Breaking Barriers in Vermont History

Selecting a topic for your Vermont History Day project is a big decision. There are many topics you could choose, although your project must show a connection to the annual theme. This year the theme is “Breaking Barriers in History.” A barrier can be physical, like a wall or an ocean. Or a barrier can be ideological, like a law or tradition. People in the past might have put a crack in a barrier or completely knocked it down. Through your research and project, you will need to make connections between your topic and the theme. And remember your topic must be “in history.” The topic should be from long enough ago that historians have had time to analyze the impact. Current events are too recent to know the full impact. What interesting topic will you pick?

Your project for Vermont History Day does not have to be about Vermont history, but you might want to consider a local history topic. You can use local archives and museums or speak with local experts. You can uncover a Vermont story that is not widely known and you can qualify for one of the special prizes that are awarded for Vermont history projects.

One way to find a Vermont topic is to start with a national topic and make a local connection. Maybe you’ve heard that 2020 will mark the 100th anniversary of 19th Amendment to the US Constitution and you want to learn more about how women won the right to vote. You would explore the lengthy battle for suffrage in Vermont to determine if and when a barrier was broken.

A good place to start would be a secondary source, like the article “The Drive for Women’s Municipal Suffrage in Vermont, 1883-1917,” written by historian Deborah Clifford. This article points out that (tax-paying) Vermont women gained the right to vote in town school district elections in 1880 and in town elections in 1917. And then in 1920, all women could vote in all elections. How did these barriers get broken? What took so long?

For further research, you could listen to “Women Get the Vote, 1920” an episode from the Green Mountain Chronicles. The radio program from the 1980s is a secondary source, even though it includes quotes from oral histories. But the website has links to transcripts of the full oral history interviews which are primary sources.

You could also explore the papers of the Vermont Equal Suffrage Association, which are boxes full of primary sources, available at the Vermont Historical Society library. Plan your research using the finding aid which explains what types of materials are in the collection. As you conduct your research (and make note of your sources for your bibliography), you should narrow your topic to focus on a particular person or a particular event that helped break the barrier.

In addition to examining what happened in Vermont, you also need to explore the context of your topic. The women’s suffrage movement was a statewide, nationwide, and worldwide movement. What happened before? What happened elsewhere? What happened afterwards? Events in history do not happen in isolation. You also want to look at the significance of your topic. What difference did it make if women could vote in school or town elections? Did breaking barriers for women’s suffrage help break other barriers? For Vermont History Day, YOU get to be the historian who develops a thesis, analyzes primary and secondary sources, and uses evidence to support your argument showing that women in Vermont broke barriers to gain the right to vote.
Vermont topics for the theme: Breaking Barriers in History

- Suffrage movement – Annette Parmelee, Clarina Howard Nichols, Vermont Equal Suffrage Association, Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Vermont League of Women Voters
- Edna Beard – first woman elected to the Vermont Legislature
- Consuelo Northrup Bailey – first female lieutenant governor of Vermont and any US state
- The Long Trail – Green Mountain Club and the Footpath through the Wilderness
- Snowboarding – breaking traditions at some, but not all, ski areas
- Civil Unions and Marriage Equality – breaking barriers for equal rights
- Abenaki Winning State Recognition – a long fight to break barriers for citizens of the Elnu Abenaki Tribe, the Nulhegan Abenaki Tribe, the Koasek Band of the Koas Abenaki Nation, and the Abenaki Nation at Missisquoi
- Fresh Air Fund – breaking barriers by bringing city children to the country
- Fairbanks Scale Company – changing the way to measure heavy loads
- Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints – moving west to leave barriers behind
- John Deere – inventing a plow to break the sod and barriers to farming
- Calvin Coolidge – breaking the Boston Police Strike and opening up new political opportunities
- Lemuel Haynes – breaking barriers as an African American minister in Vermont from 1788-1818
- Free Public Education in Vermont’s 1777 Constitution – education for all children
- Brigham vs. State of Vermont and the Equal Educational Opportunity Act (Act 60) – equal education for all children
- Abolition movement and barriers to freedom – Underground Railroad, Rowland Robison at Rokeby, Vermont Anti-Slavery Society
- Bernie Sanders, Mayor of Burlington or Representative from Vermont in the 1980s and 1990s (but not Bernie Sanders, presidential candidate in 2019, which is a current event)
- Breaking Transportation Barriers – the Champlain Canal, the railroad, the interstate
- Mary Paul and other Vermont mill girls – breaking expectations and seizing new opportunities to work outside the home
- Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Ethan Allen 1909-1913 – breaking expectations but not segregation
- Precision Manufacturing in Vermont – breaking barriers of inefficiency
- Abby Hemenway – breaking gender barriers to preserve Vermont history
- Lucy Terry Prince – breaking barriers to defend her rights
- The Black Snake Affair – breaking the law and trade barriers in 1808
- The Flood of 1927 – physical destruction of barriers and changes in attitudes to federal aid