

# IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

## The Lindbergh Baby: “The Crime of the Century”

Target Age: High School  
Time Period: 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
Featured County: Hunterdon  
NJ 350<sup>th</sup> Theme: Innovation

### Common Core States Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.2- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

R.CCR.4 – Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

SL.CCR.2- Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

### New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.D.7.b, 6.1.12.D.8.b

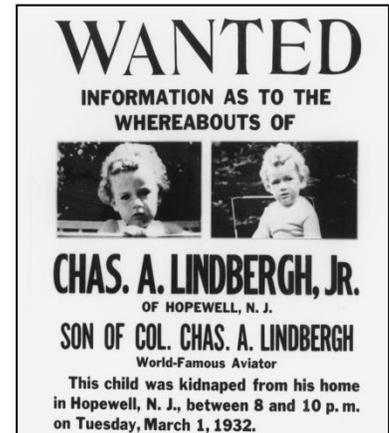
### **FOCUS QUESTION:**

How has technology changed both how the public reacts to fame and celebrity, and how news is reported?

### **BACKGROUND:**

On May 21, 1927, Charles Lindbergh—“Lucky Lindy”—landed in Paris, completing the first solo, nonstop flight across the Atlantic Ocean and thus becoming one of the most famous people in the world. Lindbergh was an innovator and a great promoter of aviation, and after his famous flight both airmail and air travel grew in popularity. Four years later, Lindbergh and his wife Ann built a home in Hopewell, New Jersey. Their estate included 700 acres as well as an airstrip. As important, it was remote, ensuring privacy for the aviator who was still a major public figure four years after his record-breaking flight. From that point on, the Lindberghs divided their time between this New Jersey home, which they named Highfields, and Ann’s parents’ home in Englewood.

“Mrs. Lindbergh, do you have the baby?” These dreadful words were uttered by Betty Gow, a nursemaid at Highfields, shortly after 10:00pm of March 1, 1932. Newspapers quickly reported on the kidnapping of the hero’s twenty-month-old infant son, Charles Jr. A ransom note found on a windowsill



Courtesy of New Jersey State Archives;  
Department of State

in the nursery demanded a payment of \$50,000 for the child's safe return. Lindbergh paid the ransom, but the child's dead body was later found in the woods not far from the home. The case had few leads until police arrested an immigrant German carpenter from the Bronx named Bruno Richard Hauptmann on September 18, 1934; Hauptmann had paid for 98 cents worth of gas with one of the ten-dollar bills from the ransom. The State's evidence at trial included comparisons of his handwriting to that on the ransom notes, and of wood used in the kidnap ladder to wood found in Hauptmann's home and the lumber yard where he had worked. After the biggest U.S. trial to date, he was convicted of the murder and kidnapping and, once legal appeals were exhausted, he was executed by electric chair in Trenton State Prison on April 3, 1936.

The crime was undoubtedly horrifying, but how Americans learned about it was almost as dramatic. Within twenty-four hours of the kidnapping, one press service alone—Hearst's International—had generated 50,000 words on the crime, the equivalent of a 200-page book. William Randolph Hearst was clear about the relationship of tabloid journalism to profit: "The public...wants entertainment not information." Hearst spearheaded the nationwide media hunt for the Lindbergh kidnapper; even Al Capone put up a \$10,000 reward from his jail cell. Extra editions, made possible by new printing technology and prefiguring today's 24-hour news, breathlessly announced each new detail of the case. It was the addition of radio—with its repeated updates on the events of the police search, the trial, and the personal backgrounds of all involved—that allowed average citizens to keep track of events on a daily if not hourly basis, and made it possible to track the lives of public celebrities from private homes.

#### **ACTIVITY:**

Knowledge: Newspapers and television broadcasts are filled with high-profile cases about crime. Have the students list as many unsolved, controversial, or highly publicized stories they can recall.

Comprehension: After generating this list, review the story of the Lindbergh kidnapping and ask students to identify elements that would qualify it to be included on their list of celebrity crime. Have students listen to one of the first televised broadcasts of the Lindbergh kidnapping, recorded within hours of the event and broadcast nationally on both television and radio (posted by CNN on Youtube, it is less than two minutes long: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tDLYIkKIUo>). This event is often considered one of the first cases of "tabloid" journalism as public interest in the crime and subsequent trial resulted in the rapid proliferation of newspaper and radio features. The daily—sometimes hourly—updates whet the public's appetite for more. After listening to this 2-minute feature, ask students to consider the language reporters used to incite interest. How did they describe the crime? The family involved? The suspected perpetrators? How important does the role of technology seem in this segment? Are there particular words or phrases that reveal how the nature of reporting was changing in 1932?

Application: If time permits, play the following two newsreels. The first is a brief segment (3 minutes) providing an overview of the Lindbergh kidnapping and trial, and role of the media in both. The second (2 minutes and 46 seconds) was a newsreel about current events which played at the beginning of films in movie theatres and ran on the "top of the hour" for radio broadcast programs. The first focuses on the Lindbergh trial, the latter mentions it as part of a range of other news of the day—while clearly still important, it was no longer headline news. What other events surround information about this crime, and does this shape the tone of the report?

Newsreel #2 (includes overview of Bruno Richard Hauptmann's trial and evidence:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il2TqTTh-ik>

Newsreel #2 (includes update on Hauptmann's execution):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLLMfs4IPwk>

### **FOLLOW-UP:**

**Follow-up #1:** The *New York Times* published 21 articles about either the kidnapping or the subsequent trial (available in transcription online at <http://www.charleslindebergh.com/ny/>). Ask students to pair up and select one article from this collection for further analysis. What is the primary point of the article? What language does the author use to describe the Lindbergh family, the crime, or the defendant? Prepare a 2-3 paragraph summary to share with the class. Analyzing these articles as a collection will demonstrate how the media shapes the information the general public receives. For an additional assignment, instruct students to find current (within the last year) articles from newspapers, magazines, the Internet, TV news reports, etc. that provide examples of modern-day celebrities and questions about privacy. Display these on a bulletin board or course website.

**Follow-up #2:** If time permits, encourage students to examine pictures of the New Jersey State Trooper investigation (a collection of this evidence is available at the New Jersey State Archives "Lindbergh Kidnapping Evidence Photographs": <http://www.nj.gov/state/archives/slcsp001.html>). You can either do this as a class, or break students into smaller groups and provide one piece of evidence to each group.

As a class discuss the following questions: What evidence seems most compelling? What is least convincing? To determine how reporters weighed evidence at the time, have students read the *New York Times* article "Lindbergh Baby Kidnapped From Home of Parents on Farm Near Princeton; Taken From His Crib; Wide Search On" (March 2, 1932; <http://www.charleslindebergh.com/ny/9.asp> and attached to this lesson below). How did newspaper articles at the time describe the event and weigh its significance?

### **WANT TO LEARN MORE?**

#### **Places You Can Visit**

Albert Elias Residential Community Home at Johnstone (formerly Highlands), New Jersey Department of State: [http://www.nj.gov/oag/jjc/residential\\_comm\\_albert\\_hm.html](http://www.nj.gov/oag/jjc/residential_comm_albert_hm.html) (for more information about the tour program, see Deb Dawson, "Lindbergh: Lindbergh's Home is for Boys," NJ.com on July 2, 2008: [http://blog.nj.com/lindbergh/2008/07/lindbergh\\_lindberghs\\_home\\_is\\_f.html](http://blog.nj.com/lindbergh/2008/07/lindbergh_lindberghs_home_is_f.html)).

Historic County Court House, Hunterdon County: <http://www.co.hunterdon.nj.us/facts/chpics.htm>

"Lindbergh Exhibition," New Jersey State Police Museum: <http://www.njspmuseum.org/lindbergh/>

#### **Additional Lesson Plans**

Missouri History Museum: [http://www.mohistory.org/Flight\\_City/HTML/ResourcesTeachRes.html](http://www.mohistory.org/Flight_City/HTML/ResourcesTeachRes.html)

History Channel: <http://www.historychannel.com/lindbergh/classroom.html>

**For More Information**

PBS “The American Experience: Linbergh”:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/lindbergh/filmmore/index.html>)

New Jersey State Archives, “Lindbergh Kidnapping Evidence Photographs”:

<http://www.nj.gov/state/archives/slcsp001.html>)

“Legacy of a Kidnapping: The History of Tabloid Journalism,” California Newsreel (56 min. documentary):

<http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0055> <http://newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0055>

**CREDIT INFORMATION:**

Pg. 1: Lindbergh Reward Poster, New Jersey State Archives, Department of State.

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