

National History Day 2010 Theme

INNOVATION IN HISTORY: IMPACT AND CHANGE

By Julie McCullough, Independent Consultant to National History Day

During the 2009-2010 school year, National History Day invites students to research topics related to the theme: Innovation in History: Impact and Change. Students need to keep the entire theme in mind: “in History” as well as “Innovation” as they begin their research. While the most obvious topics come from science like Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, or new discoveries like Isaac Newton’s laws of gravity, or new inventions like the automobile, the theme is really much broader than that.

Innovation suggests creative new approaches to any facet of life. Students might explore innovation in artistic or musical forms, for example, by looking at the rise of jazz. The important aspect of any National History Day research project is to situate the topic in historical context. What was happening in the society that supported the rise of jazz at this particular point in time? Another way to extend the topic would be to follow the impact of jazz on society through time, for example, on the African American community or subsequent music forms.

Changes in political, social or religious institutions or arrangements might also be considered innovations, as new ways to respond to problems facing society. For example, the establishment of the United States of America, the “Cultural Revolution” in China, the development of settlement houses in America and Europe, or the Protestant Reformation could all be topics for NHD this year. As always, the theme is broad enough to include topics from any period of history and from any part of the world. Whatever topics they choose, however, students must remember to address the theme and place their projects in historical context.

What is “Innovation”?

The initial challenge for students participating in National History Day is to make sure they choose a topic that demonstrates the theme. Innovation, by definition, involves some sort of change, but not all changes are innovations. As students select their topics, they need to ask themselves whether their topic is indeed an innovation. What is it about the

topic that is new and different, and is also the result of human ideas or actions?

Let’s say a student wants to research something related to the 1900 hurricane that hit Galveston, Texas. Taking the topic of the development of better storm warning systems or weather observation technologies that emerged to prevent similar future disasters would fit the theme. On the other hand, simply describing the devastation and loss of life resulting from the hurricane, even if the project showed the legacy of the hurricane for future

development on the island in subsequent decades, does not address the innovation part of the theme. Not the hurricane but the technology. Another example is how the 1906 San Francisco earthquake inspired

innovation in the construction industry to design buildings to withstand seismic activity. Remember innovative is synonymous with new, and the context sets the stage.

Once an appropriate topic has been identified, the crucial first step in any research project is to learn about the specifics of the topic. What was the innovation called? When was it adopted or developed? Who was involved, or, in other words, who were the innovators who created, designed, or implemented the innovation? What did the innovation look like, how did it work, and what previous ideas, objects, actions, or institutions did it replace? What benefits did it provide, and to whom? How was it received?

What is “in History”?

Capturing the “in history” part of the theme is critical for a National History Day project. While it is tempting to focus entirely on the specific innovation, exploration of the “in history” part of the project takes students into the exciting realm of analysis, of exploring questions of “why?” and “so what?” This is where students look at how the topic fits into historical context, why the innovation was important or significant, and what it left as its legacy.



An examination of historical context begins with looking at why this innovation came about when and where it did. Establishing historical context means showing what economic, political, social, technological, cultural, religious or other circumstances existed before, and perhaps caused or contributed to the innovation of interest. It is critical for students to read about the time period first. The development of barbed wire does not make sense unless it is first situated in the cattle industry and grazing rights. The impact of the vacuum cleaner is only understood when juxtaposed with the changing roles for women in the 20th century. Without historical context it is impossible for students to analyze the impact of an innovation.

Perhaps the innovation was an answer to a problem. For example, the New Deal could be seen as the United States' response to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Or maybe the innovation built on other recent developments, with creative individuals taking advantage of opportunities rather than setting out to solve a problem. Thomas Edison's discovery of ways to understand and harness electricity, for example, made all sorts of further inventions possible: electric lights, automobiles, and labor saving devices for the kitchen, just to name a few. Other innovators built on Edison's work to develop new systems to distribute electricity from a central utility company to

individuals' homes and businesses. Innovation in government roles, regulation, and policy also took place, as distribution of electricity became increasingly perceived as a public service — most likely to solve problems as well as take advantage of the new technological innovations.

The other aspect of the "in history" part of the theme is to look at the effects or results of the innovation. How did people react initially, in the short term (within a few years), and over the longer term (in later years and decades), to the new idea, arrangement, organization, or technology? The short term is the impact of the innovation and the long term is the change over time brought about by the innovation. What were the personal ramifications for the innovator? How soon did people adopt or accept the innovation — or did they reject it? What happened to the ideas or items replaced by the innovation, and how quickly did those trends show up? How did it change people's ideas, scientific knowledge, everyday behavior, political processes, etc.? Did the innovation just influence people locally, or did its influences extend nationally or to other countries, and in what ways did the influences appear? Has the innovation been supplanted by other innovations, and how fast did that replacement process occur? All of these questions are designed to explore the historical significance of the topic.

For more information, contact:
Judy Dobbs, Maryland History Day State Coordinator
410-685-4185 jdobbs@mdhc.org www.mdhc.org

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