

Historical Song Sheets

The Star Spangled Banner: The Story & the Song

Overview

Today, you learn the lyrics to popular songs by listening to music on the radio, TV, CD or DVD players, and MP3 players. But in the 19th century, none of these electronic devices existed. In fact, it wasn't until the early 20th century that Americans first began to have electricity in their homes at all. So, back then, if you wanted to learn the words to the latest songs, you learned them from printed song sheets.

Song sheets were single sheets of paper printed with the words, or lyrics, to songs but no musical notations. They became very popular in the early 1800s thanks to a new technology, the mechanical printing press, that enabled publishers to make thousands of copies of a single document for a very low cost.

Song sheets were usually printed in black and white but were sometimes colored in with pre-cut blocks or even by hand. Many song sheets were illustrated with pictures of political symbols, military figures, battle scenes, landscapes, or social settings. Others simply featured decorative borders around the text. Because song sheets were in such great demand, different publishers frequently created newly illustrated versions of the most popular songs.

The Library of Congress has a collection of nearly 5,000 nineteenth-century song sheets, including numerous song sheets for *The Star Spangled Banner* in both English and German, all of which are available for viewing online.

Song-Sheet Illustrations: A Closer Look

Instructions

The eagle was chosen as our country's national symbol in 1782. Take a look at the image of the first die made to allow uniform printing of the Great Seal of the United States. Then take a look at the images of the two song sheets for *The Star Spangled Banner* that feature illustrations of eagles. When you have reviewed these images carefully, compare and contrast the eagles in these three images by filling out the worksheet below.

Comparing & Contrasting Designs

Compare the Eagles: Great Seal and Song Sheet A.

Similarities: Eagle in Great Seal versus Eagle in Song Sheet A

Differences: Eagle in Great Seal versus Eagle in Song Sheet A

Compare the eagles: Great Seal and Song Sheet B.

Similarities: Eagle in Great Seal versus Eagle in Song Sheet B

Differences: Eagle in Great Seal versus Eagle in Song Sheet B

Compare the Eagles: Song Sheet A versus Song Sheet B.

Similarities: Eagle in Song Sheet A versus Eagle in Song Sheet B

Differences: Eagle in Song Sheet A versus Eagle in Song Sheet B

Which eagle illustration most appeals to you? Why?
