

Teaching with Historic Places Makes a Splash on the Web

Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) posted its first pages on the World Wide Web in 1995 <<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp>>. With our goal to reach the widest possible audience, the web became the fastest, most economical way to disseminate information. That first step launched TwHP into a never-ending process of change and improvement.

TwHP began on the web by taking existing printed materials—introductory flyers and announcements—and coding them in HTML. This produced text-heavy pages that described our material well, but lacked visual appeal or easy navigation. The limitations of this format quickly became evident, particularly when developing the lesson plan section of the site. Visitors could

access descriptions of the printed lessons as well as the history of their development, their purposes, and their components, but because the classroom-ready materials were not posted online, teachers could not use the lessons themselves electronically.

Realizing these limitations, the program experimented with ways to offer an online sample. In the fall of 1996, the National Register of Historic Places created an online version of its printed travel itinerary, "Along the Georgia-Florida Coast." One of its featured sites, Fort Frederica National Monument, was also the subject of a lesson plan. TwHP posted an Acrobat, or read-only, web version of the lesson to link the two National Register programs. In late 1997, when the Seattle, Washington, travel itinerary was launched, the same technique allowed readers to view the lesson on the Klondike Gold Rush's effect on Seattle.

In 1998, the development of online, downloadable lessons began to materialize in response to our desire to distribute lessons to the widest possible audience for free. That spring and summer, TwHP worked with Target Stores and the National Park Foundation to create a free curriculum kit that Target distributed during its annual Teacher Appreciation Day. The kit included six previously published TwHP lessons, redesigned to fit with the rest of the materials. This new format soon became the basis for web lessons, giving teachers the option to print and distribute to the class, or have students use a lesson online.

Adapting printed lessons to the computer proved challenging. Anyone picking up a paper lesson can quickly flip through its pages and see its various elements. That sort of skimming on the web requires clicking through several screens. As a result, each TwHP web lesson starts with a Table of Contents describing the resources in each section, such as maps and readings. These categories are also links on each page, helping viewers navigate the lesson.

Teaching with Historic Places online lesson plan. Courtesy National Park Service.

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying a TwHP lesson titled "Adeline Hornbek and the Homestead Act: A Colorado Success Story". The page has a header "Netscape: Adeline Hornbek and the Homestead Act" and a location bar showing the URL. Below the header is a title "Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plans" and the specific lesson title. The main content includes a map of Colorado Springs, a photograph of a landscape labeled "(Fossilized Fossil Beds National Monument)", and a portrait of Adeline Hornbek. To the left is a "TABLE OF CONTENTS" with sections like "About This Lesson", "Setting the Stage: Historical Context", "Locating the Site: Maps", "Determining the Facts: Readings", "Visual Evidence: Images", "Putting It All Together: Activities", and "Supplementary Resources". To the right is a "RELATED INFORMATION" sidebar with links to "How to Use a TwHP Lesson", "Lessons on Related Topics", "TwHP Home", "National Register Home", "About the National Register", "How the National Register Helps Teachers", "Contact TwHP", and "Fossilized Fossil Beds National Monument". At the bottom is a note: "This lesson is based on the Homestead Act, which is within the boundaries of Fossilized Fossil Beds National Monument, one of the thousands of properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places." The footer includes "Comments or Questions", "Last Modified: Thu, May 4, 2000 10:41:28 am EDT", "TCP", "ParkNet National Park Service", and a "Continue" button.

Graphics presented another challenge in adapting lessons to the web. Maps, photographs, and other visuals are integral to helping students achieve the lesson's objectives. Unfortunately, electronic versions of these documents with high enough resolution to reveal important details are often slow to download. To accommodate this limitation, the web lessons offer a low-resolution image, which loads quickly, but links to a high-quality copy.

Although there were initial challenges, placing lessons on the web allowed us to make many useful additions, such as the Supplementary Resource page. Each online lesson includes links connecting users to web sites related to the lesson's topic. All lessons featuring National Park Service sites link to the appropriate park web page. This feature also allows us to link to the National Register travel itineraries; other agencies that can help students, such as the Library of Congress and the National Archives, which have nearly unlimited resources available on almost any historical topic; local museums; and other resources. Another helpful addition to the web lessons is a set of directions on how to use them, available via a link on each page of the lessons.

In an early effort to organize our online lessons, TwHP decided to develop web "features" for African-American and Women's History Months in 1999. Arranging and categorizing lessons in this way continues to be a focus of the program's web site. We are also able to feature lessons that complement and commemorate special occasions like Independence Day. Furthermore, the flexibility of the web allows us to demonstrate the variety of ways our lessons can help fulfill curriculum requirements. The lessons, now indexed by theme, time period, and state, can be categorized in other useful ways such as by the skill students' gain from a particular lesson.

In 2000, TwHP redesigned, updated, and expanded its web site to enhance its visual appeal, improve navigation, and add a variety of other tools to encourage the use of places in teaching. In addition to lesson plans and guidance on using them, the site now includes our author's packet to help others develop their own lessons, worksheets, a brief history of TwHP, and helpful information detailing the many ways in which the National Register can assist educators.

The instant communication afforded by the web has improved our ability to get feedback, as

users are able to send TwHP email through our web site. With the comments, reviews, and suggestions received, and the ability to monitor our user sessions via statistical web reports, we can implement new ideas, observe the growing interest in our web site, and determine which lessons attract the most attention.

Comments reveal that not just history and social studies teachers are using our lessons. A high school English teacher wrote, "...please allow me to tell you how impressive the lesson plans are...thank you for an incredible web site." A mother using our lessons to supplement her children's classroom learning said, "wonderful work! ...the information contained in 'When Rice Was King' is invaluable." Also providing important feedback are other web sites that evaluate the TwHP site. Education World called it a "must-see site for any teacher of history, social studies, geography, or civics or anyone with an interest in historical places" and the University of Wisconsin's Internet Scout Project (National Science Foundation-sponsored organization) acknowledged TwHP as one of "the most useful resources, considering the depth of content, the authority of the source, and how well the information is maintained and presented."

The web has helped us pursue our goal of demonstrating the value of using places to teach history. The ability to relay our information and products to a broader audience in new, useful, and up-to-date formats, and the flexibility to update our information as often as needed are just a few of the web's benefits. Further improvements include the ability to publish online lessons that we cannot print, to continually add lesson plans allowing easy access for the public, and to supplement the site with new tools. Now teachers, home schoolers, preservationists, and anyone interested in history can take an alternative field trip on the computer. With our online lessons, students can learn broad historical themes through places they may not be able to visit in person. Finally, the web permits us to reach a whole new generation of computer-literate students who may feel as comfortable using a computer as reading a book.

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