

A FILM BY KEN BURNS  
**THE NATIONAL PARKS**  
**America's Best Idea**

THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA  
LESSON PLANS

**ALL ABOARD! SEE AMERICA FIRST**

For more information, visit

[www.pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/](http://www.pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/)

## All Aboard! See America First

### Overview

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the United States experienced unprecedented growth and prosperity. The Industrial Revolution was in full stride and the building of railroads across the country gave Americans access to some of the more remote and uniquely scenic parts of the country. An unlikely alliance developed between the railroad companies and a new generation of young wealthy patricians who saw an opportunity to use their fortunes to advance the public good. Men like George Bird Grinnell, Theodore Roosevelt, and Stephen Mather made up an American aristocracy that practiced populist politics and saw themselves as guardians of the public trust that was becoming the National Parks.

In this activity, students will work in creative teams to develop a promotional program for a railroad company taking tourists to the national parks.

### Objectives

The student will:

- summarize the patriotic theme 19<sup>th</sup> century railroad companies used to promote travel to the national parks
- understand the Native American perspective on the value of national park land
- describe how some of the remaining Native American tribes were used by the railroad companies to promote travel to the west
- describe the costs and benefits of commercializing the national parks
- develop a promotion for visiting a national park highlighting accommodations and attractions (note: these are historical campaigns, not focused on present day.)

### Estimated Time

Two to three class periods

### Materials Needed

- Internet access
- Student handouts:
  - Graphic Organizer for video segment, "All Aboard! See America First"
  - **All Aboard! See America First** student handout
- Poster paper or butcher paper, pens, pencils, markers, etc.

### Activity/Procedure

#### Activity A: Video Segment Review

This activity sets up the main activity below. Tell students in this activity they will be exploring the early days of the National Park Service and the efforts of the parks first director, Stephen Mather. Explain that Mather believed the only way to save the parks from the speculators and opportunistic politicians was to get Americans into the parks so they could see firsthand their beauty and value. Then, in the democratic spirit, they would pressure Congress to have them protected.

1. Divide students into pairs to view the video segment "All Aboard! See America First" ([pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/lesson-plans/#see](https://pbs.org/nationalparks/for-educators/lesson-plans/#see)).

2. Distribute the graphic organizer for student to take notes on the video segment. Stop the video a few times as necessary to allow student pairs time to discuss information.
3. After students have filled out the graphic organizer, debrief this activity a class discussion using the questions on the organizer for guidance.

#### **Activity B: “All Aboard! See America First”**

4. Divide students into five groups, one for each of the railroads featured in the video segment and distribute the student handout, **All Aboard! See America First**. Assign each group one of the parks that the railroad company is promoting (question 2 on the graphic organizer).
5. Review the activity directions with them helping them understand the scope of the project and the details of the promotion. Consider telling students to assign specific tasks for each member of the group, playing to their strengths.
6. Student groups will visit the National Park Service website ([www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)) and the corresponding railroad company’s website or historical society:
  - Great Northern Railroad [www.gnrhs.org/](http://www.gnrhs.org/) and [www.gngoat.org/](http://www.gngoat.org/)
  - Union Pacific [www.uphs.org/](http://www.uphs.org/) and [www.uprr.com/aboutup/history/index.shtml](http://www.uprr.com/aboutup/history/index.shtml)
  - Sante Fe [www.sfsr.com/](http://www.sfsr.com/) and [www.atsfrr.com/](http://www.atsfrr.com/)
  - Northern Pacific [research.nprha.org/default.aspx](http://research.nprha.org/default.aspx)
  - Southern Pacific [www.sphts.org/](http://www.sphts.org/)
7. Provide time for students to develop their promotion programs and then have them present them to the class.

#### **Assessment:**

For assessment, have students present their promotional program to the class. Use this rubric to ensure students address the following in their campaigns:

- Details of the featured park’s major attractions, history, and environment (scenic and wildlife).
- Information on the park’s uniqueness and why it would be a great place to visit
- Comparison of the national park with European attractions
- Accommodations at the park
- Accommodations on the train
- Map of the journey from St. Louis
- Map of the park and its unique features
- Poster
- Pamphlet

#### **Related Academic Standards**

This lesson meets the following curriculum standards set by McREL – Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning:

U.S. History

Standard 16: Understands how the rise of corporations, heavy industry, and mechanized farming transformed American society

Historical Understanding

Standard 2: understands the historical perspective

## Language Arts

- Writing

Standard 1: uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Standard 2: uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

Gathers and uses information for research purposes

- Viewing

Standard 9: uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

## Visual Arts

Standard 1: understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts

## Geography

Standard 1: understands the characteristics and uses of maps, globes, and other geographic tools and technologies

Standard 2: knows the location of places, geographic features, and patterns of the environment

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**Graphic Organizer for video segment “All Aboard! See America First”**

1. Review the words of Gerard Baker as he describes the importance of national park land to Native Americans.

*When you walk into any natural, national park // you’re walking into somebody’s homeland. You’re walking into somebody’s house. You’re walk into somebody’s church. You’re walking into somebody’s place where they’ve lived since the time the creator made it for them. And so // you’re walking into someplace that has been utilized for generations upon generations in every form you could imagine. This was their homeland.*

Discuss with your partner how White Calf’s statement (below) makes Ranger Baker’s words all the more important. Write your thoughts in the space provided below. Use a separate sheet of paper if necessary.

*“The mountains have been my last refuge. Chief Mountain is my head. Now my head is cut off.”*

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2. Listen closely to Alfred Runte’s description of the railroad companies “adopting” a National Park for its commercial interests. In this matching activity, draw a line from the railroad company to the national park it promoted.

Santa Fe Railroad	Glacier National Park
Great Northern Railroad	Yellowstone National Park
Union Pacific Railroad	Grand Canyon National Park
Northern Pacific Railroad	Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks
Southern Pacific Railroad	Mt. Rainier National Park

3. Summarize the patriotic theme the railroad companies used to promote their routes to the national parks.

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Discuss with your partner the reasons the promotional message “See America First” would be so appealing to Americans in 1914 or 1915.

4. Briefly summarize how the Blackfeet Native Americans were used by the railroad companies to promote the idea of traveling west.

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Discuss with your partner the pros and cons of this promotional technique for the railroad companies, for the tourist public, and for the Native Americans.

5. Summarize Stephen Mather's thinking behind making the national parks "dollarable."

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6. List the costs and benefits of this policy in the chart below and discuss as a class.

Costs	Benefits

## All Aboard! See America First Student Handout

**Background:** In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the railroad industry discovered the scenic wonders of the national parks provided a great opportunity to expand their business into tourism. Wealthy easterners were eager to spend the summer far from the crowded and polluted cities during the Industrial Revolution. The railroads began promoting the west as an alternative to vacationing in Europe and providing vacation packages to the various national parks.

In this activity, your group will develop a vacation promotion program to encourage Americans back east to come west to see the national parks. The time period is between 1890 and 1920. The railroad companies have asked your public relations firm to put together a promotional package to encourage affluent Americans to see America first.

1. Begin planning your promotion by doing some research on the park the railroad company wants you to promote. Go to [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov), select your park, and review different aspects through the following areas on the individual park's website. Make sure not to identify any aspect after 1920. Assign specific tasks for each member of the group, playing to their strengths.
  - a. Plan your visit
  - b. Photos and multimedia
  - c. History and culture
  - d. The nature and science
2. Conduct a creative brainstorming session with your group members discussing questions such as, what makes this park unique? What can you tell people about the park that would make them want to visit? What new experiences does the park offer that they may not have experienced before? How do the park features compare to the attractions of Europe? Why are the parks a better choice for a vacation?
3. Now go to the railroad company's website from one of the links below. In some cases you will go to the railroad company's historic society. Look at any history or archive material, photos, information on the train's accommodations, any tourist promotions they offer, links to other related organizations, etc. in addition to the links below, you might also explore 19<sup>th</sup> century passenger trains.
  - Great Northern Railroad [www.gnrhs.org/](http://www.gnrhs.org/) and [www.gngoat.org/](http://www.gngoat.org/)
  - Union Pacific [www.uphs.org/](http://www.uphs.org/) and [www.uprr.com/aboutup/history/index.shtml](http://www.uprr.com/aboutup/history/index.shtml)
  - Santa Fe [www.sfsr.com/](http://www.sfsr.com/) and [www.atsfrr.com/](http://www.atsfrr.com/)
  - Northern Pacific [research.nprha.org/default.aspx](http://research.nprha.org/default.aspx)
  - Southern Pacific [www.sphts.org/](http://www.sphts.org/)
4. Discuss with your group members questions like, what accommodations – food, sleeping car, first class, coach class, stops along the way – can you offer the customer (circa late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century)? What are the routes your train would take from St. Louis, Missouri, to the park? What are the top highlights of the park for people to see?
5. Consider what visuals your promotion will have. Do you want to use archival photos from various online sources or create your own? What visuals would be eye-catching? What would be informative? What visuals will draw people's attention?
6. At this point you are ready to develop your promotion plan. It should contain the following components:
  - A poster that can be displayed publically.

- Maps showing the route the train will take from St. Louis to the park and a map of the park's unique features. (These can be on the poster or in the pamphlet)
- A pamphlet that can be distributed to the public

The following information should be contained in either the poster or the pamphlet

- Details of the featured park's major attractions, history, and environment (scenic and wildlife).
  - Information on the park's uniqueness and why it would be a great place to visit
  - Comparison of the national park with European attractions
  - Accommodations at the park
  - Accommodations on the train
7. After developing your promotional program, present it to the class.