



Triumph and Tragedy in Vermont History

You have a lot of choices to make when you decide to participate in Vermont History Day. Are you going to work by yourself or with a friend? Do you want to make a website or write a paper? You also need to decide what topic you will research – a topic that fits this year’s theme of “Triumph and Tragedy in History.” A triumph can be related to winning – like a fight for more rights. A triumph can also be an individual achievement, like succeeding against the odds. A tragedy can be a horrible event like a disaster or a personal loss. You may find that a single event is seen as a tragedy by some and a triumph by others. When you connect your topic to the theme, you should address both triumph and tragedy, but you don’t have to cover them equally. As you work on your project, you might narrow your topic and refine your thesis, but make sure you pick a topic you find interesting. Remember to pick a topic that is “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.

Your project for Vermont History Day does not have to be about Vermont history, but you might want to consider a local history topic. There are archives and museums in Vermont where you can research local stories and make local connections; and there are experts who can help you. You can uncover a local story that is not widely known and have a unique topic at the state contest. And you can qualify for one of the special prizes that are awarded for Vermont history projects.

One example of a Vermont topic that fits the theme is the reapportionment of the Vermont legislature in 1966. Prior to 1965, each town in the state sent one representative to Montpelier, regardless of how many people lived in the town. The US Supreme Court declared this system unconstitutional because it violated the 14th Amendment. In 1965, the Vermont House voted to change the balance of legislative districts so that representation is now based on population and all districts have a similar number of people.

So how is this a both triumph and a tragedy? It depends on perspective. Governor Phil Hoff, from Burlington, supported reapportionment and probably considered the change a triumph, one that would lead to further improvements to Vermont. But some legislators saw that small towns would lose their vote in Montpelier, a tragedy that would impact their communities in the future. Newspapers from the time are great primary sources to explore this topic.



Now we have a connection to the theme, some ideas for research about short-term and long-term impact, what about the bigger picture, the historical context? How long had unequal representation been an issue? What else was happening at that time related to voting rights and representation in the United States in the 1960s?

A good History Day project includes research and analysis and investigates what happened, how things changed (or didn't change), and why this topic happened at this place and at this time. Historians examine the context of an event by looking at the time and place. A good History Day project also looks at the significance of the story and answers the question "So what?" Why is this story important to tell? With your project, you can investigate how triumph and tragedy changed history.

Vermont Topics for: Triumph and Tragedy in History



- Educational reform and school consolidation in Vermont (<https://vtdigger.org/2015/09/08/william-mathis-the-history-of-school-consolidation-battles/>)
- The Raid on the Abenaki village of St. Francis by Rogers' Rangers (1759) and different perspectives of the event (<https://vermonthistory.org/images/stories/articles/historicroots/theraidonstfrancis.pdf>)
- Railroad worker Phineas Gage's tragic injury and medical advancements in brain science (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/05/21/528966102/why-brain-scientists-are-still-obsessed-with-the-curious-case-of-phineas-gage>)
- Greater safety and efficiency of bulk tanks at dairy farms, leading to the closure of numerous farms in the 1950s (<http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/the-coming-of-the-bulk-tanks-1954>)
- The disastrous 1927 Flood followed by the introduction of flood control measures which were tested by the Hurricane of 1938 (<http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/the-flood-of-27-1927>)
- Reverend Lemuel Haynes, anti-slavery advocate – individual successes in the face of racism (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p29.html>)
- The tragic effects of silicosis and Barre granite workers strikes in the 1920s and 1930s for safer working conditions (<http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/fighting-silicosis-dust-control-in-the-granite-industry-1937>)
- Women gaining the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution – but without Vermont's support (<http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/women-get-the-vote-1920>)
- *Baker v. Vermont*, the denial of equal rights and the introduction of Civil Unions (<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/26/us/vermont-gives-final-approval-to-same-sex-unions.html>)
- Early aviation in Vermont, including the crash that killed George Schmitt (<http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/early-aviation-1910>)
- The Elnu, Nulhegan, Koasek, and Missisquoi bands of Abenaki achieve recognition by the state after years of being marginalized (<http://vcnaa.vermont.gov/recognition/recognized-tribes> and <http://vermonthistory.org/research/research-resources-online/green-mountain-chronicles/the-first-vermonters-the-abenakis-1976>)
- Child labor in Vermont, as seen through photographs by Lewis Hine – see individual stories: <https://morningsonmaplestreet.com/2015/01/01/meyer-rome/> <https://morningsonmaplestreet.com/2015/01/01/morris-levine/>
- Romaine Tenney, eminent domain, and the construction of the interstate highways in Vermont (<https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/2016/11/24/history-space-creation-vermont-interstates/94332176/>)