

History Through Buildings: Introducing Undergraduates to Historical Research

Sally McMurry

Professor of History, *Penn State*

Most history majors at American universities experience their major subject as a set of narratives, usually delivered through a lecture and discussion format. This approach builds a foundation, but by their senior year students are ready for a different kind of experience, one which exposes what's behind all those seamless stories. This brief note describes a course given at Penn State which introduced students to primary research. History 302, the Undergraduate Seminar, is required of undergraduate majors; it is intended to focus on "historical criticism and analysis." Rather than approach abstract historiographical issues, however, this version of the course focused on material artifacts, and moved to interpretive questions after uncovering information about the artifacts, in this case 19th- and 20th- century buildings. Through this "learning by doing" approach, students connected with the subject matter at many different levels, and they learned from the experience and from each other. The culmination of their work was a public presentation to the local village conservancy, so they also saw that their work actually made a difference to real people.

The focus for our investigations was a tiny 19th-century post town just outside of State College. Boalsburg, bypassed by railroads and throughways, has a rich group of extant buildings dating from 1819 to 1930, plus a separate, self-contained post-World War II suburb; they represent a wide variety of building techniques (log, plank, brick, balloon frame) and vernacular types ("I" houses, Pennsylvania German plans, pattern-book and Sears houses). In order to provide some structure for the course, I spent part of the summer preparing "kits" for ten different buildings in the town; I verified that source material was available, listed its whereabouts, and offered suggestions for how individual researchers should proceed. After an introductory class, the next four (we had a single three-hour session weekly) were spent on-site, first in Boalsburg, later at the Centre County Courthouse and Historical Library and at the University Archives. We also had a hands-on workshop on construction techniques given by a faculty member in American Studies. In the meantime, students each chose a building to work on; some worked in teams, some worked alone. Over the next few weeks, in addition to beginning research on his/her building, each student reported to the class on a specific type of primary source—deeds, wills, maps, inventories, local newspapers, etc.—analyzing their strengths and weaknesses and giving local examples. Their work on these was exemplary, I believe in part because they realized that they were all de-

pending on each other for information. They also read brief, classic works such as Peirce Lewis's "Axioms for Reading the Landscape." During the middle part of the semester, students wrote a building description and discussed it in class. Class discussions at this point proved very fruitful as we discovered that in a little place like Boalsburg, everyone was connected to everyone else! The last third of the semester was taken up with readings which brought up interpretive themes relevant to 19th-century Boalsburg. We debated, for example, what "saloon culture" meant in a town which had three taverns for a few hundred people; what it meant that people improvised buildings and pursued multiple occupations in a context of relative poverty; why people built porches late in the 19th century and what that meant for public space. Readings such as Henry Glassie's "Eighteenth-Century Process in Delaware Valley Folk Building" helped us relate our buildings to a larger context. All this paved the way for an interpretive paper, in which the students were asked to make an argument which stated their building's significance in its historical context. The results were very exciting, ranging from an analysis of the loss of community in a postwar suburb to a thesis about ethnic assimilation in the mid-19th century.

For the final, evening presentation to the Boalsburg Village Conservancy, the students prepared "poster presentations" which visually communicated their major findings. Each student or team gave a five-minute talk about each presentation, and afterwards the audience was invited to view the posters and discuss. This too was valuable experience—though it took nerve to get up in front of an audience, the students were happy to see how much local interest their work had generated. The student interpretive papers were placed on deposit with the Conservancy and also with the Centre County Historical Society.

Students responded positively to the whole experience. One said, "I felt like a *real* researcher." Another, hesitant at first, was thrilled to work on a project in which he got to read Civil War letters and diaries. A third plans to write a book!

Though we learned a great deal, there is still lots of rich material in Boalsburg to explore, and I look forward to offering the class again.