

Brenda Kelley Olio

Creating Place-Based Classroom Resources

Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plans

Since its inception in 1991, the Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) program has created a variety of products that help teachers bring historic places into the classroom. Perhaps best known among these is a series of lesson plans based on National Register properties across the country. These lessons, which explore places connected to a variety of themes in American history, allow students to become historians as they gather evidence from primary sources, historical and contemporary photographs and maps, and other documents. By examining the real places where history happened, students—even those who may not visit these places—can become excited about the past and begin to appreciate the value of the nation's, and their own community's, cultural resources.

TwHP always has relied on input from educators, education specialists, and preservationists to insure that its materials are educationally sound. Fay Metcalf, a nationally recognized social studies educator, developed the lesson plan format, authored the first seven lessons, and served as the series editor. To date, approximately a hundred TwHP lesson plan drafts representing themes such as African-American history, politics and government, the Civil War, and women's history have been created by National Park Service interpreters, preservation professionals, and educators.

Each lesson contains the following sections that collectively reveal the story of the place and lead students from basic to higher-order thinking skills: Introduction (evocative description of the place); Setting the Stage (historical background); Locating the Site (maps); Determining the Facts (readings, etc.); Visual Evidence (historic and modern photographs, drawings, etc); and Putting It All Together (activities). Designed for middle

school students, the lessons are adaptable from upper elementary through high school.

Once the format was established, generous grants from Parks as Classrooms, the Cultural Resources Training Initiative, and the American Battlefield Protection Program supported the creation of early lesson plans. TwHP next faced the challenge of getting the word out to teachers. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Preservation Press designed, printed, and distributed the first 54 lesson plans, but they had limited means of tapping into the educator market. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) helped fill this void by printing the first seven lessons in their journal *Social Education*, which has an estimated distribution of 25,000. *Social Education* continues to feature TwHP lessons periodically and remains a valuable way to increase visibility.

To reach educators and preservationists directly, TwHP began exhibiting and conducting sessions at the annual conferences of NCSS and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This allows us not only to personally introduce the program to hundreds of people each year, but also to hear feedback from people who use our materials already.

In 1998, the National Park Foundation approached the TwHP staff with a proposal to develop an education kit for one-time distribution at Target Stores' annual Teacher Appreciation Day. Target designed, produced, and gave away to teachers more than 35,000 copies of *Explore Your National Parks: Historic Places*, a curriculum kit containing six reformatted TwHP lesson plans, a teacher's guide, posters, and a video. While the kit is no longer available, much of its content is online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/curriculumkit/>.

As beneficial as the curriculum kit was to the program, it did not offer a sustained means of reaching educators. In July 1998, Teaching with Historic Places assembled its third panel of educators, preservationists, and National Park Service education specialists to access the program and consider its future direction. While panel members attested to the soundness of TwHP materials, they challenged us to make them more available and user friendly. With the group's suggestions in mind, TwHP applied for and received a Parks as Classrooms grant to redesign and publish 13 TwHP draft lessons. The program also began an intensive effort to make the lessons available on

the Internet (see the article by Theresa Campbell-Page and William Wright).

Following another suggestion from the panel, TwHP convened a focus group of nine social studies educators representing various grade levels and geographic regions during the 1998 NCSS conference. The meeting's purpose was to provoke a pointed discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of the format and content of TwHP lessons. The participants examined examples of three formats in which TwHP lessons had appeared and offered comments, criticisms, and suggestions. Both the July panel and the NCSS focus group provided invaluable guidance at a critical time in the program's history. Following many of their suggestions has enabled us to enhance the look and usability of our lessons in several ways.

To address the concern that most educators are not accustomed to integrating historic places into the curriculum, new lessons incorporate guidance on how to use TwHP lessons. While a strength of TwHP lessons is that teachers can use individual sections or the entire lesson, depending on time constraints and student skill level, the instructions provide a suggested order for proceeding and give suggestions that may help teachers feel more comfortable with the concept of using places.

After receiving advice that the lessons would benefit from a "grabber" designed to immediately seize the attention of students, TwHP added a section called Getting Started. This section presents a visual image—historic or contemporary—that is related to the lesson's topic but contains no caption or credit. The

image is accompanied only by one or two questions that students try to answer based on their observations. For example, in a lesson on Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site in Hyde Park, New York, students examine a photograph of the mansion under construction and try to answer the questions, "For what purpose do you think this structure was built?" and "When might it have been constructed?" Without knowledge of the lesson's topic, students must carefully study the photo and form hypotheses.

Rather than serving merely as illustrations, the visual materials in each lesson are documents that help students achieve the lesson's objectives. Because analyzing and extracting information from visuals are not necessarily skills students have developed, new lessons now include a Photograph Analysis Worksheet. The worksheet directs students to describe a photo after looking at it briefly and then again after careful examination. They might be surprised at the information they can gather, or at least surmise, about when and where the photo was taken, the reason the photo was taken, etc. Appropriate for analyzing both historical and modern photographs, the worksheet helps students learn how to "read" visual materials.

Supplementary Resources, another new section, indicates books that students or educators can use to explore the lesson's topic in greater depth. Teachers may decide to offer extra credit to students who delve further into an aspect of the lesson. In the online versions of TwHP's lesson plans, Supplementary Resources provides links to selected web sites with information on related topics.

Teaching with Historic Places has worked hard to provide educators with a means to get their students excited about history, while also offering a convenient and standardized way of introducing the concepts of preservation and stewardship to students and educators alike. By remaining committed to seeking and responding to feedback from educators and preservationists, Teaching with Historic Places hopes to insure that its products enrich classroom instruction as well as promote stewardship of our nation's cultural resources.

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The Vanderbilt Mansion under construction in Hyde Park, New York, 1895. Courtesy National Park Service.

