

## HOW TO PLAN AN EDUCATIONAL VISIT TO AN HISTORIC SITE

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### INTRODUCTION

Teaching history can be far more than dry lectures and reading long books. One challenge is to find creative and innovative ways to present the material. Another challenge is to avoid having a visit to an historical site degenerate into an elementary school field trip. The "historical staff ride" program in the United States Army can serve as an example of how to teach history outside of the classroom.

The "historical staff ride" is a method for teaching military history by visiting a battlefield and discussing the events that took place. The historic event is then used to teach current Army doctrine. The United States Army has had a leading role in developing this technique.<sup>1</sup> Battlefield visits have obvious applications to the education of Army officers. Yet the techniques used in developing a staff ride can be applied to any historical topic. This article provides some ideas on how to develop your own visit to an historical site. For simplicity, this out of classroom event will be called a visitation in this article.

### VALUE OF VISITATIONS

A visitation can be exceptionally valuable to a history class. There are concepts that are very difficult to communicate in the classroom. In military history, terrain appreciation is one of them. Unless students can look at the ground over which a battle was fought, many of the actions of units are meaningless. Arrows on maps often fail to communicate the sheer difficulty of moving from point A to point B.

A similar point can be made in a class covering eighteenth or nineteenth-century migration. What better way to appreciate the difficulties of moving cross-country in a Conestoga wagon than to go out to a location and try moving from point A to point B? Students will have a much better sense of history after they have tried to wrestle a wagon out of a rut and up a hill.

There are two key points to making a visitation worthwhile. The most important is imagination. There are countless locations around the country that the "historical staff ride" method can be applied to. A museum, a restored house, a factory, a park, or government building could all be locations that support an historical visit. The challenge is thinking of the commonplace in a new way.

The second key to making a visitation useful is developing the teaching point you want to make. Does the trip facilitate learning about an aspect of history that you cannot communicate in the classroom? Does the organization of the trip have the

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<sup>1</sup> The War College, the Command and General Staff College, the Center for Military History, and the Department of History at the United States Military Academy are all major proponents of the "historical staff ride" in the Army. The author would like to thank Professor Ira Gruber, Visiting Professor, Department of History, United States Military Academy, for commenting on a draft of this article.

students thinking, discussing, or doing something? Will the program of instruction do more than show students something? These are key questions to keep in mind as you prepare your excursion. Is it simply a lecture while standing? If the answer to this question is yes, then it should be a warning that you should rethink your tentative plan.

### CONSTRAINTS

A teacher always faces time and money constraints. Few military history teachers in California can realistically expect to fly their entire class to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to walk the ground of that historic battlefield. The maximum distance feasible for a visit of this nature is 100 miles, approximately two hours on a bus. With four hours driving time, round trip, your site visit can last four hours and still fit into an eight-hour day.

A trip longer than one day is probably not feasible for most classes. An overnight trip adds immense problems concerning lodging, meals, and other necessities. There is also the issue of how many other classes a student will miss while participating in your excursion.

These constraints need to be considered up front in the planning of your visitation. They will limit your possibilities. Several weeks into putting together the course plan for a project of this nature is not the right time to discover constraints.

### RESEARCH

The first step is to acquaint yourself with one of the several published "historical staff rides." A well known work is *The U.S. Army War College Guide to the Battle of Gettysburg*, edited by Jay Luvaas and Harold Nelson.<sup>2</sup> This, or one of the other volumes in the War College guidebook series, is indispensable as a format for creating your own visitation. Another valuable guide is William G. Robertson's *The Staff Ride*.<sup>3</sup> From these works you should have a good idea of how the ideal "staff ride" works. The format is easily transferable to other subjects.

At this point consult your course objectives to guide your research. You should look for an historical site that fits one of your goals. A course emphasizing transportation systems might want to look for a railroad bridge or canal. A key to success at this stage is imagination. Even the most mundane or well known location can be a valuable experience if used in a new and exciting way. Remember, the course objective should be a guide, not a constraint keeping you from visiting an important local site.

Armed with a basic idea of how a visitation operates and remembering the course objectives, the teacher, or trip organizer, now faces the hardest part. The RESEARCH! There is no need to panic at this step. Before resigning yourself to countless nights in the library reading, you should consider the following short cuts.

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<sup>2</sup> Jay Luvaas and Harold W. Nelson, ed., *The U.S. Army War College Guide to the Battle of Gettysburg* (Carlisle, PA: South Mountain Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> William G. Robertson, *The Staff Ride* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1987).

A key source of information is a nearby archive or research library. In my research for an "Historical Staff Ride to the Canard River," John Dann, the Director of the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, was of immense assistance. Mr. Dann was able to provide me with most of the extant sources on the Hull Campaign in the War of 1812. If you do not teach at a university or college, you are probably within driving distance of one. Odds are somebody on the staff or faculty of a nearby facility can assist you in your research.

Another available source is local historical or antiquarian societies. This seems like a strange place to look for information, but the rewards can be exceptional. For example, the Infantry Officer Advance Course, at the United States Army Infantry School, Fort Benning, Georgia, conducts an "historical staff ride" to Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park, Georgia. A park ranger at Kennesaw Mountain is a Civil War reenactor. This ranger gladly assists with the staff ride. This is the kind of asset that adds a great deal to a visit, but cannot be found readily. These unexpected wealths of information are out there. The key is tapping into the right group to find them.

If these short cuts fail to produce a possible site, then research is the only alternative. Initially, consult tourist guide type material to find some possible sites. There are numerous printed works that fit this description. One example is *Guide to Historical Resources in Orange County, New York*.<sup>4</sup> Published local histories are another good way to find sites near your classroom. Research with an eye toward the teaching point you want to make and the distance from your school.

## PLANNING

Once your research has uncovered a possible location, you must match the material to the terrain. The first step is to conduct a personal reconnaissance of the area. A sad fact of life is that construction does not stop for history. This is especially true if you want to visit an old battlefield. It is impossible to conduct an "historical staff ride" of the Battle of Detroit, August 16, 1812, because the Renaissance Center and the rest of downtown Detroit has altered the terrain. This holds to a lesser degree for other topics. Much of Saratoga Springs, New York, has changed. However, the Saratoga Historical Museum is sufficiently preserved to facilitate an interesting class on "taking a cure" in nineteenth-century society.<sup>5</sup> The terrain does not have to be exactly the same as when the event occurred; that would be an impossible requirement. However, major features should be the same.

The next step is to select several stopping points from which to discuss various aspects of the site. For a battlefield, you should select key terrain or a vantage point overlooking key terrain. For non-military visits, the spot should be some place with a view of an area that will facilitate your discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> *Guide to Historical Resources in Orange County, New York: Repositories* (Ithaca: New York Historical Resources Center, Olin Library, Cornell University, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> For more information on this particular site, call: (518) 584-3255/1531 or write: The Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce, 494 Broadway, Saratoga Springs, New York 12866.

Ideally, you want to read a first-hand description of the event or location at a particular stop. First-hand accounts from participants add realism and authenticity to your visit. While not a requirement, they are very beneficial. This method is illustrated with an example from an "historical staff ride" that I developed for the skirmish along the Canard River, Ontario, Canada, on July 16, 1812. My first stop was on the American side of the river, so I selected the following description of the terrain by Colonel Lewis Cass, the commander of American forces.

From Sandwich to the river Aux Canards lies an open country, cultivated for many years, for distance of about 12 miles, along or near the river—The river Aux Canards is a small stream, but deep—about three rods over, perhaps not so much, and has a bridge; there is an open prairie ground from the Camp towards Malden, for the space of about 1 1-2 miles, near which the ground is bad for marching troops,—the whole distance from Sandwich to Malden is quite level.<sup>6</sup>

Using the Saratoga Springs example, your first stop might be at the entrance to Congress Park looking toward the building where the museum is housed. From this vantage point you have a good view of the park and building. To begin your discussion you could read this description of the area from John Disturnell's 1864 travel guide.

The village of SARATOGA SPRINGS, 38 miles north of Albany and 40 miles south of Whitehall, by railroad route, is pleasantly situated on a plain, surrounded in part by a beautiful grove of pine trees. This is the most noted watering-place in the Union, or on the continent of America; the mineral springs, possessing great medicinal properties, . . . The village is built chiefly on one broad street, intersected by cross streets and the numerous large hotels and boarding-houses for the accommodation of visitors give it a lively and imposing appearance, particularly when thronged with fashionable company, as it usually is during the summer months. Population about 6,000.

The principal hotels are the United States Hotel, Union Hall, Congress Hall, Columbian Hotel, American Hotel, and Marvin House, all being situated on the main street or avenue running north and south. Other hotels and private boarding-houses are to be found in every direction. There are also several public bathing-houses near the Springs, where cold and warm water and shower baths can at all times be obtained.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> James G. Forbes, *Report of the Trial of Brig. General William Hull* (New York: Eastburn, Kirk, and Co., 1814), 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> J. Disturnell, *The Traveler's Guide to the Hudson River, Saratoga Springs, Lake George, Falls of Niagara and Thousand Islands; Montreal, Quebec, and the Saguenay river; also to the Green and White Mountains, and other parts of New England; Forming the fashionable northern tour through the United States and Canada* (New York: American News Company, 1864), 60.

The next step is to develop discussion questions for each of the planned stops. In a battlefield visit, these questions can develop lessons learned from the historical battle, how the battle should have been fought, or why the opponents acted the way that they did. The questions should expand on the passages read at that stop. Returning to the above example from the River Canard, some activities or questions that would follow from Colonel Cass's description are:

1. Conduct a terrain analysis of the Sandwich-River Canard-Fort Malden area.
2. Is the bridge over the River Canard key terrain?
3. What engineering assets are required for a river crossing operation?

Of course, if your topic is non-military, you would be developing different discussion questions. Returning to the example of Saratoga Springs, you could ask questions like these:

1. Was there a correlation between drinking spring water as a cure and the lack of municipal drinking water systems in the nineteenth century?
2. Why would a casino develop at a health spa?

A final consideration in the planning is the requirement for prior preparation. Preparation falls into two categories, class and individual. To get the most out of your visit, classes on the topic being studied might be necessary. Again, considering the River Canard, a class on nineteenth-century weapons and tactics would be useful before visiting the terrain. The key to developing your pre-visit lecture plans is to consider what your students need to know before they get to the site in order to get the most out of the visit.

The other aspect of the "staff ride" technique is individual preparation. In a visit to a battlefield, each student is assigned a particular role to play or the responsibility for leading the discussion at one stopping point. Returning to the Canard example, students could be assigned the roles of Colonel Lewis Cass, Brigadier General William Hull, Brigadier General Sir Isaac Brock, or the unknown British Army Captain in charge of the defenders at the River Canard. Prior to going on the trip, students should research their role in order to properly play the part during the visit.

Applying the role playing technique to a social history topic would work just as well. While the student may not have a name, they could still play a typical individual from a given group. Building on the Saratoga Springs example, roles could be assigned for a middle class white woman visiting the spa, an immigrant man working as hired help in the Casino, or an African-American woman working in the baths at the spa. At each stopping point a selected student would lead the discussion of society, using their character as a starting point.

Naturally, every student probably will not have a role to play or discussion to lead. This is not a serious problem. A good visit very much depends on the quality of the

preparation by the students. Student participation can be managed by having students work in groups to prepare the role.

### LOGISTICS

The planning and development up to this point has been entirely education oriented. However, for any historical visit to be successful, logistics need to be considered well ahead of time. If you are visiting a battlefield, one of the most important resources are maps. In the case of a well known battlefield, like Gettysburg, maps are fairly easy to obtain; however, for a less well-known battlefield maps could be a real problem. You need two maps. The first is a map of the area, showing the actions of the battle. You also need a good present-day road map so you can move around the location using the modern road network.

As previously mentioned under constraints, transportation and lodging are vitally important. Do not forget to coordinate bus transportation far enough in advance to support your trip. There is too much work involved in a project of this nature to see it all fall apart because the bus does not show up at the right time or place.

Permission to use the area also needs to be considered, especially if private property is involved. This could be a very time-consuming process, but several agencies exist to assist you. The Chamber of Commerce for the area you are visiting would probably be more than willing to help you contact the people necessary to use private property. Another resource might be a local school principal.

Clothing and equipment will depend on transportation decisions and weather. The variables of your specific trip preclude a discussion of all the factors that affect this aspect of logistics. One example can suffice: If you plan to walk anywhere, good walking shoes for all your students will be necessary.

### CONCLUSION

There are tangible benefits, besides educational value, involved with an historical visit. Use of local history helps to establish a greater sense of pride in where your students live. History is no longer something they read in books, but something that happened where they live. The research and coordination done to prepare for an historical visit also serves to strengthen ties between the school and local community. I hope this article stimulates you to develop your own historical visit. Proximity to a national battlefield should not dictate whether you conduct an historical visit. That river at the edge of school property might just be of historical significance. All that is required is a little research and some imagination.