

**An Applied History Course:
*Cruising with Clio Car***

by James A. Percoco

Editor's Note: We know that curriculum frameworks are important and that Scope-and-Sequences help institutionalize history education. But, without a doubt, the most important variable in a student's history education is contact with a knowledgeable, enthusiastic teacher. In this piece Jim Percoco gives us a peek at how his own professional education led directly to five years' worth (and still counting) of students who know, do, and love history.

Since 1980, I have made many journeys in "Clio Car", so named because of its Virginia license plate in honor of the muse of history and my unbridled interest in the American past. During vacations Clio Car takes my family and me to historic sites that augment my ability to present the past in vibrant ways to my students. Clio Car and I have traveled to sites in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New England, Kentucky, Tennessee, and along Rt. 1 on the California coast. We have stopped at San Simeon, paid our respects at the Lexington Green, explored Lincoln's Birthplace, and trundled the hallowed ground at Gettysburg. In our sojourns to myriad meccas I had no idea that our summer 1989 trip to Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, New Hampshire, and to Chesterwood in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, would be our most important.

In April 1989 I received a Council for Basic Education/NEH Independent Study in the Humanities grant. The program allows teachers to study the topic of their choice for six weeks during summer vacation. I chose the public sculpture of Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French, among others. As part of my study I traveled in Clio Car to conduct primary source research in the Baker Library at Dartmouth College, to visit the homes and studios of Saint-Gaudens and French, and to inspect their noted works in New England.

I was unprepared for the reception I was given at the Baker Library and the two museum properties. For the first time in my nine year teaching career, I was treated as a scholar. I was given access to places and material

that I had previously only dreamed about. The curators and archivists were genuinely interested in my work and were excited to learn that I would share my findings with my students. Somehow we seemed to validate

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each other. In Clio Car on the ride home to Virginia I got an inspiration. How fantastic it would be to engage my high school students in the same kind of experience that I had just had.

I discussed my idea with my mentor, Dr. Michael Richman, editor of the Daniel Chester French papers, and other people who had assisted me during my fellowship, including Sherry Birk, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Octagon Museum. They encouraged me so I approached my principal, Glynn Bates, with the idea. I would design a

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senior level curriculum providing students one semester to learn about historiography, museum studies, the world of archives, and other topics. This classroom experience would be followed by a spring semester internship at a local museum, historic site, or museum property.

It seemed natural to link school with the wealth of history-related sources in the Washington, DC, area. I contacted some thirty agencies, property sites, museums, and archival repositories. In all but one case my student interns were welcome. Internship sites included the National Museum of American History, the Octagon Museum, Gunston Hall, the Fairfax County (VA) archaeology office, and the Carlyle House. The class, entitled Applied History, met for the first time in September, 1991 and from its inception was a success. Now in its fifth year, students, parents, and history professionals have helped to shape and redefine the course. The Applied History course is attractive because it is hands-on. Students know they will be learning by doing. Usually more students want to take the course than there is space available. Though we now have a screening process, the only prerequisite for the course is a student's appreciation and enthusiasm for the study of history.

The course is flexible. For example, we can start early. Last summer incoming students read John Hersey's *Hiroshima* and an extensive editorial packet on the Enola Gay exhibit controversy. I also had students visit the exhibit at the Smithsonian. By the first day of class, students already had background and could share their views with alacrity.

The flexibility also lets me incorporate my own expanding interests in history through film. I have added a unit in which students read Cornelius Ryan's *The Longest Day* and watch the film. We do the same with Michael Shaara's novel *Killer Angels* and the Ted Turner production of *Gettysburg*. Guest speakers include Academy Award winning producer Charles Guggenheim, creator of the documentary, *D-Day Remembered*, and historian/consultant Brian Pohanka, who worked on the movies *Glory* and *Gettysburg*.

My students, the internship sponsors, and I have forged a strong, mutually beneficial partnership program. Sponsors are able to extend their missions by reaching specially interested individuals

in a personal way; at the same time they have special projects done that their own budgets and staffing would otherwise not allow. Parents rave about the course content and the benefits, academic and developmental, for their son or daughter.

Clio Car logs many miles during the spring semester as I visit students at their internship sites. In past years Clio Car has taken me to students at the National Museum of American History who restored a 19th century farm quilt, helped arrange and describe the Duke Ellington Papers, and installed exhibitions; students at the Octagon Museum who helped restore the building itself; others at Colvin Run Mill, Sully Plantation, and Gunston Hall who conducted living history programs ranging from 19th century blacksmith demonstrations to recreating colonial and Civil War experiences; still others at Woodrow Wilson House and Carlyle House who were trained as docents; and to archaeological sites in Fairfax County, Virginia, where students helped dig for and sort evidence on the life and times of people who trod that ground before them.

At year's end a banquet honors students and their internship sponsors. I present a slide show documenting the year. Both students and sponsors receive certificates marking their participation in the program. At the end of the evening I climb into Clio Car, sigh with relief that another year is complete, and head down the road to our next adventure, secure in the knowledge that most of my students are now more aware of what is around them and cognizant of what has come before. ♪

James A. Percoco teaches U.S. History at West Springfield High School in Fairfax County, Virginia. In 1993 he was named Outstanding Social Studies Teacher of the Year by Disney. A prolific writer and speaker, Jim was a presenter at NCHE's National Conference last October in Williamsburg. HM! readers who would like to receive a copy of Jim's Applied History Course Outline can call him at school 703-913-3800 or at home 703-569-5673; or send a #10 stamped (55¢), self-addressed envelope to:

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