

Teaching From The Grave: Community History at the Local Cemetery: A Save Our History How To Project Guide

At the *Save Our History*® National Honors luncheon in May 2005, **The History Channel**® awarded the Three Village Historical Society, in collaboration with students at Minnesauke Elementary School, the *Save Our History* Classroom Award for their exceptional *Save Our History* project. Students learned the history of their community by exploring a very valuable resource: the local cemetery. At the graveyard, students recorded data from headstones. In the classroom, they compiled, organized, and graphed information to demonstrate changes in mortality rates, population patterns, and longevity over time. Additionally, historical texts from the local historical society were used to interpret and explain data from the gravestones.



Minnesauke Elementary, East Setauket, NY.
Bank of America Classroom Award Winner.

Project Description:

Students will visit their local cemetery, record details from the headstones, and conduct a detailed analysis of the information they collect as it pertains to local and national history.

Goal:

Students will discover that they can learn history through a variety of sources, including their local cemetery. Students will preserve – and perhaps unearth – important information about the history of their community.

Time Required:

1-2 days spent in a local cemetery;
2 class periods spent organizing data

Materials Needed:

Data collection sheets, clipboards, pencils, calculators, bags of pebbles, historical texts, computer access.

Project Guidelines: Preparing for Your Cemetery Visit

- 1. Collaborate!**
Contact your local historical society and invite a representative to work with your class.
- 2. Identify existing resources.**
Identify whether the information at the graveyard has already been documented or mapped out. If it has, ask for a copy of the records. If not, plan a field trip with students to collect and record this information. In addition, investigate books they may have to further your inquiry.



Minnesauke students at Setauket Presbyterian Cemetery.

3. Create worksheets.

In preparation for the field trip, create a data collection sheet and practice recording information with students by using gravestone rubbings or photos in class.

Project Guidelines: At the Cemetery

- 1. Gather data.**
Collect information from gravestones (i.e. day, month, year of birth and death, family name, and gender of individual). Have students work in pairs to ensure information is properly recorded.
- 2. Avoid duplicate entries.**
Place a rock atop the headstone to indicate that information has been collected.
- 3. Enter data into a spreadsheet.**
Have students work in pairs on a computer to log the data they collected.
- 4. Organize data.**
Use the computer spreadsheet program options to configure the data in ascending order by category (i.e. year of death, gender, etc.) and print several copies.

Project Guidelines: Follow-Up Research

- 1. Think critically.**
Ask students to consider events in history which may have impacted your community. (The introduction of antibiotics in the 1940s may inspire you to separate your data into pre- and post-1940 groups.)
- 2. Divide students into groups and assign categories to investigate.**
For instance, one group may examine average age of deceased subjects longitudinally, while others may examine percentage of deaths by month.
- 3. Graph your findings.**
- 4. Make connections.**
Examine historically significant occurrences which may have impacted your community.
- 5. Present your work to the community.**
Correlate your findings and present them to your community. Some suggestions could include creating data-based documents,

including the information on the historical society or school's website, or delivering the information via a science-fair-style format.

The Three Village Historical Society, located in the historic Bayles-Swezey House in Setauket, New York, works within the community to explore local history through education. The Three Village area is located on Long Island Sound, midway between New York City and the eastern tip of Long Island. It includes the incorporated villages of Old Field and Poquott and the unincorporated communities of Setauket, East Setauket, South Setauket and Stony Brook.

By Dr. Frank Turano, President, Three Village Historical Society with Paul Wilgenkamp, Sixth Grade Teacher, Minnesauke Elementary School, Setauket, NY.

Helpful Tips:

- 1.** Cluster the population in 5- or 10-year intervals. If your population is small, use individuals.
- 2.** Compare the community mortality data to the arrival or departure of industry (i.e. immigration and emigration).
- 3.** The U.S. Census is available on the web.

Extension Idea:

Use digital images to record and archive gravestone images and map the graveyard.

Adaptation for Special Learners:

Use digital images of headstones from the cemetery to enable students with disabilities to take part in the project back in the classroom.



Students from Charlotte, NC during an intensive exploration of the endangered Davidson Family Cemetery at Rural Hill Farm