

**NJS Presents****Teaching NJ History****In this Issue:*****New Jersey History Day: Doing History, Discovering New Jersey*****By Barbara Gallo****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v4i1.110>**

*There is an increasingly expanding movement happening in classrooms across New Jersey towards teaching history through an inquiry designed program. For educators, participation in New Jersey History Day (NJHD) is a vehicle to teach history for all the reasons that make it such a critically important subject in a student's education and provides an opportunity for students to engage in historical research. Working on an NJHD project teaches critical thinking, writing, and research skills and boosts performance across all subjects. Along the way, sometimes by design and sometimes by chance, students are enriched by learning about the history all around them in their home state of New Jersey.*

Middle and high school students throughout New Jersey are discovering that the history of their home state is all around them and often has national implications. Some have read about Dorothea Dix and her campaign to improve the care of the mentally ill, and found out that Dix in the last six years of her life moved into a state legislature-designated private suite in the hospital she established in Trenton and lived there until her death. Some have learned about the fight for women's enfranchisement and identify Alice Paul as a Jersey Girl who grew up in Moorestown. In science class, some have explored chemicals and the chlorination of water and discovered that Newark was the first city in the United States to chlorinate its water supply. Some have read literature about Japanese internment in the United States during WWII and uncovered a connection

to Seabrook Farms in Upper Deerfield Township. Some have researched the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and discovered that a similar catastrophic fire happened a year earlier in New Jersey - and they began to ask why there were different historical impacts of the two fires. These students didn't make these connections to New Jersey because a teacher told them about them or because they were in their textbooks; the students made these discoveries in the course of working on New Jersey History Day (NJHD) projects.

More and more teachers across the state- in the classroom and in after-school clubs, in private, public, and home schools, in middle and in high schools- are embracing a history competition offered by New Jersey History Day, an affiliate of the national program, National History Day (NHD). Involvement in the competition offers students an exciting way to integrate history into their lives and to do historical research. Students are not just collecting facts to compile in a report but analyzing and evaluating, asking questions, inquiring as to the context of the event and the impact, focusing on answering the guiding question "So What?" And what do the students do with all the information they have gathered? How do they present their findings? They become writers, filmmakers, web designers, playwrights and artists as they create unique contemporary expressions of history. They can write a paper, or, individually or as a group, create an exhibit, website, or a ten-minute performance or documentary.

For educators, participation in NJHD is a vehicle to teach history for all the reasons that make it such a critically important subject in a student's education. Working on an NHD project teaches critical thinking, writing, and research skills and boosts performance across all subjects. Evidence shows that students who participate in NHD become better writers, write with a purpose and real voice, and marshal solid evidence to support their point of view. They learn 21<sup>st</sup> century college and career-ready skills. They learn to collaborate with team members, talk to experts,

manage their time, and persevere. They become critical thinkers who can digest, analyze, and synthesize information.

NJHD has grown from holding just one state competition per year to holding four regional competitions, with qualifiers advancing to the annual state competition held the first Saturday in May at William Paterson University. The finalists at the state competition represent New Jersey at the national competition held in June at the University of Maryland. Over 5,000 students in New Jersey presently participate in the program, with more than half a million students participating in NHD around the world.

The process for the yearlong competition begins when NHD announces the annual theme, which provides a lens through which to study history. Some students work on choosing their topic over the summer, some begin in September, and some teachers introduce the theme and the project during a specific semester. For competition, the student-chosen topic must link to the theme. This year's theme, for example, is *Conflict and Compromise in History*. Topics can come from any place (local, state, nation, or world) and any time period. Students in New Jersey are encouraged, though not mandated, to consider a New Jersey history topic and NJHD creates a suggested New Jersey topics list every year that correlates to the theme.

Once the students have identified a topic and formulated their thesis statement, the real work begins. For this computer-savvy generation, that usually means research using the internet but soon the questions that the investigation generates leads students to books, newspapers, magazines, archives, museums, historical exhibits, primary sources, secondary sources, and interviews with college professors, experts, and possibly first-hand witnesses and authors. When the topic one year was *Taking a Stand in History*, for example, some students chose to study the Revolutionary War Battle of Trenton. They went to the reenactment held each year in December,

they read local authors' books and articles on the subject, they spoke to experts on the subject and came to comprehend what the fledgling Continental Army had already experienced and suffered as it marched out of New York and through the state of New Jersey. The students also grew to understand the impact of the victory and its historical consequences.

NJHD is fortunate to have Kean, Monmouth, Princeton, Rutgers, Rutgers-Camden, and Seton Hall Universities offer their campuses for the regionals on a rotating basis. Students present their projects before a panel of three judges, each project competing against similar projects in their category and in their age group (juniors and seniors). Judges look for historical accuracy, historical context, analysis and interpretation, use of available primary sources, wide and balanced research, relationship to theme, significance of topic in history, the conclusions drawn, and clarity of presentation.

Those who qualify for the next round of competition have the opportunity to improve their projects and to continue to research to delve deeper into their topic in preparation for the state competition when they again will present their projects before a panel of judges. Two finalists in each category are chosen to attend the national competition where students enjoy the fruits of their hard work, meeting, competing, and talking with students from across the United States.

By participating in this yearlong program, students do the work of historians, seeking answers to their original thesis question, analyzing sources, recognizing bias, looking at multiple perspectives, putting the person or event in historical context, and evaluating impacts, both positive and negative. Last year, students did even more, they uncovered history! During their research on New Jersey native Josiah DuBois, some students unearthed facts previously unknown- that under an assumed name, DuBois had worked to funnel funds to Raoul Wallenberg to aid European

Jews fleeing the Holocaust. Their resulting NJHD project, a documentary, placed second in the nation at the national competition.

The educators and schools involved in NJHD are committed to presenting an exciting program to students, providing an opportunity for them to realize just how relevant history can be in their own lives. Along the way, sometimes by design and sometimes by chance, students are being enriched by learning about the history all around them in their home state of New Jersey.

*New Jersey History Day depends on historians, educators, and others to volunteer a few hours to judge student projects. Judges are an integral part of making the History Day program a success. Please consider participating in one of the competitions being held this year on the following dates:*

*Monmouth University: February 24*

*Rutgers University – Camden: March 3*

*Princeton University: March 10*

*Seton Hall University: March 17*

*William Paterson University: May 5*

*Come to a competition to see the projects students have created or attend a judges' training and become actively involved in NJHD. Contact the state coordinator of NJHD, Nancy Norris-Bauer, at [norrisn@wpunj.edu](mailto:norrisn@wpunj.edu) for further details, or click [here](#) to visit the NJHD website.*

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