

EXPLORATION



ENCOUNTER



EXCHANGE



IN HISTORY

NATIONAL HISTORY DAY
2004

National History Day invites students to research topics related to the theme

Exploration, Encounter, Exchange in History during the 2003-2004 school year.

The theme is broad enough in scope to encourage investigation of topics ranging from local to world history. To fully comprehend the historical importance of their topics, students must ask questions of time and place, cause and effect, change over time, as well as impact and significance. They must consider not only when events happened, but also why

they happened, what impact they had on broader history, and what factors contributed to their development. A presentation of a History Day topic, in short, should not be limited to description, but should draw conclusions about how that topic influenced individuals, communities, nations, the world.

The word “exploration” can be applied to a range of historical settings. For some of us, the term conjures up visions of travel for the purpose of discovery, such as occurred during the European Age of Exploration. The lure of highly prized spices, improvements in ship design, powerful naval artillery, and a desire to spread Christianity to non-Christian lands drove Europeans to the seas in the fifteenth century. The term “explorer” may call to mind individuals such as Prince Henry of Portugal, who organized several expeditions to Africa in search of wealth during this period, or Christopher Columbus, whose plan to reach the spice-rich Indies more rapidly than his competitors failed, but dramatically transformed both Europe and the Americas forever. Exploration, conceived as global travel toward discovery, promises to yield superb material for this year’s History Day projects.

While explorers, their journeys, and the consequences of those journeys offer worthy topics for History Day projects, however, we encourage any student that decides on a project related to exploration of the Americas and elsewhere to consider the other parts of the theme as well. By definition, “encounters” are often as unexpected and unpredictable as exploration itself, and they can reveal much about the views and belief

systems of those involved in them. When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, a pair of explorers from a much different age than Columbus, began their exploration of western North America in May 1804, almost nothing of the vast territory west of the Mississippi River was known to the people of the United States. The Lewis and Clark encounter with the western territory, however, was shaped in part by individuals like Sacagawea, a Shoshone woman who understood much about the land and its inhabitants and served as a guide and translator for their expedition. How did this Native American influence their encounters with other Native Americans? With the plants and animals they encountered along the way? How did their notes and drawings of the geography, wildlife, and inhabitants influence the encounters of later Americans in the region? An illuminating History Day exhibit on the observations of members of the Lewis and Clark expedition might focus on both the exploration and encounter aspects of the theme.

Encounters that occurred in the Americas between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries often involved peoples, plants, and animals that had no previous interaction with each other. Yet, encounters so often occur between familiar parties—the United States Civil War offers one such example of an encounter between peoples that were well aware of each other’s cultures. From classical times, Greece offers similar examples of such encounters. A History Day project might examine how political, social, and cultural differences between the Athenians and the Spartans, differences of which each side was familiar, affected the way the Peloponnesian War was waged. How did military encounter differ from environmental and cultural encounter in its consequences? Solid projects will consider the ways explorations and encounters remained the same across time, as well as how they varied with changing historical circumstances.

Explorations and encounters often lead to the exchange of objects and ideas. Exchange, in the sense of something given in return for something else, has taken place countless times in history in physical and non-physical ways, in ways influenced by culture, society, and economics. The Silk Road, a series of ancient routes connecting the lands bordering the Pacific Ocean to those of the Mediterranean Sea, formed a means of exchange between European, Eurasian, and Asian peoples for more than a thousand years. The Silk Road brought gunpowder, the magnetic compass, printing press, and silk to the West. To China, it brought precious stones, furs, and horses. One of the route’s most famous travelers, Marco Polo, recorded his observations in his *Travels of Marco Polo*. A project on the Silk Road could focus on the exchanges among peoples all along the route, or discuss Marco Polo’s encounters and exchanges as recorded in his *Travels*.

Dramatic exchanges, of course, also can be found in the

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history of ideas. Czechoslovakia and its successor, the Czech Republic, like many former Communist countries, drew many political ideas from western democracies. A History Day perfor-

mance might focus on the ways former Czech President Vaclav Havel's drew on existing republican ideas as his country's political system shifted from communist to republican.

While History Day projects could focus on any one part of the theme, some topics might be best explored by considering all three: exploration, encounter, and exchange. All three parts of the theme can be explored fruitfully, for example, in projects related to the migrations of peoples triggered by industrial revolution and the rise of global capitalism over the past three centuries. Such technological and economic transformation deeply influenced the nature of work and compelled peoples that had labored on farms for several generations to explore new means of making a living. Such migrations generated encounters between people of dramatically different backgrounds and worldviews. Irish women, for example, left their poverty-stricken homeland for the United States in search of work throughout the nineteenth century. Working as domestics for the expanding United States middle class, these women often absorbed ideas about success from their more economically comfortable American employers. By contrast, Italian immigrant women to the United States modified social and cultural prohibitions against their laboring outside the home by taking in "homework," to be completed around the kitchen table by family members. Different groups of immigrants, a performance or documentary might show, handled the encounters of the industrial age by altering and adapting traditional ideas of exchange.

The scope of historical exchanges, of course, can stretch beyond the human experience to involve entire ecosystems. The exchange of plants, animals, and diseases that occurred between the Americas, Europe, and Africa following Columbus' transatlantic voyage offer many fertile topics for History Day projects. From the Americas to Europe went potatoes, tomatoes, maize, tobacco and syphilis. Europeans brought horses, cattle, smallpox, turnips, sugar, and coffee to the Americas. African slaves were forced to work on sugar and tobacco plantations in the Americas, in turn carrying many of their agricultural practices to such plantations. A paper or exhibit might detail the impact of this global exchange on the cultures of Europeans, Native Americans, Africans, or the natural environment.

Yet another form of exploration—scientific—has transformed the way many of us have encountered our environment. Rachel Carson combined scientific research abilities with writing talent to offer the United States and the wider world a deeper understanding of

the effects of chemicals on the environment. Her book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, described how the crop pesticide DDT remained toxic in the environment long after performing its original function. A project might focus on Carson's exploration of the effects of pesticides on the environment, the kinds of encounters between humans and the environment her findings revealed, or the encounters and exchanges her work triggered between an emerging environmentalist movement and the chemical industry.

The search for new modes of movement has captivated humans since the beginnings of recorded time. This form of exploration has resulted in the invention of a range of vehicles that would make excellent subjects for History Day projects this year. From the invention of the wheel more than 5,000 years ago to the most recent launch of the U.S. space shuttle lies a range of explorations, encounters, and exchanges. What effects did the invention of the wheel have on commercial encounters and exchanges? How did the design of longships affect the Vikings' encounters with non-Vikings? Ships, trains, cars, airplanes, and rockets each dramatically transformed ideas about what kinds of exploration were possible, the encounters their users had with other peoples and the environment, and the kinds of exchanges experienced in the world as a result of the development of these new modes of transport.

As this brief "exploration" into this year's theme suggests, it is a broad one, so topics should be carefully selected and developed in ways that best reflect students' talents and abilities. Whether a topic is a well-known event in world history or focuses on a little-known individual from a small community, students should be careful to place them into historical perspective, examine the significance of their topics in history, and show, in their projects, development over time. Studies should include an investigation into available primary and secondary sources, analysis of the evidence, and a clear explanation of the relationship of the topic to the theme, **Exploration, Encounter, Exchange in History**. Students may then develop papers, performances, documentaries, and exhibits for entry into National History Day competitions.

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Refer to Web site for local contest dates and information

National Contest: June 13-17, 2004