

READING, WRITING AND WALKING: STUDENT PROJECTS LINKING PRIMARY DOCUMENTS, CLASSROOM LEARNING, AND HISTORICAL SITES

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Introduction

Virtually every instructor who teaches history survey courses has struggled with issues of time constraint at one time or another. Choices between sufficient content coverage, in-depth analysis of crucial issues, connections with broader concepts and themes, and opportunities to encourage critical thinking and analysis appear to be rivals for limited time on both the part of the student and instructor. I encountered this issue in an intensified manner in 1991 when I came to Kennesaw State University. The college recently had redesigned its general education core curriculum to include two courses in world history and two courses in United States history configured with the "typical" chronological divisions, but had reduced each course in credit hours and, concurrently, classroom contact time. I found myself having one-third less in class time with my students as well as needing to adhere to reasonable limitations on out-of-class requirements. Obviously I had to seriously restructure the form and content of the American survey classes I had been teaching to respond to these limitations. One difficult but extremely beneficial result of the restructuring was that I also had to reexamine and prioritize my goals with regard to what I most wanted students to gain by having studied U.S. history.¹

The project described in this essay is the product of that process of reflection and of my learning from the comments and papers of my students. On the surface it is simply a project in which I combined two formerly separate written assignments into a single more complex form. More significantly, I believe it is an exercise that encourages optimum learning in an efficient time frame. Perhaps most importantly, student responses also indicate that it offers a learning experience in which the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts.

Development of the Project

As noted, precursors to the current project included two separate written assignments. The first of these, the major writing assignment for the course, was an essay in which students were to trace a continuing theme in U.S. history, discussing an

¹For a discussion of the centrality of this reflective process in regard to in-class lecture, see Robert Blackey, "New Wine in Old Bottles: Revitalizing the Traditional History Lecture," *Teaching History*, 22 (Spring 1997), 4-5.

example of continuity and change over a period of time. The emphasis on continuity and change grew out of my clarifying priorities in my teaching of the survey. In stressing an understanding of the "big pictures", and continuing themes in history my goal was not to simplify history, but rather to lead students to an understanding that historical events are not isolated incidents separate from past or future. An increased student understanding of context and connection, continuity and change in history were chief objectives for the class.

The requirements of this paper were shaped also by a departmental commitment to introducing students to the centrality of primary materials in the study of history. In support of that goal all instructors were required to use a common set of textbooks in the core U.S. history classes, including Paul Boller and Ronald Story's *A More Perfect Union: Documents in United States History*.² In line with this departmental commitment to use primary materials, the basic sources for the students' interpretive essays needed to be documents selected from the Boller and Story reader.

A second assignment in the course was geared toward introducing students to the "variety" of sources available for interpreting history. Students were asked to visit an historic site located nearby and write a short paper evaluating what they had seen and learned. The stimulus for this paper was a firm belief that the three-dimensional, physical experience of a visit to an historical site provides students with unique learning benefits that cannot be duplicated in the classroom.³

The final step in the creation of the project was the direct result of my evaluating student papers generated by both assignments. While I was sure of the intellectual and pedagogical value of the major essay assignment, in general students detested it. In addition, only the strongest students produced papers that clearly demonstrated the ability to trace the continuity or change in an historical theme over time, and even fewer were able to utilize the primary material available in the documents with any skill at analysis. In contrast, students universally praised the historic site visit, and even marginal students regularly included little gems of insight into such things as the connection between the sites and their own experiences, or statements that reflected a sound grasp of the unique type of knowledge gained from material culture and historic

²With one exception (a reference in fn.11), all documents mentioned in this essay came from Paul F. Boller, Jr. and Ronald Story, *A More Perfect Union: Documents in U.S. History*, Vols. I and II, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996). This collection now is available in a fifth edition (2000).

³As examples, see Charles S. White and Kathleen A. Hunter, *Teaching with Historic Places: A Curriculum Framework for Professional Training and Development of Teachers, Preservationists, and Museum and Site Interpreters* (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1995); Dwight T. Pitcaithley, "Historic Sites: What Can Be Learned from Them," *The History Teacher*, 20 (February 1987), 207-219; John F. Votaw, "The Military Museum as Classroom," *Teaching History*, 19 (Fall 1994), 65-70; and, David S. Sutter, "How to Plan an Educational Visit to an Historical Site," *Teaching History*, 19 (Fall 1994), 71-76.

sites. Reflection on these outcomes resulted in a concerted effort on my part to combine the key objectives of each assignment into a single unified project. (The project as assigned to the students is attached as Appendix I.)

Description of Project

Basically divisible into a visit to an historic site⁴ and a written report, the specific requirements for the report structure the assignment to address several key objectives. These could be identified as follow:

1. Understanding of Historical Context and Significance. The site must be set into its historical context and evaluated as to its significance. Students are encouraged to use classroom notes and discussion and information in their general textbook to determine this significance. This requires students to practice some critical assessment of how the site relates directly to a specific event or time period and also to demonstrate what makes any such historical "moment" significant. Any successful effort at this requires students to display a grasp of the broader context of the site in U.S. history.

2. Written Expression of Knowledge; Application of Analytical Thinking. The summary of what the student saw is simplistic. But the requirement that students evaluate the presentation of the site by tour guides, printed information, and so forth requires that they apply what they know about the time period to assess the accuracy and validity of how the historical significance of the site is presented to the public. To do this successfully, skill in analysis of verbal, written, and visual sources of information is required.

3. Personalizing Learning and Knowledge. The required personal assessment of what students learned that they believe they could not have learned in class or from a book allows students to reflect upon the differences between traditional classroom-based modes of learning and experiential learning. Beyond broadening what the students learn about U.S. history, this also encourages each student to reflect on how he or she personally learns best.

4. Understanding of Historical Context and Developments; Critical Thinking; Use of Primary Materials; Written Expression of Knowledge. The central portion of the essay requires students to thoughtfully connect all of the basic historical concepts introduced in class to their experience at the site and their understanding of primary written records represented by the documents. Identifying a broad theme in history, relating a particular site to that theme, using primary material reflecting conditions,

⁴The metro Atlanta area as well as the surrounding counties and adjacent regions in nearby states offer students an incredibly wide array of publicly and privately operated historic sites, but a suitable list of acceptable "sites" could be generated by any instructor teaching in all but the most isolated areas. See Appendix II for examples of typical sites in Georgia.

attitudes, and values at specific times over a longer span of history, and organizing all of these elements into a meaningful essay creates a challenging assignment. The creative, discerning, and knowledgeable student often produces an essay of remarkable insight, but even less astute students do some parts of the assignment extremely well.

Student Responses

In general, an evaluation of student projects supports my contention that restructuring the project has strengthened the academic value of the paper and benefited students on both an intellectual and personal basis. Many students continue to produce poorly written papers that only minimally identify a valid theme connected to the site. Others demonstrate little creative thought, or fail to use accurately the most essential content of relevant documents. Yet even weak students consistently end their papers with statements about how much they learned or how much they enjoyed the project, and their papers reveal a heightened interest in historic parks, buildings, etc. In contrast, many students do sound jobs of demonstrating their grasp of the relationship between such sites as the Martin Luther King National Historic Site, the documents on seventeenth-century slave laws, Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Exposition Address," King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," and the concepts of both change and continuity in U.S. race relations.⁵ Beyond these solid projects, there are true jewels that demonstrate either substantial critical thinking and historical analysis or an understanding of the personal relevance of history. The following examples of student responses illustrate the merits of the project.

For one project a rather quiet, athletic-looking student who turned out to be an avid hiker used the Appalachian Trail as his site. As a document he used a 1921 magazine article displayed at the Trail's main visitors' center, written by a civil engineer who lobbied for the construction of the Trail.⁶ In the article the author argued that labor troubles in the United States largely stemmed from the daily drudgery of industrial work and the oppressive character of the urban setting in which workers lived. The Trail, he theorized, would provide a place where even the poorest of Americans could interact with nature and escape the stress of city life. The student directly linked this expression of the value of constructing the Trail to Jane Addams's "The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets"⁷ and the Progressives' belief in the detrimental impact of urban life for the working class immigrant. He further noted that

⁵Boller and Story, I, 24-26; II, 50-53; 245-251.

⁶Students are allowed to include additional primary material, but they must also use documents in the reader.

⁷Boller and Story, II, 128-134.

the use of logical arguments rather than emotional appeals to justify the Trail was a demonstration of the Progressives' reliance on pragmatism. He continued on to link later repair efforts on the Trail to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's recovery efforts through the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression, using Roosevelt's inaugural address as a related document.⁸ Finally, through this reasoning he linked the Appalachian Trail to the theme of social reform in U.S. history. As a final citation he included a reference to the Trail's website where I could find the log of his 40-mile hike from the visitors' center to the summit of Blood Mountain!⁹

More recently another student visited the Swan House, a 1920s-era Atlanta mansion now owned and operated as a historic home by the Atlanta History Center. After a sound description of the site and tour, she offered a rather critical, but equally sound assessment of the failure of the tour guide to set the home and the lifestyle of the residents into proper historical perspective. In particular she noted the guide's failure to comment on the continued serving of alcohol during prohibition. Far more astutely, she linked the site to three documents representing three different viewpoints on the possession of wealth. She cited Andrew Carnegie's "Wealth," the "Populist Party Platform," and Meridel Lesueur's "Women on the Breadline."¹⁰ She noted that the tour guide had pointed out that Robert Inman, the original owner, had inherited most of his wealth from his father, citing that Carnegie had identified that as one of the three ways of obtaining wealth. She went on to note, however, that her visit to the site had given her no reason to believe that Inman had followed Carnegie's famous "Gospel of Wealth" admonition to dedicate a portion of acquired wealth to benefit society. Contrasting the description of women seeking work during the Great Depression eloquently offered in "Women on the Breadlines" with the china and crystal used in the Swan House during the Depression years, she related the site to the continuing issue of class distinctions in U.S. history, and used the Populist document as an example of that conflict.

These are only two examples of students who not only competently fulfilled the assignment, but demonstrated a true understanding of how both historic sites and primary documents offer students of history an opportunity to form their own interpretation of history based on a variety of historical records. Certainly not all student papers reflect such skill in critical thinking and analysis as the two above, but I believe most students reap substantial benefits from the project. Other students gain less pervasive but still valuable insights into the relevance of history not just in general, but to them personally. For example, one young woman stopped me after class to

⁸Boller and Story, II, 167-170.

⁹The student's log is no longer available. For current logs of trail hikes see www.trailplace.com.

¹⁰Boller and Story, II, 95-98; 100-102; 161-165.

relate her experience over a Sunday dinner after she had visited the Swan house. While she was telling her family about her visit and how much she had learned, her grandmother had said, "Oh yes, it's lovely. I was a friend of Mrs. Inman and used to attend parties there." The project gave that student the opportunity to learn directly from her grandmother that the sources for understanding history surround us in our everyday lives if we seek them.

Perhaps the most personally satisfying response to the assignment I have read was from a student who asked to use a site that had no markers or tour guides to evaluate. He used an abandoned rail depot near his grandparents' home as his "site." His paper dealt with the rather narrowly defined theme of U.S. industrialization, particularly the New South philosophy. He used Tom Watson's "Populism in the South"¹¹ as an opposition view to the benefits of industrialization in the South. He successfully noted the corruption often associated with Gilded Age railroads and identified the farmers' and workers' struggles with big business. Most meaningfully to me he ended his paper with this paragraph.

In conclusion I can honestly say that I enjoyed every minute of my history excursion. From standing in half-foot deep water at Elizabeth to get a picture, to the absolute beauty of the Smokey Mountains at Etowah, I have learned that history surrounds us and if you dig deep enough it's easy to find. Most importantly I have seen history disappearing; from the demolished depots, to the elders who tell their stories of great steam engines and passenger trains. As I explored further and further into the subject it seemed the closer and closer I became to it. I now look at the railroad tracks behind my grandparents house with awe and humility. A great time has come and gone and what few connections we have to it seem to be vanishing. I am deeply bothered by this.¹²

Conclusion

As a teaching strategy the success of the project rests only in part with the students. It also demands a commitment from the instructor to teach "to" the objectives of the project. In class discussion of a specific historical event, I ask students to link the event with developments studied earlier, as either a contrast or a continuation, and to postulate on how it could affect later events in time periods yet to be examined. In

¹¹Paul F. Boller, Jr. and Ronald Story, *A More Perfect Union: Documents in U.S. History*, Vols. I and II, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), II, 50-53.

¹²Student paper.

addition to testing students on the content of the documents, during class time I devote attention to explaining how documents currently being discussed relate to previous ones, and suggest how specific documents relate to broad themes such as race relations or economic development. Our teaching must help students develop an appreciation for insight into the minds, structures, and perceptions of people and society at a particular historical time that primary documents offer. Similarly, class discussion should lead students to see the link between the primary documents they read and the broader events covered in a survey class.

On a practical level the assignment has great merit. It combines several major objectives into a single project, requiring a reasonable commitment of time on the part of both students and instructor in relation to the credit value of the class. Papers, as noted in the assignment, can be graded on the basis of correct composition as well as a demonstration of the grasp of key historical concepts, thus evaluating the student on skills and knowledge of several different kinds. The examples of student work cited above demonstrate how the requirement to link primary documents, the concept of historical themes, historic sites, and personal experience can offer the perceptive student exceptional opportunities to gain skills in composition, analysis of documents, and critical thinking. Perhaps just as importantly, reading primary materials and visiting historic sites can give almost any student a personal sense that "history" has some relevance to his or her own life experiences. As a history teacher it is that quality of the project that I consider to be of the greatest value.

Madison

Tullie Smith House, African History Center

(2) The more unique, discerning, and creative your choices are, the better.

Westville, Lumpkin (south of Columbus) through your papers.

Liberty Hall, home of Alex H. Stephens, Crawfordville

Your essay must be typed, proofread, and double-spaced. Make sure it is not longer than 3-4 pages (would seem appropriate). Your essay will be evaluated on the basis of content,

depth of analysis and thought, as well as grammar, mechanics, and quality of expression. In other words, do your best. Make use of the Writing Lab if necessary.

This is your chance to do something fun, intellectually challenging (I hope), and practice your writing skills at one of the following sites:

Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park

Chickamauga National Battlefield Park

Kennesaw Civil War Museum (home of "The General")

Pickett's Mill, East Paulding County

Andersonville Prison, Sumter County

Ft. Pulaski National Monument, Savannah

APPENDIX I

Assignment for Historic Site Evaluation

Visit an historic site associated with an event or person in U.S. history since 1890. A list of nearby sites is attached. There are other sites that you can choose. After visiting the site write a report that includes:

- (1) An introduction to the site that explains its historical significance. (You might need to read ahead in the text).
- (2) A summary of what you saw there.
- (3) An evaluation of how well the information, tour guides, etc. did in imparting an understanding of the role that the site played in American history.
- (4) A personal evaluation of what you think you learned from visiting the site that you could not have understood as well by reading about the topic in secondary sources.
- (5) A discussion of how the site relates to any major theme in U.S. history, identifying at least three documents in your reader that are related to that theme, and explaining how the site and the documents relate to that theme. While extensive quotations should be avoided, you must use the content of the documents, not just their "topic." This final "linking" of site, document, and theme might be the hardest part, but most important part. If you interpret the theme broadly enough, you will find applicable documents.
- (6) The more unique, discerning, astute, and creative your choice of theme, site, and documents are, the stronger your paper.

Your essay must be typed, proofread, and corrected. There is no set length, but 3 to 4 pages would seem appropriate. Your essay will be evaluated on the basis of content, depth of analysis and thought, as well as grammatical correctness and clarity of expression. In other words, do your best. Make use of the Writing Lab if necessary. This is your chance to do something fun, intellectually challenging (I hope), and practice your writing all at once.

¹Paul F. Diller, Jr. and Ronald Story, *A More Perfect Union: Documents in U.S. History*, Vols. I and II, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), II, 50-51.

²Student paper.

APPENDIX II

Popular Historic Sites in Georgia

A. NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY

- New Echota Cherokee Capital, near Calhoun
- Etowah Indian Mounds, Cartersville
- Vann House, at Spring Place
- Chieftains Museum, Rome (Major Ridge home)
- Ocmulgee Mounds, Macon
- Kolomoki Mounds, Blakely
- Red Clay State Historical area, Cleveland, TN

B. COLONIAL AND EARLY NATIONAL GEORGIA

- Savannah (numerous sites)
- St. Simons Island, Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center
- Augusta (home of George Walton, etc.)
- Hofwyl-Broadfield Plantation, Brunswick
- Traveler's Rest, Toccoa
- Fort King George State Historic Site, Darien (Guale Indians and English Fort)

C. ANTEBELLUM ERA

- Barnsley Gardens, near Adairsville
- Bulloch Hall, Roswell
- Madison
- Tullie Smith House, Atlanta History Center
- Gold Museum, Dahlonega
- Westville, Lumpkin (south of Columbus)
- Liberty Hall, home of Alex H. Stephens, Crawfordville
- Root House, home of Marietta's first pharmacist
- Savannah Historic Railroad Shops
- Robert Toombs House, Washington

D. CIVIL WAR

- Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park
- Chickamauga National Battlefield Park
- Kennesaw Civil War Museum (home of "The General")
- Pickett's Mill, East Paulding County
- Andersonville Prison, Sumter County
- Ft. Pulaski National Mounument, Savannah

E. LATE NINETEENTH - EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

- Wren's Nest, home of Joel Chandler Harris
- Swan House, Atlanta, History Center
- Roselawn, home of Rev. Sam Jones, Cartersville
- Marietta Welcome Center, walking/driving tour
- Agrirama, Tifton
- Noble Hill-Wheeler Memorial Center
- Alonzo Herndon Mansion, founder of Atlanta Life Insurance Co.
- Oakland Cemetery, Atlanta
- Jekyll Island, Convention and Visitor's Bureau
- Jarrell Plantation, Juliette
- Little White House, Warm Springs
- Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home
- Margaret Mitchell House, Atlanta

F. LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

- Martin Luther King Historic Site, King Center and Ebenezer Baptist Church
- Carter Library and Museum, Atlanta
- Plains, GA (home of Jimmy Carter)
- Erskine Caldwell Birth Home and Louise Grissard Museum, Moreland
- Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum

G. CITY AND COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUMS

- Atlanta History Center, W. Paces Ferry road
- Bartow Historical Museum, Cartersville
- Seven Springs Museum, Powder Springs
- Smyrna History Museum
- Marietta Museum of History, Kennesaw House

H. ADDITIONAL SITES:

- Various exhibits at the Atlanta History Center span different periods
- The Plantation Center, Stone Mountain Park, Stone Mountain, GA
- Numerous Sites in Alabama (ex. Selma, Tuskegee, Birmingham), or other nearby states are excellent choices
- Personal non-public sites may be approved by the Instructor