledge of Connecticut spiritualism and women’s suffrage in two ways. First, they will complete an Event/Concept Graphic Organizer depicting the various social reform movements involving Connecticut spiritualists. Second, students will choose one of the following five options: Students will A) pretend they are Isabella Beecher Hooker and write a one-page journal entry describing her first day at the National Woman Suffrage Association meeting in 1871, B) write a 250-word description of Hooker’s participation at a séance with other Nook Farm residents at her home in Harford, or C) compose a letter to a friend describing his or her first experience at a séance, or D) compose a song with period-appropriate lyrics calling for women’s suffrage, or E) create a poster with captions depicting a séance or a meeting of the National Woman Suffrage Association. In all five choices, attention will be paid to historical accuracy.

State Standards Addressed:

Content Standard 3.2 – Analyze and evaluate human action in historical and/or contemporary contexts from alternative points of view.

- High School students use a variety of writing formats to portray attitudes in a historical time period.

Essential Questions: What was spiritualism? What was the connection between spiritualism and social reform? Why were women attracted to the spiritualist movement?

Objectives: Students will be able to explain the connection between spiritualism and other social reforms. Students will read “The Spirit of Reform” by Dawn C. Adiletta and then complete an Event/Concept Graphic Organizer. Students will read Susan Campbell’s “A Tribute to Isabella Beecher Hooker” and then choose one of the following activities: A) write a journal entry, B) write a descriptive essay, C) compose a letter, D) compose a song calling for women’s suffrage, or E) create a poster with illustrations and captions depicting a séance or a meeting at the National Woman Suffrage Association.

Historical Background: The origins of American spiritualism extend back to 1848, in Rochester, New York, when, one night, sisters Margaret and Kate Fox claimed to hear knocking sounds in their bedroom. At first frightened, but then intrigued, the Fox sisters initiated a movement that attracted thousands of Americans for a variety of reasons. Claiming to be mediums or those who could make contact with the spirits of the dead, the sisters soon amassed a fortune by holding sessions called séances. The contacting of the dead through mediums is centuries old. Believers have long sought answers to age-old questions involving romance, financial gain, and other topics. In time, spiritualism evolved into a new religion, one that was rational, scientific, and dedicated to betterment of humankind. At first, the new movement and religion attracted solid, middle-class educated Americans who saw great promise in spiritualism. For many Americans, spiritualism offered a break from the suffocating confines of orthodox religion.

Almost overnight, hundreds of new periodicals devoted to the new religion flourished, spiritualist camp meetings and churches were established, and a new profession of mediumship emerged. Leading personalities from all professions were drawn to spiritualism inspired by its seemingly intellectual basis and its support for scientific inquiry. The commitment to human betterment, which so marked the spiritualist movement, led many of these same supporters into other channels of social reform. Health crusades, women rights, the abolition of slavery, and temperance reform also attracted spiritualists.

In the area of women’s rights, spiritualism made deep inroads. Of all the professions in the 19th century, perhaps clerical life was the least accessible to women. A patriarchal elite jealously guarded entry into the ministry, even while many women labored on behalf of their churches in all denominations. Spiritualism provided women with a unique religious opportunity. Within this more democratic environment, claims Dawn C. Adiletta, “Spiritualism helped women find their public voice by easing them from their traditional roles”. Women were now free to preach, debate, interpret, and argue religious doctrine without censure. Over time, women spiritualists were drawn to politics as well.

In Connecticut, spiritualist Isabella Beecher Hooker was the most remarkable political sensation. As a member of one of the state’s leading families, Isabella Beecher Hooker carried considerable influence in political and social circles. Mrs. Hooker was an advocate in the women’s rights movement where, in 1869, she became a founding member and active participant in the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association. Two years later, she participated in the National Woman Suffrage Association in Washington, D.C. where she vied with Susan B. Anthony for leadership. Back in Connecticut in 1877, Mrs. Hooker helped to secure the passage of legislation establishing the legal right of women to hold property.

Politically motivated though she was, however, “Her interest in spiritualism was to become an obsession,” according to historian Kenneth R. Andrews. At Nook Farm in Hartford, home to many literary and cultural luminaries such as Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), Harriet

Beecher Stowe, Charles Dudley Warner, the Reverend Joseph Hopkins Twichell, and the Hookers, Isabella held séances serving as medium. Spiritualism was a cause to which Mrs. Hooker remained steadfast for the remainder of her life. She died in 1907.

In the post-Civil War period, interest in spiritualism declined. The movement, it was discovered, was riddled with frauds and charlatans. Mediums, working through séances, meetings, and private readings, bilked small fortunes out of unsuspecting patrons. In the 1880s, one of the Fox sisters confessed that the “spirit rapping” or the knocks Margaret and Kate heard in 1848, were actually made by cracking the joints of their toes against furniture. While widespread interest in the movement declined, spiritualism survived. Today, many continue to gather to probe the supernatural for answers regarding love, fortune, and fame.

Strategies: This lesson must be taught within the context of 19th century America. Spiritualism emerged a little more than a decade prior to the Civil War and was tremendously popular in the post-war period. Students must be familiar with the many reform movements that occurred during the Antebellum period as well as the major personalities who participated in multiple crusades. An informative resource on American spiritualism is the PBS documentary *Telegrams from the Dead* (The American Experience). Teachers wishing to expand the lessons might offer the following to interested students: A) Conduct a debate on the pros and cons of spiritualism or B) Dramatize a séance, replete with Victorian costumes, make-shift planchette, medium, parlor décor, and memorized scripts. For teachers unfamiliar with the subject, I recommend *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. by Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986). This work covers a wide range of topics connected with spiritualism during the 19th and 20th centuries and covers the development of the movement during the Antebellum period well.

Authentic Assessment Activities:

Day 1 Activity – After reading Adiletta’s article “The Spirits of Reform”, students will complete an Event/Concept Graphic Organizer illustrating how Spiritualism influenced other reform movements in Antebellum America.

Day 2 Activity – After reading Susan Campbell’s “A Tribute to Isabella Beecher Hooker”, students choose one of the following: A) write a one-page journal entry describing Hooker’s first day at the National Woman Suffrage Association meeting in 1871 or B) write a 250-word description of Hooker’s participation in a séance with other residents in the Nook Farm section of Hartford or C) compose a letter to a friend describing your first visit to a séance or D) compose a song with lyrics calling for women’s suffrage, or E) create a poster with illustrations and captions depicting a séance or a meeting at the National Woman Suffrage Association. Whichever one the student chooses, be sure he or she includes as much historical information as found in the readings.

Materials: The following documents are easily accessible for students.

Dawn C. Adiletta, “The Spirits of Reform” Hog River Journal, Volume 7/ No. 1, pp. 40-45, http://hogriver.org/backissues_htm

Susan Campbell, "A Tribute to Isabella Beecher Hooker" HartfordInfo.org

Annotated Bibliography

Andrews, Kenneth R. *Nook Farm: Mark Twain's Hartford Circle*. Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1969. This volume provides a snapshot of life among Hartford's social and cultural elite. A good discussion is included on Isabella Beecher Hooker and her involvement with Spiritualism.

Braude, Ann. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. Braude's book focuses on the early relationship between feminism and Spiritualism. An excellent study at the national level, the author discusses Mrs. Hooker as well.

Brown, Slater. *The Heyday of Spiritualism*. New York: Pocket Books, 1972. Brown's work is a popular, non-academic history of the Spiritualist movement. The book provides valuable background information on Spiritualism's major figures.

Carroll, Bret E. *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. In this well-written study, the author sees Spiritualism "as a reflection of and a reaction to" many of the social, political, and economic developments in American life in the decades before the Civil War.

Cross, Whitney R. *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965. Cross's book is instructive in that it places the birth of Spiritualism within its specific locale, a region where many new religions emerged during the Antebellum period. The parallels make for interesting reading.

Hardinge, Emma. *Modern American Spiritualism*. New York: University Books, 1970. Originally published in 1869, this primary source captures the development of Spiritualism in its early years. Covering region by region, Hardinge was immensely devoted to the movement and served as one of Spiritualism's earliest chroniclers.

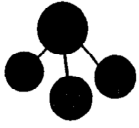
Gyory, Andrew. "The Hydesville Horror," *Scholastic Search*, February 13, 1982, Vol. 14, No. 12, pp. 2-4. A brief but good easy read on the Fox sisters.

Guthrie, John J. et al. eds. *Cassadaga: The South's Oldest Spiritualist Community*. Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2000. These essays document the longevity of the South's oldest Spiritualist community. Cassadaga was founded in 1893.

Wicker, Christine. *Lily Dale: The True Story of the Town That Talks to the Dead*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003. Located 60 miles south of Buffalo, New York, Lily Dale is the oldest Spiritualist community in the United States (1879). Like Cassadaga in Florida, Lily Dale continues to serve as a religious Mecca for Spiritualists.

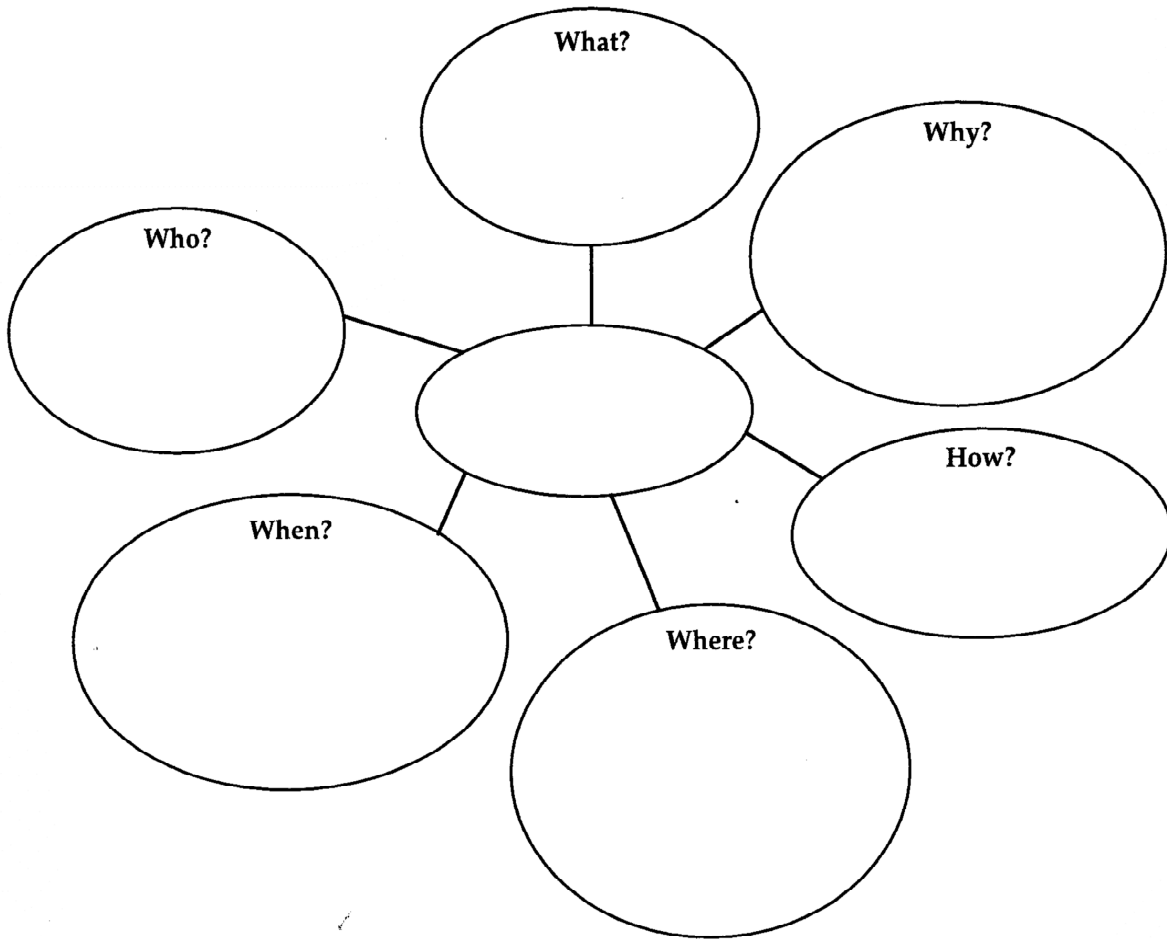
Field Trip Options: A trip to the Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain houses in Hartford makes for a possible field experience for students interested in early feminism, spiritualism, and the literary colony at Nook Farm. Isabella Beecher Hooker's papers and other memorabilia are housed at the nearby Stowe-Day House.

Rubric-Day 1 Activity: The Concept/Event Graphic Organizer will be assessed on the following basis: The entire graphic organizer is complete, depicting What, Why, How, Where, When, and Who. Answers will vary.



Concept/Event Map

Write your topic in the center circle. Then write details in the smaller circles. Add and delete lines and circles as needed.



Name _____
Date _____

Rubric for Activity II

<u>Components</u>	<u>Total Points</u>	<u>Student Self-Evaluation</u>	<u>Teacher Evaluation</u>
Includes appropriate title, name, date	25		
Includes historical information that demonstrates knowledge of spiritualism or women's suffrage	25		
Includes historical figures involved in spiritualism or women's suffrage	25		
Proper spelling and grammar	25		
total score	100		