

Saving the Past

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The past is in trouble in the u.S. Nobody knows much about it.

The intercollegiate studies institute issued a report in 2008 titled our fading heritage: americans fail a basic test on their history and institutions.

While 56 percent of americans could name paula abdul as a judge on american idol, only 21 percent knew that the phrase “government of the people, by the people, for the people” comes from lincoln’s gettysburg address. Just 54 percent could correctly identify a basic description of the free enterprise system.

Thirty percent of elected officials did not know that “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” are the inalienable rights referred to in the declaration of independence and 20 percent falsely believed that the electoral college “was established to supervise the first presidential debates.” More bad news: 71 percent of officeholders earned an f on the test; the average score was 49. And the problem has only intensified since then, as schools spend less and less time teaching americans about their past. Funding for the “teaching american history” grants program, which provides professional development for educators, was cut sharply in the federal budget approved in april by congress.

Diane ravitch, former assistant secretary of education, worries that the erosion of historical knowledge is especially dire in those under 35 and that while math and reading skills are regularly tested, historical understanding rarely is. She wrote in the new york times, “if knowledge of the past is in fact relevant to our ability to understand the present and to exercise freedom of mind -- as totalitarian societies, both real and fictional, acknowledge by stringently controlling what may be studied or published -- then there is cause for concern about many americans’ sense of history.”

No wonder few people seemed upset when michele bachmann said that the battles of lexington and concord were fought in new hampshire instead of massachusetts, and that the founding fathers were opposed to slavery. As teachers continue to steal time away from history classes to get kids up to basic levels in math and reading, history is doing to decline even further.

Unless we find a way to save it.

A few weeks ago, i had an experience that made me think i’d seen the future of the past. Along with a few other time travelers, i went back into the past -- to 1835, to be exact, to experience life in a small town in north carolina in that year. We arrived to be greeted by the mayor, and invited to take part in a number of daily activities. The display was set up for children, but the grown-ups were equally absorbed. Sailing the ocean in a wooden sloop, we sang sea shanties to regulate the

pace of work by sailors, and killed rats that would have eaten the larder. We wrote headlines in the shop of the local newspaper, and put together colorful quilts under the sharp eye of a master seamstress. We found the ingredients for baked fish in the local store, and signed on as hands at the turpentine still, making sure the sticky stiff didn't get too hot and boil over.

I had a sense that for a short time i was actually living in the past, not just viewing dusty objects from it. This all happened in the new north carolina history center in new bern, adjacent to one of the restored gems of pre-colonial architecture, tryon palace. The museum was designed by edwin schlossberg, founder of esi design in new york city (and incidentally, husband of caroline kennedy). He didn't want the museum to be a traditional one. "Museums have long been basically object-oriented. People collected things because the things embodied great skill and great messages," he told the raleigh news and observer. "You could see examples of what's great."

But in this era of the internet, 3d movies and ipads, the past is in danger of seeming antiquated and well, just plain dull. But in the n.C. History center, the combination of design and technology brought the past alive. The mayor, the ship's captain, the printer and the quilter were present on video screens, and we went about killing rats and singing sea shanties by interacting with computers and display screens. Museum director kay williams says that one of the kids who sang a sea shanty did it to a rap beat. "It was wonderful!"

All through the museum, visitors interact with displays and are encouraged to figure things out for themselves instead of passively listening to lectures or looking at static objects. They can rent a "history navigator" via an electronic device loaded with different tour guides -- including women, children and free and enslaved blacks.

With state standards on the teaching of history eroding fast, funds drying up and ignorance of the past skyrocketing, the north carolina history museum may be the antidote to ignorance. It was funded jointly by the city of new bern, craven county, private foundations and the pepsi company -- pepsi was invented in new bern.

This model can be replicated. Why not a national initiative to build a chain of regional history museums around the u.S. With public and private monies? Then, people -- especially young people -- can understand the past as lively and entertaining as well as all-important to the present and the future.

Because, as the philosopher george santayana warned, "those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it."