
HISTORY



IN THE MAKING

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A
HIGH SCHOOL APPLIED HISTORY PROGRAM

BY JAMES A. PERCOCO

This teacher's story begins in April 1989, when I received notification from the Council for Basic Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities that I had received a modest fellowship award for independent study in the humanities. This grant program is designed for teachers to pursue academic study on a topic of interest to the applicant. I drafted a proposal to study the life and works of sculptors August Saint Gaudens, Daniel Chester French and John Quincy Ward, with no foreshadowing of the number of individuals who would be touched by my study grant experience.

During the first part of my study program, I travelled to New England to examine public monuments specific to Saint Gaudens and French, and to conduct research at the Baker Library at Dartmouth College, which houses the Saint Gaudens papers. I also visited Saint Gaudens National Historic Site and Chesterwood, the home and studio of French. I made arrangements prior to my trip to conduct research at these sites and was received with enthusiasm by John Dryfhout, superintendent and curator at Saint Gaudens, and Susan Frisch Lehrer, the assistant director at Chesterwood. My experiences at both sites were rich and rewarding. I was treated with the respect afforded a scholar and historian, something very foreign to me. I was allowed to see objects not normally on view to the public, given permission to photograph at my desire, and was provided with a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes operations of historic sites and museum properties. I was appreciative and heartened by my visits and the experience confirmed my convictions that education can flourish outside the bounds of an institutional classroom.

As I drove back to Virginia, somewhere along New York's Taconic State Parkway, I had a brainstorm. I wondered if it was possible for high school students to have the same rewarding, "hands-on" experience. Could a course be developed for high school students that could provide them with opportunities to do the same sorts of things that I had done? A class not normally found in a high school curriculum; a course that would permit students to work with primary source documents, conduct research, and be a historian.

I approached several people with the idea including Michael Richman, a historian of American art and my mentor for the fellowship. He was supportive of the idea and felt that it could have some real merit.

During a subsequent research trip, I met Sherry Birk, the curator of prints and drawings at the Octagon Museum in Washington, D.C., who also expressed enthusiasm and a willingness to participate. Leslie Gray, social studies specialist for the Fairfax County Public School, was

excited about the prospect of the course and offered the services of her office to get such a program off and running. I met Mary Dyer, coordinator of internships and fellowships at the National Museum of American History and queried her about the possibility of having high school students work as interns. She expressed a great interest and also offered her support.

Upon my return to West Springfield High School that fall, I approached principal Glynn Bates with my idea. I

offered her an outline and objectives of a proposed course entitled, "Applied History." The course would be divided into two segments, a classroom component and an internship, and would be designed for juniors and seniors interested in the study of history. The class would emphasize historiography, archival work, archaeology, historic preservation, museum studies, and career planning. At the end of the first semester, students would complete a research project related to the National History Day program. The class size would be limited to 25 students and the course would be offered the last period of the school day so students could leave school early to work at their respective internships. Bates gave me the green

light to begin the process of developing such a course as an elective in the social studies department.

In November, I was invited to participate in a two-day conference to design a National Center for Heritage Education. The conference allowed me to do some politicking and develop a resource pool of museum properties, historic sites, preservation organizations, and history-related agencies interested in the Applied History course. I talked with historians, museum directors, and curators regarding their interest and thoughts on the feasibility of the idea. Their support and helpful suggestions helped solidify the curriculum.

The next step was to put together a course syllabus and reading list. Included on the reading list was *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, by James Davidson and Mark Lytle. This book provides a variety of historical models related to various themes such as social history and psycho-history, with an emphasis on documentary evidence. It was a perfect match for the course. I also chose Josephine Tey's novel, *Daughter of Time*, a fictional account of a collaboration between a Scotland Yard inspector and an American art historian to solve a Medieval Ages mystery. It is a fascinating illustration of the value of inductive and deductive reasoning when faced with

*I was able to see
history in
physical form.
We were allowed
to walk on it,
move through it,
and let it run
through our
fingers.*

— JOE TILTON,
STUDENT
WEST SPRINGFIELD
HIGH SCHOOL



Hands-on experiences are an important element of the Applied History course. Photographer: Bob Clift.



Field trips, such as this one to Fredricksburg National Military Park, are incorporated into the first semester. *Photographer: Bob Clift.*

contradictory evidence.

I determined that the course would begin with an introduction to the methodology of history and a unit on history as interpretation. The classroom phase would focus on various interpretations of history such as, "History as Biography," "History as Event," and "History as Film," and specific examples from the American Civil War would be used to highlight the various units. The life of Robert E. Lee would be examined in the biography unit and students would read Thomas Connelly's controversial writing, *The Marble Man*. In the "History as Event" unit, we would explore the Battle of Gettysburg and read Glenn Tucker's narrative account, *High Tide at Gettysburg* and Michael Shaara's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Killer Angels*. The motion picture *Glory* would be analyzed and students would compare the film to Peter Burchard's book *One Gallant Rush*, on which the film is roughly based. Students would submit written analyses of each of the readings.

Applied History exposed me to a side of the historical process that students don't usually see in the textbook teaching of history. The field trips fostered a behind-the-scenes appreciation for the people who created the history we are taught.

— TAMRA THETFORD,
STUDENT
WEST SPRINGFIELD
HIGH SCHOOL

History News and *History News Dispatch*, the periodicals of the American Association for State and Local History, would be distributed to the class. My rationale was to expose the students to career avenues available in the history profession, as well as have them write abstracts about the magazine's various articles and features.

The next step was to cull and develop sponsors for internships. I contacted 30 museum properties, historic sites, and related agencies in northern Virginia and Washington, D.C. to solicit their interest in working with high school interns. I received only one negative response. With the course design complete and a list of 29 interested sponsors, the course was approved for the 1991-1992 school year.

The Applied History class met for the first time on September 3, 1991, punctuated by my excitement and anxiety. I told the charter members of the class that I appreciated them taking the risk with me in launching this educational experiment.

The anxiety of the first day proved unnecessary. The course surpassed all

expectations. Highlights included several field trips, including a trip to the National Archives to participate in a primary sources workshop and to register the students for their researcher cards. We also visited the Manassas National Battlefield to learn about the National Parks Service's efforts in historic preservation and to examine the archaeological digs. A full day was spent at Gettysburg National Military Park crossing the terrain and exploring the battlefield in an effort to help the students appreciate their assigned readings.

Art historian Michael Richman provided an in-class slide program on American public art and sculpture, followed by a tour of Washington, D.C.'s familiar and not-so-familiar civic sculpture. In all instances, the students were active learners.

Students were also required to visit historic sites or museums of their own interest and document their experiences with a photo essay. The range of sites visited reflected the diverse interests of the students and included Georgia's Kennesaw and Stone Mountain, Monument Avenue in Richmond, a trip to a local family cemetery dating to the eighteenth century, and an examination of Frank Lloyd Wright's Pope-Leighy Home.

Perhaps the most magical moment of the first semester came when the class participated in a telephone conference with film maker Ken Burns. As part of the "History as Film" unit, we watched several of his films including *The Brooklyn Bridge* and assorted segments from the *Civil War* series. The active dialogue between Burns and the students will long be remembered



During the second semester, students intern at historic sites and museums, such as the Hartwell Site Indian village archaeological dig in Fairfax County, Virginia. *Photographer: Bob Clift.*

Flexibility

to provide
loss control
protection and
insurance
coverages for

- Historic Buildings
- Collections
- Exhibitions

Specialized markets for History Museums, Historical Societies and Historic sites and buildings

Contacts:

Deborah M. Taylor or
Victor A. Sanders

Rust Insurance Agency, Inc.

1634 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
1-800-235-1889
Fax (202) 879-9035

Rust Insurance Agency

WASHINGTON, DC

Circle 107 on Reader Service Card

by the students and myself.

Near the end of the first semester, representatives from a variety of organizations interested in sponsoring student interns came to speak to the class. I wanted the students to have a choice of where they would work so that institutions and interns would be matched with interests and skills. By the end of January, all the students were in place at internships and the second phase of the program began.

It was an absolute delight to work with the students and the sponsors. From the beginning of February to early June, the students were engaged in a variety of tasks as varied and diverse as the internships themselves. Four students worked with the archaeology staff at Manassas National Battlefield where they conducted digs, cleaned and sorted artifacts, and assisted in compiling an inventory and data base. Several students worked at the National Museum of American History and participated in projects ranging from collections management to exhibit preparation.

At the Octagon Museum, two students participated in an architectural archival project. Other students were trained as museum guides and worked at properties such as the Carlyle House in Alexandria and Gunston Hall in Lorton. One former student is now a paid staff member at Carlyle House. No matter where they worked they had rich and rewarding experiences as they tasted the life of a scholar and historian.

A celebration dinner for students, parents and sponsors concluded the year and students received certificates of recognition. As Frank Sinatra sings, "It was a very good year."

The course continued during 1992-93, with some adjustments based on comments from students and sponsors. A high-



Although not reflected here, the Applied History course provides many students with a new sense of direction. *Photographer: Bob Clift.*

50th anniversary of the American-Australian alliance of World War II. Students in both countries researched oral histories pertaining to American-Australian interaction and home front activities of the 1940s. The one-hour teleconference

proved to be just as electrifying and moving as the conversation with Ken Burns.

There is no end in sight to the journey that began several years ago after my own exciting historical adventure. It is a journey that I hope continues for as long as I teach. Clearly there are rewards for everyone involved. It is energizing to see students become involved in their projects and internships and take ownership of their own learning. It is satisfying to watch the sponsors become involved with their young proteges and help develop possible future stewards of history.

Saint Gaudens, near the end of his life, expressed his philosophy on art and life stating, "You can do anything you please, it's the way that it's done that makes the difference." For all of those involved in the development, implementation and maintenance of the West Springfield High School Applied History Program, Saint Gaudens' words could not ring truer. ■

James A. Percoco is a high school teacher at West Springfield High School in Springfield, Virginia. He was named one of 60 teachers to be recognized during the 1993-94 Disney Channel's Salute to the American Teacher, a national program recognizing outstanding educators. Contact Percoco at West Springfield High School, 6100 Rolling Road, Springfield, Virginia 22152; (703) 569-5673.

It was one of the most rewarding school experiences I have ever had. The interaction brought lessons much closer to home.

— BOB CLIFT,
STUDENT
WEST SPRINGFIELD
HIGH SCHOOL