

## Teaching With Historic Sites



Historic sites provide visitors with a unique opportunity to “walk in the footsteps” of ordinary and extraordinary people of the past. Museum exhibits of artifacts, displays, documents, and other primary sources help us understand *how* people lived; visiting an historic site also gives us a sense of time and place. Visiting a Native American village site, a “station” along the Underground Railroad, a Civil War battlefield, or even famous Monticello can overwhelm the tangible and intangible senses of any visitor. The topography of the land, the climate, structures, monuments, and markers are vivid reminders of what life was *really like*, what struggles were endured, and legacies left behind.

It is important to remember, however, that *how* historic sites are preserved and presented are often left up to the interpretation of local agencies or organizations. According to James Loewen, “Events of national and international significance happened at local sites that are under local control. The way that these sites tell their history and perhaps distort it affects how events and people are remembered far away. Every historic site tells two different stories about two different eras in the past – the time it is about and time that put it up.”

There are many things that can be done to turn any visit to a historic site into an enriching and enjoyable learning experience for young people. Below are a few suggestions:

### ***Before the Visit:***

- Connect the visit with classroom learning objectives and academic content standard(s). *Any* field trip becomes more meaningful to students who come with background knowledge and enthusiasm to learn more about the site to be visited, the events that occurred, and the people who lived there.
- Make the visit an interdisciplinary experience by connecting it with literature, creative writing, science, art, music, technology, and architecture.
- Contact the historic site ahead of time for directions, hours of operation, food and restroom facilities, special needs, parking availability, cost of admission, tours, etc.

- If taking a large group, contact the education department of the site to notify them of your visit and if possible, arrange for a private tour. Divide the class into smaller groups and ask parents or other adults to accompany each group as a chaperone. Acquaint each adult with the learning objectives, the facility, the trip agenda, and their role.
- Identify specific exhibits or points of interest during the site visit.
- Talk with young people, ahead of time, about the historic site they will be visiting: what they will see, why it is significant, and what to expect.
- Prepare young people with strategies for examining artifacts, analyzing primary source documents, and interpreting visuals. Acquaint them with a sense of time and place. Remind them of rules, expectations, and “museum etiquette”.

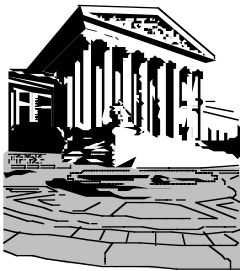


### ***During the Visit:***

- As appropriate, explore the historic site using a variety of senses and learning modalities: seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching.
- Make connections with background knowledge.
- Ask pointed questions about the significance and authenticity of the historic site. James Loewen, in his book, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* advises visitors to historic sites to ask the following questions:
  - When did this location become a historic site? When was the marker or monument put up? Or house “interpreted”? How did that time differ from ours? From the time of the event or person commemorated?
  - Who sponsored it? Representing which participant group’s point of view? What was their position in the social structure when the event occurred? When the site went “up”?
  - What were the sponsors’ motives? What were their ideological needs and social purposes? What were their values?
  - Who is the intended audience for the site? What values were they trying to leave for us, today? What does the site ask us to go and do or think about?
  - Did the sponsors have government support? At what level? Who was ruling the government at that time? What ideological arguments were used to get the government to acquiesce?
  - Who is left out? What points of view go largely unheard? How would the story differ if a different group told it? Another political party? Race? Sex? Class? Religious group?

- Are there problematic (insulting or degrading) words or symbols that would not be used today, or by other groups?
- How is the site used today? Do traditional rituals continue to connect today's public to it? Or is it ignored? Why?
- Is the presentation accurate? What actually happened? What historical sources tell of the event, people, or period commemorated at the site?
- How does the site fit in with others that treat the same era? Or subject? What other people lived and events happened then but are not commemorated? Why?

*After the Visit:*



- Reflect upon the experience as an opportunity to reinforce and continue learning. Encourage young people to make a journal entry, write a story, dialogue, create a piece of artwork, or make a presentation about the historic significance of the site.
  - Encourage further study by accessing web sites, primary sources, literature, and artwork connected to the historic site and the people who lived there.
  - Provide young people with service learning opportunities to volunteer at the historic site as a tour guide, participate in a restoration project, record local histories, or inform others of the site as a local resource.
- Ask to be put on a mailing list of the site visited to be informed of future events and special exhibits.
  - Write letters to the staff members of the historic site, thanking them for their hospitality and contribution to student learning.