



Collection Assessment for Educator Partnership

A Brainstorming Toolkit for Local Historical Societies

This toolkit is designed to help staff and volunteers at local historical societies (LHS) take a fresh look at their collections (objects and archival materials) through the lens of education. Use it to identify items that could spark student inquiry and support classroom or on-site visits.

The questions and themes below are organized around subjects commonly studied by K-12 students. They are tied to the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards which are a nationally recognized framework built around inquiry.

How to Use this Document

Work through this document with your team (staff, volunteers, board members) who know your collection well. For each theme section:

- If you have a catalog, scan it for collection items that fit the themes below
- Use the *Inquiry Spark Questions* as a spot test: can a student meaningfully engage with this item?
- Jot down specific items from your collection in the notes column or on sticky notes
- Note the grade band(s) that seem most appropriate for each item you identify
- Flag high-potential items for follow-up

Grade Band and C3 Inquiry Quick Reference

The C3 Framework emphasizes four inquiry practices: constructing compelling questions, applying disciplinary tools, evaluating sources, and communicating conclusions. The grade bands reflect how these skills deepen over time.

Grade Band	C3 Inquiry Focus	What to Look for in Your Collection
K-2	Asking questions, observing, describing	• Tangible, visually clear objects • Simple photos • Familiar scenes
3-5	Sourcing, comparing, explaining cause & effect	• Objects with a clear function • Photos of daily life • Documents with dates/names
6-8	Corroborating, analyzing perspective, constructing arguments	• Multiple sources on one topic • Records showing change over time • Conflicting accounts
9-12	Evaluating sources, civic reasoning, taking informed action	• Complex primary sources • Records of decisions, power, or civic action • Oral histories

Theme 1: Community and Daily Life

Who lived here? How did people work, eat, dress, travel, and gather? These questions anchor many elementary and middle school units. Nearly every local collection has materials that speak to daily life across generations.

Collection Type	Sample Items for which to Look	Inquiry Spark Questions	Grade Bands
Objects	- Kitchen tools & cookware - Clothing & textiles - Farming implements - Toys & games - Trade or craft tools	- What was this object's purpose? - Who might have owned this, and what was their life like day-to-day? - How is this different from what we use today? Are there any similarities? - What does this object tell us about what people valued?	K-2 3-5 6-8
Photographs	- Family portraits - Street scenes - Workplaces & storefronts - School or church gatherings - Seasonal or holiday images	- What do you notice first? - What questions do you have? - What can you infer about this community from what you can see? - How has this place or gathering changed over time? - Whose stories might be missing from these images?	K-2 3-5 6-8
Documents & Records	- Town directories & ledgers - Diaries & letters - Church membership records - School records & report cards - Recipes, newspapers, or almanacs	- What was important to the person who wrote this document? - What does this record tell us about how community was organized? - What is surprising or unexpected about this document? - How does this source compare to another from the same era? Different era?	3-5 6-8 9-12

Theme 2: Work, Industry, and the Local Economy

How did people make a living? What industries shaped this community? Economic history is central Vermont's story. Agriculture, lumber, granite, marble, mills, and manufacturing all left traces that local collections often hold.

Collection Type	Sample Items for which to Look	Inquiry Spark Questions	Grade Bands
Objects	• Farm or dairy equipment • Mill or factory tools • Trade signs & ledger books • Samples of local products (wool, maple, granite) • Currency, tokens, or receipts	• What kind of work required this tool? • Who did this work? • How did this industry affect/impact the community as a whole? • Is this industry still part of our community today? Why or why not?	3-5 6-8
Photographs	• Factory or mill interiors • Workers at their jobs • Storefronts and market scenes • Before/after images of industries	• What working conditions can you observe in this image? How does this compare to workplaces today? • What questions would you ask the people in this photograph? • What does this image tell us about who held economic power?	3-5 6-8 9-12
Documents & Records	• Business ledgers & account books • Employment or wage records • Advertisements & trade catalogs • Deeds and land records • Tax records	• What can wages or prices tell us about fairness and inequality? • Who owned land or businesses in this community? Who didn't? • How do these records reflect broader economic forces (industrialization, the Civil War, the Great Depression)? • What do these documents reveal that photos might not?	6-8 9-12

Theme 3: Civic Life, Government, and Community Decision-Making

How did people govern themselves and participate in community life? Civic history is at the heart of the C3 Framework's emphasis on informed action and democratic participation. Vermont's town meeting traditions make local civic records especially rich.

Collection Type	Sample Items for which to Look	Inquiry Spark Questions	Grade Bands
Objects	• Ballots or voting materials • Meeting gavel or ceremonial items • Awards, plaques & community honors	• What does this object tell us about how people made decisions together? • Who was allowed to participate in civic life at this time? Who was excluded? • How does this compare to how decisions are made in our community today?	3-5 6-8
Photographs & Maps	• Town hall or courthouse images • Protest or civic gathering photos • Historical maps of town boundaries • Infrastructure (roads, bridges, water systems)	• What does this map tell us about priorities and power in the community? • What civic project does this image document? Who was involved? • What would you ask the people who gathered here? • How has the community's footprint grown or changed? Why?	3-5 6-8 9-12
Documents & Records	• Town meeting minutes • Local ordinances or bylaws • Election results & ballots • Petitions & letters to officials • Town annual reports	• What issue was this community trying to solve? • Who had a voice in this decision? Who didn't? • Can you find evidence of disagreement or competing ideas? • How did this decision shape the community in the years that followed?	3-5 6-8 9-12

Theme 4: Migration, Identity, and Community Change

Who came here, from where, and why? Who left? How did the community's identity shift over time? Vermont communities have been shaped by Indigenous peoples, waves of immigration, and migration in multiple directions. These stories often surface in unexpected corners of a local collection.

Collection Type	Sample Items for which to Look	Inquiry Spark Questions	Grade Bands
Objects	• Items from immigrant households • Religious or cultural objects • Traditional clothing or crafts • Items brought from homelands	• Where do you think this came from? How did it get here? • What does this tell us about what people carried with them when they moved? • How might this object connect a family to a place far away?	K-2 3-5
Photographs & Maps	• Ethnic or cultural group portraits • Neighborhood or district photos • Images of places of worship or cultural institutions • Before/after population maps	• What communities or groups are visible in these images? • How does this image challenge or confirm what you expected to find? • What can a map tell us about which groups lived where and why?	3-5 6-8 9-12
Documents & Records	• Naturalization papers • Ship manifests or passenger lists • Letters in multiple languages • Religious organization records • Obituaries or genealogical records	• What challenges might this person have faced arriving here? • How does the language of this document reflect power and who "counted" as a citizen? • What can a name tell us about a person's origins and identity? • What was happening in the world that might have caused this family to move?	3-5 6-8 9-12

Theme 5: Conflict, War, and Social Change

How have periods of conflict and social transformation shaped this community? Military history is a common curriculum focus at multiple grade levels, but local collections often hold materials that bring national and global events into a personal, human frame.

Collection Type	Sample Items for which to Look	Inquiry Spark Questions	Grade Bands
Objects	• Uniforms, insignia, or medals • Weapons or equipment • Homefront items (ration books, victory garden tools) • Memorial objects or monument photos	• Who owned this, and what might their experience have been? • What does this object tell us about how “ordinary” people were affected by war? • How did this community prepare, sacrifice, or grieve?	3-5 6-8
Photographs & Maps	• Group portraits of soldiers or veterans • Homefront gatherings or war bond drives • Post-war rebuilding or memorialization • Images of social movements (labor, civil rights, suffrage)	• What emotions do you see in this image? • How was this image used, and by whom? • What does the staging or framing of this photo tell you about its purpose? • How did this moment of change create new opportunities or new hardships?	6-8 9-12
Documents & Records	• Town meeting minutes • Local ordinances or bylaws • Election results & ballots • Petitions & letters to officials • Town annual reports	• What issue was this community trying to solve? • Who had a voice in this decision? Who didn't? • Can you find evidence of disagreement or competing ideas? • How did this decision shape the community in the years that followed?	6-8 9-12

Theme 6: Environment, Land, and Place

How have people interacted with the natural environment of this place over time? What has been preserved, lost, or transformed? Place-based learning is especially strong in Vermont, and many collections hold materials that connect directly to the landscape within which students live and interact.

Collection Type	Sample Items for which to Look	Inquiry Spark Questions	Grade Bands
Objects	• Farming & land-use tools • Fishing, hunting, or forestry equipment • Natural specimens or samples • Objects tied to seasonal cycles	• How did people use land within this community? • What can this object tell us about the seasons and the natural world? • How have our relationships with the land changed over time?	K-2 3-5
Photographs & Maps	• Historical land surveys or plat maps • Before/after landscape photos • Images of cleared land, forests, or waterways • Aerial images	• What has changed about this landscape? What has stayed the same? • What does a historical map tell us about who claimed the land and how they used it? • What environmental decisions were made here? Were there consequences? • How might Indigenous peoples have understood or used this land differently?	3-5 6-8 9-12
Documents & Records	• Lumber or quarry company records • Water rights or mill privilege papers • Agricultural census data • Conservation or boundary dispute records	• Who controlled this resource, and who benefited? • What conflicts arose over natural resources? How were they resolved? • Can you trace how land ownership changed over one or two generations? • How do historical decisions connect to environmental conditions we see today?	6-8 9-12

Theme 7: Schools, Churches, and Community Institutions

How did communities organize themselves around shared values, learning, and care? Schools, churches, fraternal organizations, libraries, and civic clubs have shaped nearly every Vermont community, and they often leave archival trails.

Collection Type	Sample Items for which to Look	Inquiry Spark Questions	Grade Bands
Objects	• Schoolbooks, slates, or school supplies • Diplomas or report cards • Church hymnals or ceremonial objects • Fraternal or civic group regalia	• How did people use land within this community? • What can this object tell us about the seasons and the natural world? • How have our relationships with the land changed over time?	K-2 3-5
Photographs	• School class portraits • Church or religious gatherings • Organization meeting or event photos • Library or public building images	• What do you notice about who is included in this image? • What does the setting tell you about community values? • How has the role of this institution changed over time? • Who has made decisions for this institution? How do you know?	3-5 6-8
Documents & Records	• School district records or curricula • Church membership or baptism records • Club minutes, constitutions, or membership roles • Charitable giving or fundraising records	• Who controlled this resource, and who benefited? • What conflicts arose over natural resources? How were they resolved? • Can you trace how land ownership changed over one or two generations? • How do historical decisions connect to environmental conditions we see today?	6-8 9-12

Collection Brainstorming Exercise

Use the space below to record items your team identifies for each theme. Make notes about conditions, handling, and location in your space/catalog. Also, identify any necessary follow-up steps needed.

Inquiry Spark Questions

✓	Selection Criterion	Assessment Questions to Ask within Team
	Does it tell a story?	Can this item be connected to a person, event, place, or moment in time that students could research further?
	Does it raise a question?	Does the item prompt genuine curiosity, or challenge assumptions, rather than simply confirming what students already know?
	Does it represent this place?	Does this item reflect something specific and authentic about this community?
	Does it represent diverse voices?	Does your selection include items connected to a range of community members, not just the prominent?
	Can a student observe it?	Is there something visible, tangible, or legible for a student to examine in person or in a high-resolution image?
	Is it accessible?	Can it be handled safely, loaned, photographed, or digitized? Is the condition suitable for use with students?
	Does it connect to a curricular subject or C3 Standard?	Does it align with a theme commonly taught at a grade level in nearby schools?

Suggested Next Steps After Brainstorming

- Photograph each identified item and create a simple "Object Card" with name, provenance, approximate date/period, and 2-3 inquiry questions
 - Consider building one or more *Primary Source Sets* of 5-8 objects that connect to a specific theme, a compelling question, and a C3 Standard
 - Reach out to a potential education partner to share an idea or activity that integrates a *Primary Source Set* that could be shared on-site or in a classroom setting
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Collection Items Identified by Theme

Theme	Possible Collection Items	Grade Band & Next Steps
Community & Daily Life		
Work, Industry, & the Local Economy		
Civic Life, Government, & Community Decision Making		
Migration, Identity, & Community Change		
Conflict, War, & Social Change		
Environment, Land, & Place		
Schools, Religious Institutions & Community Organizations		