

Johnny Appleseed: A Tall Tale Retold and Illustrated by  
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Tall tale: a story that is very difficult to believe : a greatly exaggerated story

Unlike some tall tales, Johnny Appleseed was a real person. His name was John Chapman and he was born in 1775 in Massachusetts. Like any tall tale, stories about his life have been exaggerated. The author included both facts and legends in this book.

**Introduce yourself and tell your group your favorite kind of apple or favorite way to eat apples.**

I couldn't think of many discussion questions, so today I'll give you more to read about Johnny Appleseed and you can think of the questions to discuss!

The legend of Johnny Appleseed is all that I knew about him until I did a little research a couple of years ago. As a child, I believed the story in the Disney cartoon about a nice man who wandered around the country planting apple trees so that we would have a healthy snack to eat. Below are excerpts from an article that claims to shed light on the true story of Johnny Appleseed.

HE WAS A CHILD OF WAR.

Born in Leominster, Massachusetts, on September 26, 1774, John Chapman grew up in the midst of the American Revolutionary War, in which his father served. While his father would survive the war, Chapman's mother did not, dying in childbirth in July 1776. In 1780, Chapman's father returned home, and began to teach his son the farming trade.

HE WAS NO MEANDERING PLANTER.

Chapman developed as an orchardist and nurseryman, and by the early 1800s was working on his own. While his legend imagines him as a messy nomad, in reality, Chapman was much more practical. People could claim land through development of a permanent homestead. Such a claim could be made by planting 50 apple trees. So in his travels through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois, Chapman would plant seeds to begin an orchard, then sell them to settlers once the land had grown bountiful. This made him quite the land baron as he traversed 100,000 square miles of Midwestern wilderness and prairie. When he died on March 11, 1845 at the age of 70, he owned more than 1200 acres of land.

HIS APPLES WEREN'T FOR EATING.

The apples that Chapman favored for planting were small and tart "spitters"—named for what you'd likely do if you took a bite of one. But this made them ideal for making hard cider and - an alcoholic beverage. This was a far more valuable crop than edible apples. In rural areas cider took the place of not only wine and beer but of coffee and tea, juice, and even water. Where water could house dangerous bacteria, cider was safe. (And delicious.)

## HIS SIGNATURE LOOK IS PRETTY TRUE TO LIFE.

Chapman was often noted for his threadbare clothes and preference for bare feet. But these eccentricities may have been a practice of his faith, the Church of Swedenborg (also known as The New Church), a Christian denomination established in 1787. The second part of his signature look—that sack of apple seeds—was most definitely accurate. Because the Church forbade its members harming God's creation, Chapman became a vocal animal rights activist and vegetarian. He also refused to use grafting to create his orchards, believing that this growing technique physically hurt the source plants. So, he carried a large sack of seeds everywhere he traveled. However, the tin pot hat has not been proven.

## IN DEATH, HE GREW LEGENDARY.

Though some say Chapman acquired his nickname by 1806, it wasn't until after his death in 1845 that the legend of Johnny Appleseed really took off. Considering his distinctive look, uncommon views, and contribution to the settling of the frontier, it's little wonder his legend proved so powerful. Over the years he was made to seem less entrepreneurial and the use of his apples as an alcoholic beverage was played down as they made their way into children's books and a famous Disney cartoon.

## PROHIBITION KILLED MUCH OF HIS LEGACY.

By the time the U.S. government outlawed alcohol in 1920, Chapman had become an American folk hero. But this didn't stop the axes of FBI agents who mercilessly tore down orchards to prevent the making of homemade hooch. Aside from killing Chapman's trees, this also nearly killed America's connection to hard cider. The beverage rooted deep in our history has only recently seen a resurgence in popularity.

## YOU CAN STILL VISIT ONE OF HIS TREES.

Nova, Ohio, is home to a 176-year-old tree, the last known to be planted by Johnny Appleseed himself. It grows tart green apples, which are now used for applesauce and baking in addition to cider making. While Chapman might be glad to see his seeds still bearing fruit, he'd likely be sad to hear this tree is a noted source for grafting new apple trees.

## HE FOREVER CHANGED THE APPLES OF AMERICA.

Since apples that are grafted are the same as the parent tree, they don't change. By not grafting, Johnny created the conditions for apple trees to adapt and thrive in their new world home.

