

Beyond Visuals and Texts:
Using Folk Songs from Primary Sources
to Engage with Historical Events

Anne Laskey

NCHE 2026 National Conference

Montgomery, Alabama

March 27, 2026

Wasn't That a Mighty Storm



Informant/Performer:
Congregation, Darrington State Farm
Sandy Point, TX, 1934

Source:
Library of Congress AFS 185 B2
Collected by John A. Lomax

Pounding
or stepping
throughout

The first line of music consists of two staves. The top staff shows a rhythmic pattern in 2/4 time, starting with a quarter rest followed by a series of eighth notes with accents, ending with 'etc.'. The bottom staff shows the melody in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time, starting with a quarter note G4, followed by eighth notes A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.

1. Gal - ves - ton with her sea - wall to keep the wa - ter down,

The second line of music is a single staff in G major and 2/4 time. It continues the melody from the first line, ending with a double bar line and a 2/4 time signature. The notes are: quarter note G4, eighth notes A4, B4, C5, eighth notes B4, A4, quarter note G4, eighth notes F4, E4, quarter note D4, quarter note C4.

But the high tide from the o - cean brought wa - ter o - ver the town.

Chorus: (with three off-beat claps)

The first line of the chorus is a single staff in G major and 2/4 time. It features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents on the off-beats, indicated by 'x' marks above the notes. The melody starts with a quarter note G4, followed by eighth notes A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. There are three off-beat claps marked with 'x' above the notes. A downward arrow points to the first off-beat clap.

Was-n't that a migh-ty storm! Oh, was-n't that a migh-ty storm with wa - ter!

The second line of the chorus is a single staff in G major and 2/4 time. It continues the rhythmic pattern and melody from the first line. A downward arrow points to the first off-beat clap.

Was - n't that a migh - ty storm that blew the peo - ple a - way!

Transcribed by Gail Needleman

2. Their prophets give them warning,
"You'd better leave this place."
They never thought of leaving
Till death looked them in the face.
(Chorus, repeated after each verse)
3. The trains they were loaded
With people leaving town.
Their tracks give away on the ocean.
The trains they went on down.
4. Death like a cruel master,
As the wind began to blow,
Rode out on a train of horses.
Let, Death, let me go.
5. Now, Death, in 1900 –
That was fifteen years ago –
You've thrown a storm at my mother.
With you she had to go.
6. Now, Death, your hands is icy,
You've got them on my knees.
You done carried away my mother,
Now come back after me.
7. The trees fell on the island,
The houses give away.
Some people's crushed and drowned,
Some died 'most every way.
8. The lightning played an [emblem?]
The thunder began to roll,
The wind it began blowing,
The rain began to fall.
9. The sea it began rolling,
The ships could not stand,
I heard the captain crying,
"Please save a drowning man."



The Great Galveston Storm of 1900—Associated Press

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A la Puerta del Cielo

A Pares y Nones



Acka Backa

Aguinaldo



Al Citrón



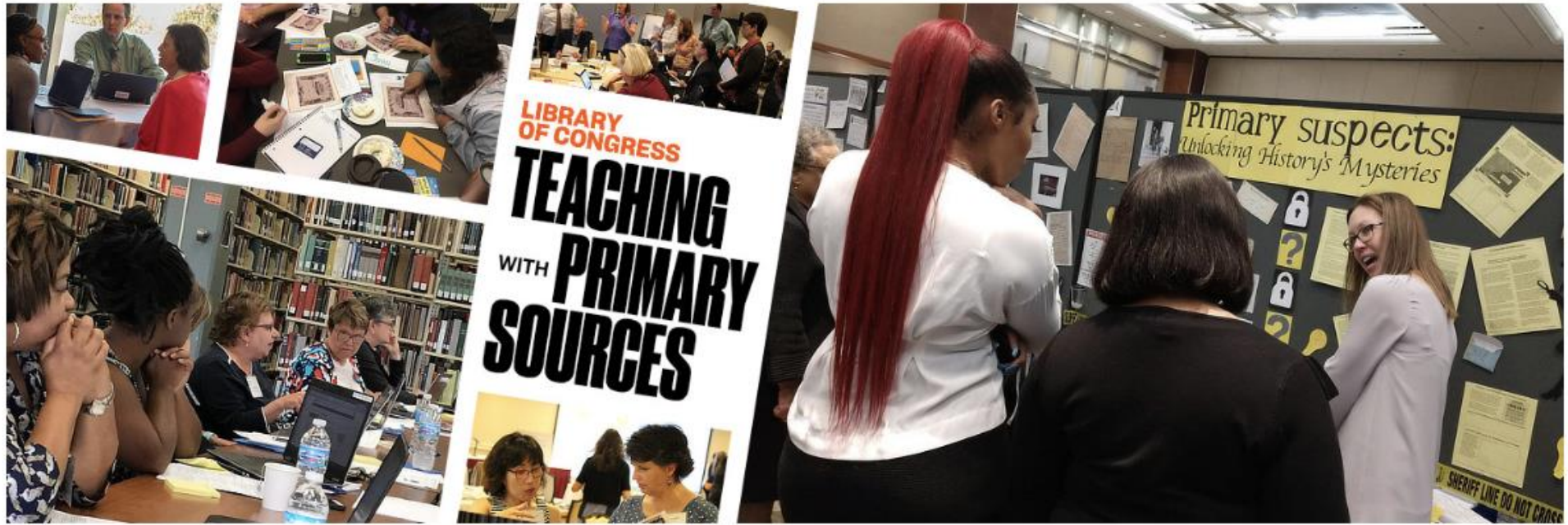
Al Corre, Corre



Gail Needleman and Anne Laskey
American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, 2000



Teaching with Primary Sources Partner Program



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Is there a role for folk music in a history curriculum?

Folk songs help students to identify more personally with historical events. Like stories or writings from the past, folk songs allow students to connect with the voices of people from the time in which they were created.

Because music involves more of our senses, it adds greater emotional impact and may resonate with students longer. If students learn and join in singing some of the songs presented, this creates an even stronger connection with the subject they are exploring and with each other.

I'm Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad



Informant/Performer:
Gussie Ward Stone
FSA Camp, Arvin, CA, 1940

Source:
Library of Congress AFS 4103 B1
Collected by Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin

With guitar

1. I'm go - in' down the road feel - in' bad,

I'm go - in' down the road feel - in' bad,

I'm go - in' down the road feel - in' bad, Lord, Lord,

And I ain't a - gon - na be treat - ed this - a - way.

2. Oh, they put me in a jailhouse on my knees, . . .

3. They feed me on cornbread and peas, . . .

4. I'm goin' where the climate suits my clothes, . . .



Not Identified and Robert Hemmig. *Group of children posing under the sign that reads "U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Security Administration Farm Workers Community".* El Rio, California, 1941. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/toddbib000400>



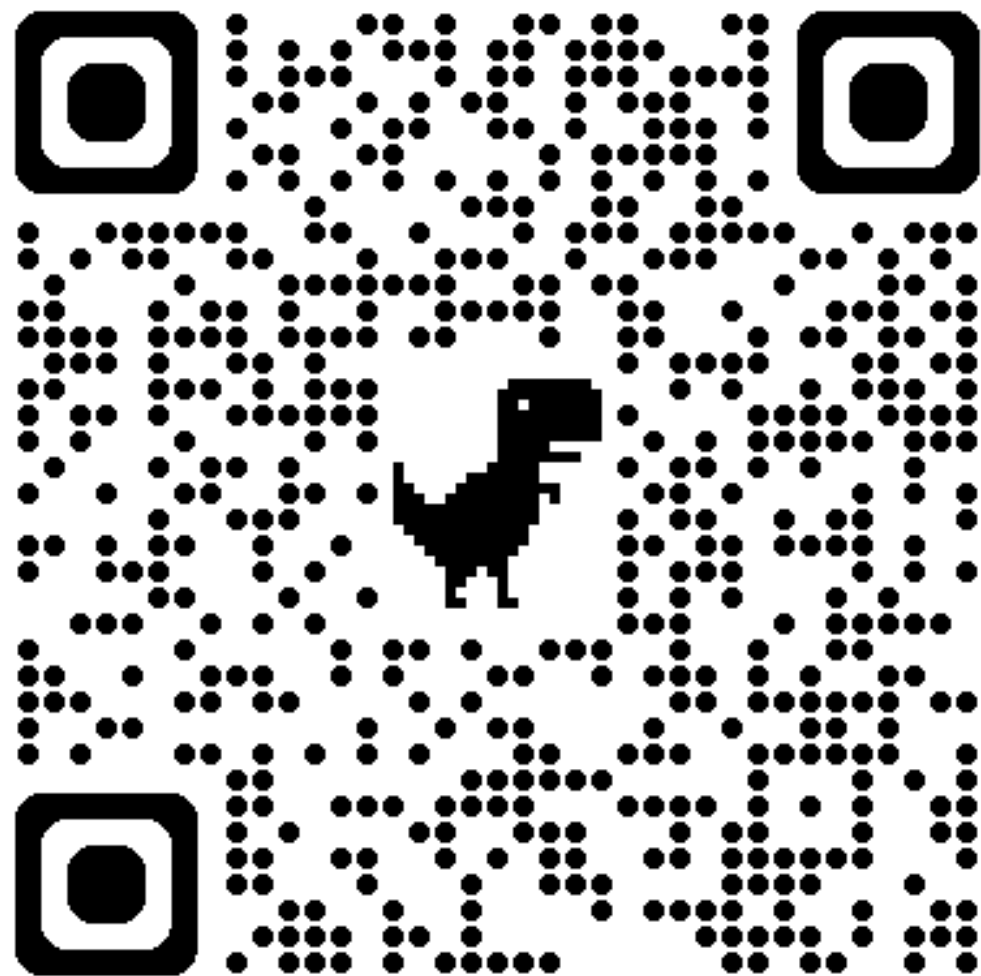
Robert Hemmig,
photographer.

Migrant camp,
wide shot.

What is folk music?

Folk music, in the truest sense, arises from the people, not from a single person. Each folk song is handed down from one generation to the next, resulting in many variations of the song.

The folk music tradition was strongest before the advent of radio and television, when people had few external sources of entertainment. They would sing throughout the day — while working, playing, resting, socializing and praying.



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School Grade Level

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Game

*A la Puerta del Cielo**A Pares y Nones**Acka Backa**Aguinaldo**Al Citrón**Al Corre, Corre**Alabama Gal**All Around the Green Apple Tree**All Around the Maypole #1*

Examples of search category drop-downs

<p>✓ Region</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">All RegionsAppalachiaBritish IslesCanadaCaribbeanCentral AmericaEuropeGreat LakesMexicoMid-AtlanticMidwestNew EnglandNorthwestOzarksPacific IslandsPlainsSea IslandsSouthSouth AmericaSouthwestWestWidespread	<p>✓ Song Type</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">All Song TypesActionBalladBluesCanonCarolCeremonialChants and RhymesChildren's songComicCowboy SongDanceDialogueEpicFiddle TuneFolk HymnFreedomLamentLullabyLyricNonsense and PlayNurseryPlay-PartyRiddleScare SongSea SongShantySinging GameSocialSpiritualStoryStreet CryWelcomeWork Song	<p>✓ Subject</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">All SubjectsAnimalsBirdsColorsCountingCrime and PunishmentDeath and AfterlifeFishesFood and DrinkFreedomGreeting and FarewellHeroism and VillainyHistoricalHolidayHome and FamilyInsectsLove and CourtshipMovementMusicNamesNatureNonsense and PlayNumbersOccupationsOutlawReligiousRiddleSeasonsSleep and WakingTravel and TransportationWar and Peace	<p>✓ Origin</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">All EthnicitiesAfrican-AmericanAnglo-AmericanArmenianCajun/CreoleChinese-AmericanEnglishFinnishFrench-CanadianGerman-AmericanIrishIrish-AmericanJewish-AmericanLatino/SpanishNative AmericanPennsylvania DutchPolynesianPortugueseRussian-AmericanScottishScottish-American
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Song Lessons

Available Lessons

Song Title	Genre	Link
<i>Away, Rio</i>	shanty	View Lesson
<i>A-Working on the Railroad</i>	railroad	View Lesson
<i>Cumberland and the Merrimac, The</i>	civil war	View Lesson
<i>Fight for Union Recognition</i>	dust-bowl	View Lesson
<i>Great Day</i>	civil rights	View Lesson
<i>I'm Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad</i>	dust-bowl	View Lesson
<i>Old Chisholm Trail, The #2</i>	western	View Lesson
<i>Santy Anno</i>	shanty	View Lesson
<i>Shantyman's Life</i>	lumberman	View Lesson
<i>Stone River</i>	civil war	View Lesson
<i>Wabash Cannonball #2</i>	railroad	View Lesson
<i>Wasn't That a Mighty Storm</i>	disaster	View Lesson

The Cumberland and the Merrimac

(The Sinking of the Cumberland)



Informant/Performer:
Warde H. Forde
Crandon, WI, 1937

Source:
Library of Congress AFS 02236 A2
Collected by Sidney Robertson

1. 'Twas ear - ly in the morn - ing, just at the break of day,

When our good ship, the Cum-ber-land, at an - chor safe did lay;

When the man up - on the look - out to those be - low did cry:

"I see some-thing like a house-top, to our lar - board it doth lie."

Transcribed by Anne Laskey

2. Our captain seized his telescope, and gazed far o'er the blue.
And then he spoke as follows to our brave and hearty crew:
"That thing you see floating yonder just like a turtle's back,
Is that infernal Rebel steamer they call the Merrimac!"

Activity

Play the recording of “The Cumberland and the Merrimac” (without showing the score)

<https://kodalycollection.org/song.cfm?id=2374>

- Where does the song take place? (at sea, in the harbor)
- What’s happening? (battle)
- Did you hear the names of the ships?

This battle took place during the Civil War, in 1862, and was the most deadly battle in American naval history before World War II. Project the score and listen again for which ship wins.

<https://kodalycollection.org/song.cfm?id=2374>

- Which ship won the battle (*Merrimac*)
- Why did it win? (its iron cladding repelled the shots, it rammed the *Cumberland*)

Provide background from above: The *Cumberland* was a wooden ship serving as a blockade in the harbor of the James River. The *Merrimac* had belonged to the Union, but the U.S. Navy had sunk it to prevent it being captured by the Confederates. However, the *Merrimac* was raised by the Confederates, fitted with thick iron siding as well as a massive ram. (See Further Resources, below, for an article on the Union use of naval blockades during the war.)

Share civil war map of area at Hampton Roads, VA

<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/hrnm/education/hampton-roads-heritage-hunt/Introduction.html>

Share Civil War drawings of the *Cumberland*

Waud, Alfred R., Artist. U.S. Ship Cumberland. United States, None. [Between 1860 and 1865]

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a17411/>

The sinking of the "Cumberland" by the iron clad "Merrimac," off Newport News, Va. March 8th 1862 / sketched by F. Newman, Newport News, Va.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2001705847/>

“Let’s Go to Canaan”: Song of the Month – March/2026

March 2, 2026

The spiritual **“Let’s Go to Canaan”** was performed as a duet by Lillie and Minnie Knox in 1937 in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina. It was recorded by John Lomax, Curator of the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress from 1934 – 1948.

Lillie Knox was one of Lomax’s favorite informants; he made 34 recordings of her singing during two visits, in 1936 and 1937. Two other recordings of Lillie appear on this site: **“Got the Keys to the Kingdom”** and **“Want to Be in Heaven When the First Trumpet Sounds.”**

Let's Go to Canaan



Informant/Performer:
Lillie and Minnie Knox
Murrells Inlet, SC, 1937

Source:
Library of Congress AFS 903 B2
Collected by John A. Lomax

1.

Chorus:

* do (D) in verses 2-4

Background Information

The Library of Congress gives the title as "Let's Go to Cane-yun," indicating the pronunciation used in the recording. This pronunciation of the name Canaan—the Biblical Promised Land—has fallen out of common usage, but Henry Watson Fowler's magisterial *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) states that "The prevalent pronunciation is undoubtedly kā'nyan. . ." and notes that what has become the more common usage today, "kā'nān," is "chiefly in clerical use." The earlier British vernacular pronunciation thus appears to have been preserved not only among the ordinary people of the British Isles but in at least one Black community in the American South as well.

Canaan—the Promised Land—appears in many folk hymns and spirituals as the representation of a higher world, accessible through personal sacrifices or through participation in communal rituals. The name was also used during years before the Civil War as a code word for Canada and the free states of the North, with "Bound for Canaan" and "Bound for the Promised Land" in common usage in the social movement known as the Underground Railroad. Escape from slavery to freedom, of course, also involved both personal sacrifices and the help of the community, and the persistence of the image of the Promised Land in spirituals after the end of slavery surely reflects this twofold meaning of both outer and inner freedom.

Gail Needleman



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Great Day

Informants/Performers:
Eugene Blacker, Terrell Conley, Alvin Brown and William Brown
Huntsville, TX, 1939

Source:
Library of Congress AFS 2646 B1
Collected by John A. and Ruby Lomax

Solo:

Melody

1. Oh, the li - ars will be run - nin' in that great day,

Group

great day,

8

Lord, the li - ars will be run - nin' in that great day,

Lord, the li - ars will be run - nin' in that great day,

8

Lord, the li - ars will be run - nin' in that great day,

Lord, the li - ars will be run - nin' in that great day,

8

Cry - in', who shall be a - ble to stand. 2. Oh, the

Cry - in', who shall be a - ble to stand.

1. Oh, the liars will be runnin' in that . . .
2. Oh, the preachers will be marching in that . . .
3. Oh, my mother will be resting in that . . .
4. Oh, the sinners will be running in that . . .
5. Oh, my Lord's gettin' us ready for that . . .
6. Oh, Jesus will be calling on that . . .

* Bass moves from G to B on verse 1 only.

** Fs are pitched between F sharp and F natural.