



“We’re going where?”: Experiential Learning and the Landscape of History in Vermont

When I announced that our field trip was headed to the Essex Junction Village Burial Ground, the students were confused. What did a cemetery have to do with history? Was this just a silly, slightly creepy way to occupy them on the first day? In some ways that’s exactly how this field trip began, but it quickly became much more.

BY SUSAN OUELLETTE

One of the greatest challenges to teaching history is creating opportunities for students to imagine the world they are trying to understand. The more distant in time, the more difficult it becomes to bring the past alive. As historian and author David Lowenthal rightly observed in 1985, “The past is a foreign country.” Of course Lowenthal’s work is far more complex and theoretical than I am able to address here, but the sentiment that the past is a strange and unfamiliar place to navigate is certainly relevant to this essay.¹ In some ways, as a teacher of American history, I am lucky: The historical landscape I am trying to resurrect for my students often lies outside our very windows. It is sometimes hidden with accreted layers of modernity, but at other times the past is present in antique buildings, ancient roadways, and other physical remnants of former times. I did not always recognize what a treasure trove of teachable material I had just outside my classroom windows, but I cannot imagine my current teaching practices bereft of these prospects.

.....

SUSAN OUELLETTE is Professor of History and American Studies at Saint Michael’s College.

Vermont History Vol. 84, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2016): 1–8.

© 2016 by the Vermont Historical Society. ISSN: 0042-4161; on-line ISSN: 1544-3043

My “discovery” of the teachable landscape began a little less than a decade ago as I prepared to teach a seminar entitled “Antebellum America.” An upper-level humanities offering, this course was intended to be a topical consideration of the period before the Civil War, with special attention paid to the social history of ordinary people. I chose my readings and developed a rough syllabus of reading, writing, and classroom activities. After I had accomplished most of the preparation for the fall semester, I became convinced that as much as I liked the topic, the course as it was conceived still lacked a “spark” to ignite students’ interests. I paid close attention to the learning objectives expected of these courses—a strong writing component, primary document analysis, thesis development, and rich content—but I also wanted to inspire my students with firsthand practice. In other words, I wanted them to have the experience of *doing history*. I especially wanted to incorporate the interpretation of primary sources—manuscript documents, maps, and images—anything that could enliven and deepen their learning experience. Work with primary sources has always been exciting for me and I hoped that students would benefit from both the thrill of discovery and the practical application of interpretive skills. Moreover, I anticipated that these proficiencies would enrich their work in other history courses and beyond. I must admit that some of my motivation for this type of course development was fueled by the growing importance of the capstone history thesis that all students in our major have to complete at my institution. I’d had my fill of the same few topics that students chose simply because they had been introduced to various historians’ secondary interpretations. I wanted them to become more adventurous and explore less-traveled subjects through the investigative methods of historians. In other words, in their upper-division courses they were getting a good grounding in what other historians thought and wrote about, but often had few opportunities to actually develop their own independent thinking and scholarship.

So, as I thought about the materials I might bring to the “Antebellum America” course, I also looked for ways I could introduce my students to the practical skills that would serve them in that process. I pondered various scenarios to engage them—role playing, debates, journalistic reporting—all worthy and useful approaches. Beyond the practical considerations, I also hoped to convey the excitement and wonder of discovery that were so much a part of my own attraction to the profession as a scholar and teacher. So, I assembled a list of readings, gathered a toolkit of activities, and finalized my syllabus—almost.

In the end, I was faced with a small hitch that was more of a scheduling issue: What was I going to do for the first class, when students would not be prepared for anything substantive? An introductory lecture was a safe

option, but the first day of class on the last day of August was likely to be warm, sunny, and hardly conducive to students listening intently at their desks. I decided that for that day, leaving the classroom had a great appeal for all of us. Little did I know that this would fundamentally shift my teaching strategies from that time forward.

Casting about for a place to take my students, I finally settled on a local cemetery, the Essex Junction Village Burial Ground, with a fairly sizable section created between 1800 and 1860. When I announced where our field trip was headed, the students were confused. What did a cemetery have to do with history? Was this just a silly, slightly creepy way to occupy them on the first day? In some ways that's exactly how this field trip began, but it quickly became much more. At the cemetery, I paired up the students, told them to pick a row of headstones in the designated area, and asked them to record every bit of information they could find. The students dutifully complied, and even became enthusiastic about the work. It was a beautiful afternoon and they were outside. I gave them an hour to wander, take notes, do sketches, and make plot maps, and then we adjourned to a small ice cream shop across the street. Sitting at the picnic tables outside, but still in sight of the cemetery, I asked what the students thought they knew about the people they had just discovered. Anticipating their answers, I hoped they would come to see that these graves were the final resting place of people who lived in the time that we were about to study. I wanted them to understand the flesh-and-blood reality of the people who lived the experience of the antebellum period. But they did far more than that. The first discussion was lively and interesting; the students were full of questions and the answers led them to other questions and new ideas about the people, place, and time reflected in that small graveyard.

Over the course of the semester, our field trip became the cornerstone of many of the discussion threads we would pursue for the entire semester. Among the headstones of the burial ground in Essex Junction, the students discovered all the national themes we would explore: the development of the new frontier settlements in Vermont as well as the Ohio Valley after the American Revolutionary period; the high mortality of



Essex Junction [Vermont] Village Burial Ground. Photograph by the author.

women in childbirth and equally high mortality of children from epidemic disease; the development of the new industrial economy that brought steamboats, textile mills, and railroads; demographic changes in the face of the arrival of immigrants; and the Second Great Awakening and other antebellum reforms such as abolition and temperance.

The initial discussions begun over ice cream at the first meeting expanded. Class discussion frequently circled back to the evidence gathered in Essex Center as we explored these various themes in secondary readings as well as primary documents and images culled from local histories, newspapers, municipal documents, wills, deeds, maps, and other primary sources. The engagement of the students was palpable and exciting. They became the explorers and, in turn, I became invigorated by their discoveries. For me, though, the most important discovery I made was the allure and pedagogical potential of the historical landscape that lurked right down the street from our classroom.

This first successful foray (albeit accidental) into place-based history led me to rethink how I could use local resources to infuse my teaching with that same “voyage of discovery” approach. As a social historian, my interests have always focused on the history and experience of ordinary people, and I had often used local history in my scholarly explorations. But I had not consciously thought to translate this directly into my classroom. This pedagogical “blindness” was likely a result of my training. Until recently, academic historians tended to overlook and sometimes held outright disdain for local history and its practitioners; the societies that created and preserved that part of the historical narrative were deemed “antiquarian” and by definition, not scholarly. Fortunately, this has begun to change and a shift toward a new appreciation for local history as a micro-laboratory for understanding regional and national historical trends has emerged. This surge in scholarly interest focused on local history resources has also promoted an increased awareness of the value and utility of local history in a variety of contexts. “The little old ladies in tennis shoes” who created and nurtured these small, local historical societies have developed rich collections of materials that mainstream archivists of the past rejected as being too parochial or mundane. As scholarly interest in social history increased, these somewhat quirky repositories began to inform many different kinds of historical inquiry, even if limited to the geographic confines of “local.” As historian Carol Kammen has observed, such local historians informed and energized historic preservation, contributed materially to document collections, and helped to foster a flood of film, historically focused writings, and performance art.²

So, while I was aware and appreciative of the efforts of the “little old ladies in tennis shoes,” I embraced them in my scholarly work but largely

ignored the possibilities of their utility in my teaching. Others were not as slow in this recognition. A renewed and updated interest in the history of communities has also stimulated many schools and colleges to develop courses that emphasize local history. The more sophisticated approaches also incorporate the expansive social history categories of study—including, but not limited to, women’s history, ethnic history, urban history, and so on.³ I only discovered this rich new area of pedagogical resources after my students enthusiastically plunged into the archival materials they needed to explain some of the “mysteries” of the cemetery. This was my “aha” moment. The original cemetery field trip exercise marked the beginning of a whole series of courses—not to mention a few senior thesis projects—that I eventually created or redesigned. In courses that already existed, I expanded on and experimented with a variety of settings, methodologies, and skills. Each success led to another set of ideas and opportunities.

The first course specifically designed to use local, place-based history was entitled “The St. Albans Raid.” Students wrestled with the question of why Confederate sympathizers chose St. Albans, Vermont, as the target for what was the northernmost action of the Civil War. They had to identify, collect, sort, make sense of, and then interpret a wide array of documents, including manuscript federal census lists, land records, newspaper reports, government documents, maps, correspondence and diary entries, and other ephemera. Along the way, this intentional place-based history morphed into a service-learning opportunity for the students as they catalogued, scanned, and organized the materials they gathered. Collectively employing these materials, individual students worked on self-selected aspects of St. Albans history and wrote interpretive essays based on their research. At the end of the semester, they shared their finished papers, and the raw data collection was stored on searchable CDs, with the St. Albans Historical Society. The element of service-learning embedded in sharing the collected materials with interested community partners was new to me. At the same time, it signaled another shift in my pedagogical approach: the engagement of community stake-holders in the projects that students could undertake.

In the initial development of “The St. Albans Raid” course, I consulted with the Saint Michael’s College archivist, Elizabeth Scott. She assisted in the development of a basic tutorial for students interested in the collection of archival materials. The collection, collation, and preservation of the data on St. Albans were the initial result of this exercise. However, this was the beginning of yet another local history adventure: It was Ms. Scott who pointed out a huge range of opportunities for similar student projects on a variety of primary sources housed in the archives at Saint

Michael's College. The college archives collect and preserve materials related to the history of the institution, but they also contain the substantial archive of the founders of Saint Michael's College, the Society of Saint Edmund (SSE). These materials held tremendous possibilities for student projects that capture place-based local history, experiential learning, and community-engaged learning. The Saint Michael's College archives subsequently became an important catalyst for a new style of course.

The concept of service-learning is another new development in college-level curricula, including but not limited to the humanities.⁴ In the instance of the "St. Albans Raid," students performed a service for the community of St. Albans by collecting, cataloging, and organizing historical resources for the community's use. In this example, the historical society, town government, school system (pupils or teachers), and other interested parties directly benefited from the digital archive created by the college students. Their work would continue to be a resource for the community long after the students' involvement ended. This experience deeply influenced my thinking about the utility and long-term benefits of place-based history and service-learning.

The next foray into this genre of courses was "The Society of Saint Edmund in the Era of Civil Rights." This was the first course I taught that deliberately married service-learning, community-engaged learning, and local, place-based history. As indicated above, this course grew directly out of my original collaboration with our archivist, Ms. Scott. The accessibility of the Edmundite archives on campus, the backlog of materials flowing into the college archives that needed cataloguing, and the enduring link to the Edmundite mission at Selma, Alabama, connected all the dots. The history of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s as lived by the Edmundites in Selma merged with an opportunity for service-learning in the archives in Vermont as well as community-engaged learning in Selma. These materials, generated by the Edmundites, some of whom participated directly in the 1965 protest marches, were preserved in the Society's document collection housed at Saint Michael's College. In effect, the students' work bridged the local history of Vermont with the national narrative of civil rights. The service-learning/community-engaged learning aspects of the course were two-fold: Students would participate in processing the Society's documents in the college archives, and they would travel to Selma to participate in service-based activities at the mission itself. The course was delivered twice, first in the fall of 2008 and again in the spring of 2010. Predictably, the outcomes of the two semesters were quite different. The final project of the 2008 course was a series of local public presentations (one at Montpelier in the State House) coinciding with the Martin Luther King, Jr. celebrations. The students in 2010, spurred on by

*Class picture, 2008.
Saint Michael's College
students at Selma, Alabama.
In the background, the
Edmund Pettus Bridge, scene
of the civil rights marches from
Selma to Montgomery, in
March 1965. Photo by the
author, used with permission.*



new technology and expanding opportunities through our IT department, produced a short documentary film screened on campus and then uploaded to YouTube. The documentary, made from historical footage, their own film shot in Selma, present-day interviews, and still photos from the SSE collections, captured the story of the Edmundites' social justice past and the students' historical journey as well. Overall, the intellectual development and expansion of research skills of the students involved with these two experiences was amazing and led to additional projects, including capstone projects with publishable results.

The most recent course taught in this genre has brought me back full circle to using a cemetery as the stepping off point. In the spring of 2012, I was contacted by the administrator for the Merrill Cemetery, a burial ground that is now a part of the Saint Michael's College campus. The administrator, Nancy Deyette, needed help in determining the history of the cemetery and in identifying the actual boundaries of the original burial ground. "Society and Culture in America: the Social History of the Merrill Cemetery," was launched in the fall of 2012 to serve the needs of the community that wanted to make use of the cemetery, and to provide another opportunity for service- and community-engaged learning. Once again, students used a cemetery as a basis for studying the history of the local community while embedding their work in the context of the larger American national narrative. A number of the student-designed projects that emerged from the semester coincided with, and helped to inform, the 250th anniversary of the town of Colchester. An end-of-the-semester reception included project posters, short films, and photographic essays, and inspired additional projects that are ongoing.

In sum, I want to suggest some fruitful possibilities for experiential and community-engaged learning with local history. First, as a qualification, I realize that the depth to which these activities can be developed depends entirely on the number of students enrolled and intrinsic details such as transportation, accessibility, and cost. However, small exercises—a walk in a cemetery or a historical walking tour—are the best place to begin. For



Class picture, fall 2012, at Merrill Cemetery of Saint Michael's College, Colchester, Vermont. Photograph by the author, used with permission.

instance, a landmark or a building can illustrate changes over time. Who built it? What might have preceded it? How does it inform us of the motivations, needs, and expectations of the people who built, placed, or preserved it? Of course, I always recommend cemeteries because they are replete with many little stories to explore; but simply using the visible environment to engage students in the process of engaging in a “thick description” of their historical landscape can be a valuable pedagogical tool. Along the way, primary sources such as maps, photographs, monument inscriptions, ceremonial artwork, or buildings can serve as “documents” for students to practice their interpretive skills upon. Do some role playing. Have the students imagine themselves as the characters they are trying to recreate/envision. Most importantly, use your imagination to inspire them to do the same. I know it can be infectious.

A *New York Times* article by Laura Pappano emphasized that some of the most exciting and sought after courses being offered at colleges and universities today use a form of “inventive teaching” in which “students are not just sponges soaking up content.”⁵ Such courses, taught with “imagination and spirit, guided by the passion of the professor,” have the potential to reinvigorate the classroom and provide “life lessons.”⁶ I believe that the same can be said for the use of local, place-based history as a foundation for engaging students and creating an atmosphere where they not only learn transportable skills, but can practice them in meaningful ways. And everyone benefits.

NOTES

¹ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

² Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2003).

³ There are a number of approaches, both national and international, to the incorporation of local history in college and K-12 educational settings. Recent articles include Kim Perez and Steven Kite, “It’s Not the End of the World, But You Can See It from Here: The Importance of Local History in a Rural Setting,” *The History Teacher* 44 (February 2011): 261-272; and Michael P. Marino, “Urban Space as a Primary Source: Local History and Historical Thinking in New York City,” *The Social Studies* 103 (2012): 107-116.

⁴ For instance, see Emily E. Straus and Dawn M. Eckenrode, “Engaging Past and Present: Service Learning in the College History Classroom,” *The History Teacher* 47 (February 2014): 253-266.

⁵ Laura Pappano, “Ten Courses with a Twist,” *New York Times*, 8 April 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/13/education/edlife/10-courses-with-a-twist.html?_r=1

⁶ *Ibid.*