

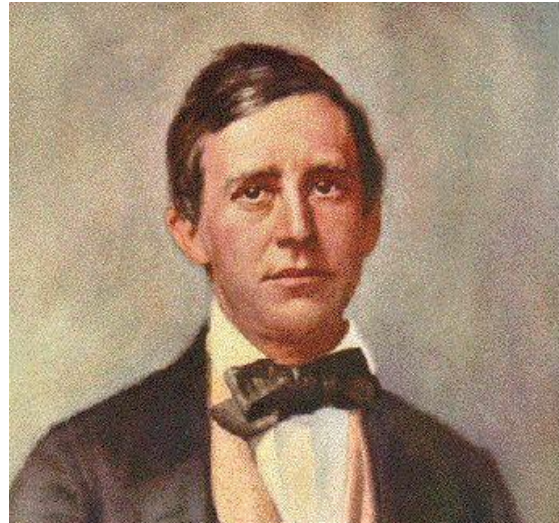
Student Handout 1-Biography of Stephen Foster

Musical Beginnings

Stephen Collins Foster was born on July 4, 1826, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He had seven brothers and sisters. Stephen shared his family's musical talent. From an early age he was interested in music. He enjoyed singing and learned how to play the guitar, flute, and piano.

Stephen's father William was a businessman. He was also involved in politics. As a Democrat, William was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature. He also served two terms as mayor of Allegheny, Pennsylvania.

When he was 14, Stephen wrote his first song for piano and four flutes. After he graduated from school, he was soon writing music and lyrics all the time. In those days, composing music was not considered decent full-time work for a man. People thought men should support their families by having a job outside the home. Stephen's family did not give him much encouragement to become a professional composer.



Stephen Collins Foster, late 1850s.
Courtesy of the Pennsylvania State

In 1846 when he was 18, Stephen moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. There he worked as a bookkeeper for his brother's business. He kept writing music and lyrics in his spare time.

Good Times and Hard Times

The next year in 1847 Stephen wrote "Oh! Susanna." It became very popular, and people sang it from coast to coast. This is remarkable, since in those days there was no radio or recorded music. People learned the song by buying sheet music and singing songs in their homes. When gold was discovered in California in 1848, "Oh! Susanna" became an unofficial anthem of the Gold Rush. Stephen enjoyed success during the next few years. He published more popular songs, including "Camptown Races."

By this time, Stephen had quit his day job and was writing songs full time. He signed a contract with a New York publishing company. They paid him two cents per copy of sheet music sold. This may not seem like much money, but it was enough for him to earn a living just from writing songs. This made him possibly the first professional composer in America.

In 1850 Stephen married Jane McDowell. A year later in 1851 their daughter Marion was born. Sadly, Stephen and Jane's marriage was not always a happy one. In 1853 Stephen and Jane separated, and Stephen moved to New York City alone.

The next year Stephen and Jane reunited. A few months later Stephen published “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair.” This song, too, became quite popular. Historians believe Stephen first wrote it as a love song to his wife. In his early drafts of it he used the name “Jane” instead of “Jeanie.”



“Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair,” by Stephen Foster, 1854.
Credit: Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh

In 1855 the economy of the United States was entering a downturn. Banks closed, businesses went bankrupt, and many people lost their jobs. Things were getting hard for Stephen, as well. After several years of success, he found it difficult to compose songs that were popular. With sales of his new works dropping, he began having money problems. Stephen also experienced sadness that year. Both of his parents died a few months apart.

Singing for the President

A presidential election was held the following year in 1856. People in the northern and southern states disagreed about several important issues. One of the biggest was slavery. Southern states allowed it, but many people in the north were against it. The Republican Party called for abolition, or the ending of slavery. If slavery were outlawed, people in the south said their states would secede. This means they would split away from the U.S. and form their own country. Democrats wanted to let the issue of slavery up to each state. This would keep the country united. The Democrats nominated Pennsylvanian James Buchanan for president.

Stephen followed his father’s footsteps and got involved with the Democratic Party. He wanted Buchanan to win the election. Besides politics, Stephen had a personal connection to Buchanan. His sister was married to Buchanan’s brother. Stephen became the musical director for the Buchanan Glee Club. This group of men sang songs in public to help Buchanan’s campaign. Buchanan went on to win the election.

Struggles to the End

During the next few years Stephen kept having trouble writing songs that would earn him money. To pay off debts, he sold the rights to his older and more popular songs. Sadly, he also began to abuse alcohol.

In the fall of 1860, Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected president. In the spring of 1861, the North and South began fighting the Civil War. Stephen wrote songs about the war effort. A few of his tunes became popular. However, he was not nearly as successful as he had been 10 years before.

In 1861 Jane and Stephen separated. Jane and their daughter moved to Pennsylvania while Stephen stayed in New York City. He became poor and struggled with an addiction to alcohol. In January 1864, Stephen died in a New York hospital. All he had left was 38 cents in his pocket. He was 37 years old.