

# **A SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM GUIDE: WHAT CAN THE HIGH LINE TEACH US ABOUT COMMUNITY ACTIVISM?**

Grades 6 and 7

## **Materials:**

### **Period 1:**

- PowerPoint presentation

### **Period 2:**

- Activism question sheet
- Articles about the preservation of the High Line

### **Period 3:**

- No special materials.

## **LESSON GOALS**

Students will:

- Learn that the High Line was built in the 1930s to carry freight along Manhattan's west side
- Learn that the High Line is now open as a public park
- Learn that before the High Line, freight lines ran at grade along sections of 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> avenues
- Learn that the sections of avenues where the freight train ran was known as "Death" Avenue
- Learn that citizens rallied and fought against Death Avenue for nearly 70 years
- Learn that the streets and waterfront along the west side of Manhattan were overly congested and dangerous to cross
- Learn that trains running along "Death Avenue" were preceded by a flag-waving "West Side Cowboy" riding on horseback to alert pedestrians
- Learn that the High Line was part of a larger program called the West Side Improvement
- Learn that it was citizen activism and participation that eventually led to the elimination of Death Avenue
- Learn that once the High Line was built, it did help mitigate traffic
- Learn that the High Line eventually fell into disuse and was abandoned in 1981.
- Learn that property owners underneath the High Line lobbied for its demolition
- Learn that community members came together to preserve the High Line
  - These members came together as Friends of the High Line
  - FHL was successful in fighting the city's plan to demolish the High Line
  - From the time FHL was formed until the new park opened, it took nearly a decade.
  - FHL is dedicated to retaining the High Line and advocated for its reuse as a park

- FHL will manage and operate the new High Line

**Duration:** 3 periods

**Period 1**—PowerPoint presentation (NOTE: This PowerPoint is a little long, and may take up nearly the entire 45 minute period.)

**Period 2**—primary source research

**Period 3**—stage debate

**Extension or Homework**—write newspaper editorial

## **PERIOD 1:**

Ask students, ‘What is community activism?’ They may be aware that Barack Obama began his political career as a community organizer. With what sorts of issues might a community organizer or activist be involved? (Answers will vary, but might include affordable housing, education, traffic, environmental concerns, gentrification, displacement, development or over-development, etc.) Ask if any of the students have been involved in any activism themselves and encourage them to share their experiences. (Some may have helped clean up a park or block, taken part in a block party or other community event, etc.) Ask if ordinary citizens can have a positive impact upon their communities. (Yes, although sometimes it may not seem that way.) What are some of the things people can do to help a community cause? (Answers include circulating a petition, writing letters to elected officials, staging a protest, etc.) Tell students that the High Line, a freight train line, is a wonderful example of the power that ordinary citizens wield in the life of their city. Ask students if they are familiar with the High Line. (Some may be, others may not be.) Explain briefly that it is an elevated freight train line that was abandoned and is now open as a public park. Say, “Let’s find out how the High Line inspired ordinary New Yorkers to get involved and be committed to a positive cause—twice in its history!”

### **Slide 1: 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue, c. 1920.**

Ask students to describe the scene. It is a crowded, congested nightmare! Trains, horse-drawn carriages, trucks, cars, and people all try to make their way. Point out the train tracks in the roadbed. What does that mean? (Trains travel there.) Ask students if they know where this picture is. Explain that it is in New York City, on the west side of Manhattan, around the year 1920. Ask students to share what they know about shipping in New York City’s history. (Shipping is vital to the city’s economy; historians agree New York’s status as the world’s city is due to its harbor’s natural attributes.) Ask if any students have ever been to South Street Seaport Museum. If any have, ask them to share their experiences. South Street Seaport Museum shows us what New York was like when the center of shipping was downtown, and on the East River. In those early days, cargo was shipped by sailing ship. Why? (With the advent of steam power in 1809, shipping shifted to the Hudson River.) Why were ships and the river so important to New York’s early economy? Given the fact that shipping was so vital to New York’s (and the country’s) economy, does this image look like anything is getting through? (No.) Where were all these trucks and wagons and trains going? (They were picking up or delivering goods to ships and also picking up or delivering goods from warehouses.) Explain that there were many warehouses and factories located close to the Hudson River. Why? (To be convenient for shipping.)

**Slide 2: 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue, c. 1920.**

Explain that in addition to the slow-down of shipping, this traffic had another, very serious problem. Point out the train in the upper right of the image. This is a freight train, traveling right in the street, along with all the other traffic. Ask students if they have ever seen a freight train. (Many may not have.) Ask if they think it would've been safe to have freight trains so close to pedestrians and people traveling in a horse-drawn wagon? (Not at all.) In fact, these streets where the train ran at grade, came to be known as "Death Avenue."

**Slide 3: *New Yorker* cover, Sept. 1933.**

Ask students to describe everything that is going on in the drawing. Explain that it was common knowledge that the streets leading to the piers on the Hudson River were a cacophony! Point out the train with the man who is riding horseback. Who is he and what is he doing? Elicit that he is riding in front of the train to help alert pedestrians of the train's arrival. What is he carrying that would help alert people? (A red flag.) Explain that he was known as the "Death Avenue" cowboy, and that was his job. Ask students if they think the problem of Death Avenue was serious? (It was.) Explain that at that time, the railroad was very powerful. Many people wanted to get rid of Death Avenue by getting the tracks off the street. Ask if people felt they might be able to fight the railroad. (Maybe yes, maybe no.)

**Slide 4: *New York Times* headline, October 25, 1928.**

Ask a student to read the headline. What does it mean? (A child was killed on Death Avenue, and 500 children protested.)

**Slide 5: *The New York Times* article portion, April 8, 1910.**

Explain that this article, from 18 years before the child's death, shows that Death Avenue had been a problem for an extremely long time, one that had concerned New Yorkers deeply. Read the paragraph, and explain, as some of the wording might be difficult for students to comprehend.

**Slide 6: *The New York Times* article portion, June 29, 1934.**

Ask for a student to read the headline, "The New West Side." What might it mean? (Answers will vary.) Explain that it took nearly 70 years, but the problem of Death Avenue was finally solved. "The New West Side" refers to the plan to get the trains off of Death Avenue and make other improvements. Ask a student to read the first three sentences, and question the class about the meaning. What does this perseverance teach us? Can ordinary citizens have an impact? (Yes.)

**Slide 7: The High Line, under construction, 1933.**

Explain that the plan was in the works for decades, but citizens agreed that the end to Death Avenue would come only when the trains were no longer running at grade. Yet freight still had to be delivered and picked up. How would this problem be solved? The High Line solved the problem by constructing elevated tracks that would go directly into warehouses.

**Slide 8: The High Line, under construction, 1933.**

Ask students to share their thoughts about the construction of the High Line.

**Slide 9: West Side Improvement Brochure, opening day, 1934.**

Explain to students that the problem of Death Avenue was not only the safety, but also the total inefficiency of moving traffic and goods. By the time the city finally got around to partnering with the railroad to do something about all of these issues, the plan included many facets. These included the High Line, an elevated vehicular highway (the West Side Highway, aka the Miller Highway, and the construction of a new freight terminal at Laight Street. Have students look at the brochure cover and describe the image. What impact is imagined the High Line will have?

**Slide 10: National Refrigerator Company and High Line, c. 1933.**

Ask students to describe the street traffic. How does it compare with the image they saw at the beginning of the presentation? (Totally different!) Ask students to notice the High Line's track's going through the building. Why? (To make pick up and drop off easier.) Explain that as part of the West Side Improvement, many warehouses built these additions to allow the High Line to go directly through the building. These are called *sidings*. Ask students if the West Side Improvement met its goals? (Yes in that Death Avenue ceased to exist, local and express traffic were separated by the construction of the elevated highway, shipping became more efficient.) Even though the High Line is still under construction in this image, the difference can be seen.

**Slide 11: Death Avenue cowboy, 1934.**

Explain that this was a ceremonial ride to retire the Death Avenue cowboy, when the High Line opened. Notice the High Line in the background of the photo.

**Slide 12: High Line, c. 1998.**

Tell students that although the High Line solved all the problems of the west side, it was built at a time when the world was changing. Ask the class to describe the image. What does the High Line look like in this picture? (Abandoned, a field, not in use.) Explain that not long after the High Line was built, shipping began to change. Planes came into greater use, and better highways were built, enabling trucks to be used more and more. Ask what impact they think this had on train shipping? (It declined.) It declined so much that the High Line was eventually abandoned and left to decay. It sat idle from 1981 – 2007. This is what it looked like in 1998 when New York City wanted to tear it down.

Explain that just like the High Line came into being due to the voice and passion and activism of ordinary citizens, the High Line was saved because of all those things. Explain that the next period (tomorrow), they will learn about the accomplishments of New Yorkers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century in relation to the High Line.

# **FRIENDS OF THE HIGH LINE**

## **PERIOD 2:**

Remind the students that the High Line is now open as a public park. But this wasn't an easy task. Some people felt that the High Line was an eyesore and should be torn down. Other people felt that it was an important link to New York's history and should be preserved. The people who were in favor of preservation were ordinary New Yorkers who got involved in this cause because they felt so strongly about it. They came together and formed a group. Their group is called Friends of the High Line.

Distribute the articles about the High Line. Have the students read them and then work together in a group or pairs to answer the questions on the handout. Tell the students that they are going to stage a debate tomorrow (the next period.) One side will represent the Chelsea Property Owners who would like to have the High Line torn down. Others will represent Friends of the High Line and its view that the High Line could enhance the city. Others will represent the city government. Some members of city government were supportive of demolition and others were supportive of preservation. Students who are not representing one of the groups will be newspaper reporters covering the debate. Students should spend this period preparing for the debate.

# **THE HIGH LINE DEBATE**

## **PERIOD 3:**

Stage the debate. You may invite other classes or teachers to observe the debate. Who won? Who won the debate in real life? (Friends of the High Line.)

## **EXTENSION OR HOMEWORK:**

Students may write two editorials for a newspaper (a persuasive essay). One editorial should take place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the argument about eliminating Death Avenue was current. The other editorial should take place in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the argument about preserving or demolishing the High Line was current.

# ACTIVISM QUESTION SHEET

## Grades 6 and 7

Group Member Names \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** Read the articles you and your group members have been given. Afterwards, answer the following questions.

1. Who are the people in favor of preserving the High Line? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Who are the people who are in favor of demolishing the High Line? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What are the reasons given for demolishing the High Line? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What are the reasons given for preserving the High Line? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. How are the preservationists attempting to meet their goal? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. How are those in favor of demolition attempting to meet their goal? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7. List some important turning points in the story of this fight.

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_

d. \_\_\_\_\_

8. Name the sources from which your article came. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_