

# Remember The Alamo? Learning History with Monuments and Memorials

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**W**ho are we as Americans? What aspects of our heritage are important to remember, celebrate, and memorialize? These questions are center stage in Texas as the state Board of Education debates the contents of the Texas social studies curriculum frameworks. For example, Thomas Jefferson was removed as an important philosophical influence on revolutions from 1750 to today (he was not religious enough for members of the conservative state Board of Education), and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich was added in (the board deems him a significant voice of the 1990s). Decisions about what to leave in and what to leave out are a crucial element of history, but one that is not highlighted in most history textbooks and commercially-produced materials.

Even after the Texas curriculum debate fades, teachers don't need to look far to find another rich resource that helps students learn about the decisions involved with remembering the past. There are thousands of monuments and memorials all across the United States. Each tells a specific narrative about what is important to remember and provides an opportunity to celebrate and memorialize the past. Similar to the controversy in Texas, there is often significant debate regarding what story about the past a monument should tell or even whether a monument should exist at all. For example, it took 50 years before there was agreement on creating the FDR memorial in Washington D.C. Even the final monument sparked controversy for its historical accuracy because, among other things, it does not show Roosevelt smoking, a politically correct modification reflective of the late 1990s when the memorial was

built. Proposals for monuments and memorials all over the country face the same scrutiny. Who is worthy of being memorialized? Which people? Which groups? Whose story? These monuments are a tremendous resource for teachers to develop vibrant and meaningful learning experiences for our students. In this article, we propose an activity that teachers can employ that fortifies students' aptitude to understand and interpret historical monuments. (The term monument will be used to signify monuments, memorials, and historic markers.)

Monuments are valuable resources for social studies teachers. They provide opportunities for student learning and engagement that are not easily duplicated in the classroom. Their physical appearance, history of creation, narratives, and other features promote opportunities for students to deepen understanding of specific content and to develop historical

thinking skills. Providing educational opportunities for students with monuments is particularly important for three reasons.

First, few students will engage in formal history instruction after high school, yet many will see or visit monuments throughout their adult lives. Given this potential for monument visits as adults, students' participation in field trips to monuments may enable lifelong learning of history. These skills include the ability to analyze, interpret, and evaluate primary and secondary sources, to develop historical empathy, and to understand the nature of history as constructed by humans with agendas.

Second, while often perceived as truthful and authentic, monuments also provide an opportunity for students to explore how monuments present a subjective and selective past. This is not to say their history is inaccurate or not useful, but students must learn that all history is a recreation of past events and people, and is laced with subjectivity, interpretation, and hypotheses. Monuments are themselves historical sources that need to be critically analyzed and evaluated.<sup>1</sup> They almost always present history without the supporting documents and research conventions (footnotes, bibliography, etc.) of more traditional sources. Thus, we must encourage students to see the value in learning from monuments while



Alamo Monument, Courtesy State Preservation Board, Austin, TX

also challenging students to confront the objective aura of monuments.

Third, monuments are easily accessible and free. There are countless monuments in state capitols, in city parks, and in town greens. Most teachers can take students to local monuments without any cost for admission.

Below, we propose a monument creation endeavor. This activity helps students to learn from monuments and to view them critically, weighing both the

objective realities and subjective interpretations offered by monuments. The assignment presented here is not intended to be duplicated exactly, but provides a template that can be adapted to specific teaching contexts and content.

### Evaluating Monuments

#### *Overview and Objectives*

This activity helps students think about how, and why, monuments can reflect different perspectives on the same history.

### Figure 1 – Text on Monuments of Shays’ Rebellion

#### First Monument (dedicated in 1927):

“In this town on Sunday morning, February fourth, 1787, Daniel Shays and 150 of his followers, in rebellion against the commonwealth, were surprised and routed by GENERAL BENJAMIN LINCOLN in command of the Army of Massachusetts, after a night march from Hadley of thirty miles through snow in cold below zero. This victory for the forces of government influenced the Philadelphia Convention which three months later met and formed the Constitution of the United States. Obedience to law is true liberty.”

#### Second Monument (erected in 1987):

“In this town on Sunday morning, February fourth, 1787, CAPTAIN DANIEL SHAYS and 150 of his followers who fought for the common people against the established powers and who tried to make real the vision of justice and equality embodied in our revolutionary declaration of independence, was surprised and routed, while enjoying the hospitality of Petersham, by General Benjamin Lincoln and an army financed by the wealthy merchants of Boston. True Liberty and Justice may require resistance to law.”

In this specific case, students examine two monuments created to commemorate Shays’ Rebellion and then create their own monuments for Westward Expansion from a variety of different perspectives. The purpose of this assignment is for students to: (1) understand the subjective nature of monuments and markers; (2) evaluate the impact of Westward Expansion on various groups from the group’s perspective, and thus develop historical empathy. The guiding question for this activity is: How do we remember Westward Expansion and subsequent events?

#### *Procedures*

The sequence of components for this activity is:

#### *Opening*

1. Ask the students what they know about Shays’ Rebellion and facilitate a discussion around their knowledge.

2. Provide a brief overview of Shays' Rebellion building on students' knowledge. Students only require enough background and context to understand the two monuments.
3. Display and read the inscriptions from two monuments (see Figure 1) commemorating Shays' Rebellion.<sup>2</sup> These monuments present very different views of Shays and his role in history. Facilitate a class discussion about how each monument "remembers" Shays' Rebellion. For each one, students discuss:
  - What is the message about Shays? What are the perspectives?
  - When do you think it was dedicated? What are the possible purposes of each monument?

*Creation of Monuments (over several days)*

4. Form students into small groups. Each will create the text for three new monuments. (Groups have the option to design the aesthetic features of the monument, but this is not required or expected.) For this example, the monuments are designed to commemorate some aspect of Westward Expansion. Assign each group a historical perspective and require that they create their monuments from that generalized perspective. Assigned perspectives in this example include: Women, Native American, Non-American (Mexican, Canadian, Spanish, other), and U.S. Government Officials. The assignment takes place at the end of the Westward Expansion unit so that students can draw on their knowledge and resources to complete the activity. See Figure 2 for a model worksheet.
5. Instruct students to work in their groups to create the text for monuments from their perspective on large poster paper. For the Westward Expansion unit these monuments include:

- One for early expansion (east of Mississippi).
  - One for the far West.
  - One other; the group chooses a location and wording based on what is appropriate for their perspective. Possible locations include: Texas, Utah, Oregon Trail, etc.
6. Post student monument texts on walls of the classroom. Students complete a museum gallery walk. Students take notes regarding how the monuments depict similar events from the various perspectives.

7. Use whole class discussion of the monuments and their perspectives to assess students' content knowledge and understanding of the way monuments are created with subjectivities and agendas.

*Site Visit*

8. An optional activity for this unit is to visit local monuments as a class or to ask students to find local monuments to visit on their own and report back to the class. This can be completed after the intro activity, but before students complete their own monuments, as a way to scaffold the monument design. Alternately, such

**Figure 2 – Model Worksheet for Monument Creation Activity**

Congratulations! You have been selected to participate in a competition by the National Park Service to create three monuments about Westward Expansion. The monuments that best represent the past will be selected for actual creation. Thank you for your participation.

Please complete the following tasks in your groups:

1. You will be assigned one of the following perspectives:  
 Women  
 Non-Americans (Mexicans, Canadians, others)  
 Native Americans  
 U.S. Government Officials
2. Choose the location for three monuments. One should be for early expansion (east of the Mississippi), one about the far west, and then one other based on what is appropriate for your perspective.
3. For each monument write the text that would appear on the monument. Feel free to consult your books and other resources. You will need to explain why you have chosen the text and how it is appropriate for your perspective.
4. If you would like, you may provide any aesthetic details for your monument. This step is optional. We have professional artists who can help you with this part of the task.
5. See the worksheet below to guide your work. Once your text is complete please write it on the large paper provided.

Monument: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Monument \_\_\_\_\_

Text for Monument \_\_\_\_\_

Aesthetic description for Monument (optional)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

visits can be completed as the final activity to assess student learning through an analysis of monuments.

### *Discussion of the Assignment*

This activity positions students to view museums more critically, thus challenging the objective authority of these sites and developing students' historical thinking skills. Although this activity was implemented for Westward Expansion, it can be used for any unit of study by altering the assigned perspectives and location of the monuments. It works particularly well at the end of a unit to check for student understanding. Once students are required to create their own monuments and do so from a specific perspective, they begin to fully grasp just how subjective monuments and historical markers can be, while also realizing the value of studying them as a means of understanding the past and how the past interacts with the present. If feasible, visiting local monuments nearby further reinforces students' ability to analyze how we remember past events.

The most significant obstacle to the success of this assignment is students' background knowledge. Prior to the

monument creation activity, students complete a variety of readings, primary source work, and other assignments to acquire an adequate understanding of Westward Expansion as well as the perspectives of various groups. Without sufficient prior knowledge students would find the assignment difficult.

### **Conclusion**

Long after the conflict over the social studies curriculum in Texas subsides, our historical monuments will continue to represent a variety of narratives about the past, helping to shape our notion of who we are as Americans. We can help students experience monuments as living entities. Monuments don't just present some static "true" version of history. They present us with messages about our heritage for our benefit and enjoyment, and on behalf of political, ideological, or social agendas. The fact that monuments conduct their work in support of specific missions and represent specific perspectives can illustrate what a rich, fascinating, and human activity the construction of history really is. We can position our future monument-goers to see how lives past and present

are required to conjure up the visions of history we get at monuments; we can position students for a lifetime of enjoying the magic that monuments create, allowing us to experience things that are long gone from our everyday lives and concerns. Whether students are studying a national memorial in Washington, D.C., monuments about The Alamo, or a local town monument to honor war veterans, we can help students become more critical consumers of monuments, thus developing skills for learning about the past throughout adulthood. 📖

### **Notes**

1. Barbara Trofanenko, "Interrupting the Gaze: On Reconsidering Authority in the Museum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 38, no.1 (2006): 49-65.
2. The activity for Shays' Rebellion monuments is adapted from: <http://shaysrebellion.stcc.edu/>. Text of the monuments retrieved from [http://shaysrebellion.stcc.edu/shaysapp/artifact.do?shortName=barregazette\\_19feb1987](http://shaysrebellion.stcc.edu/shaysapp/artifact.do?shortName=barregazette_19feb1987)

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## Teacher Resources

The following books, websites, and articles are useful resources for teachers.

### **Websites/Organizations**

Database of Historical Markers in the United States:  
[www.hmdb.org/](http://www.hmdb.org/)

Field Guide to U.S. Monuments and Memorials:  
[www.monumentsandmemorials.com/](http://www.monumentsandmemorials.com/)

Teaching with Historic Places: Lessons using properties listed in the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places: [www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/)

### **Books**

Loewen, James W., *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong*. New York: Touchtone, 1999.

Rosenzweig, Roy & David Thelen, *The Presence of the*

*Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

### **Articles/Journals**

Marcus, Alan S., "Representing the Past and Reflecting the Present: Museums, Memorials, and the Secondary History Classroom," *The Social Studies* 98, no.3 (May/June 2007): 105-110.

Organization of American Historians, *Magazine of History* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2002). Entire issue devoted to issues of public history.

Potter, Lee Ann, "Connecting with the Past," *Social Education* 67, no. 7 (November/December, 2003): 372-377.