

Historic Sites and Your Students

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Academics debate the veracity of historic sites and what they represent, but no one that has visited historic places as a student, or traveled with students to historic places, can deny their power to teach. Every community has historic sites. Some sites are simple building exteriors with historical markers; others have costumed guides or interpreters who interact with visitors. The sites range in size from one small building to many acres of historic land. A class fieldtrip to a historic site can have a tremendous impact on students. The question for you, the teacher, is how to get the most out of the experience.

Dave Doody, 2000



Living history sites reconstruct early trades and industries like blacksmithing to provide students a tangible experience of the past.

George Washington Really Slept Here!

Many history stories are outside of the students' realm of experience and concept of time. However, these stories are about real people, and historic sites can make that connection explicit. Though we can no longer meet the people of the past, we can walk in the same places, and see part of the world from their perspectives; that physical connection makes the past tangible.

For example, George Wythe lived in a house on Palace Green in Williamsburg,

Virginia. The building is an important artifact in and of itself. The brick two-story house was built in the mid 1750s by George Wythe's father-in-law Richard Taliaferro (pronounced "Tolliver"), and it is a classic example of Virginia Georgian architecture. Students discover that home life in the eighteenth century was very different from their own as they visit the separate kitchen, smokehouse, laundry, poultry house, lumber (storage) house, well, and stables. It is also an excellent opportunity for students to understand the daily life of enslaved African Americans,

like cook Lydia Broadnax, who labored to keep this household for George Wythe and his wife Elizabeth.

It is an important site, too, because George Wythe was a key member of the Revolutionary generation. He taught law to Thomas Jefferson and to John Marshall. Wythe and his students discussed the great Enlightenment philosophers like Locke and Montesquieu. Together they cultivated and refined the ideas that found expression in documents like the Virginia Declaration of Rights and The Declaration of Independence. Wythe was one of Virginia's delegates to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. He signed the Declaration of Independence and was a Virginia delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

This house—this artifact—was also a place of action. The building served as George Washington's headquarters before the Siege of Yorktown. (Yes, Washington really slept there!) Washington's Life Guard stood post at these doors. Inside, Washington and his generals pored over maps and dispatches amidst the coming and going of messengers. The Count de Rochambeau, commander of the French Army, advised and consulted with General Washington in these rooms as they planned their advance against Cornwallis. The Wythe house is a tangible and physical connection to the past and can help make eighteenth-century events real for students.

How do you make the most out of a historic site's connection to the past? Have students do some research and summarize the events and the people associated with the site. Event connections for the Wythe house, for example, might include

the Declaration of Independence and the Siege of Yorktown. People connections could include George Wythe, his wife Elizabeth, Thomas Jefferson, other family members, and slaves or servants like Lydia Broadnax. Finally, what available primary source documents, portraits, and other artifacts can be connected to the occupants of the house? By the time students arrive at a historic site, they should feel like they are visiting someone they already know. Then students can begin asking the interpretive questions of history. How did these people deal with the events taking place around them? What did the events mean to them?

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

This line, which was the provocative opening sentence of L.P. Hartley’s 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*, is a critically important lesson for students. Students have a tremendous capacity for “historical imagination.” They are willing to immerse themselves in a foreign world and imagine that time travel is actually possible. Students will enter a new environment and imagine that they are a Union soldier watching and waiting for General George Pickett’s Confederates to charge across the field at Gettysburg. They can look up at the steeple of Boston’s Old North Church and see the lanterns placed there to warn of the British march on Lexington and Concord. They can watch a Colonial Williamsburg blacksmith at work and imagine that they are the shop apprentices.

Young people have a vivid historical imagination, but one that is also tainted by a powerful sense of presentism. Students generally assume that life in the past was very similar to their lives today—that children attended school until the age of 18, played organized sports, and had time to pursue games and entertainments. They believe that food was provided by stores, parents left the house every day to travel to work, and so on. Past human experience, however, is inconsistent with our modern experience, and historic sites help to tell that story.

A physical place gives texture and context to daily life in the “foreign country” of the past. When visiting a historical site, make sure that students look for differences between the past and present. Probing questions may include: How many people lived or worked at the site? Who were they? What were their jobs? Were they free or enslaved? Where did they sleep and eat their meals? Many historic sites offer hands-on programs for students that make learning a tactile experience. What was it like, for example, to hoe a tobacco field and pick tobacco worms off the leaves? Doing the work, even for a few minutes, is a powerful experience particularly if it is reinforced with a reminder that such work was a field hand’s life from sunup to sundown six days a week.

Dave Doody, 1995



The Wythe House at Colonial Williamsburg, available for student tours, is an excellent example of mid-eighteenth century Virginia architecture.

You can help students focus on these kinds of questions by creating a graphic organizer that helps them find the artifacts and clues related to these different life patterns. It also helps students frame questions and probe for more information as they work with the interpretive staff at the historic site.

Primary Sources

Historic sites are, by definition, primary sources. They are artifacts of the past that often contain a host of smaller, related objects. An onsite visit is a wonderful opportunity for students to hone their analytical skills.

Begin with **identification** and **evaluation**. What is the site? Is it authentic and can that be verified by the way it is constructed? Has it been modified? What are its specifications (dimensions, color, shape, etc.)? What is the quality of the structure’s design, building materials, and craftsmanship? Are there other structures from the same time period nearby? If so, how do they compare in terms of use, design, and so on?

Next, ask students to do a **cultural analysis**. What is the function of the historic site (home, work site, public site, etc.)? What does the site tell you about the values and beliefs of the people who lived or worked there?

Finally, ask students to **interpret** what they have discovered during the identification, evaluation, and cultural analysis. What does the structure and its related artifacts reveal about the people and events of its time? How do we believe people were using the site? How important was it to the community? There are a host of questions students can address as they discover the story of the primary source.

Historic sites come in all shapes and varieties. The Colonial Williamsburg Historic Area is one mile long, three blocks wide, and interprets a complex story about citizens in action shaping the nation at the time of the American Revolution. Your community almost certainly has a historic site focused on local history and events. In either case, there are museum staff members and volunteers who would love to help you and your students get the most out of a fieldtrip to their historic site. Often, they also have posted classroom materials on their websites or have printed copies available. Contact them to discuss your classroom objectives. Let them help you use these very special places and resources to excite your students with the magic of history. 🏠

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