Once again this year, life on and along the Erie Canal was the focus of yet another inventive three-month study unit that culminated March 20 with Kelley School fourth graders reenacting life along the “canal” in the school gymnasium.

Passengers aboard “packet boats” made stops along the “waterway” where costumed students relived historical scenes from the era.

Again this year, fourth grade teachers and students partnered with Young Audiences of Rochester visiting artist Brian Coughlin to create the innovative and instructive living timeline of the Erie Canal during an eight-session artist’s residency.

Young Audiences of Rochester visiting artist Brian Coughlin to create the innovative and instructive living timeline of the Erie Canal during an eight-session artist’s residency.

Students created their own scripts depicting the important influence the canal had on New Yorkers. Coughlin worked with students on a variety of theatrical skills including acting, reading and presenting.

“This was a unique experience where art, history, and cooperation came alive,” said District Enrichment Coordinator Robyn Ross-Squirrell, who coordinated the event.

She said students learned about how the Erie Canal not only significantly improved transportation, but greatly improved economic opportunities and encouraged more settlers to head west and expand our nation.

“Students explored the trials and tribulations of early transportation, leading up to the conceptualization of the Erie Canal and the development following it,” Ross-Squirrell said.

Parents, students, teachers and others were among those visiting the unique living timeline March 20 and were treated to rides on wheeled “packet boats” in which they “sailed” through the eight stations of canal history.

Packet Boat captains were: Coughlin, Kelley teacher assistant Becky Hauf and Reading teacher Mikey Davanzo.
Students enjoyed participating in the event.

Caroline McGavisk, a student from Sarah Consentino’s class commented: “We learned how people back then did similar things to what we do nowadays. For instance, how they used transportation like boats instead of a bus, subway or car. I liked turning into a performer and acting like a character that might have lived on the Erie Canal back then. Learning this way taught me more about Newark. When I would look at the Erie Canal before this, I didn’t really think about it much. Now I realize how important it was.”

John Murphy, a student from Amanda Quku’s class said: “My favorite part was practicing our skits with our group members and being able to watch each other’s skits. It was an opportunity to practice using body language and to become our characters. I liked learning this way because it wasn’t just getting out books and notebooks and writing about history. You got to take what you learned in the classroom and actually act out the history.”

Emma Kuhn, a student from Christine Kriwox’s class stated: “My favorite part was learning how to make a creative, unique character that would have lived during that time period and being able to show our learning about the Erie Canal to our audience. I liked learning this way because it is more exciting and you learn the features of acting and history. When you are acting and telling the facts to the audience, you’ll always remember the experience.”

Everett Cole, a fourth grade student, from Marcy Peters class commented: “Learning the way we did was much more interesting than if we read it from a book because it is fun and gets everyone active.”

Courtni Tang, also a student from Marcy Peters class stated: “My favorite part of this experience was the acting. I got to do something that I wouldn’t normally do in school. This was a great way to share what I learned with others.”