



5-1991

Cellar Holes for Creative Thinking

Gregory T. Scotten

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Scotten, Gregory T. (1991) "Cellar Holes for Creative Thinking," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol5/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

CELLAR HOLES FOR CREATIVE THINKING

by

Gregory T. Scotten

One of the major challenges enjoyed by a scholar drawn to a career in any of the fields connected with historical research is the critical thinking involved. Such research is filled with higher order cognitive skills: analysis, synthesis, comparison, and classification. It is the research of solving puzzles, speculating about how events fit together, and resurrecting ghosts of bygone ages. It can be walking on an empty road, finding the remnants of a long abandoned village, feeling the rumble of a phantom wagon, or digging through an open cellar hole to find the relics of a young family whose existence is only memorialized by a lone lilac bush and the weather-worn tombstone of a child. This tantalizing, critical and creative side of historical research activity is seldom seen by primary and secondary school students.

If, as the theorists tell us, an essential element in a scholarly discipline involves the introduction of novices to its special mode of inquiry, a set of terminology, and a unique perspective on humanity, then certainly an effective way to meet this responsibility can be to introduce students to the study of history by developing with them, when possible, an original piece of historical research. To use an archeological and anthropological setting for such an introduction we need only to look around us. North America is filled with ready-made "laboratories," places which hold hidden stories all their own. Old buildings, cemeteries, clothing, letters, or any other artifacts can serve as starting points. I selected abandoned mountain villages in Vermont as the focus of such an activity.

My tenth grade social studies/remedial reading classes contained students whose reading levels were anywhere from first through seventh grade. To challenge these young people to read I would begin by asking them to learn about the history in themselves and the community in which they lived. Each year my new students and I would investigate one of the many of the "New Hampshire Grants." This was very convenient for my purpose because virtually every current township in Vermont was originally a grant of land established by the colonial governor of New Hampshire, Benning Wentworth, in the name of the English monarch.

At the beginning of each year, my students at Mount Anthony Union High School would report any clues that suggested that an abandoned village might have existed near their homes. Since the students lived in so many diverse locations over several hundred square miles, many different New Hampshire grants would be suggested. The students would naturally offer their own neighborhood or favorite local hunting area as the preferred site for that year's study. To support their choice they would gather data from museums, libraries, town clerks, newspapers, attics, maps, gazetteers, old business directories and personal explorations about their site. Oral histories would be gathered from grandparents and "old timers." Students on scouting expeditions would visit potential sites to collect

supporting documentation to prove their location more ripe for study than those of their classmates.

Villages long gone were annually placed on the list: Bear Town, The Kelley Stand, Fayville, and Somerset. Each of these places was within an hour of the high school. Finally, through class discussions one site was selected by the class and then the whole class would focus research on the chosen village.

One of the most exciting project sites ever selected appeared on the list a number of years before I took it seriously. The Waters Hill-Woodford site had been originally proposed when two students on the annual "lost village hunt" reported an old cemetery next to an unused woods road above the Molly Stark Trail (State Route 9) near the Bennington-Woodford town line. I had not taken the report seriously and discouraged further interest because the students' description seemed to match that of so many isolated burial plots found on old abandoned Vermont farms. Furthermore, our ninety year old maps of that township recorded no houses or roads in that location.

Each year the same reports resurfaced until a colleague who was a camera buff stumbled on the cemetery and returned with numerous photos of pre-1860 grave inscriptions. Also, to challenge my reluctance that year, a group of students sought the advice of two elderly gentlemen whose families had been in the area since colonial days. Both men suggested that they had heard about a village in the disputed location. Finally members of this new class showed me conclusive evidence that my conclusions were wrong when they found a copy of the recorded proceedings of the Woodford Town Proprietors in the Bennington Free Library. In it were notes from a 1796 meeting that documented a plan to build an east-west road from Bennington to Wilmington.

They also had obtained testimony from a local resident that the original road to Wilmington could not have run along the stream in the valley as does the current highway. It had to be built with a steep grade right up the side of the mountain, because the mountain itself formed an impenetrable ledge to the edge of the river and blasting techniques had not been employed in the region until almost mid nineteenth century. I was excited about the students' efforts at scholarship as they successfully refuted the fading validity of my assumptions, and they in turn felt the excitement that they had discovered history in spite of me.

Each day they brought even more information about "their village" and a group of significant facts emerged. Once there had been a booming economy in the area which was dominated by a Bennington Iron Works. It had been located at the foot of the mountain at the beginning of an ancient road that led toward the "discovered" cemetery. One of Bennington County's most illustrious sons, Trenor Park, had been born in a settlement which existed there. In later years, after becoming a legal advisor to John C. Fremont on the west coast, he returned with his own millions to build Bennington's historical Park-McCollough House which has become one of the most important local landmarks.

The documentation of the old iron works also broadened when a student obtained a copy of an old drawing of the original site from a local farmer. Some of the buildings still

stand as farm buildings along with rock piles which once were furnaces. The bigger story soon emerged as parts of the puzzle began to fit neatly together.

Copies of Gazetteers and an economic history of Vernon iron revealed that before Pennsylvania became the national center for iron and steel, iron ore had to be extracted from ochre clay in many locations within the original states. The economy of the day depended on beehive shaped rock furnaces to carry on the process which provided the raw substance for cannon balls, horse shoes, and so many necessities of the day. The charcoal fuel for the Bennington Iron Works furnaces had to be made on the mountain above it in the charcoal pits near that now extinct village of Waters Hill. Even its production had to be supplemented in years like 1827 when 500,000 bushels were sought for six months' consumption by the Iron Works through outside advertising.

The village would slowly disappear as the causes for its original growth disappeared. The process of making steel would be discovered and its production would move to Pittsburgh. Methods of blasting to remove geological obstructions to road building became available. By 1840 the cliff that had prevented a road down along the river could be eliminated, and so the upper settlement at Waters Hill would be by-passed. These construction efforts remain of historical significance because the current highway is even today considered one of the most dangerous in the nation.

As in previous years the class spent a day together on the site itself. This became a highlight of the village research. That year twenty-five students joined me and a colleague one crisp October morning. We traveled to the site of the old Iron Works and compared the remains with the pre-1850 drawing. We then hiked as we traced the now fragmentary ancient road up the side of the mountain to the location of the cemetery.

A student, Scott Barber, later wrote:

We started walking up the trail at Leake's Farm which used to be the Bennington Iron Works. About a mile later we were at the site of a long abandoned village in which people had built their homes about 1800. Many families lived there for more than fifty years.

Our major finds were pieces of glass and ceramic fragments which probably came from pre 1850 dishes and Bennington Pottery. We found these things by digging in the cellar holes and sifting the dirt.

On the east side of the trail we found a small cemetery with gravestones. We later found that most of the original stones had been stolen by students from California in 1973. Those stones that remained were fascinating and dated from 1790 to 1860. They contained interesting sayings.

Later in the day we had good luck. We found more glass, a little pottery and a small button. Finally we found the foundation stone for the fireplace of the largest of the homes.

After the initial confusion of students making themselves familiar with the site, the area was systematically roped off into sixteen square sections and most students were organized two to a section. Each duo then carefully extracted and sifted dirt while probing

for precious treasures. Other students collected and made preliminary identifications of the unearthed artifacts which included knife pieces, shoe parts, metallic remains of a door, and pottery fragments. By 11:30 the two hours work had exposed the cellar walls of what might have been a one-room school house because several pieces of ancient slate chalk were found amidst the debris.

Now it was time to layout the afternoon research projects based on the morning's findings. One team was assigned to photograph artifacts. Another team reconstructed the village both by drawing a map of discovered foundations and roads, and by making sketches with the aid of books on historic architecture. Four students copied grave inscriptions and made grave rubbings. Others scouted for more cellar holes and experimented with our new tool, a metal detector. The remaining students continued to work the main dig, still hoping to uncover that elusive jar of coins or arrowheads or a musket.

By two o'clock many interesting items were unearthed along with a few puzzling man-made rock formations and six additional building foundations set along what may have been the village main street. Not far from the new cellar hole discoveries, students found three circular pits with traces of charcoal.

Mary Anne Holt summarized the day with a poem:

Our Little Town

It's a pretty little town, our little town,
 but we don't know who lived there.
We dig and we dig,
 we search and we search,
 but we hardly make any headway.
We look and we ask
 some help us, some don't
I guess we will never know
 all there is to know
 about our little town.
If only someone cared
 If only someone could
 show us the gold.

The next morning the history classroom was transformed into an impromptu museum prep room. When each of the artifacts had been cleaned and laid out, the assistant curator of the Bennington Museum joined the group and was well prepared to share his views about the purpose and source of each fragment. He thrilled students with explanations about their finds and was able to help the students place each into a social context.

A few days later an afternoon was spent at the Park-McCollough House itself, where the students were received more as contributors than as tourists, for they had information to share with the staff. Mary Anne Holt described her feelings:

THE PARK - MCCOLLOUGH HOUSE

The home built by Trenor Park offers an interesting contrast between the life and work of the mid nineteenth century and today. On entering the huge house we had a feeling of walking into history. We were met by a servant (one of the educational staff) who showed us into the foyer in which there was a small table, desk, and large mirrors.

Walking through a large hallway, we entered a study in which Trenor Park spent a great deal of time. There were furnished sofas and chairs, huge bookshelves with books at least a hundred years old.

As you stand at the foot of the main staircase, which divides and doubles back as it reaches for the second floor one can see a sky light with colored glass of different shapes and sizes.

On the second floor are bedrooms and sitting rooms. Here the girls tried on dresses and the boys tuxedos, two piece suits and loose pants. We were surprised at how small the people were but their clothes were certainly elegant.

The third floor was a work area and a storage space. Here we found a stairway that led to the cupola from which you can see just about everything for miles around. All around us were colored panes of glass, one was gold another blue, orange, or pink through which to view the Vermont countryside.

We gained a great deal from the Park McCollough House and came away eager to learn more about our local past.

The labors of the apprentice historians were still not over. Now the data had to be reexamined, documents and interviews correlated, sketches and interpretations completed. Some students wrote essays examining their own participation in the project. Others wrote historical vignettes about events and key characters. Some attempted to reconstruct the society in the village through fictional pieces, while others prepared an article for the local newspaper which had offered them a full page.

During the final phase of analyzing and summarizing the data, an interesting coincidence was revealed by the House's curators. Earlier in the same year a young scholar had undertaken the transcription of a diary of William Park. The staff now realized that the days recorded in the book were concerning our village and the author was Trenor's grandfather, an early resident of Water's Hill. Debbie Daniels made it her project to capture the story of William and his famous grandson.

WILLIAM PARK'S DIARY

In May of 1802 William Park, grandfather of Trenor Park, began a daily journal which reveals his life in Woodford. The following seemed important to him.

William Park worked with his son Luther planting potatoes, corn, beans and making blocks of charcoal. The blocks were sold at a rate of \$3.34 cents for 5000. William spent a great deal of time that year making chairs with Zadoc Tuft while Nathan Tuft and Luther worked the fields. William

Park and Zadoc Tuft worked on the building of the Woodford Road. The last entry was made August 29, 1802: "A very windy day. William went to meeting in Bennington."

WILLIAM AND TRENOR PARK

Records show that William Park was a gallant soldier and commissioned officer in the Revolutionary War. He wrote many articles like those written by generals in the 1760's. He called for elimination of prison terms for debtors because the laws were driving the young people of the early 1800's to flee. Luther, his son, was a man of honorable character and high ideals, but extremely poor. Luther married Cynthia Pratt who bore him a son on December 8, 1823. They named him Trenor William Park after the owner of the Bennington Iron Works. When Trenor was three the family moved to Bennington. There Trenor attended public schools and worked at odd jobs until he was fifteen, when he opened a small candy store on North Street. At sixteen the young businessman entered studies of law with A.P. Lyman, Esq.

On December 15, 1846 Trenor Park married the lovely Laura Hall. In 1852 they moved to San Francisco and soon he helped John C. Fremont become a millionaire. At the same time Park made his own fortune, and after losing a close election for U.S. Senate he returned to Bennington. In Vermont he built a mansion on his father-in-law's property, and became engaged in state politics as well as a number of railroad and mining enterprises.

Trenor died on December 13, 1882 on shipboard while traveling to Panama.

Among the interesting characters that the class uncovered in the research was one Thomas Trenor for whom Trenor Park was named. He was one of the early owners of the iron works and was among the many Scotch-Irish who flowed into Vermont from Connecticut around 1800 and suffered the same prejudice afforded to newcomers by some Vermonters even today.

He was described in a Scott Barber essay as follows:

One of the most colorful owners of the iron works was the legendary Thomas Trenor, a leader of Dublin's United Irishmen who was the sole survivor of the hangings which followed the uprising of 1798. Trenor escaped to the United States and purchased the Bennington furnace in 1811. He soon became a close personal friend of surveyor, Luther Park, who returned Trenor's comradeship by naming his son Trenor Park. Trenor's thick Irish brogue and pension for keeping goats, aggravated local prejudices to the point where a crude poem, written by a man named Ayers, became popular among the local people.

It was recorded that in the course of time Trenor was summoned to court and fined fifty dollars plus court costs for the physical punishment he inflicted on Mr. Ayers as reward for the rhyme.

In the Water's Hill study, as with my earlier local history studies, the textbook came alive for my students. They had touched colonial history and had read the many restrictions the Crown had placed upon the settlers of their village. They could find constitutional issues at the roots. They questioned the circumstances surrounding Vermont's exclusion as an original state and its flirtation with the idea of joining Canada. They also saw similarities between the royal grant of Woodford and the plans laid out by the Puritans in the Holy Commonwealth experiment.

The possibilities for using the techniques of critical and creative thinking in the teaching of history are vast, but in too many classrooms students are left unmotivated because they are often required merely to memorize names, dates, and events. By using as teaching methodology the very tools employed by the scholars in the field, the teacher can share the dynamics and the wonder that go into recording and reaching new understandings about history.
