



# Cornelius Vanderbilt Lesson Plan

How do individual ambitions shape and transform societies?

---

Students will understand how Cornelius Vanderbilt's innovations in transportation and his competitive business practices shaped the growth of American industries and laid the foundation for the country's economic development during the Industrial Revolution.

## Learning Objectives:

- Identify key life events of Cornelius Vanderbilt.
- Explain how Vanderbilt revolutionized the shipping and railroad industries.
- Analyze Vanderbilt's competitive business strategies and their impact on transportation and trade.
- Evaluate Vanderbilt's contributions to American industry and his role in the development of modern transportation systems.

## Key Vocabulary:

- **Entrepreneur:** A person who starts and operates a business, usually with substantial initiative and risk.
- **Exorbitant:** Going beyond what is reasonable in cost, quality, amount, or size.
- **Inclement:** Severe, rough, or stormy, usually referring to the weather.
- **Magnate:** A powerful or influential person, especially in business or industry.
- **Monopoly:** When one company has so much control over a certain type of good or service that no other companies can make money selling that good or service.
- **Price-Fixing:** An agreement between companies in the same industry on what the price of a certain good should be, which often raises the price for consumers.
- **Subsidy:** Money given by a government to a private person or company to support public programs or services.

**Educational Standards:** CCRA.R.7, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.W.9, CCRA.L.1, CCRA.L.2, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2

**Academic Subject Areas:** Biography, Investors, Historical Figures

## What You'll Need

- Video: *Guess or Mess: Cornelius Vanderbilt* (Watch [Here](#))
- Worksheet: *Guess or Mess: Cornelius Vanderbilt* (Click [Here](#))
- PragerU Kids *Builders of America* biographical book: *Cornelius Vanderbilt* (Download [Here](#))
- Large paper or poster board for each group, along with markers



## Lesson Plan: Read and Complete (60 minutes)

### Introduction to Cornelius Vanderbilt (5 minutes):

1. Begin with a brief discussion about entrepreneurs who helped shape America's economy. Ask students if they can name any business leaders who changed how people traveled or conducted business.
2. Display the *Cornelius Vanderbilt* digital book using an electronic device. Briefly highlight Vanderbilt's role in developing the steamboat and railroad industries, as well as his legacy in American history. Show images from the digital book to give a visual overview of his life and achievements.

### Vanderbilt's Journey: Group Activity (25 minutes):

1. As a class, read the "Meet Cornelius Vanderbilt" section on page 1 of the digital book. The teacher should lead the reading to model fluent reading and set the tone for the lesson.
2. Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a different section of the digital book to explore:
  - Group 1: A Humble Mooring (page 2)
  - Group 2: Vanderbilt the Boatman (page 3)
  - Group 3: Fierce Competition, Building a Business (page 4)
  - Group 4: Did You Know?, Full Steam Ahead (page 5)
  - Group 5: Subsidy on the Seas, To California! (page 6)
  - Group 6: Fascinating Facts about Vanderbilt, Later Life (pages 7-8)
3. Allow time for each group to take turns reading their section aloud and to discuss key points.
4. Provide large paper or poster boards and markers. Each group should write down key facts, ideas, and quotes they find.
5. Allow each group 1-2 minutes to present their findings to the class, followed by a brief discussion to ensure that the class understands the points covered.

### Worksheet Workshop (15 minutes):

1. Distribute individual worksheets to students and explain how to complete them.
  - **Timeline:** Plot key dates and events from the digital book. Some suggestions:
    - 1794: Birth of Cornelius Vanderbilt
    - 1810: Vanderbilt starts his ferry business
    - 1846: Vanderbilt becomes a millionaire through his steamboat business
    - 1877: Death of Cornelius Vanderbilt
  - **Innovator's Gears:** In this section, students will identify a problem or need in their community, brainstorm solutions, and then draw an invention that could solve the problem based on one of their ideas. They could add labels or descriptions to explain how their invention works.
  - **Vocabulary Builder:** Choose a word from the glossary on page 10 and use it in a sentence that clearly conveys its meaning.

- **Multiple Choice:** Allow students to complete the multiple-choice section of the worksheet individually. (Note: The multiple-choice section corresponds to the *Guess or Mess* episode about Cornelius Vanderbilt and can also be used to play along while watching the game show video. See “Extension Activity” below.)

### **Reflection Round-Up (10 minutes):**

1. Briefly summarize key points about Cornelius Vanderbilt’s life, his role in transforming transportation through steamboats and railroads, and his competitive business strategies.
2. **Think-Pair-Share:** Ask students to recall one fact about Vanderbilt and discuss its significance with a partner.
3. Ask students to answer one of these reflection questions on a sticky note or index card:
  - What did you find most interesting about Cornelius Vanderbilt?
  - How did Vanderbilt’s innovations impact transportation and the economy in the U.S.?
4. **Bonus Activities:** If time allows, have students complete the “Fill-in-the-Blank” activity on page 7, as well as the “Word Scramble” and “The Profits Add Up” maze on page 9.

### **Extension Activity** (20 minutes):

*Guess or Mess* Trivia Show: After the lesson, students can participate in the *Guess or Mess* trivia show for Cornelius Vanderbilt, using the multiple-choice section of the worksheet to play along.

### **Don’t have time for a full lesson? Quick Activity (30 minutes)**

Read the *Cornelius Vanderbilt* book together as a class, with students taking turns reading aloud. Then, watch the *Guess or Mess* video and play along with the trivia questions.