

Saving Hometown History

Local historic preservation teaches students what it means to be a historian.

BY TERRI PAYNE BUTLER

NEARLY TWO DOZEN STUDENTS FROM THE Skowhegan Area Middle School in Skowhegan, Maine, have gathered in Laura Richter’s classroom. They hook up their laptops to scanners, then don white gloves. There’s a buzz of excitement as they peer at the historical documents they’ll be working with that day, and questions fly as they pore over photos of the town’s now-vanished log drive or 19th-century ice harvesting on the Kennebec River. Lee Granville and Lynn Perry of History House, the town’s local museum and historical association, answer questions as they show students how to handle documents and artifacts with an archivist’s touch.

“I watch their faces when they look at the old pictures,” says Granville, the curator and chairman of the board for History House. “They’ll ask why this road grader was hauled by horses instead of heavy machinery and why road graders were needed at all. You can see their minds going from one topic to another. In schools today, they

learn American history, but in most cases they know almost nothing about local history, which is even more fundamental to them.”

Richter, the school’s technology integration specialist and a teacher of history, social studies, and geography for 17 years, agrees. “It’s sometimes difficult to interest students in history when they learn from a textbook only. It doesn’t allow them to have kinship or connection to the people they study. But when they handle primary resources—whether a canteen Benedict Arnold’s men left on Skowhegan Is-

land or the Civil War letters from a Skowhegan soldier to his girlfriend—they really come to see themselves as part of a tradition passed down.”

But the benefits of the Skowhegan school’s collaboration with History House extend far beyond either institution’s door— thanks to their own computer savvy, the middle schoolers are not only learning about their town’s history, but making it accessible to others. They’ve now scanned over 100 documents and each one—photograph, artifact, letter, or journal—has been uploaded to the Maine Memory Network, a two-year-old project of the Maine Historical Society.

“It began as a way to give online access to the collections of about 225 small historical societies throughout the state,” says Steve Bromage, Maine Historical Society’s director of education. “We wanted

to make it as easy as possible for teachers and others to use this dynamic resource. Some teachers will find a photo they’ve been searching for and print it and put it on the wall, while others, like Laura Richter, will reinvent their curriculum and make a major investment of time. There are about 10 schools around the state that we’re working closely with, and in each, the project looks quite different. But in each,

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Related Resources

The Local Heritage Project
www.msad54.k12.me.us/MSAD54Pages/SAMS/Heritage/Heritage.html

Maine Learning Technology Initiative
www.state.me.us/mlte

Maine Memory Network
www.mainememory.net

National History Day
www.nationalhistoryday.org

Skowhegan History House
skowhegan.com/historyhouse

The Skowhegan, Maine Community Project
www.msad54.k12.me.us/MSAD54Pages/SAMS/cedarsite/commweb/skowproject/skowindex.htm

“I watch **their faces** when they look at the **old pictures**. ... When they handle **primary resources** ... they see themselves as part of a **tradition passed down.**”

local history is now more accessible and more personal.”

About the time the Maine Memory Network was launched, so was the Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI), a program to put laptop computers into the hands of every seventh- and eighth-grade teacher and student in the state. “This meant there were even more reasons the schools and the historical societies should be working together,” Bromage adds. “Most of the societies are very small, sometimes open only 10 or 15 hours a week, and if they could handle 30 kids visiting a collection, it was often to just walk through. That’s not the same as studying documents closely on an ongoing basis. The historical societies had the content and they needed computers, scanners, and access to the Internet. The schools had the technology and needed the primary-source content. It was a natural connection.”

For the History House/Maine Memory Network collaboration, Lee Granville and Lynn Perry work each week with two dozen students drawn from the middle school’s five cross-curricular teams. Every team has students involved who can report back on the project’s activities. “They had already been empowered by the community project and become very involved in town government and how decisions are made,” says Richter. “They’ve seen photographs of many old buildings that have been torn down over the years and were upset to learn that the Grange Hall might become a parking lot. They’ve talked to town manager Pat Dickey and to a local bank, and are busy investigating the issue. They go to town meetings with their laptops and they’ve created an online newsletter. The level of inquiry learning is phenomenal.”

The project also meets many of Maine’s learning standards, Richter adds. “Technology is an essential tool. They are transcribing texts and using online sources to get immediate answers to their questions. When they are synthesizing what they’ve researched, they’ve got a number of



Laura Richter’s middle-school historians examine artifacts.

ways to put it all together, from basic word processing to multimedia—iMovies, PowerPoint, Web sites. At the same time, we’re meeting history standards—they learn inquiry, analysis, and interpretation; why historical accounts of the same event differ; the credibility of authors; and civic participation. At first the laptop initiative was controversial and some people thought it might be a waste of money. But these students have presented their work at public forums, shown people the documents online, and shown how the collaboration benefits the community and the state. People began to see how the tool is being used and they are impressed.”

“A lot of these kids have scanned before, use digital cameras, and are on the Web all the time,” says Bromage. “They’ve used those skills on behalf of a meaningful project that’s very visible in the community. At the same time there’s been an opportunity for students to do oral histories with many of their community’s older people, and that intergenerational experience has been very valuable educationally.” <

The Video Quilt: Saving Human History

“I give a pretty lively lecture, but I think lecturing on history sometimes repels more students than it takes in,” says Tony Renouard, a history and American government teacher at Nathan Hale High School in Seattle, Wash. “Our students need to touch history and work with it, to understand that being a historian is wrangling with a group of facts and flawed perceptions and wringing the truth out of them.”

Three years ago, Renouard and fellow team teachers were seeking to enliven their 11th-grade curriculum and make a stronger connection between language arts and history. Using the 1993 film *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* as a model, they decided their students could become active historians by becoming active filmmakers. Students teamed up to create four- to five-minute films focusing on particular aspects of civil-rights history, and the end product—over two hours of student-produced historical research—became Nathan Hale’s first video quilt.

“For the civil-rights quilt, we focused on questions like ‘How do Americans find a voice?’ and ‘How did a disenfranchised group bring about such enormous change for the better?’” says Renouard. “This year our topic is New American Revolutions—it was Thomas Jefferson who said every society needs a good revolution now and then. We’re looking at the changes brought about by immigration at the turn of the century, the industrial revolution, the labor revolution.”

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Renouard’s students are now completing 35 short pieces ranging as close to home as Seattle’s vibrant Chinatown and as far afield as the contrary nature of industrialist Andrew Carnegie, at once a union backer, billionaire, and philanthropist. “The local angle is not exclusive, but we have a lot of strong history right here. The IWW ‘Wobblies,’ for example, were the most blatantly communistic of all the unions, but they had a real toehold here, and Everett, Wash., was the site of the 1916 Everett Massacre. As we’re studying immigration, we’re also drawing on the stories of a lot of our students and their families who came from Ethiopia, China, Eritrea, Indonesia. There are movers and shakers right here, something we also discovered when we looked at civil rights and interviewed local men who had been part of the Black Panther Party.”

Renouard emphasizes that every step of the project included conscious decisions about standards and curriculum. He and his fellow teachers Larry Uhlman, Lee Micklin, and Richard Molette frontloaded historical research into the first part of the project to give students a strong foundation. In language arts, the focus was on storycraft and script-building, with each student producing either a fiction or documentary script, and the team selecting the best one from the group or melding together their efforts. As production approached, Renouard began to add in the basic elements of filmmaking, from how to use a camera to lighting and

Related Resources

Video Quilt Samples

www.ciconline.org/accesslearning
A selection of clips from the Nathan Hale High School Video Quilt.

close-ups.

“They do all the pre-production, location scouting, finding costumes, and researching visuals. Our librarian helps lead them to the immense amount of public-domain digitized imagery available through the Library of Congress, Yale University, and other sources,” he adds. “They’re going to the library, reading books, researching on the Internet. They also use their research skills to find 30-second pieces of music that work in their film—you can freely use 30 seconds before copyright kicks in.” Finally, students have three weeks for video production and computer editing, often working two class periods a day on their section of the video quilt.

“The kids come to realize that history happens all around us and that they can affect history,” Renouard says. “History is not just what presidents and kings do, it’s what normal people do, and most of our films are focused on normal people. A project like this opens kids up to abilities that sometimes they didn’t even know they had, and it appeals to a real diversity of students. It requires patience, and it means a lot of growing pains, but it yields unexpected brilliance from your kids.” —TPB

