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National History Day:

Exploring the Past with Middle and High School Students

by John Taylor

National History Day (NHD) is a highly regarded academic program that promotes historical research by students in grades six through twelve. Through the encouragement of their teachers and parents, and the all-encompassing annual theme selected by NHD, students choose historical topics that interest them. These budding historians are expected to conduct extensive primary and secondary research about their chosen topic. By combining creativity and scholarship, they present their historical research in the form of papers, exhibits, performances, websites, or documentaries as an individual or in a group on regional, state, and national levels.

National History Day began in 1974 as a small contest hosted by the History Department at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. The department decided to create a contest devoted to history that was modeled on a science fair. It quickly spread throughout the Midwest and became an international event. By the mid-1990s it became a national nonprofit organization headquartered near Washington, D.C. National History Day now coordinates year-round programs culminating in a weeklong national contest at the University of Maryland in College Park.

My initial involvement with NHD occurred in 2005 during my first year in graduate school. After spending the day looking at the projects and interviewing students about their research, I was highly impressed with what they could accomplish. Maybe more important, I was thrilled about their level of enthusiasm for history. I realized that NHD accomplishes its key goals. In addition to introducing young adults to the importance of historical research and knowledge, NHD also helps students to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, hone their research and reading proficiency, and practice oral and written communication with knowledgeable people working within the field of history.

In 2014 a collaborative effort among the University of Maine, Margaret Chase Smith Library, Maine Humanities Council, and the Maine Historical Society formed to strengthen the state program. Our first year

exceeded our expectations. In April 2014, roughly 250 Maine students from 26 schools participated in the state competition. The competition included volunteers from around the state serving as judges and staff to create a successful event that, according to one parent, is a focal point of the school year.

Our delegation of 47 then attended the national contest. Competing against students from all 50 states, three territories, and four other countries, Noah Binette, a freshman at Noble High School in North Berwick, came in first place in the Senior Individual Exhibit category. His exhibit, “Malaga Island: The Community That Maine Erased,” focused on 45 mixed race residents who were evicted from their homes in 1912. Fueled by economics, racism, and eugenics, the state forced the relocation of the inhabitants to the mainland, while also committing eight people to the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded. Years after the community was erased, descendants remained silent due to the stigmas related to mixed race and mentally handicapped people.

As the Maine NHD state coordinator, I had the privilege to travel to Maryland and spend the week with students, teachers, and parents from Maine. More than 2,000 students participated in the national contest, the largest number in the history of the 40-year event. This program is a success because it empowers students to pursue the topic that most interests them and urges young historians to seek their own answers through research in the rich tapestry of local, state, and national museums, libraries, and archives. The skills and experiences fostered by NHD will help its students to reach future successes in life. 🐟



John Taylor currently serves as the state coordinator for National History Day in Maine, and is the museum assistant at the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan, Maine.