

Ghosts, Legends, and Haunted Houses: Using Colorful Local History Resources in the History Classroom



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Most Social Studies educators believe that students need to understand and use historical inquiry methodology to some degree. Significantly, students can be exposed to historical inquiry in a history class by being given the opportunity to gather, organize, analyze, and interpret historical data. Much of this information can be found within the local community itself. Indeed, local communities are rich in potential sources for such work; almost every community has its haunted houses and buried treasure stories as well as legends and lore regarding past historical figures. One can use these stories as spring boards for historical inquiry. The following two projects were used in an Indiana Secondary history class, and they demonstrate ways to accomplish this important task.

Voting Patterns in an Indiana Community

The first project began with students being assigned to examine the voting patterns of their local community, Princeton, Indiana. Students soon discovered that in more recent elections voters had almost always elected Democrats to local offices. When the students asked several local political and community leaders of both political parties why this was so, they received two answers. One group claimed that the community's founder, William Prince, had also organized the local Democratic party and was so popular and effective in this task that the community had been dominated by the Democratic party ever since—the community was founded in the 1820s. One local Democratic party official said, for example, that the community's founder, “was a carer of the lower class. His concern showed in his work and reflects the current ideas of supporting the needy that [] democrats have always preached.” Another claim, and by far the most popular one, was that the Great Depression and the New Deal policies of Franklin Roosevelt swept the Democratic party into national power, and it has remained in power ever since.

It was at this point in the project that students were asked to gather information on past local elections. One source for this information included courthouse records. The local library also served as another source of information, especially for biographical data concerning the community's founder. Students also found

several old newspaper articles discussing past local elections in the library as well. From these articles, students were able to get the flavor of past elections, as well as examine and tally numbers from reading these old articles. Finally, several local amateur historians provided historical anecdotes about past elections which further served to make history more real for students.

Once students gathered their information, they began to analyze it to see if the beliefs of local political and community leaders concerning the causes of the Democratic party's dominance in the local area could be supported by data. Specifically, they were looking to see if the Democratic party had indeed dominated local elections either from the community's founding in the 1820s or since the advent of the New Deal in the 1930s. Their findings indicated that neither claim could be supported by data. Students found instead a pattern of wavering back and forth between parties in terms of election success. Interestingly, the data also showed that the domination of Democratic candidates actually began about the middle of the 1950s and continued up to recent times.

After analyzing the voting records of the community and discovering that the explanations by local political and community leaders concerning voting behavior could not be supported by data, students were asked to speculate on two questions. (1) Why did local political and community leaders believe in explanations for recent voting behavior that did not square with the facts?; and (2) what other explanation might better reflect recent voting records?

Possible answers to the first question put forth by students were (1) that there was a desire on the part of Democratic leaders to link their party to an early figure who also was connected to early national figures. For example, the community's founder, William Prince, was a personal friend of Andrew Jackson. And (2) the notion that the Great Depression was a cause of the Democratic party's dominance was thought by some students to be a belief that existed because many present local leaders had lived during the Depression and were familiar with the New Deal and its impact on the national level.

Finally, students speculated that the intense organization of labor in the 1950s in the local area might have been the actual cause of recent Democrat success. Indeed many of the students' fathers worked in the local coal mines, and the students were familiar with the strengths of local labor unions which have tended to support Democratic candidates. Students were reminded that these speculations could also be researched as to their validity.

Researching a Local Historical Figure

The second project began with students being assigned to examine a local historical figure, Colonel William Monroe Cockrum, who was prominent in many aspects of the early community of Oakland City, Indiana, including the establishment of a local college there. First, students were asked to list what they thought they already knew about this figure. A variety of answers were given. Several students knew that Cockrum was somehow involved with the Underground Railroad. Others mentioned that his house, which is now a part of the local college campus, was haunted. Still others said that the house was part of the Underground Railroad, and that

runaway slaves had been hidden there. Another story was that Cockrum was murdered by his wife.

Once what was believed to be true about Cockrum had been listed on the board and discussed, the students were then asked to gather data from local sources to discover what they could about this figure. Students utilized the local library in this part of the project, particularly to examine county histories. Additionally, they obtained college histories from the college library. Fortunately, Cockrum had authored two books, one a history of the Underground Railroad and the other a pioneer history of the state. These were also obtained for the students to examine. During the initial research process it was discovered that Cockrum had been an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War. A search of the college library found two regimental histories, both of which had once been part of the Colonel's personal library.

The next phase of the project involved having students compare what they thought they knew about William Cockrum and what their research indicated. The students discovered many interesting incongruencies. For example, it was true that Colonel Cockrum had been involved in the Underground Railroad, but, Cockrum was a young teenager during this time. Students found that it was his father, James, who was the most heavily involved with the Underground Railroad. Also, the Cockrum family's work in helping slaves did not take place at the location where students believed. The family farm, which was about a mile east of the location of the home, was the actual place where the runaway slaves were kept during their passage North. It was also found that the William Cockrum home had not been built, according to varying sources, until 1875 or 1876. This would have made it impossible for the home to have been used during the Underground Railroad period.

The haunted house stories also appeared to be purely myth. The supposed reason for the haunting was based on the legend that one of the owner's daughters had hung herself in the bell tower of the home, and also that Colonel Cockrum had been murdered by his wife. A consultation of the family genealogy revealed no untimely death for any family member. Several students visited the college campus, where the home serves as part of the Music Department, and viewed the home. Their comments after this visit were mainly centered around the fact that the home is in desperate need of repair.

One of the later discoveries was that Cockrum had been an officer with the Union Army during the Civil War. Subsequent research found that he had achieved the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. The students discovered that Cockrum had been terribly wounded during the Battle of Chickamauga and imprisoned in a Confederate prison. It was also discovered that Cockrum was so loved by his troops that a monument was erected on the site where he was wounded.

Finally, the college histories were consulted to find out the role of Cockrum in the founding of that institution. It was discovered that the present site of the main campus was once a part of the family homestead, and that ten acres had been donated to the school for establishment of a college in the area. From this source it was also found that the Colonel had helped build the first

building on the campus. Ironically, much of Cockrum's work in helping to found the college had not been recently published. Consequently, many people in the community and at the college itself were unaware of Cockrum's contribution. This project helped to bring this information back to life.

Conclusion

The success of projects such as these depends on two factors. First, it is helpful if students have a particular problem upon which to focus. In the case of the first project, students were able to focus upon local people's beliefs about voting behavior in their community and use historical data to check the validity of these beliefs. A simpler approach could have been to have students look at old voting records, find patterns, and check to see what historical events might have influenced these patterns. In the other project, students were able to examine the gap between what they believed to be true about a local historical figure and what the records showed. Second, data gathering should not be too difficult. A teacher can easily check out what information may be available in the local library or in courthouse records before he or she sends out students to work on a project similar to this. Another approach would be to collect or copy

such data and bring it to the classroom. Significantly, teachers should be careful not to miss the opportunity to let a project like this lead to other historical inquiry. For example, several students became interested in the unusual architecture of the Cockrum House and went on to complete a report on the history of the building of the house. Other students became interested in some of the particular battles of the Civil War in which Cockrum was involved. Several papers came out of this particular topic. Students also learned more about the real hardships of slaves and the determination of many to escape bondage.

It is also a strong possibility that the kinds of information and papers which may come out of these types of projects can be put together in booklet form. Such a project would certainly enhance the students' confidence regarding writing in the social studies classroom. Finally, projects such as these teach students that history is not "cut and dried." Historians are always looking for new knowledge, and historical inquiry is essential to this task. Furthermore, having students speculate about what they find also emphasizes the importance of interpretation in history. Consequently, students who participate in projects such as these may never read a history textbook in the same way again. □

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