

Collaboration in Teaching with Historic Places

From unorthodox origins—a scenic byway and the community development section of a regional planning agency—came the Jacob’s Ladder Trail Heritage Education Project, an effort that demonstrates the fertility of teamwork among seemingly far-flung collaborators. The project’s origin lay in Jacob’s Ladder Trail, known since 1910 as the nation’s first Great Mountain Crossover. The 35-mile trail connects five rural communities in the hill towns of western Massachusetts. Scenic byway funding was secured in 1993 by community development planners at the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), who realized that, along the way, they had collected a great deal of historical research on the five byway towns’ development which should not stay in the back of someone’s filing cabinet.

With the enthusiastic support of the byway’s corridor management committee, PVPC planner Natalie Bozarth and author Parsons chose the workbook, *How to Teach with Historic Places*, developed by the National Park Service and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, to guide the project. With help from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities (MFH), Bozarth and Parsons teamed with author Miller to develop a proposal.

The proposal embraced the Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) model and aimed at fifth-grade teachers along Jacob’s Ladder Trail. The Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks requires educators at this level to teach United States history and geography, and encourages them to link the study to American art and architecture and to take advantage of historic sites. The fit seemed perfect.

Three teachers soon signed up: Nancy Keiper, Becket Consolidated School; Rosalyn Cohen, Lee Central School; and Nancy Tobias, Gateway Middle School. The third and last set of collaborators was in place, and we were ready to seek funds to support the project: stipends for the participants, and also funds to publish a resource

book. Fortunately, MFH program officer Kristin O’Connell reported that,

The Foundation was enthusiastic about this project for several reasons: its location in a rural area with a relatively unknown history; its responsiveness to the state’s curriculum guidelines; and its plan to create a teacher workbook, a resource with substantial long-term value. We also believed that this effort would enrich the lives of local people, helping them understand how their present-day surroundings reflect a complex and fascinating past. In fact, the project shares one of the Foundation’s explicit goals: ‘to help people develop more meaningful connections with the places in which they live’. Moreover, another plus for the Foundation was the way it brought together the planning agency, scholars, and the schools. This is just the kind of collaboration that MFH likes to encourage.*

As we got underway, everything seemed straightforward, but by our second meeting some problems had emerged. The state curriculum requires fifth-grade teachers to cover the period 1763 to 1815, and most of our communities—hill towns in far western Massachusetts—did not see extensive construction until the end of that period, only a fraction of which, we came to learn, survives. How could we locate workable buildings that conformed to the time period? Also, while the TwHP program helps educators use buildings whether or not students can physically visit them, we had made direct observation a priority, in order to get students to really see their own built environment. But no school had funds for field trips; students had to be able to visit the buildings on foot.

These limitations proved, not surprisingly, constraining, and occasioned concern among the participating teachers, anxious to develop successful lessons that would meet the sometimes complementary, sometimes competing, criteria set forth by the Frameworks, the TwHP format, the MFH, and the two of us. After several false starts, the teachers wondered whether they’d gotten in over their heads, and we wondered whether we



1920s postcard
of Jacob's
Spring and
Jacob's Log
Cabin Inn on
Jacob's Ladder.
Courtesy Pioneer
Valley Planning
Commission.

could possibly satisfy everyone's expectations and classroom needs. Collaboration, we began to see, meant compromise, as each of us worked to reconcile her own and her institution's priorities.

Meeting those challenges pointed out the benefits of partnership, as we harnessed our very different skills and perspectives to find solutions. To cite just one example, the c. 1780 one-room schoolhouse selected by Huntington's Nancy Tobias seemed a natural—in the middle of our chronological range and just a short walk from Gateway Regional School. But almost no documents pertaining to the school or to Huntington in that period were known to survive. How could students “determine the facts” if we couldn't ferret them out ourselves? To find the site's potential, each participant brought knowledge and skills from our own discipline to bear. Miller, drawing on her own knowledge of early American laws and statutes, located the 1789 Act to Provide for the Instruction of Youth and for the Promotion of Good Education, which set requirements for the number of Massachusetts schools, added to the required courses, and described the virtues 18th-century educators were instructed to cultivate in their young charges. Parsons drew on her familiarity with other extant schoolhouses within town boundaries to recommend activities in which the students could develop their descriptive abilities and consider the priorities and objectives of the selectmen who commissioned these buildings. Tobias located education legislation from 1647, and proposed activities comparing the small 18th-century structure with her students' present, comparatively-lavish facility. Together, we developed exercises that called on higher-order thinking skills to place the school in its historical context, and to understand the radical transformation of

society and education that had occurred between 1647 and 1789, then to bring it to contemporary life with current debates over curriculum, infrastructure, and prayer in schools.

Working together in this way revealed that the project was bigger than any of us had realized. Teamwork was essential; together, we could begin to address the wide variety of questions posed – questions that none of us could have fielded alone. As planners and advisors, we weren't just helping educators learn how to teach from historic buildings; we were conducting mini-tutorials in primary source research, dating architecture by details, using local record centers, and assessing the quality of secondary sources. Meanwhile, the educators were educating us; we learned what middle school teachers need to integrate historic places into the social science curriculum. As we collaborated to forge exciting and engaging lesson plans, each of us learned something about the world that the others inhabit every day.

Midway through the project, we presented our work to the 31st Northeast Regional Conference on Social Studies. One attendee correctly observed the real secret to our success when she wrote, “What I most appreciate from your presentation is the passion with which you have undertaken this project.” Passion, it turns out, was the key. Over the last year, we have gained enormous insight into the opportunities and constraints present in public school classrooms, and have been inspired by the enthusiasm and dedication of these teachers. In summer 2000, fifth-grade teachers along Jacob's Ladder Trail received lesson plans and supporting resource kits. As they use and adapt our work, they will become new collaborators in an ongoing, still-unfolding process. While our grant expanded our possibilities, good teamwork does not require external funders; our success results from the commitment to teaching, local history, and the built environment that each of us brought to the project from the start. With thoughtful collaboration and no small amount of passion, integrating local history into the middle school curriculum, it seems to us, is entirely within the reach of any school district.

Note

* Kristin O'Connell to authors, May 13, 2000.

Marla Miller is Assistant Professor, History Department, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts.

Bonnie Parsons is a preservation planner with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, West Springfield, Massachusetts.