

Dennis H. Cremin

Writing a TwHP Lesson Plan

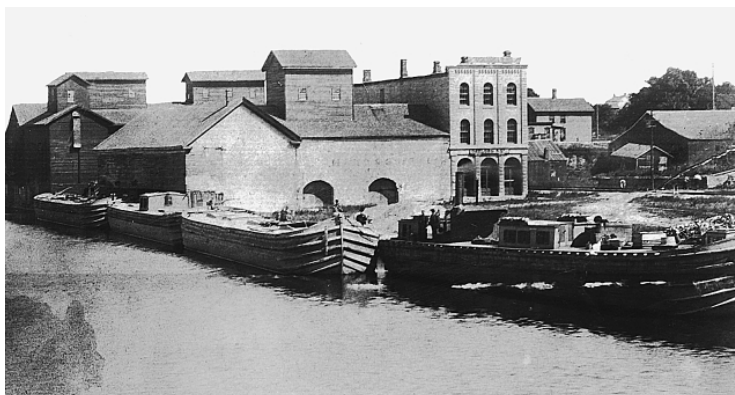
A View from the Gaylord Building

We have all heard this kind of talk from someone just won over to something new. “You know this bee pollen really gives me more energy. You should put some on your cereal every morning.” We roll our eyes and say, “You know, I really should,” but with no intention of doing so. Well, at the risk of sounding like that someone, I’m saying, “every site should do a Teaching with Historic Places lesson plan.” The program allows you to see other lesson plans and stimulates your thinking about your site. Secondary benefits include the opportunity to better organize the site’s material, learn your collection, and foster offsite partnerships. Do I sound like my friend with the bee pollen? “You know this program has given me new energy and a fresh perspective; every site should do a lesson plan.”

Teaching with Historic Places

I first heard of the Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) program at a workshop held at the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s 50th Anniversary Conference in Washington, DC, October 1999. I was impressed with the practicality and clear benefits of the program’s approach and lesson plans. The program’s *How to Teach with Historic Places: A Technical Assistance*

Canal boats at the Gaylord Building and adjacent to the public landing, Lockport, Illinois, 1880s. Part of the building was used for grain storage (note other grain elevators along the canal). Courtesy Gerald W. Adelmann.



Sourcebook provided pragmatic steps for moving ahead.

I work at the Gaylord Building, located 32 miles southwest of Chicago in Lockport, Illinois. The Gaylord Building (1838) played a vital role in one of the great enterprises of the 19th century: the digging of the 96-mile-long Illinois & Michigan Canal.

The handsome limestone warehouse was the construction depot for the canal, which linked Lake Michigan and the Illinois River, opening the Midwest to commerce and industry. The canal was also responsible for making Chicago grow into the most important city in the Midwest. In 1848, the canal was completed and the Gaylord Building was modified for grain storage. Over its long history, the building has been adaptively used as a dry goods store, a site for the manufacture of lock fixtures, and a storehouse for plumbing fixtures.

By the 1970s, however, the building stood boarded up, while major industries in the area, such as U.S. Steel and the Texaco Refinery, closed. In 1987 the Gaylord Building reopened after a four-year rehabilitation and features Public Landing Restaurant, the Illinois State Museum Lockport Gallery, and the I&M Canal Visitor Center of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR). The Gaylord Building became a National Trust Historic Site in 1997 and is the Trust’s shining example of adaptive use as a preservation method.

The National Trust ownership provided an opportunity to review public programs at the site. The National Trust and IDNR entered into a partnership to create a new permanent exhibit, *Illinois Passage: Connecting the Continent*, and to develop a Hands-on-History gallery. One way to strengthen the new partnership was to re-examine existing lesson plans, and jointly draft a new one.

The TwHP format allowed us to tap into a successful program without reinventing the wheel. The lesson plans create a template into which we entered our material. TwHP lessons provide an interesting sample of historic places. I enjoy seeing the U.S. map on each lesson plan with the state of the site filled in. I think of each site as a little star on the map and where there was once a simple constellation of sites, now there is increasingly a galaxy of places. In this view, it becomes possible to see larger patterns of American national and regional themes and the array of what historic places are and can be.

From Within the Process

Going through the process of drafting a TwHP lesson plan provided additional benefits. Helping people increase their level of awareness, whether by a site visit or in a distant learning classroom, was a motivation for writing the lesson plan. We also welcomed the chance to re-evaluate aspects of our programming in an organized way.

The TwHP lesson plan format breaks the process into achievable tasks, and among the first was finding source material. At the Gaylord Building, our visual information is limited to two 19th-century images, an 1873 lithograph and an 1880s photograph. These will undoubtedly be included in our material. There are also images from the 1980s rehabilitation work. Archeology reports and other historical materials from our storage area provide ample primary sources. This research also reminded us of the importance of organized files.

In drafting our lesson plan, the writing was easily broken down into parts, which made the process less daunting. I enjoyed looking at other lesson plans and was strongly influenced by one that highlighted historical content, but also called on students and educators to think about the importance of historic structures in their communities. These lesson plans demonstrate that people make choices, and call on students to think about these kinds of choices.

The thematic focus of the Gaylord Building's lesson plan is to teach how the Illinois & Michigan Canal served to connect the bustling East Coast to the Midwest, linking New York, via the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes, to New

Orleans, via the Mississippi and Illinois rivers. The objectives for students are: to explain the significance of the I&M canal and its role in the westward expansion of the United States, to describe economic change in the United States through the history of the Gaylord Building and the use of primary source documents and the physical structure of a historic site, and to determine if there are any buildings or places in their own communities that can help them better understand that place and its history.

Although the site has strong ties to educators, circulating a draft of the lesson plan bolstered our partnerships. Two colleagues on site looked at the draft. Then, I sent it to two classroom teachers, who provided comments that strengthened its ties to the curriculum. One teacher, whose students visit the site, commented that she was struck by her students' belief that nothing in this part of Illinois dated to the 1830s or 1840s.

Teachers who write a lesson plan will create something that is a useful and tangible product. It is something that they can point to with a measure of accomplishment along with their calendar of successfully completed tours.

Conclusion

At the time of this writing, Char Giardina, site interpreter for IDNR and partner at the site, and I continue to revise our draft. We are working with the supplementary documents to make sure that we have good copies and that the assignments fit the curriculum guidelines. Although the lesson plan is not yet completed, the process has already helped us create a stronger partnership, reconsider our educational programs, and strengthen our partnerships with educators. When the plan is finished, it can be used on site, as part of a pre-visit exercise, or without a physical visit to our site.

Those teachers who have already done a lesson plan probably have already received some of the benefits of this program. For those who have not, here is a call to add even more stars to the constellation of sites that have already been charted by this program. Like a teaspoon of bee pollen, doing a lesson plan is energizing.

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Image of the Gaylord Building as the Col. G. B. Martin Store in the 1873 Combination Atlas Map of Will County, Illinois (Elgin, Illinois: Thompson Brothers and Burr, 1873). Courtesy Gaylord Building, National Trust for Historic Preservation.

