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Plan for (Teaching) the Past! Reach Out Now to Middle and High Schools Gearing Up for National History Day

By Doris Malkmus, Pennsylvania State University

Archivists have embraced National History Day (NHD)—America’s “history fair” organized as district, state, and national competitions for middle and high school students. The Reference, Access, and Outreach (RAO) Section of SAA created an online toolkit about NHD specifically to inform and support archivists and teachers. The site links to a wealth of resources: nhdarchives.pbworks.com/w/page/37898361/National%20History%20Day%20and%20Archives.

National History Day is of special interest to archivists because it helps train future researchers—students—in high-quality in-house and online archival research. It inspires students to create brilliant projects using archival sources. Students have a lot of fun “doing history” and learn to love it.

If your archives is already collaborating with NHD projects, this is the time to prepare for the 2014 competition. If your repository is just considering some form of outreach to K–12, this is a good time to discover whether NHD is an option for you. To find out if teachers in your area are involved with NHD, contact the regional or state NHD coordinator at www.nhd.org/coordinators.htm and ask which, if any, teachers are participating this year or participated last year. Teachers are the gateway to any outreach to schools, but they are essential for student involvement in NHD. Teachers volunteer to incorporate NHD projects into their teaching for the year, which requires significant preparation and commitment on their part. If teachers sign on, they must prepare classes for research and help students choose topics and formats. Students can choose to write formal papers, prepare exhibits, do performances, create documentaries, or build websites. Projects are judged as either individual or group efforts.

The theme for the 2014 contest is “Rights and Responsibilities in History.” See the NHD Theme Sheet for more information at www.nhd.org/images/uploads/397079_2014_NHD_ThemeSheet_FNL.PDF.

Local history projects are encouraged and local instances add color to big topics and make them significant for students. Archivists can begin by reviewing their

holdings to see what might be appropriate for the theme of rights and responsibilities in history. Some topics are no-brainers—civil and human rights, treaty rights, suffrage, temperance, anti-immigration, antiwar, labor, prisoner treatment, and animal rights all raise issues that engage students. Also consider collections that document conflicts over environmental impact, land development, water and property rights, and farm practices. The theme is deliberately broad, and archives contain abundantly eclectic collections.

Archivists should pay particular attention to nontextual resources. Students use images, maps, and audio files when they create exhibits, websites, and documentaries. They may use only one of your images—don’t despair!—students can combine it with others they find online. Diversity of sources provides evidence of thorough research.

Examples include:

- Broadsides, prints, and documents about labor
- Courtesy manuals and student handbooks that outline changing ideas of men’s and women’s normative behavior
- Documents that illustrate the evolution of responsibility for environmental justice
- Photographs of uniformed women in WWI that illustrate the changing ideas of military duty

It takes relatively little time and effort to offer teachers ideas about documents and images in collections. A small effort may bring students into the archives and introduce them to archival research in a nonthreatening, positive, and age-appropriate way. The structure of NHD provides one of the very best approaches to promoting excellence in research practices. As primary sources become more available online and ubiquitous in classroom environments, National History Day may provide a ticket to the future. As special collections become more important to the teaching mission of colleges, starting with outreach to schools may enhance the preparedness of your future students.