



**A. Lesson Plan Title:** *"The Sweeneys are indeed a wonder!!"*

Developers:

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Grade Level: 6<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>

Length of Lesson: 2 -3 class sessions (45 mins.)

**B. Overview of this Collection-Based Lesson Plan:**

Park Name:

Appomattox Court House National Historical Park - P.O. Box 218 Appomattox, VA 24522

[www.nps.gov/apco](http://www.nps.gov/apco)

Description:

Most people know of Appomattox Court House as the site of the beginning of the end of the American Civil War. Largely unknown is the fact that within the park is the birthplace of Joel Sweeney – the first documented white banjo player. As a young boy, Sweeney was said to have visited the cabins of area slaves and apparently learned from them how to play the instrument that became the American five string banjo. The Sweeney family, Joel along with his brothers Richard and Sam, went on to become the preeminent name in early banjo history. Given the unique nature of white and black relations in the antebellum South, there has naturally been much controversy through the years over the significance of Joel Sweeney's contribution to the history and development of the banjo. Some have discredited the African origins of the banjo while others have reduced Joel Sweeney to a mere racist and opportunist taking credit for the inventions of Africans and African American slaves. Both interpretations are wrong. For, within the story of the banjo in America is *the* story of American culture; a story of cultural diffusion, a story of the power of music to bring disparate sections of our society together to create something distinctly American.

Essential Question:

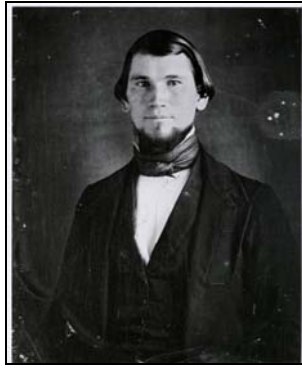
What can items associated with the Sweeney family of Appomattox Court House teach us about the early history of the banjo?

What broader picture of American culture can the story surrounding the origins of the banjo and the Sweeneys paint for us?

**C. Museum Collection Objects Used in Lesson Plan:**

Objects, specimens, documents, photographs from the Park museum collection:

1. Photographs of Joel Sweeney, Richard Sweeney, Sam Sweeney and the Sweeney banjo.



These are the only known photographs of the Sweeney brothers -Joel, Richard and Sam. In 1890 F. J. Henning, a banjoist and music teacher, traveled to Appomattox and acquired these daguerrotypes from a relative of the Sweeney family. His widow donated them to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and they are used here courtesy of the Museum.



2. Banjos that belonged or may have belonged to Joel Sweeney, or are in the Appomattox Court House collection.



This banjo is attributed to Joel Sweeney. In 1890 F. J. Henning, a banjoist and music teacher, traveled to Appomattox and acquired this banjo from a relative of the Sweeney family. It is made to be played by a left handed player and has the initials "J.S." carved into the neck. His widow gave the instrument to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County and it is included here courtesy of the Museum.



Not much is known about this banjo other than it came from a family with local ties. It has hand carved features and has frets drawn on the neck. It is believed to have come from the Sweeney family.

Wood, W: 2.5 to 5.1cm H: 2.5 cm L: 218.2 cm APCO 3915



This banjo also came to the park through a local resident but nothing else about this instrument can be confirmed. The neck and the use of metal for the head leads one to believe that this banjo was most likely a home made item. It varies dramatically from the other banjos in this group.

Wood, W: 2.5 to 22.9cm H: 2.5 to 7.6 cm L: 221.6 cm APCO 3916

### 3. 4 string slave 'banjar' (reproduction)



This is a modern interpretation of what a 1810-1830 slave made banjar from the Appomattox Court House area, between 1810 & 1830, could have looked like. It was made using materials, methods and creative influences that would have been native or available to slaves at that place and time. This banjar was made by Pete Ross (Liberty Banjos) of Baltimore, Maryland.

Wood and skin with gut strings, W: 2.5 to 22.9 cm H: 2.5 to 22.9 cm L: 228.6 cm

### 4. Traveling trunk believed to have belonged to Joel Sweeney



This trunk has the initials J. A. S. stamped on one side and the name J.A. Sweeney on the other. It is likely that Joel inherited this trunk from his father- John Sweeney. (The Sweeney's name was also variably spelled Sweeny or even Swinny at times even by themselves.) Outside of this being a gift from a family with local ties, little is known about the provenance of this trunk.

Leather Bound Wood W: 40cm H: 41.9cm L: 64.8 cm, APCO 54

## D. National Education Standards:

Meets National Education Standards for Social Studies as established by the National Council for the Social Studies, 1994. Middle grades & high school level.

Number I: Culture

- b) Explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse Cultural perspectives and frames of reference;

Number II: Time, Continuity, and Change.

- b) Identify and use key concepts such as chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity.

Number V: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions.

- a) Identify and describe examples of tensions between belief systems and government policies and laws.
- b) Describe the role of institutions in furthering both continuity and change.
- c) Apply knowledge of how groups and institutions work to meet individual needs and promote the common good.

Number VI. Civic Ideals and Practices.

- a) Examine the origins and continuing influence of key ideals of the democratic republican form of government, such as individual human dignity, liberty, justice, equality, and the rule of law.
- b) Identify and explain the roles of formal and informal political actors in influencing and shaping public policy and decision-making.

### **E. Student Learning Objectives:**

Upon successful completion of this lesson, students shall be able to:

1. *Compare and contrast the different ways in which the history of the origins of the banjo has been interpreted over the years.*
2. *Explain what the story of the banjo in America can tell us about the development of American culture.*
3. *Create a product that relays the part played by African slaves, Joel Sweeney or Sam Sweeney in the development of the American 5 string banjo.*

### **F. Background and Historical Context:**

The five string banjo is often referred to as “America’s instrument.” And it is. But the origins of the American five string banjo are found in Africa, in Senegal among the griots, tribal historians, of Mali and numerous other locations. The first mention of banjo like instruments in the New World occurred when a traveler to Martinique described the “banza” being played by the Africans there in 1678. In 1781 in his Notes on Virginia Thomas Jefferson described the slaves at Monticello as playing “. . . the banjar which they brought hither from Africa.” These instruments almost invariably consisted of a gourd body with an animal hide head, a wooden neck either planed or rounded and from three to four to five strings.

Joel Walker Sweeney was born around 1810 in a corner of what was then Buckingham County (but later became part of Appomattox County when *it* was formed in 1845) near the headwaters of the Appomattox River. Joel himself left no known written records so all that is known of him comes from what others have recollected or written about him. This is one of the reasons why his story is sometimes controversial. It is said that at a young age Joel would visit the slave quarters and listen to the banjar music being played there. One account even has him learning to play the instrument from a former African chieftain who was coach driver for a local family. Joel eventually made his own banjo choosing wood to replace the gourd body and most likely adding a bass string to his instrument

Joel began to play around Appomattox for public events, on court days and for travelers who’d stop at area taverns. By the time Joel was in his twenties he was traveling through the South with various troupes. Joel is mentioned playing his banjo at a Richmond, Virginia theatre in

December of 1836. In 1839 Joel played in New York City. By March of 1843 Sweeney had taken his banjo playing across the Atlantic to play in England, Ireland and Scotland. Joel returned in 1845 to the States with much fame and fanfare. From there he was known to tour with his brothers Richard and Sam. During this time Joel was known by several titles - "the pied piper of Appomattox," "the original banjo player" and "the Father of the banjo."

Joel, and his brothers and sometimes his musical cousins, continued to play locally and nationally for the next fifteen years. The census taker caught Joel and Sam in Appomattox in July of 1860. When asked to state their occupation, Joel and his brother alike gave the following: "bangerman." According to members of the Sweeney family, Richard died on stage in the city of Washington in 1859. Joel died on October 29 of 1860 at the home of his sister. The cause of death given was dropsy.

Although Joel died before 1861, many reports told of him playing during the Civil War. It was however Sam Sweeney, the only brother left alive by the start of the war, who joined the Appomattox County Company H (the Appomattox Rangers) of the 2nd Virginia Cavalry. Sam's reputation preceded him into the service, for when General J.E.B. Stuart learned of Sam's enrollment in the Confederate cavalry he sent orders detailing Sweeney to his own headquarters camp. Sam quickly became known as "Stuart's personal minstrel" as was known to travel with his banjo at his side and to strum it during numerous performances given at camp or simply while in the saddle. Sam continued to "gladden the hearts of the men" in Stuart's Cavalry until his death from smallpox in January of 1864.

By the beginning of the Civil War the banjo was known far and wide in America. The minstrel show craze that was *the* popular entertainment of the day was fueled in no small part by the banjo. Attempts were already under way before the death of the last of the Sweeney brothers to "civilize" the banjo from an instrument infamous for its "half barbaric twang" to an instrument suitable for the Victorian parlor. Today there is a resurgence in the interest of the early history of the banjo and especially its African roots.

Today the banjo is often referred to as an American instrument. And indeed it is because along the banks of the Appomattox River African and European traditions and cultures combined to create something born of both continents but unique to America.

## **G. Materials Used in Lesson Plan:**

### Object Images

Photographs of Joel Sweeney, Richard Sweeney, Sam Sweeney and the Sweeney banjo.

Banjo believed to have belonged to Joel Sweeney

Banjo with metal head

4-String Slave 'banjar'

Traveling Trunk believed to have belonged to Joel Sweeney

### Item Support Materials

**Photographs of Joel Sweeney, Richard Sweeney, Sam Sweeney.**

Photograph of cover of sheet music for Sweeney song "Jonny Boker"

Photographs of the Sweeney Historical markers erected by the Commonwealth of Virginia

Death Certificate of Joel Sweeney

Washington Post article about Joel Sweeney

Print of Sam Sweeney in Camp by Frank Vizetelly

Sam Sweeney-Readings

Obituary of Richard Sweeney

**Photograph of the Sweeney banjo, banjo believed to have belonged to Joel Sweeney and banjo with metal head.**

Photographs of banjo believed to have belonged to Joel Sweeney

Photographs of in the collections of Appomattox Court House

**4-String Slave 'banjar'**

Picture of the painting- *The Old Plantation* c. 1790-1800

Slave Narrative from Fannie Berry describing a slave dance accompanied by banjo.

**Traveling Trunk believed to have belonged to Joel Sweeney**

Excerpts of Newspaper articles about Joel Sweeney's travels.

Other Materials:

*How to Read an Object* graphic organizers -- available at

[http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/tmc/docs/How\\_to\\_Read\\_an\\_Object.pdf](http://www.cr.nps.gov/museum/tmc/docs/How_to_Read_an_Object.pdf)

Assessment Rubrics- available at the end of this document

**H. Vocabulary:**

Banjar- one of the many names used for an African or African American made predecessor to the modern banjo

Banjo- a musical instrument with a drum-like body, a fretted neck, and usually four or five strings which may be plucked or strummed

Chanterelle- a short drone string on the banjo

Daguerrotype- an early photograph produced on a silver or a silver-covered copper plate

Dropsy- an old term for the swelling of soft tissues due to the accumulation of excess water sometimes associated with congestive heart failure

Fret-any of the ridges of wood, metal or string set across the fingerboard of the banjo which help the fingers to stop the strings at the correct points

Griot- any of a class of musician-entertainers of western Africa whose performances include tribal histories and genealogies

Provenance- the history of ownership of a valued object or work of art or literature

Reproduction- an exact or close imitation of an existing thing

**I. Teacher Tips:**

This lesson plan is merely a suggestion for the use of these items. Although adequate time should be allowed for a thorough investigation of the artifacts and their history, these plans may certainly be tailored to the unique needs of your particular class.

**J. Lesson Implementation Procedures:**

This lesson plan may be tailored to suit the needs and abilities of specific classes and students.

All hand outs are contained herein or are available at website addresses found within this document.

Allow adequate time for group discussion of all items associated with each artifact and preparation for group assignments.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

1. Ask students to define a "legend." Discuss with students the ideas of legends from today's society. Discuss what makes a legend. Next ask students to define culture. Discuss what if any cultural barriers they think may exist in today's America, in America in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Discuss whether or not Elvis Presley and Marshall Mathers (Eminem) are culturally similar. (15 minutes)
2. Divide students into 4 groups. Provide student groups with images of the items from the four object groups. Have each group complete a *How to Read an Object* graphic organizer for their object. (15 -20 minutes)
3. Provide students with other materials pertinent to their objects. Allow them time to read other materials & discuss them with their partners. (15 -20 minutes)
4. Give the following group specific directions to each of the four groups and allow the remaining class time for them to investigate their supplementary materials, complete their assigned tasks and prepare a brief presentation for the class.

### **GROUP 1:** Photographs of Joel Sweeney, Richard Sweeney and Sam Sweeney.

After you've looked at the pictures of the Sweeney brothers, look at the additional items your instructor has given you beginning with the article from the Washington Post and answer the following questions.

1. What does the article say about Joel Sweeney's role in the development of the banjo?
2. What does the article say happened to Joel Sweeney during the Civil War?

Look at the historical markers that the state erected. One is older and has been replaced by the "Popularizer" marker. Answer these questions.

3. What are the differences between the 2 markers?
4. Why do you think the state of Virginia Historic Resources may have changed the marker?

Now take a look at the cover for the sheet music for the song "Jonny Boker" which Joel Sweeney wrote and answer the following questions.

5. How would you describe the scene depicted here?
6. How would you describe the individual in the foreground and the item he is holding? Be specific.

Read the death certificate for Joel Sweeney. Answer these questions.

7. When did Joel Sweeney die? Where did he die? How did he die?
8. What is the discrepancy between this death certificate and the Washington Post Article?

Now read through the Sam Sweeney items and take a look at the drawing of him. Answer these questions.

9. What happened to Sam during the Civil War?
10. What is the discrepancy between these readings and the Washington Post Article?
11. How would you describe the camp scene depicted in the Vizetelly drawing?



Finally, read the brief obituary notices for Richard Sweeney. Answer these questions.

12. How, when and where did Richard die?

Once you have looked through ALL these items write a brief summary about what you have learned about the Sweeneys from them. Also mention any questions these items may have raised for you or did not answer. Is there any conflicting information- if so what is it? Explain why you think there may be any conflicting information.

**GROUP 2:** Banjos that belonged or may have belonged to Joel Sweeney or are in the Appomattox Court House collection.

After you've studied the pictures of the banjos complete the following assignment.

1. Describe the three banjos. Compare and contrast the construction and the provenance of the banjos.
2. Now compare all three older banjos to the picture of the modern bluegrass banjo. What are the many differences you notice? What are some of the similarities?
2. Imagine you are the maker or player of one of these banjos. Describe yourself.
3. Create a summary of this information to use to explain the similarities and differences between the three instruments.

**GROUP 3:** 4 string Slave 'banjar' (reproduction)

Start your survey of these additional items by reading the Fannie Berry reading and answering the following questions.

1. What event is Berry describing?
2. Who is Dennis? Describe him.
3. How do we know how special an event this is?

Next take a look at the painting "The Old Plantation" located at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum in Williamsburg, Virginia Answer these questions.

4. Describe what is occurring in this painting. What instruments are being played?
5. Describe the banjo in the painting. How many strings does it have/ Does it have a short, chanterelle string?

Now take a look at the photographs of the gourd banjar at Appomattox Court House N.H.P. and answer these questions.

6. How many strings does this instrument have?
7. Would you call this instrument plain or fancy? Explain.

Finally, compare all these images and accounts of banjars and banjos with the picture of the modern day bluegrass banjo.

8. Describe the modern day banjo. What materials do you think it is made of? How many strings does it have? What type of strings does it have?
9. What would you say are the major differences in the banjars and banjos that would have been played by slaves and the modern day banjo?



**GROUP 4:** Traveling Trunk believed to have belonged to Joel Sweeney.

Start your investigation by looking at the additional pictures of the trunk.

1. Describe the trunk with the added details from the other photographs.

Now read the Joel Sweeney readings and answer the following questions.

2. How are Joel and his relatives described in these articles?

3. Name the places Joel played that are mentioned in this article.

4. Write a brief summary of how this trunk would have been used by Joel Sweeney, where it would have been and would it could have seen. Be creative.

**5. Next Class Session:** Allow any additional time you see fit for students to complete their assigned tasks but be sure to leave enough time for students presentations and some summary discussion between instructor and the class.

If students have not already mentioned some of the issues brought up in the description or background and historical context sections of this lesson plan now may be a good time to introduce them.

#### **K. Evaluation/Assessment for Measurable Results:**

Assessment Rubrics

#### **L. Extension and Enrichment Activities:**

<http://www.nps.gov/apco/sweeney.htm>

<http://www.oldtimeherald.org/akonting/index.html>

#### **M. Resources:**

Davis, Burke. Jeb Stuart: The Last Cavalier New York: Bonanza Books, 1957.

“The Swinging Sweeneys” Burke Davis. *The Iron Worker* Vol. XXXIII, Lynchburg, VA: The Lynchburg Foundry Company, Autumn 1969.

#### **N. Site Visit:**

Be sure to take a look at the park’s website first. Should you visit Appomattox Court House National Historical Park you will have to wander a bit out of the village to see most sites associated with the Sweeneys? Within the village proper though, you can visit the Clover Hill Tavern home to many a public event featuring the music of Joel and his family. Ask a ranger about the history trail to find your way to the Charles Sweeney cabin. Charles was another musical Sweeney cousin. You will also find the graves of Joel Sweeney and other relatives including Missouri “Miss Zoo” Sweeney – the musical sister of Joe. Further still is the Sweeney prizery- the oldest building in the park. This building was a tobacco packing building belonging to the family of Joel Sweeney.