



FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT
“Object of History” [Grant LG-23-05-0061-05]
December 22, 2008

As of December 2008, the Center for History and New Media (CHNM) <chnm.gmu.edu> and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History (NMAH) <americanhistory.si.edu> is pleased to report that we have completed all of the major deliverables for “The Object of History: Teaching American History through Artifacts.” The project website for this National Leadership Grant, *Object of History: Behind the Scenes at the National Museum of American History* (OOH) <objectofhistory.org> has been extremely successful at providing curricular resources for high school U.S. History teachers, and at serving as a model for small museums and historical societies who wish to use our software to create their own Object Lesson websites for educational outreach.

I. Object of History: Behind the Scenes at the National Museum of American History

We are especially pleased with the final website for the grant. OOH has garnered favorable reviews from the museum and digital history community. For example, in a review for *Picturing U.S. History: an Interactive Resource for Teaching with Visual Evidence* <http://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/item.php?item_id=177>, Catherine Whalen of Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, has commented, “As many material culture scholars have observed, people, not objects, tell stories. Which is exactly what the creators of *The Object of History* have done so very well, using evocative artifacts to interpret U.S. history; or, depending on one’s point of view, drawing upon history to give voice to inanimate if enduring relics of many American pasts.” In addition to such positive reviews, the website has experienced an 80% increase in traffic. We believe that this trend suggests more and more teachers will incorporate our resources into their teaching in the coming years.

The OOH site consists of five main elements:

1. The *Guide to Doing History with Objects* <objectofhistory.org/guide/> is intended to orient students to the practice of interrogating material culture objects in historical investigations. Written by Steve Lubar and Kathleen Kendrick, the essay presents students with a variety of routes by which they can draw historical meaning from objects, and provides them with a host of examples. After having read the essay, students and their teachers are more prepared to encounter the primary objects on the site.
2. The *Object Lessons* <objectofhistory.org/objects/> make up the central content of the site. Here, six carefully selected objects are presented to students with a host of contextualizing materials and supplementary primary sources. Each Object Lesson is divided into three areas: “The Object,” which addresses the artifact as a piece of material culture; “The Object in History,” which provides historical context for the object; and “The Object in the Museum,” which deals with the institutional and curatorial history of the object. Each of these sections is populated with up to twenty primary sources and curator interview videos. Thus, students have

the opportunity to form connections among historical sources, and have the benefit of the curator expertise as a secondary perspective.

The six main objects for the site are as follows:

- *Thomas Jefferson's Desk:* <objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/desk/> In 1776, Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence on this portable lap desk of his own design. Featuring a hinged writing board, a locking drawer for papers and pens, and an inkwell, the desk was Jefferson's companion as a Revolutionary patriot, American diplomat, and president of the United States. The content for this module introduces students to the intellectual roots of the Declaration, the drafting committee and its role in the process, and the history of the colonial move toward Revolution.
- *1848 Gold Nugget:* <objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/goldnugget/> James Marshall found this gold nugget at Sutter's Mill, California on January 24, 1848. The nugget bears evidence that Marshall bit it to determine if it was actually gold. And, there is significant evidence that its discovery was the impetus for the Gold Rush of 1849. In focusing attention on the West during this time period, the gold nugget opens a window up on issues of foreign relations and the concept of Manifest Destiny, not the least because at the point of its discovery, California still belonged to Mexico.
- *Mary Todd Lincoln's Dress:* <objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/dress/> This dress belonged to First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, who wore it at a White House event in 1862. It was probably made by Elizabeth Keckley, Mrs. Lincoln's favorite dressmaker. The dress reflects the history of fashion and a First Lady's life in the social limelight. Behind the scenes, it tells the story of two nineteenth-century women who formed a close, unequal, and important relationship across the lines of race and class.
- *1898 Standard Voting Machine:* <objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/votingmachine/> In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the electorate of the United States roughly doubled. Immigrants flocked to the nation's cities, and women in the western territories received the right to vote. Election officials worried that such large numbers of votes would make voting fraud easier. They looked for a solution in the introduction of the Australian or blanket ballot and in new ballot counting machines, such as the 1890 Standard Voting Machine. This module explores the expansion and contraction of voting rights from the Civil War through the passage of the 19th Amendment.
- *Woolworth's Lunch Counter:* <objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/lunchcounter/> On February 1, 1960 four African-American students from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College walked into a Greensboro F.W. Woolworth and sat down at the white-only lunch counter, refusing to leave until they were served. In the coming days they were joined by other students in their protest, and on July 25, 1960 Woolworth's integrated the lunch counter. African Americans had endured unequal treatment and access to public accommodations since just after Reconstruction, and the sit-ins sparked the widespread student activism that was at the heart of the Civil Rights movement.
- *Short-handled Hoe:* <objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/shorthandledhoe/> The short-handled hoe was a gift to the National Museum of American History from Cesar

Chavez's family. Agricultural workers in the Southwest stooped over crops to use the hoe, often resulting in debilitating back pain for those workers. Many growers thought short-handled hoes made workers more careful and kept crops from being damaged. In the 1960s union organizers started to organize farm laborers improving working conditions and pay for agricultural laborers. In the 1970s the California Rural Legal Assistance successfully sued to have the short-handled hoe banned as an unsafe hand tool.

3. A set of *Curator and Historian Forums* <objectofhistory.org/forum/> accompany the Object Lessons. For each of the six objects, members of the CHNM OOH team conducted a series of hour-long interviews with NMAH curators and historians whose work dealt with the context of the object. These interviews are being served as mp3 podcasts for students and teachers to download, and feature NMAH Curators: Larry Bird, Lisa Kathleen Grady, Peter Leibhold, Fath Davis Ruffins, David Shayt, Barbara Clark Smith, and William Yeigst; and historians Steven Lawson (Rutgers University), Michael O'Malley (George Mason University), Paula Petrick (George Mason University), Steven Pitti (Yale University), and Rosemarie Zagarri (George Mason University).

4. As a summative *Activity* <objectofhistory.org/activity/>, users have the opportunity to curate their own virtual exhibit using any of the objects, primary sources, or curator interviews from the website. Rather than simply prescribing a set of narrative activities or assignments to accompany the elements of the site, we decided that we should take advantage of the interactive technologies of the web to allow users to create a thematic exhibit of their own. Thus, they can assemble six items from the site and provide a thesis and narrative commentary to accompany each item. When they have completed this work the result will be a project with a unique and lasting URL that they can email to themselves and their instructor if they wish.

5. Finally, there are a full set of *Teaching Materials and Resources* <objectofhistory.org/teachers/> that accompany each of the Object Lessons. They consist of three activities that teachers might use with their students, an introductory activity on working with material culture generally, and a listing of the applicable standards of learning for each object. Additionally, there are a list of web resources that teachers might use to do additional work with their students on the historical topics associated with the objects. Together these materials facilitate the incorporation of OOH materials into the busy scheme of high school history classrooms.

II. Guide to Creating Object Lessons Using the Object of History-Omeka Package

In our effort to create a model for museums and small historical societies that wish to increase the scope and content of their educational outreach activities, we have created a "Guide to Creating Object Lessons with Using the Object of History-Omeka Package." This has allowed us to combine the successful results of the OOH project with the successful work of CHNM's web publishing platform, *Omeka* <omeka.org>, another IMLS funded project [LG-24-07-0005-07]. Rather than creating a static set of HTML pages with CSS and an accompanying database structure, we decided that we would use the *Omeka* platform because it will be continually supported and updated as the programming and accessibility demands of the web change in the coming years. Since *Omeka* is a free, open-source, easy to use web publishing platform, it stands out as a logical way for institutions with limited resources to enhance their web presence. Combined with the methodological and design lessons learned in the context of the OOH project, these OOH-*Omeka*

sites will dramatically increase the connection between small museums and historical societies and their local constituencies of students and teachers.

Institutions that wish to build their own Object of History site can download *Omeka* and accompanying plug-ins necessary to create the functionality of our site directly from the OOH homepage <objectofhistory.org>. Using the explicit documentation in the Guide, the IT staff and outreach staff will be able to create a site that includes all of the elements detailed above. In addition to providing technical instructions on the installation and customization of *Omeka*, the Guide also includes sections on selecting objects, creating introductory narratives and themes, writing annotations, securing permissions, and preparing teaching activities that emphasize historical thinking skills.

The response to the availability of the Guide and the accompanying software has been tremendous. The attendees at the 2008 Museums and the Web conference were particularly taken with the potential that the package held for their museums and for their colleagues at other, smaller cultural heritage institutions.

In conclusion, the *Object of History* project has more than accomplished the three stated goals of the original grant proposal:

- Goal 1: Produce sophisticated resources that enhance the teaching of U.S. History
- Goal 2: Make the insights of museum experts available to students, improving their ability to analyze historical objects
- Goal 3: Disseminate an easy to use and low-cost template for museums that want to augment their web-based educational programming and to reach distant communities of students.

The support and encouragement of IMLS has been essential to this success and we look forward to opportunity work together in the future.

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