



Photographs can sometimes capture events and people in history in ways that go beyond words. We know that photographs can enhance a story, but photographs can also be used as the primary tools for telling the story. Stories about history can be told through photographs, with minimal use of words to highlight specific people and events. Children can use photo essays as a vehicle for learning history, in order to tell their own stories, and as a visual tool to communicate what they have learned.

Photography can be an exciting way to integrate art and creativity into social studies. Photography allows students to use creative self-expression in revealing the symbolism in historic places, people, or scenes with a richness that words alone often cannot accomplish. Photo essays have their roots in traditional journalism. While photo essays are occasionally accompanied by a brief narrative, concise captions normally take the place of narrative written material, giving the photographs the opportunity to speak for themselves.¹

Description of the Project

The North Church, Paul Revere’s house, Beacon Hill—these are some of the historic sites that lie along Boston’s Freedom Trail. “Here were the gathering places of the patriots, the incubators of revolution...the buildings where American resistance to the British crown was born, grew, and flourished ... until, eventually, the only alternative was war and independence.”²

Photographs of Paul Revere’s house and The North Church can help bring to life the colorful story of the ride of Paul Revere. Photographs of old tombstones set against modern Boston buildings represent a rich history in a modern context. Children can explore the retelling of history through photo essays. Every community has its own history—a busy road in the Midwest might once have been part of the Oregon Trail; a creek behind a California school might have been panned for gold; a bike path in Oklahoma was once a railroad. Many older buildings, such as a brick school or a county courthouse, have interesting stories to tell.

During a recent visit to Boston, we created a historical photo essay in a manner that could be done by young learners. We took the photographs with a simple, disposable camera (see sidebar: Photography Hints for Children). The story we selected to portray through photographs was that of the Freedom Trail.

Preparation

Before walking the Freedom Trail, we read about the history of what happened along the trail. Reading about their topic (or hearing the information read aloud) is an important step for children before they begin shooting a photo essay. Students should think about what they want to portray and how they want to portray it before they take any photo-

Using Photography to Tell a Story

Susan Thompson and Kayenta Williams

A written description can offer facts and attempt to set a scene, but what do you see today as you stand beneath the towering North Church? What might the elite of Boston have felt as they walked through the iron gates and prestigious entry of the Massachusetts State House, which sit on Beacon Hill overlooking the Boston Common, in the late 1700s? These are questions that photography can help us to ask—and answer.

graphs. In this case, students should have completed lessons about the Puritans seeking to practice their religion freely in 1630, the writing of the Declaration of Independence, and the Revolution that followed.

The Freedom Trail begins at Boston Commons and ends at Bunker Hill. A red line on the sidewalk indicates the route of this pedestrian trail, which is walked by thousands of tourists every year. We walked along the Freedom Trail, taking photographs of some of the designated sites and later analyzed the photographs we wanted to use in our essay, thinking about what story our photographs might portray to students. For example, we took photos from multiple views of some buildings and then selected which one best told the story we were trying to convey. Children may think about which camera angles or lighting (i.e. time of day) may convey a certain feeling or assist in telling a certain part of the story.

After the images are printed, children can lay out the photographs on a rug or large table and see whether the story “takes shape” through the images.

It often happens that students, in constructing their final presentation, may wish they had a photo that they failed to take. This is a common problem (for photographers of all ages!) and is a good exercise in thinking about how to plan, and how to make adjustments given the resources at hand. Children can, if possible, re-visit a site to take additional photographs, or they can just move on to the next important photograph and experiment with alternative ways to fill in the gap, such as a drawing. In the photo essay example we use in this article, we have not included every historical site, but have selected a few with which to tell the central story of the Boston Freedom Trail.

The project description at the end of this article describes the process we went through while taking the photographs and includes discussions we might have with students as we guided them in creating their final presentation.

Photography Hints for Children

Depending on their background knowledge and experiences, children may need a simple lesson on using a camera. For example, you might want to tell children when they will need to use a flash (if available on the disposable camera), such as when the sun is not out, the object is shadowed, or they are indoors. You can also show them how to use the flash and how to know when it is ready.

Children can also discuss what makes an interesting photograph vs. what makes a rather boring photograph. If photographing a building, for example, they would not want to take a picture of a sidewall without any interesting features. As with the Massachusetts State House, there may be a significant doorway or a window that could function to tell the photographer’s story.

A good source for tips on improving photography is Kodak’s consumer products page at kodak.com. You can show students how to follow the “consumer products” link to the “tips and

projects center,” where they will find the “tips” area. This area offers easy, clear suggestions for everything from using backgrounds to enhance photos to using a flash outdoors.³ Children can explore the many ideas included in this website and learn from advice given by professional photographers.

Captions

Captions can be added under photographs to extend the reader’s comprehension of an event. Words and image then complement each other. In her book *History Makers*, Myra Zarnowski explains some interesting ideas to consider when adding captions.⁴ She notes that captions are used to:

- Point out details that viewers might not have noticed
- Give additional information beyond what is in the photograph
- Speculate on symbols in the image
- Refer to other illustrations
- Pose a question for the viewer

Time magazine’s photo essays provide excellent examples of the use of captions to enhance the story-telling abilities of photographs. Children can look at examples on *Time*’s website for ideas of additional information that can be added with captions. One example is a photo essay by Chris Lamarca called “Forest Defenders,” which is the chronicle of a group of environmental activists trying to stop logging in a historic forest.⁵ Photographs of trees, logging activities, and events that took place during the protest are accompanied by captions that give readers background information on the struggle to save the trees as well as information about the photos themselves.

If students were to put a caption under photos of North Church (shown below on page 21), rather than just labeling the image “The North Church,” they could write about history: “From the steeple of The North Church, Paul Revere signaled with a lantern that the British troops were marching toward Boston.” A teacher, when writing a caption, could pose a question to the students such as: “Why did Paul Revere choose the church steeple as the place to send his signal?”

Extension Ideas

A timeline can also be added to the photo essay to help readers place events into an historical period and provide a sequence in which the events took place. The timeline could be placed at the end of the essay, or dates could be part of the caption.

If your school has the available technology, or if children have digital cameras at home, photo essays can be expanded to slide presentations that may even include audio. Children can visit the *Time* website and view examples of photo essays accompanied by audio. An excellent example of a photo essay that has audio in addition to very minimal captions is Jonathan Hyman’s photo essay, “Memories in the Landscape.”⁶ He photographed various multimedia memorials to September 11th and then recorded audio clips to accompany each photograph.

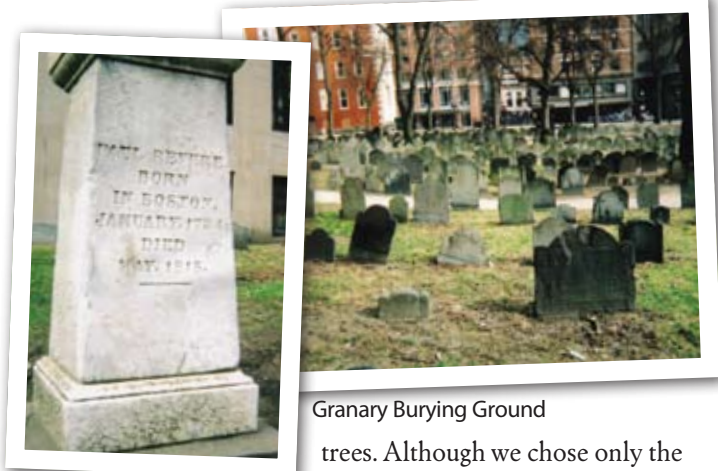
His written captions only briefly identify the material in the photograph, and his audio adds the richness of additional details to the essay.

Audio and other electronic presentation options will provide older students with the opportunities to expand their creative use of photography and encourage them to make use of technology to further explore self-expression. While these options may add another level to the photo essay, simply using a disposable camera allows students to produce a richly creative project while learning about the process of taking photographs.

The Freedom Trail

The trail begins in Boston Common, “America’s oldest public park.” The first building on the trail is the Massachusetts State House. At the top of the staircase, there are center entrance doors that were reserved for visiting presidents, for soldiers returning from war, and for the departing governor at the end of his term. Looking at the two photographs, we took of the Massachusetts State House, we saw that one framed the doors, and the other did not. If we want to focus on the rich history of people who “passed through the doors,” we would select the photograph that emphasized that entryway.

Granary Burying Ground is a two-acre plot that includes the graves of three signers of the Declaration of Independence



Granary Burying Ground

trees. Although we chose only the panoramic view, a third option would be to select both the wide view of the cemetery and a representative photo of a historic headstone that highlights the details of the stone itself.

When children are exploring historical sites, there may no longer be a structure to photograph for their essays. A photograph of something symbolic may take a structure’s place in cases like this. For example, the first public school that would have been situated along the Freedom Trail was no longer standing, so we took a photograph of an inlaid sidewalk mosaic indicating the site of the first public school. A child might photograph a tree that once stood by a famous house that is no longer

standing or a river along which an old steamship may have traveled.

The Old South Meeting House is a beautiful building with a high steeple. Because of where it sets on the block, it is difficult to capture much of the building on film using a disposable camera, so we had to choose between taking the steeple with a small part of the building or the wider view of the building’s side. In researching the history of the Old South Meeting House, we read that the building held hundreds of everyday citizens during revolutionary meetings and was one of the first buildings to be preserved in whole as a historic site and haven for free speech. Because the building’s importance lies in its status as a public haven rather than a church, we see that our photograph of the street view of the Meeting House, with a fruit and vegetable stand in its shadow, best captures the story.



Inlaid sidewalk mosaic



Meeting House



Massachusetts State House

and Paul Revere, among other famous figures. Upon examining our photographs, we can see that we have the choice of highlighting individual headstones, table tombs, and vaults, or selecting to focus on a wider view of the cemetery with its various looming headstones. We selected the larger panoramic view to add historical voice to our essay, feeling that this photograph shows the layout of the cemetery and that the larger setting captures the mood of the stones among the

Paul Revere's House and the North Church are two highlights along the Freedom Trail. Paul Revere's house still stands today and is Boston's oldest building. We took simple photographs to express the house's stature on the lot. In these photos we also see the limits of a disposable camera because we were not able to use a zoom lens for a view of the home in its entirety. Children's photographs will have some of these same limita-



Paul Revere's House

tions which will add character to their photo essays.

The Old North Church is Boston's oldest standing church and was made famous by Paul Revere's use of it during the Revolutionary War. Paul Revere had an important role as a patriots' messenger in that he watched the movements of the British soldiers. He signaled that the British were moving by either water or land by placing one or two lanterns in the steeple of the North Church. We took two photos here: one wide-angle view to illustrate Paul Revere's famous ride, and one concentrated photo of the steeple as a symbol of Paul Revere's lantern signals.



The Old North Church

Angles can make a large difference in the mood of the story being told. A photograph taken from the perspective of one who is looking up at a large building could express the feeling that the building is looming over the viewer or perhaps that the building has an ominous story to tell (Old City Hall and columns at King's Chapel are shown here, respec-



tively). Lighting, likewise, can be used to give mood to a story. Photographs taken in bright daylight, with few shadowy spaces would illustrate a much different story than photographs taken on a cloudy day or from an angle that shows many shadowed areas. The moods and perspectives children want to portray with their photo essays are important to discuss before they begin because their ideas about the project as a whole will affect the photographs they will choose to take..

The time of day that a photo is taken can also affect the mood of the story. For example, photographing Boston Harbor in the middle of the day to tell the tale of the Boston Tea Party would not have the realistic effect that a night time photograph would have. Since the Tea Party took place late at night, that event would be best portrayed by a picture taken at night. Night time photography requires students know how to use a flash with good results, moving close to their subjects for example, so that the scenes they photograph will be visible in the picture. 📷



Old City Hall and columns at King's Chapel

Notes

1. Stephan J. Dollinger and Stephanie M. Clancy, "Identity, Self, and Personality: II. Glimpses through the Autophotographic Eye," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64 no. 2 (June 1993): 1064-1071.
2. Charles Bahne, *The Complete Guide to Boston's Freedom Trail*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Newtown, 2005).
3. "Tips" at kodak.com.
4. Myra Zarnowski, *History Makers* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).
5. Chris Lamarca, "Forest Defenders," *Time* (2006), www.time.com/time/photoessays/2006/forest_defenders/.
6. Jonathan Hyman, "Memories in the Landscape," *Time*, www.time.com/photoessays/2006/911_folk_art_multimedia/.

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