

James A. Percoco

A Blast from the Past

Using Historic Sites to Enliven History

The field stands before you, silent and empty; commemorative markers stand guard as timeless sentinels. But on a hot July afternoon in 1863, this field was far from silent. Human witnesses stood toe to toe with each other, clashing in the greatest battle ever fought in the Western Hemisphere, the Battle of Gettysburg. Visitors to the site can let their mind's eye drift back to that tumultuous day, when 12,000-15,000 Confederate infantrymen, a mile to a mile-and-a-half in length, battle flags unfurled, launched Pickett's Charge and marched into history. The modern-day visitor to Gettysburg need only to stand there at the "Angle—the High Water Mark of the Confederacy" while reading eyewitness accounts to see the carnage unfold before them. This is how I work with my students when we make our annual pilgrimage to Gettysburg National Military Park. There is no greater teaching tool than combining the historic memory of a place with the words of the spirits who went before us. Whether visiting Andersonville National Historic Site with my students; participating in the Annual Antietam Battlefield Memorial Illumination; or overlooking the site of the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club dam, which

burst open in May 1889, creating one of the worst calamities in American history, the Johnstown Flood—I have discovered the power of authentic teaching that goes well beyond the textbook or the walls of a classroom. During these visits and at these sites, students come to appreciate the drama of the past in ways that fire the imagination and touch the senses. As I look at my students' faces I can clearly see that what was once an abstraction is now a reality.

But what if you are a teacher in New Mexico and you want to bring the Civil War alive in your classroom? Most likely you can't visit Gettysburg. What are your alternatives? Today there are over 60 alternatives that you can turn to in order to bring historic sites into your classroom, in the format of the Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) lesson plans. These thoughtful and compelling lessons developed by classroom teachers and public historians make a superb companion to any history or social studies teacher's repertoire. Teachers and students in Hawaii who want to visit the home and workshop of Thomas Edison in New Jersey now have that option, while classrooms in Vermont can explore the Yukon Gold Rush in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. Each lesson is set within its proper historical context and matches the numerous standards set by the *National Standards for United States History*. Using these built-in "field trips" can foster a growth and understanding that will inspire students to want to learn more about their past and their place in the always-changing story of humanity.

Of particular interest is the value of using Teaching with Historic Places lesson plans prior to site-specific field trips. For example, several years ago I took 25 students to Andersonville National Historic Site in Andersonville, Georgia. I was able to use the lesson plan developed by park ranger Alan Marsh as a segue to field-trip preparation. By doing so I was able to make my students more familiar with the site prior to our visit. The maps, illustrations, and source readings

The author takes his Virginia high school students to study Gettysburg Battlefield in person. Courtesy the author.



in the TwHP lesson proved helpful in making students aware of what they were going to encounter. In addition, I dovetailed slides that I had taken on a previous personal trip into the lessons. A combination of the TwHP lesson plans, my slides, and our visit to Andersonville made both learning and teaching more powerful than any other approach could accomplish.

I was so taken with the lesson plans and their teacher-friendly format that I decided to submit a lesson plan for publication, based on a lesser known national historic site: Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, New Hampshire. Here I was able to take a personal interest—specifically in the life and work of one of America’s foremost artists, sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, creator of the Adams Memorial and the Shaw Memorial—and develop a lesson plan that was rich in primary source and visual material. In this lesson, teachers and students encounter the life of this great American artist, his home, and studio workshop, as he created a number of projects during the Gilded Age. While

I conducted my own research and developed the lesson, I found a great deal of support and assistance afforded to me both by site superintendent John Dryfhout and lead park ranger Greg Schwarz. My experience proved that there is a wealth of collaborative opportunities to be made between partnerships and alliances of public history institutions and schools. I think what gave me the most pride about my lesson plan was that this particular site—one of the least known in the national park system—received well-deserved extra attention. My lesson plan on Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site was published as part of the TwHP series.

James A. Percoco teaches AP (Advanced Placement) United States and applied history at West Springfield High School in Springfield, Virginia, and is the author of A Passion for the Past, a book detailing his approach to teaching history. He was named to the first-ever USA TODAY All-USA Teacher Team (1998), and Outstanding Social Studies teacher of the Year at the Walt Disney Company American Teacher Awards (1993).

Kay Kevan Callentine

Teaching with Historic Places in the Classroom

From the Boott Mills of the Industrial Revolution in Lowell, Massachusetts, to the horrors of Andersonville during the Civil War; from the waters of the Mediterranean with Stephen Decatur to the boyhood home of William H. Taft, the Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) lessons have provided helpful support tools for me in my classroom. The topics mentioned are but a few ready for use by the busy teacher. The lessons available on the Internet have links as well, to help teachers keep up with the growing technological side of education. These resources bring a social dimension to history that is not possible by simply reading a textbook. TwHP makes history current and active as students engage in analyzing documents, search maps and photographs to find answers to questions, and explore elements of history that

can provide explanations and examples of why things in history happened as they did.

Curriculum materials are abundant and sometimes they are worthwhile. Such is the case with TwHP lesson plans, which provide a complete lesson plan for each topic. Included are background information, discussion questions, clearly stated lesson objectives, and a variety of student learning activities. The teacher can select desired activities from a variety offered, including those which can be done in a single class lesson, or for homework, outside research, or enrichment, depending on the time available. The several TwHP lessons I have used in a variety of classroom sessions fit well into U.S. history courses, including advanced placement, or in geography classes. I have used TwHP lessons in four basic ways: as whole class readings and discussion; as cooperative learning jigsaws, in which