Stagecoaches in Kentucky History

In this activity packet, we will recreate the stagecoach journey many Kentuckians made in the 19th century. We will also learn vocabulary.

This packet is intended for fourth grade students and covers Kentucky history and geography. It can be completed individually or within a group.

International Museum of the Horse
Kentucky Horse Park
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Below is an image of the stagecoach that traveled from Monticello to Burnside, Kentucky.
For well over a century of American History (19th centuries), the stagecoach served as the main mode of transportation. Stagecoaches, or simply coaches, delivered goods, mail, and passengers to cities and towns throughout the eastern United States and later out west. Up to nine people, including the driver, could fit in the larger coaches, and some trips could take days or even weeks to reach their destination. Stagecoaches could travel at about ten miles per hour. Riding horseback was much faster, but one could not carry nearly as much cargo. Riding in a coach was much different than our experience riding in cars today. Coaches could not have glass windows, as the rocky and rough roads would have broken them. Leather shades on the windows would block sunlight, but dust, heat and cold would make the trip very unpleasant. Also, the lack of seat belts would cause you to bump into the person seated next to you constantly.

The Beginning of Infrastructure
So how were the roads for Stagecoaches developed? Highways and roads today are public property, or owned by the government. With the unsettled lands of the early United States, many routes would pass through private properties. Stagecoach companies paid a toll to land owners to pass through their property, and in return, the landowners would develop and maintain adequate roads for them to pass. These “roads” were often very muddy and difficult for travel. The Kentucky state legislature saw a need for improved “stagelines” and budgeted funds for road improvement in 1795. Many roads would still be closed off during the winter months, and horseback was still the preferred method of travel until several years later when the road quality improved.

Did you know?
Mary Todd Lincoln’s grandfather, General Levi Todd, was the first person in Lexington to own a carriage.

What is the difference between a carriage and a stagecoach?
A stagecoach is meant for long trips and are generally more rugged and stronger than carriages. Carriages have thinner wheels and are primarily meant for travel within a town or city, such as a trip to the grocery store. Think of the tires of a mountain bike versus a street bike. The mountain bike has thicker tires and is more durable.
On Wednesday, August 9, 1803, a gentleman by the name of John Kennedy opened the first Stage Coach line that ran on a regular schedule. It ran weekly, on Thursdays, and went to Olympian Springs, a popular vacation spot. When disease became a problem in Lexington during the 1830’s, many people from Lexington went to Olympian Springs to avoid getting sick.

Each passenger was allowed to have ten pounds of luggage with them. Mr. Kennedy was aware that the roads made travel very uncomfortable, and he spent a lot of money to improve the conditions. From this point on, Lexington citizens could carry more luggage with them than those who rode on horseback.

What was it like to ride in a Stagecoach?
As stated before, these trips could be difficult for passengers. Windows lacked protection, except for a piece of leather. Because of this, you would get cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and wet during storms. Many times, the stagecoach would get stuck on the side of the road or in the mud, and passengers would have to get out and help push the coach back onto the road! On overnight trips, stagecoach drivers would stopover at Inns. Most of the trips in Kentucky could be made in one day. To do this, these coaches often left at 4:00 in the morning!
The Concord Coach was a major part of Kentucky history, and Kentucky is known for its innovations in travel.

Did you know?
Have you ever called “shotgun” in a car? This term is from Kentucky! The Shotgun Seat on the Concord Coach was right next to the driver, and this person was responsible for the coach’s security. The person in the Shotgun Seat would protect the passengers from thieves and American Indians. Both were big risks in early Kentucky history!
Stagecoaches were the main form of transportation for a few decades until the Railroad, which was much quicker, came to Kentucky.

Below are the average times the Stagecoach would take to travel within Kentucky:

- Lexington to Frankfort → 4 hours
- Lexington to Louisville → 11 hours
- Lexington to Covington → 11 hours
- Lexington to Paris → 2 hours
- Louisville to Nashville → 33 hours
- Louisville to Frankfort → 7 hours

The End of the Stagecoach Era
The first successful railroad in Central Kentucky opened in 1848 and ran from Lexington to Frankfort. The last “stage” to run in all of Kentucky ran from Burnside to Monticello in 1915. Railroads offered a smoother travel and passengers could carry more luggage. People continued to use carriages within towns and cities, as passengers would need to get to their final destination from the railroad station.
Activities and Vocabulary

Lexington History Timeline

1775
Lexington Founded in Virginia Colony

1789
Transylvania College is founded

1792
Kentucky Constitution ratified and Lexington is now in Kentucky.

1803
John Kennedy opens first stagecoach line going to Olympian Springs

1833
Illness spread in Lexington, and many people fled to Olympian Springs

1848
First Railroad line opens, going from Lexington to Frankfort

1877
First Railroad line opens, going from Lexington to Harrodsburg

1915
The last Stagecoach Line ran from Burnside to Monticello

1877
The last Stagecoach stops running, from Lexington to Harrodsburg

1915
The last Stagecoach Line ran from Burnside to Monticello

Vocabulary-

1. **Carriage**- a four-wheeled passenger vehicle pulled by two or more horses: a horse-drawn carriage. (Mainly used for travel within a town or city)

2. **Era**- a long period of history with a particular feature or theme

3. **Infrastructure**- the basic physical structures and facilities (buildings, roads, and power supplies)

4. **Innovation**- Invention in technology; make changes in something especially by creating new methods, ideas, or products

5. **John Kennedy**- gentleman who introduced the first commercial stagecoach line in Central Kentucky, running from Lexington to Olympian Springs

6. **Olympian Springs**- A popular destination in Kentucky, where people in the 19th century believed the waters would improve their health. It was a place where people escaped to when illness came to Lexington.

7. **Ratify**- sign or give formal consent to (a treaty, contract, or agreement), making it official.
Using the map provided, locate the major stopping points within Kentucky stagecoach lines. Also, stagecoaches had a lot of trouble with mountains and rivers, so we will need to locate the following landmarks within Kentucky:

1. Appalachian Mountains
2. Cumberland Mountains
3. Ohio River
4. Kentucky River

Landmarks and Cities on the Line Stops:
1. Lexington
2. Louisville
3. Covington
4. Olympian Springs
5. Harrodsburg
6. Paris
7. Frankfort

Questions:
1. By looking at your finished map, did the mountains and rivers make it hard to get around Kentucky? Why?

2. What regions of Kentucky were most popular for stagecoaches?
Stagecoach Lines in Kentucky

Olympian Springs

International Museum of the Horse
Kentucky Horse Park

Name: _______________________________   Date: ____________________