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Unsung Heroes in American History
Final Proposal

Proposal Abstract:

My proposal included not only an initial unit of study but also a theme that was carried throughout the year's studies. I wanted to examine the role of individual heroes who have advanced our founding ideals throughout the history of our nation. The Founders planted the seeds and spoke and wrote eloquently about their ideals for the perfect nation but it has taken the work of countless individual heroes to advance those ideals and try to make their words become reality. The work continues to this day to make this nation live up to its founding ideals.

The students first examined primary documents to establish the founding ideals of our nation. Over the course of the unit, various writings, speeches, and actions of prominent Americans were used to explore the evolution and promotion of American ideals. We also looked at symbols used in American art, architecture, and wartime propaganda that have been used to express and advance American ideals, which added a visual learning component to the unit.

Grade Level:

This project was used with 10th grade U.S. History students but could be easily adapted for use with elementary or junior high students as well.

Seminar Impact:

The theme of this year's seminar and the first assignment that we did inspired me to create this project. I started thinking about the word hero and what it means to each of us. I wanted to carry the theme of American heroes throughout the year as my students studied U.S. History. I can't deal directly with the American Revolution, as I teach the second U.S. History survey. I usually start with the Civil War and end up in 1991 with the end of the Cold War. I wanted to look at the founding ideals of our nation and then examine "heroes of liberty" (as the seminar title describes them) who have helped advance these ideals throughout our nation's history, up to the present day. At the same time, I wanted to examine the ways in which our founding principles and values have been expressed throughout our history and how our ideas about their meaning have evolved over the years.

Another part of the seminar that influenced me was Michael Dwyer's presentation, *The Iconography of Revolution; Symbols that Shaped American Values*. His wonderful presentation reminded me how much I enjoyed the courses that I took as an undergraduate to complete my minor in art history. It also reaffirmed my belief in the use of as many visuals as possible in high school history courses. Therefore, I wanted to incorporate an examination of the evolution of the expression of American ideals through symbolism in the various arts.

Central Questions:

- What are the central ideals upon which our nation was founded?
- What do the terms liberty, freedom, and equality mean to us today and have these meanings changed since 1776?
- In what ways has the U.S. government tried to advance these ideals over the course of the nation's history?
- Which individuals in our nation's history deserve to be considered American heroes for their efforts to advance these ideals?
- Has the media created heroes out of undeserving individuals (Starting with the dime novels of the old west [i.e. Jesse James, Billy the Kid] and continuing up to the present day)?
- How do legends, myths, and folklore play into our concept of the American hero?
- Why do a handful of individuals make it into our textbooks while others remain unsung heroes?

Challenge Questions:

- What does it mean to be heroic/what does one have to do to be considered a hero?
- Why does a nation need heroes/what purpose do they serve?
- Does a hero need an identifiable enemy to be juxtaposed against (Can there be heroes without "evil-doers")?
- What motives might cause those in positions of power to promote certain individuals and acts as heroic while leaving other individuals in relative obscurity?
- How have our ideas of unalienable rights changed since the Declaration of Independence was penned (relate this to current issues, for example, is universal healthcare an unalienable right)?

Lesson Length:

- Initial lesson will take four class periods (40 minutes each).
- Students will be working with primary documents to discover our nation's founding ideals.
- Class discussions will center on how these ideals were interpreted and expressed both then and now.
- On the fifth day there will be a quiz on the information examined that week.

* The theme of "American ideals and heroes who have advanced them" will be carried throughout the school year

Key Ideas:

- Although a select few are widely known by the American public, there are numerous unsung heroes in American history.

- Due to a variety of factors, some people get their names immortalized in American History while others are largely forgotten.
- As a nation of immigrants with a relatively short, shared history compared to many nations, what really binds us together as a nation is our dedication to our founding ideals.
- Our interpretation of these ideals, what constitutes them, and who is entitled to them have changed over the course of the nation's history (property ownership requirements for voting, Civil War and amendments, women's suffrage, civil unions in Vermont, etc.)

Intended Learning Outcomes:

Students should be able to:

- Discuss the ideals on which our nation was founded.
- Identify and discuss the meaning of various symbols used to advance American ideals.
- Explain how our idea of what constitutes liberty, freedom, and equality has changed over time.
- Identify well-known American heroes as well as some who have gone unsung.
- Choose an American hero and conduct research on the life of that individual.
- Create a well-written essay based on their research of an individual who they think was heroic.

National History Standards:

- **Standard 4:** How democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events, and symbols.

4A The student understands how the United States government was formed and the nation's basic democratic principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Explain the importance of the basic principles of American democracy that unify us as a nation: our individual rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; responsibility for the common good; equality of opportunity and equal protection of the law; freedom of speech and religion; majority rule with protection for minority rights; and limitations on government, with power held by the people and delegated by them to their elected officials who are responsible to those who elected them to office. [Demonstrate and explain the influence of ideas]

4B The student understands ordinary people who have exemplified values and principles of American democracy.

Identify *ordinary people* (emphasis added) who have believed in the fundamental democratic values such as justice, truth, equality, the rights of the individual, and responsibility for the common good, and explain their significance. [Assess the importance of the individual in history]

4C The student understands historic figures who have exemplified values and principles of American democracy.

Identify *historical individuals* (emphasis added) who believed in the fundamental democratic values such as justice, truth, equality, the rights of the individual, and responsibility for the common good, and explain their significance in their historical context and today. [**Assess the importance of the individual in history**]

4D The student understands events that celebrate and exemplify fundamental values and principles of American democracy.

Describe the history of events, such as the signing of the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence, and the writing of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation. [**Demonstrate and explain the influence of ideas and beliefs**]

4E The student understands national symbols through which American values and principles are expressed.

Describe the history of American symbols such as the eagle, the Liberty Bell, George Washington as the “father of our country,” and the national flag [**Demonstrate and explain the influence of ideas**]

Vermont Standards:

- **Historical Connections**

6.4 Students identify major historical eras and analyze periods of transition in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations worldwide to understand the past, the present, and the relationship between the two. This is evident when students:

d. Identify and sequence patterns of change and compare historical data from Vermont, the U.S. and the world by examining:

United States:

-how democratic values came to be and how people, (e.g., Washington, Lincoln, King) events (e.g., 4th of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day) and symbols (e.g., flags, eagles) have exemplified them.

-regional folklore and cultural contributions that helped form our national heritage.

- **Traditional and Social Histories**

6.5 Students investigate both the traditional and the social histories of the people, places, and cultures under study, including those of indigenous peoples. This is evident when students:

- a. Describe and interpret events through the perspectives of people (both famous and common) living in the time and place under study.
- b. Demonstrate understanding of the relationships among powerful people, important events, and the lives of common people.

- **Being a Historian**

6.6 Students use historical methodology to make interpretations concerning history, change, and continuity. This is evident when students:

- f. Identify and analyze recurring themes in the midst of change (e.g., ethnic and national identity); and
- g. Explain why we study human actions in the past.

- **Meaning of Citizenship**

6.9 Students examine and debate the meaning of citizenship and act as citizens in a democratic society. This is evident when students:

- a. Debate and define the rights, principles, and responsibilities of citizenship in a school, community and country.
- bb. Examine how citizens work to close the gap between the ideal and the reality of everyday life.

- **Human Rights**

6.12 Students identify and evaluate the concept of human rights in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations world wide. This is evident when students:

- aaa. Identify and evaluate how individual and group action promote or deny human rights; and
- bb. Compare and contrast various statements about human rights (e.g., U.S. Bill of Rights, Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and examine their current impact.

Preparation for Teaching:

- Copies of primary sources for student use
- Copies of books for research ideas (see *Secondary Sources* section)
- Computers with internet access for student research
- *PowerPoint* presentation comparing well-known American heroes vs. unsung heroes to start off the unit and spark interest in the topic of unsung heroes

Primary Sources:

* All of the primary sources that I used in this unit of study can be obtained through Yale's Avalon Project web page at the following address: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm>. This is an excellent resource that I highly recommend to social studies teachers at all levels.

** Primary sources are organized by date, not author's name

Jefferson, Thomas. "The Declaration of Independence." *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*. 1776. 10, Aug. 2007. <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/declare.htm>>

Obviously, no study of American ideals should be conducted without a close examination of our founding document. Although he borrowed from previous authors, no other author has more eloquently stated America's national ideals than Jefferson did in the Declaration of Independence. The purpose of this document was to state the American colonies reasons for pursuing independence from the British Empire. This document was crucial to my unit as it formally established the founding ideals of our nation, which my students would be tracing the development of throughout our study of American history.

The circumstances of Jefferson's life, and early America in general, provides plenty of fodder for discussions of equality and liberty and what those ideals meant when he penned those famous words. Students can discuss why Jefferson, a slave owner, would state that, "all men are created equal" and have "certain unalienable rights." Another discussion topic is how the Declaration has shaped American history by giving us such lofty goals to pursue.

"The U.S. Bill of Rights." *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*. December 15, 1791 (ratified). 10, Aug. 2007. <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/rights1.htm>>

Once again, the reasons for using this document while teaching a unit on American ideals are obvious. It would be impossible to explore our ideals as a nation without examining this document. Therefore, this was one of the main primary sources that was discussed and used in the opening days of this unit. This document lays out our most cherished rights as citizens of the United States.

“Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls Convention.” *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*. 1848. 10, Aug. 2007 <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/senecafalls.html>>

This document was useful to illustrate the expansion of the ideals of liberty, freedom, and equality to groups like women who had originally been deemed unworthy of being full participants in the political and public spheres of the nation. This led to many great discussions about the absence of women in our history books (until recently) and dovetailed quite nicely with Carol Berkin’s and James Loewen’s books (see *Secondary Sources*)

Lincoln, Abraham. “The Gettysburg Address.” *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*. 1863. 10, Aug. 2007. <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/gettyb.htm>>

This primary source was very useful during this unit. Granted, part of Lincoln’s purpose in writing this address may have been to solidify the moral high ground that the Union had seized after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Nonetheless, it is a clear, concise statement of American ideals and gives the teacher an opportunity to discuss how the Civil War fundamentally altered the meaning of the Declaration of Independence by attempting to extend those unalienable rights to a group of Americans who had been marginalized in American society and would continue to be for decades to come.

King, Dr. Martin Luther Jr. “I Have a Dream.” *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*. 28, Aug. 1963. 10, Aug. 2007. <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/treatise/king/mlk01.htm>>

This document was an essential part of tracing the evolution of the ideals of liberty, freedom, and equality from the Founders to the present day. This was especially useful later in the year when we discussed the failure of Reconstruction in class. It would be hard to find a more stirring and emotional call for America to live up to its founding ideals than Dr. King’s *I Have a Dream* speech.

“What We’re Fighting For: A Letter from America.” *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*. 13, Feb. 2002. 10, Aug. 2007. <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/sept_11/letter_002.htm>

This document was also very useful when examining the evolution of American ideals. Written in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks on America, it attempts to rededicate the nation to its founding ideals and clarify exactly what it is that America is fighting for and defending in the war on terror. This document provided an important opportunity to link what we were discussing to the present day America in which my students live, an endeavor that I believe is essential to sparking their interest in the value of historical education.

Secondary Sources:

Ayres, Thomas. *That's Not in My American History Book: A Compilation of Little-Known Events and Forgotten Heroes*. Lanham, Maryland: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2000.

This was one of the most useful resources that I came across during the research for my project. It was an invaluable tool for information on unsung heroes in American History. It was a lively and quick read. High school students could read this easily and I think they would really enjoy the book. The material is presented in short, individual entries so it is a book that can be picked up and read straight through or the reader can pick and choose only the entries that interest him or her. Instead of focusing on dates and events Ayres focuses on individuals and how they have affected American history. The author's goal was to present a more interesting historical account than what is found in most history textbooks. I think he accomplished that goal with this entertaining book.

Berkin, Carol. *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence*. New York: Random House, 2005.

Carol Berkin made an important contribution to the historical record with this book on the long overlooked contributions of women in American history. Berkin's book focuses on the contributions of women to the fight for America's independence. This book was very useful to me during my research. The book is easy to read and use, as it is organized using thematic chapters. It is a clear, concise book that presents a lot of little-known facts.

After having the opportunity to hear Professor Berkin speak, it was apparent that the book was painstakingly researched. The book is filled with the heroic acts of women, most of which my students had never heard before. Obviously, one of the great illustrations of the fact that some people have been left out of our American History texts is the absence of women. Although things have improved over the last few decades, there are still relatively few women mentioned in the American History text that my classes use. This book could be read by high school students who are reading at or above grade level. I would not recommend it for junior high students.

Butterfield, Herbert. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1965.

This is a very informative and thought-provoking essay that explores the desirability (and possibility) of objectivity in history. Butterfield argues against the Whig interpretation of history and in favor of studying the past with an open mind and without an agenda that would cause one to select certain facts while ignoring others. He points out that, "It is astonishing to what an extent the historian has been Protestant, progressive, and whig . . ." (3).

Although I personally enjoyed this book, it was not of much use to me in the development or implementation of my unit. The ideas presented in this essay were a little too advanced for the

students in my U.S. History classes. It would be a difficult read for high school sophomores and I definitely would not recommend it for junior high students. It should also be noted that the book is not a current source, as it was originally published in 1965. However, the issues that Butterfield explores in his essay are timeless issues that will fuel historical debate for many generations to come.

Loewen, James. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.

Loewen's book was of particular interest to me when developing this unit of study, as it deals directly with the subject of American History textbooks and what they get wrong. The main title is misleading at best, since it seems to place the blame on teachers who "lie" when really the focus of the book is on American History textbooks. Another weakness is the small sample used by Loewen. He only used 12 different textbooks for his analysis out of the huge pool of available textbooks on American History. It should also be noted that this was a representative sample of textbooks that were in popular use in the early 1990s. Therefore, this book is becoming a little dated if you are interested in a current analysis of the material presented in today's popular American History textbooks.

Randall, Willard Sterne. *Alexander Hamilton: A Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

Randall's account of the life of Alexander Hamilton reads like a novel. It would be too difficult for younger readers but would be appropriate for upper level high school students. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. It was well researched and well written. The author showed no obvious bias. He didn't try to make Hamilton out to be some sort of immortal historical figure. Instead, he let the reader see his shortcomings as well as his genius. As much as I enjoyed this book, it was not of any use to me in designing my unit.

Shenkman, Richard. *Legends, Lies, and Cherished Myths of American History*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1988.

This was an interesting and useful book by Shenkman. It provided me with examples and possible research subjects for my students. The book is organized into thematic chapters (such as "Discoverers and Inventors," "From Rags to Riches," and "Immigrants") so you can easily find information that pertains to your research. The reading could be handled by high school students and advanced junior high readers. I would recommend it as a resource for the teacher, if nothing else, as it presents a lot of quality research on individuals who don't appear in the average high school history textbook.

Shenkman, Richard and Kurt Reiger. *One-Night Stands with American History: Odd, Amusing, and Little-Known Incidents*. (Revised edition). New York: Perennial, 2003.

This resource was useful, not so much for unknown people but for unknown events. It was useful to illustrate that only certain aspects of our American heroes' lives find their way into our textbooks. It is a collection of short accounts that could be read by high school students and junior high students with some vocabulary support. The book is more of a reference book of short entries on interesting facts and figures than something that you would sit down and read in one sitting. I used it as a reference for myself but if I were going to have students use it I would assign them certain accounts rather than the entire book.

Activities:

- Analysis of primary sources to determine America's founding values and how they have evolved throughout our history
- Analysis of symbols and how they have been used to express American ideals throughout our history
- Research for, and writing of, individual hero essays

Assessment:

- Participation in class discussions (evidence of reading required documents)
- Analysis of primary documents
- Hero research and essay
- Various quizzes and tests throughout the year (especially the one at the end of the initial unit)

Accommodations:

- During this unit accommodations were made on an individual basis according to each student's particular needs and learning style and in accordance with the student's IEP, 504, or 157 plan.