

Mapping Out the Historical Process in Novel Ways

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The standard final assessment for Dr. Max Felker-Kantor's undergraduate Ball State University course, "American History 1877 to the Present," was a research paper, and that is exactly what I planned to do. I had written my paper and was content, yet after reviewing the rubric to make sure I had met all the requirements, I found that there was another option available that I had never considered. Instead of writing an essay, I could choose a public history alternative: compose a historical site marker or create a more interactive history with the web-based ArcGIS StoryMaps application.¹ Using local historical sites as a way to think about national movements and events made them seem more compelling and led to using a greater variety of evidence (e.g., visual, video, and textual). These new options opened a door in my early experience as a historian and allowed my work to become more creative and inclusive. Choosing the nontraditional option resulted in stronger research that could be shared with a wider audience.

The project started with selecting two Indiana landmarks. Then students provided a detailed history of these two sites by expanding on the story behind the construction, the people who lived in these buildings, and connecting them to topics that we had touched on throughout the semester. The majority of students chose to create historical markers to describe the landmarks' significance. Following these brief histories, students wrote short reflections, providing specific examples of how these sites were connected to our classwork. Students could also use the ArcGIS StoryMaps application to present their work, which offered a more interactive experience for the audience than a plaque would provide.

StoryMaps creates a webpage that visitors scroll through to view maps, pictures, videos, and text. Combining these materials in one integrated experience explicitly displays the historian's knowledge and skills. Although I had already completed an essay, for the next 36 hours before the assignment was due, I poured myself into creating a StoryMaps project. This new platform allowed me to strengthen my voice as a public historian at the same time that I worked with new and exciting historical materials. The ArcGIS StoryMaps site provided me with all the tutorials needed to bring my project to life, although I did not delve too deeply into them and mostly created my work by trial and error. But this process was also key to figuring out the type of narrative I wanted to provide about the Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site (Indianapolis, IN) and the Lincoln Gardens Housing Project (Evansville, IN).² Somehow the importance of argument, justification, and the need for context becomes more obvious when building a public-facing project.

When planning my StoryMaps project, I gathered all of the primary and secondary sources I could find, and this was my first mistake. Not that I was using material that was not relevant, but rather that I was reflexively, uncritically accepting the words I had read without further investigation. At this point I was thinking that History is a bunch of facts about the past, when I should have realized that History does not happen in a void. It was only when I began engaging more actively in the historical process by locating and presenting primary sources and identifying connections to course materials, that I starting to move past the history-as-chronology mindset and see the complexity of long- and short-term factors.

Historians must question all of their sources in case of potential bias or irrelevance. This requires the historian to explain their choice and investigate the source's origin and creator. I felt like I was failing in the right directions as I contextualized the landmarks and how they forged a connection between Indiana's past and present and the nation as a whole. In the post-Civil War period, Southern Indiana provided a sanctuary for African Americans, but in the 1930s the New Deal did not improve African American communities to the

¹ *ArcGIS StoryMaps*, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/>.

² Samantha Kidder, "Engage in Indiana's History," *ArcGIS StoryMaps Project* (May 2021), <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/31c8117776444b1e8058cbb6b6805ae7>.

extent that it helped majority white communities. Investigating the Lincoln Gardens Housing Project revealed that it was opened by Eleanor Roosevelt in 1938, who was an important African American ally, initially housed 500 residents, and also included a USO for WWII servicemen. Although the housing project fell into disrepair and closed in the 1970s, from 2007 the site provided for the community in a new way, when it reopened as the Evansville African American Museum.³

There was a second hurdle I ran into during my work, which was luckily solved through the StoryMaps' structure. I was so focused on providing as much information as I could and my own thoughts, that I had not considered the landmarks' own stories. Only through experimenting with the different features of the StoryMap did I understand the type of narrative that would make the most sense with my sources. Using videos and images I was able to transition more smoothly and strengthen my argument. To show how African American housing was a key product of Roosevelt's New Deal, I used informational videos as secondary sources to provide interested viewers with a quick and compelling way to further explore the subject. In a public history project, offering optional material is a way to provide value-added paths, while maintaining the visitor's focus on the core argument. Similarly, photographs visualized the site's history, reminding us that the past looked and thought differently. The flexibility of this platform was a great benefit as these additions provided different perspectives and more exciting ways to understand the material presented.

Reflecting on this project, I see how StoryMaps influenced my developing historical skills and encouraged me to explore and defend my argument in novel ways. By broadening my research materials, I encountered sources that I would not have considered before. I brought different domains together, like geographic information systems and mixed media, which will attract a wider audience. I did not know it at the time, but this project honed my skills as a historian at the same time that it led me to public history. As the world becomes more comfortable with fully digital products, using apps like ArcGIS StoryMaps, helps historians show that history is relevant and easily accessible.