



An Educator's Guide to

The Kite That Bridged Two Nations: Homan Walsh and the First Niagara Suspension Bridge

Written by Alexis O'Neill
Illustrated by Terry Widener

978-1-59078-938-4 • Grades 3 and up
Calkins Creek Books

www.calkinscreekbooks.com
www.alexisoneill.com
www.terrywidenerart.com

*Guide prepared by Jane Becker.
For poster, contact alexis@alexisoneill.com while supply lasts.*

Summary

The Kite That Bridged Two Nations is about how one boy's persistence, skill and determination led to the creation of a bridge across Niagara Falls in 1848 – the first of its kind – that opened trade between America and Canada.

(Historical fiction. 40-page picture book for older readers. Back matter includes Author's Note; What We Know; What We Don't Know; The Rest of the Story; Niagara Suspension Bridge Timeline; Selected Sources - Primary Sources, Books, Websites, Interviews Videos; For Further Exploration; Acknowledgements.)

What the Reviewers Say

Memorable and dramatic.

-- *Kirkus Reviews*

The rich language and the evocative oil paintings make these subjects of history and civil engineering come alive . . . For libraries looking to strengthen STEM-related units on engineering this is the perfect match.

-- *School Library Journal*

O'Neill's spare text communicates both grandeur and dignity . . . Widener's full-page acrylic paintings closely follow the narrative, emphasizing the harsh winter landscape and giving a clear sense of the odds against spanning the gorge. An extensive author's note spells out what is known and not known about the story and supplies additional facts about the building of the bridge.

-- *Booklist*

O'Neill recreates Walsh's feat . . . with a rhythmic cadence that will be a pleasure for reading aloud.

-- *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

A well-told story with many curriculum links, the style lends itself to a terrific read-aloud. Teachers can use this book to make curriculum connections in science, social studies and expressing emotion in narrative writing, to name a few. The illustrator, Terry Widener, did a wonderful job of evoking the setting and matching the words with pictures in a seamless union.

-- *Elementary School Librarian*

Discussion Questions and Research

Homan Walsh loves to fly kites. Find scenes in the story that describe Homan's desire to fly a kite. Find scenes that tell how he feels when he flies one.

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.1)

On the first page of the story, Homan is hard to find in the picture. What does the illustration tell you about Niagara Falls?

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.7)

What is "lift?" Why does Homan need to think about it?

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.4)

Homan's father is a merchant. What is that? What does Homan's father think of kite flying? How does Homan's relationship with his father change over the course of the story?

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.5)

Homan names his kite "Union." Why is the name of his kite significant?

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.1)

The author describes Niagara's Whirlpool Rapids as grasping." What does she mean by that?

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.4)

What words does the author use to create the mood for the night Homan first tries to fly Union across the river?

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.7)

When the kite line snaps, Homan worries that his kite is lost. What does he do next? How do his actions reveal his character? Discuss characteristics that define Homan.

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.3)

In the book, the author sometimes describes the kite as if it were a living thing. Find examples in the story where the author gives the kite human characteristics.

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.4)

At the end of the story, the illustration depicts Homan looking out at the suspension bridge. Imagine what Homan is thinking when he looks at the bridge. What do you think he is feeling?

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.3)

The author uses words to create an atmosphere – we feel like we are not just reading the story, but are witnesses to the event. Find an example in the book where a scene is beautifully depicted with both words and illustrations.

(CCSS Literacy RL 3.1)

Curriculum Connections

- Freezing temperatures and wind direction affected Homan's kite flying. Consider how people learned about weather patterns over 150 years ago. How did things like barometers and looking at the sky help people predict what the weather would be like? Make weather predictions for the next few days. Were the predictions accurate?
- To craft his kite, Homan used spars made of supple wood, twine, a calico sail, and over a thousand feet of string. Build your own kite using a plastic garbage bag, wood, dowels, cloth tape, ribbon and string. Do a quick Internet search on "build your own kite" to find out more.
- Homan named his kite "Union." List some non-living things people name (such as teddy bears, dolls, sailboats, etc.). What are some of the reason why people give names to objects? Does the naming of an object change how we feel about it? Why?
- Homan was only 16 years old when he flew his kite the "joined two countries." Who are some other people in history who had a big impact at a young age? Ask your librarian for help in finding some real-life stories about young people doing incredible things. Here are some books to get you started:
 - The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by William Kamkwamba
 - In the Bag! Margaret Knight Wraps It Up* by Monica Kulling
 - A Boy Called Dickens* by Deborah Hopkinson
- The author based this picture book on an actual historical event that took place in 1848. Parts of the story were imagined. For example, there is no historical record of what Homan's father thought about his son's kite flying. Think about another historical event, perhaps one that happened where you live. Write a paragraph where you imagine being on the scene and what you might have thought about what you were witnessing.
- A handbill is a paper advertisement. Before radio, television and the Internet, handbills were common ways to advertise products, announce events, and get the word out about political candidates. Think about some of the ways we share information today. What is different? What is the same? How would you share information about an upcoming school event today?
- Charles Ellet, Jr., an engineer, designed and built the first major wire-cable suspension bridge in the United States in 1842. The Niagara Falls International Bridge Company (New York) and the Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge Company (Canada) hired Ellet in 1847 to build a bridge over the Niagara River (spanning eight hundred feet!) in full view of the falls. Think about why Homan's kite line was so important to the creation of the bridge. Research what bridge engineers do and why they are important.

Facts About Niagara Falls

- Niagara Falls is actually made up of three falls: Horseshoe Falls (on the Canadian side), the American Falls and Bridal Veil Falls (both on the American side).
- The three falls have the highest flow rate of any waterfall in the world, and Horseshoe Falls is the most powerful waterfall in North America. The three falls are a source of hydropower, producing large amounts of electricity. The falls are capable of producing 4 million kilowatts of electricity – electricity that is shared by Canada and the United States of America.
- Four of the five Great Lakes (Superior, Michigan, Huron, and Erie) drain into the Niagara River before emptying into Lake Ontario. These five Great Lakes hold almost one-fifth of the world's fresh water supply!
- The Niagara River is about 35 miles long (59 kilometers) and is the source of the falls. The river flows north from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The total drop in elevation along the river is 325 feet (99 meters)!
- Niagara Falls has been a popular tourist destination for a long time, and Niagara Falls State Park is the oldest state park in the United States (1885). Over 30 million people visit the falls each year.
- The Maid of the Mist was first launched as a ferry service in 1846. Once the bridge opened, the ferry lost service business. The ferry company decided to shift its focus to tourism, and millions of people have since enjoyed taking a boat ride to get a close-up look at the falls.

That's Not All About Waterfalls . . .

- The tallest waterfall in the world is Angel Falls in Venezuela at 3,212 feet (979 meters).
- Victoria Falls, located on the Zambezi River (along the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia), is one of the largest waterfalls in the world. When the river is at high flow, a sheet of water more than a mile wide flows over the falls!
- Niagara Falls is the widest falls in North America, but the highest falls in North America is Yosemite Falls in Yosemite National Park, California.

Extra Credit

- Homan had to endure very harsh weather conditions as he attempted to fly his kite across the falls. In fact, the weather conditions for the entire winter of 1848 were extremely severe. In March of that year, strong winds moved huge chunks of lake ice

on Lake Erie, blocking the head of the Niagara River. That ice jammed up the Niagara River, and for thirty hours the falls went dry. Water wheels on mills and factories stopped. At first, no one knew why the mighty roar of Niagara Falls was silenced. Some people walked on the river bed below the falls and found all sorts of artifacts. To find out more about the day the falls stopped, visit <http://www.wired.com/thisdayintech/2010/03/0330niagara-falls-stops/>

- Imagine you lived near the falls on the day Niagara Falls stopped flowing. What would you think about the sudden quiet? Would you be worried about what could have made the falls run dry? Write a paragraph imagining you were an eyewitness that day.
(CCSS Literacy writing 3.3)
- Niagara Falls straddles two nations, and the geography and geology of the area are both interesting topics to explore. Holling C. Holling's book, *Paddle to the Sea*, a Caldecott Medal Winner from 1942, is an exciting and beautifully illustrated book that follows a small model boat as it journeys through the great lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. The larger story is broken up into shorter vignettes, making it the perfect classroom read-aloud and an excellent companion to *The Kite That Bridged Two Nations*.
(CCSS Literacy Reading 3.7)

Websites for Further Research

www.niagarafallsstatepark.com
www.niagarafallslive.com
www.niagarafallsinfo.com

Videos

- **Kite Book Trailer**
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRsPLVlt6yU>
- **Author Interview: Family Day at Oakwood**
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRGftGriMqc>