

National History Club

Engaging a new generation with a passion for history

By Megan Hamby

Achievement in history and civics remains stagnant in American classrooms. A 2014 History Assessment, administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), saw no change in eighth graders' scores since the last assessment in 2010. The NAEP assessment measures how well eighth-grade students know American history, evaluate historical evidence and understand democracy. Though the average score has increased by 8 points since the first NAEP U.S. history assessment in 1994, **only 18 percent of students in the 2014 assessment performed at or above the proficient level.** The average score was only 267 on a 0–500 scale.

That's why organizations such as the National History Club (NHC) are so essential to furthering students' knowledge and understanding of the past.

In 2002, William Hughes Fitzhugh, the founder of *The Concord Review*, was prompted by a teacher to create a history honors society for high school students. Just a few months later, Fitzhugh expanded the parameters, deciding that any student with an interest in history—no matter his or her grade point average—should get to participate in such a club.

Thus, the NHC was born. In the last 13 years, the club has welcomed 14,000 members, and it now encompasses more than 500 chapters at schools in 44 states. The club recently opened up membership to middle schools groups.

The national organization welcomes dozens of chapters every year, says Robert Nasson, NHC's executive director. The annual chapter membership fee is only \$50, making it realistic for clubs in many areas to afford.

"There's no limit to where history clubs can take place," Nasson says. "We want to have a history club in every secondary school in America."

The club's primary goal, Nasson explains, is for teachers and students to learn about and experience history in creative, inspiring ways. The NHC provides chapters with resources and services, such as monthly electronic updates and a triannual newsletter, to help them frame, focus and plan their activities. The NHC also co-sponsors several award programs to recognize outstanding student members, advisors and chapters.

Each chapter is allowed to chart its own course, customizing its activities to its location and the interests of its members.

Many groups go on field trips, others do community service activities, and most embrace the local history found in their towns. Almost every chapter addresses each component of the DAR's three-pronged mission: historic preservation, education and patriotism.

Living Out History

East Bladen High School's history club, which consists of 65 students, was founded in the spring of 2010. Since then, students have been actively participating in local service projects in their town of Elizabethtown, N.C.

"We made two rules when we started the club," explains Sunday Allen, the chapter advisor and a history teacher at the school. "First, have fun. Second, we won't be a do-nothing club. We want to be of service to the community."

Students began volunteering at Harmony Hall Plantation, one of the oldest homes in North Carolina, right after the club was founded. Revolutionary Patriot Colonel James Richardson built the home in the 1760s. A Richardson family legend claims that British General Charles Cornwallis commandeered the home during his march down the Cape Fear



Left: East Bladen History Club members bring history to life during the 2014 Christmas Open House at Harmony Hall.

Right: Members in period garb are a highlight of the Christmas activities at the historic site.

River. Harmony Hall is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and it is owned and maintained by the Bladen County Historical Society.

As part of their service at Harmony Hall, the students help clean the house, maintain the grounds, and even perform as costumed actors during spring and Christmas events.

Allen and her students make Colonial-era costumes to wear at the events, and Allen has taught several of the girls how to needlepoint.

The group also takes field trips to historical sites. In October 2014, the group traveled to Charlottesville, Va., to tour Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson.

“These students love to learn about the Colonial time period and the Revolutionary War because they’re able to experience it hands-on and live it out,” says Allen, who is a former president of the Bladen County Historical Society and a member of the Battle of Elizabethtown DAR Chapter, Elizabethtown, N.C.

Expanding Knowledge

The history club at Williams Bay High School, located in Williams Bay, Wis., is the largest extracurricular activity at the high school. Though the school numbers only 185 students, more than 100 participate in the history club.

“It doesn’t matter if we have six members or 600,” says Deb Soplanda, the club’s advisor. “As long as the students are interested in what they’re learning and having fun, we’ll keep going.”

Founded in 2000, the group joined the NHC in 2004. Since then, the student-led club has participated in the National



Top: The Williams Bay High School History Club has more than 100 members. Left: Four members compete in the 2015 National History Bee and Bowl National Championships.

History Bee and Bowl, a history quiz competition for primary and secondary students, and several community service activities. In 2010, the group won the “National History Club of the Year” award, and, in 2014, the club took home eighth place in the small school division of the National History Bowl.

But more important, the club pays special attention to its members’ individual interests, ensuring that every student finds a history-related activity that he or she enjoys.

“I want my students to enjoy participating, as well as learn something new,” Soplanda explains. “The group does everything from geocaching to cleaning up parks.”

The students are most interested in preserving and caring for their small town. Named for Israel Williams, an infantry captain in the War of 1812, Williams Bay is one of the three municipalities on Geneva Lake in southeast Wisconsin.

The students of Williams Bay have beautified an American Indian burial site and even proposed a motion requesting that the cardinal be named the official bird of Williams Bay. The motion was subsequently passed by local officials.

“Our current project is preserving our local Frost Park,” says Nick Robison, an upcoming junior and the new club president for the 2015–2016 school year. “We started working there a few years ago. We’ve planted flowers and bushes, placed benches, and are working on building a stone pathway. It looks fantastic.”

The group also regularly takes field trips to museums, seminars and observatories. Their biggest trip is their European adventure—a group of students travels to Europe every two years. In June, 18 students set off for London, Paris and Barcelona to experience the culture, food and history of these cities during their weeklong adventure.

“Many of these students go on to college and end up studying abroad,” Soplanda says. “This trip really opens up their eyes to the world outside their little corner of it. They’ve studied the history, but now they get to experience it. It’s an expansion of their knowledge.” 🙌

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