

Explore PA History with the Internet

by Susan Richman

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Looking for engaging materials to study PA History, but a bit short on funds? Look no farther—just set your Internet browser to www.ExplorePAhistory.com and you'll find more than enough for several years of state history study, completely free. And the best thing—the site has follow-up activity suggestions and assessments for elementary, middle, and high school levels, plus info on visiting related sites around the state.

This website was developed by Public Broadcasting Station WITF in Harrisburg, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania State Historical and Museum Commission and other groups, and you'll be amazed at the breadth of information, and the helpful and flexible format. The site is broken into different “stories” about our state's history, based upon the system of state historical road markers (you know, those blue signs that you can never quite read as you zoom by in your car!). So far the site includes the following themes, with 16 more in the works:

- Vision of William Penn
- Set Apart: Religious Communities in Pennsylvania
- The French and Indian War
- The Philadelphia Campaign (1776-1777)
- The Underground Railroad
- Abe Lincoln and the Politics of the Civil War
- Crossing the Alleghenies
- Mining Anthracite
- Striking Oil
- Jazz in Pennsylvania
- Pennsylvanians and the Environment

Come back to the site regularly – you'll keep on finding new stories, new information, new ideas, and an expanding library of creative projects and lessons. And again, it's all free.

This site would be great for homeschoolers working with lots of different ages. The whole family could work on the same “story” but each with age-appropriate activities and materials. For example, here's an overview of the different lesson plans developed for three different levels for the Striking Oil theme:

Elementary School:

Oil and its Everyday Uses. Students will explore the properties of oil through an oil viscosity investigation. They will hypothesize, experiment, collect data, graph, average, and finally draw conclusions about oil. Through video, pictures, teacher demonstrations, materials found on the Internet, the students will draw conclusions on how oil has changed our everyday lives. Next, in cooperative groups the students will research oil and the discovery

of oil in Pennsylvania. The unit will then be summarized by students presenting their research findings orally and in writing.

Middle School:

Oil-Impact of a Resource. Probably no other natural resource has had the impact on both American society and the modern world as did the discovery of how to extract and refine petroleum. The story of this process, which shaped our modern world, begins in Pennsylvania, in Venango County at Drake's Well. This lesson explores the early development of the oil industry.

High School: Ida Tarbell

Hysterical Woman vs. Historical Facts. Investigative journalism became a movement at the turn of the century when magazines began publishing articles exposing corruption in politics and business. Ida Tarbell, writing for McClure's Magazine, was one of the premier writers in this genre as she took on John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil. This lesson will ask students to examine the writings of Ida Tarbell and political cartoons of the era. They will compare circumstances at the turn of the century with government actions against monopolies today.

I could also of course imagine that the older kids in a family would readily enjoy seeing those experiments with oil, everyone would enjoy a trip (virtual or on-the-road!) to see the Drake Oil Well Museum, and that the teens could make presentations on Tarbell that could interest the younger kids. All needed print materials are available right on the site for printing out (in "printer friendly" format too -- no missing words along the righthand margin!), and there are also links to many related sites for further discoveries. I found in browsing about on the Strike Oil section that I found lots of fascinating material -- including info on the history of the use of natural gas, which was especially interesting to me as we have three gas wells right on our farm. I'd never known anything at all about how this fuel, that's so abundant all around my region of the state, was discovered and developed, or that there was a somewhat similar "natural gas boom" in PA the late 1880's, following the original oil boom in the Titusville region of PA. And I'd certainly never heard about the Murrysville gas well, near to Pittsburgh but this website has the text of the PA Historical Marker that tells about it:

Murrysville Gas Well: First gas well in county, and one of world's most productive. Drilled, 1878. Caught fire in 1881, burning for years with tremendous roar and brilliance. Later was controlled and piped to Pittsburgh.

And following this is a little article about how natural gas was found and developed here, including this engaging little story:

One of the first applications of natural gas occurred quite by accident. In the 1870s Josh Cooper was tending a pot of boiling maple sugar in the woods of Murrysville along Turtle Creek, about 18 miles east of Pittsburgh. The boiling pot was a very familiar part of life here. However, its fuel was very odd. A steady stream of invisible fuel from the ground heated the pot. For Cooper, this was merely a convenience. Enterprising eyes, however, would see it differently.

Definitely have your good readers take a look at the excellent "teacher background info" pages on the website too -- these could also make great read-aloud sections for the whole family. No need to keep these away from the kids!

I also think www.ExplorePAhistory.com would be terrific for homeschool co-ops offering a class in PA history, something that seems to be a popular offering in many groups, as it lends itself so well to planning group trips to related history sites, and because the site would really ease teacher planning. You'd have free access to all the materials you could want for an in-depth class pitched to the appropriate level, and students could readily be assigned to look over source materials online at home to be ready for weekly class activities. Would also be great for just a couple homeschooling families working together -- would give everyone focus and shared assignments and resources. There is linked info on places to visit, historical markers to find, and so much more -- planning couldn't be easier than with this site! You'll also find listings of PA history events all across the state that relate to these stories, and you can access info on PA history that is organized chronologically, by PA region (they actually map out a 4-day itinerary to help you take in all the major history-related sites in the Pittsburgh region, and much more!), or by story theme.

I was also very pleased with the quality of the learning activities offered -- students were required to be active learners, not mere "pencil pushers" working mindlessly through fill-in-the-blank worksheets. All activities are also tied to the official PA learning objectives, and there are pages showing the correlations to these right on the site -- could be a useful source when pulling together homeschool objectives for your affidavit. Activities are also designed to be integrated into all areas of the curriculum, and there is a way to search the site for specific activities related to the arts, to science and technology, to language arts, and more. For instance, one of the writing activities involves learning about journal writing for the elementary level:

Writing American Diaries: This lesson will introduce the concept of historical perspective. By reading the diary of Sally Wister, a Patriot girl living in the Philadelphia area during the Revolutionary War, students will learn about the life of colonists who were Revolutionaries. In this lesson, students will learn to incorporate different points of view that encompassed the American experience during the Revolutionary War. Journal writing techniques will be stressed throughout the lesson.

This 16-year-old's Revolutionary War journal is absolutely fascinating -- and I think students of all ages would find it very worthwhile to take part in this activity. Don't take the age designations too seriously on the site -- you may find that a much wider age range can all enjoy the same lesson.

I'd be very interested to hear how homeschooling families in PA find ways to use this site -- I really think we are probably much better geared than schools to use these excellent resources in active ways. And if your kids write some engaging pieces related to creative assignments such as this journal activity, do send them on to the Backpack for possible publication right here.

And one final challenge -- this site even links you up to info on how to suggest a new historical road marker for the state. I challenge each homeschooler in PA to try to come up

with an idea for a new marker for the state – wouldn't that be neat if a homeschoolers's idea got accepted! Happy exploring!