

Teacher's Guide to "Adopt a Dead Person"



The Plusses and Minuses of the "Adopt a Dead Person Project:

The "Adopt a Dead Person" project can be an amazingly effective way to get middle and high school students to relate to American History. It can also be a pain in the butt of epic proportions. It is up to you to decide whether the enormous amount of time and energy it requires will be justified. Speaking strictly from my own experience, it is.

Here, in a nutshell, are the pros and cons of conducting this project:

Cons:

- It takes an lot of time and effort on your part. Expect to take at least two professional days away from school to conduct research and many late nights. If you design an internet webpage to display student work yourself, you can probably expect to write off your mid-winter vacation.
- It takes a lot of time and effort on the part of your students. Even if you do much of the primary source research for your students, this is still a very big project. If you undertake this at the middle school level, your students will probably never have done anything with this level of complexity before and will need a lot of guidance and validation.
- You will lose about a month of class time that you may not be able to afford during the writing phase of the project.

Pros:

- This project makes abstract concepts very real to students. It is one thing to explain concepts like "urbanization" to them in the classroom, and another to actually see it in the life of "their dead guy". Once they have a face to put on it, American History becomes very real to the students. You will find yourself making reference to "the

dead guy" several times a week as something you are talking about connects to one of the projects.

- Students get an enormous amount of self-esteem from this project. They feel that they are working on something important - not on busywork. They can show the projects off to their parents and grandparents and receive badly-needed validation.
- The project builds bridges with the community. Even if you get suspicious glances from people in the community when you start this project for the first time, once local citizens see the kind of research your students are doing, they tend to support it whole-heartedly. In small New England towns, where teachers and schools become "the enemy" each March, this kind of project brings badly needed good will to the table.

Notes on Different Stages of the Project:

Preparing for the Field Trip to the Cemeteries

Make sure that your students know what you expect of them before you go to the cemetery. I spend at least one class period explaining the whole project to them and going over the "Picking a Gravestone" worksheet a day or so before the actual fieldtrip. Make sure they know what they are supposed to do. This will simplify things enormously when you get to the cemeteries.

I pick three to four different cemeteries for students to visit. I generally give each class an hour or so in each cemetery before rotating them to the next one. This means that with creative transportation, I only need to reserve one bus for the day.

Visit the cemeteries and mark reference points for the students' maps, then prepare the maps themselves (see below).

On the Day of the Field Trip:

Remember to bring:

- Clipboards
- Worksheets
- Giant graph paper for cemetery map (see below) and easel
- Extra pencils
- Toothbrushes
- Magnifying glasses
- Surveyor's tapes
- Digital cameras
- Cell Phones
- Normal field trip equipment - first aid kits, inhalers, signed permission slips, etc...

Remind the students that they need to act responsibly in the cemeteries - no rough-housing, yelling, scaring each other, etc.. Be aware that it is impossible to send teenagers into a cemetery

on a sunny day with magnifying glasses without having them set fires. Make it clear that charring dead leaves is okay, but that creating actual flames is not. Surprisingly, they generally respect that distinction.

In the Cemetery:

The class should break into teams of 3-4 students. Each team will head out with a clipboard and pencils to look at gravestones. I generally limit "eligible" graves to people who died between 1860 and 1930. (Any earlier than 1860 and it is extremely difficult to find primary documentation on a person. After 1930, privacy regulations come into effect and it is difficult to get your hands on official records.)

Once a team has found a gravestone it is interested in, a representative should report to the teacher on duty to see if another team has already picked that grave. The teacher should also exclude any graves that have had projects done on them in past years.

Once a team has gotten permission to "do" a particular grave, it should get every bit of information possible from the grave. Team members should sketch the grave, write down every piece of information carved on the stone and look for clues around the grave, such as fresh flowers, flags or G.A.R. medals.

Once this is done, the teacher on duty should take one or more digital photographs of the grave for later use. In the past, I have had the students make rubbings of each grave with supplied paper and crayons, but this can be hard on the grave and might even be illegal in your area. Now, we take digital pictures, which are more useful anyway if the class decides to make an interactive map of the cemetery later. (See www.sau53.org/net4/classes/8/8f/parade.html or www.sau53.org/net4/classes/8/8f/tilton.html for examples of this.)

Unfortunately, taking a photo takes much less time than grave-rubbing, so the students should have an activity to occupy them. Once again, this should **NOT** be busywork. A very useful activity that integrates Social Studies mapping skills and Math is to map the location of the grave. Before the field trip, you should have sketched the outline of the cemetery on a large (hopefully poster-sized) sheet of graph paper. You will have marked reference points along each side of the cemetery, both on the map and in the actual cemetery. Each team will pick two reference points and measure the distance to "their" grave. By using triangulation, they will be able to place the grave on the map. It helps for teams to pick two reference points along one side of the cemetery - it will make "their" grave easier to plot. Make certain that students know the scale of the map. If one inch equals two meters, for example, make sure that they remember to divide each of their measurements by two when they do their triangulation on the map.

[Note - if you are math-phobic, this sounds very intimidating and difficult. Don't worry - it really isn't!]

[Another Note - this activity works best in small cemeteries. If the cemetery is too big, another activity needs to be found or the cemetery can be broken down into smaller grids, each with its own map.]

Back in the Classroom:

During the next class, review pictures of all the graves surveyed by the students. This can be done by projecting the graves onto a screen with a digital projector or in printed handouts. Ask the class what can be learned by looking at each grave and which mark people who might be easy to research. Have the class pick three graves - a first, second and third choice, in case one or more of the "dead guys" turn out to be difficult to research.

[Note - it will be tempting to choose a veteran of WWI. It is very difficult to find any information on WWI soldiers; a warehouse containing the official records from the war burned down in the 1970s. Civil War soldiers, on the other hand, are relatively easy to research.]

It is important for the students to make the choice as to which "dead guy" they will research. If they are emotionally invested in the project, they will be more committed to it.

Researching Primary Resources:

The students will be able to do some research on their "dead guy", but not until you have laid the groundwork by uncovering primary source material. It will probably take a month or so to do this research. The following have been excellent sources of information for me:

- Town records - Town records from the 19th and early 20th Centuries list most deaths and some births and marriages of townspeople in any given year. If you look up the death record, it will probably list the cause of death. It is also worthwhile to look for records of previous marriages. In the case of Deerfield, where I've done this research, the records are kept in large, leather-bound books. Make sure that you give the Town Clerk advance notice that you will want to see the records. If it is the week that tax notices go out, for instance, the last thing the staff will want to deal with is a teacher going through records and asking questions.
- County Probate Court - If your "dead guy" left a will or other probate documents, they will be recorded in the courthouse. The original records might be stored there or at the State Archives (see below). In either case, you will need the reference number for the documents in order to look them up. Most county courthouses in New Hampshire will not let you scan the documents into a computer, but will let you make photocopies. Many of the records at the courthouses are stored on microfilm.
- National Archives - Copies of the military records of Civil War soldiers can be ordered from the National Archives. If you send away for these, allow six-eight weeks and make sure that you order any pension files as well. If a soldier requested a pension, he had to include a written statement of how he was wounded and his experiences in the war. If he appealed any decisions by the pension commission, he had to include affidavits from friends at home and men he served with. One of the best examples of this was one of our "dead guys" who submitted letters from people in the community saying, "This is what he was like before the War and this is what he's been like since he got home..." These records cost about \$50 per soldier, but you can probably pay for this out of classroom funds or Social Studies Committee funds. If necessary, the local historical society might chip in to pay for this if you agree to donate the records to them when you are done with them.

- New Hampshire State Archive (71 South Fruit St., Concord. 271-2236) - This is where you can handle original probate documents and land deeds, as well as other historical documents. The staff here is very helpful and will usually let you scan documents into a computer.

[Note - if possible, scan documents instead of photocopying them. Then you can make as many copies as necessary and manipulate the size of the images if necessary.]

- Tuck Library - New Hampshire Historical Society Library (30 Park St., Concord - across from the State House. 856-064) - This is a great source for historical publications. Some of the items I've found here include turn-of-the-century agricultural bulletins, 19th Century Health Department brochures on tuberculosis and an 1880 manual for house painters.
- New Hampshire State Library (also on Park St., across from the State House in Concord)- This can be a good source of other old documents and books, including old city directories and family histories. The staff here can be prickly and should be handled with care.
- Ancestry.com (www.ancestry.com) - This is a genealogy website run by the Mormon church and is an outstanding resource. Among other things, original census records are stored for each census year through 1930. A membership costs \$100-\$200, but can be used for many other projects - passenger manifests for all ships docking at Ellis Island are available, for instance.
- Newspapers - Most large public or college libraries have microfilmed copies of local newspapers from the 19th and 20th Centuries. This is where you will find your "dead guy's" obituary.

Don't rush yourself on this stage of the project. It takes time to track down the details of a person's life and you will have to make peace with the fact that you will never track down all of them. I usually spend six weeks or so on this phase.

Introducing Your "Dead Guy" to the Students:

This is really where you make or break the "Adopt a Dead Person" project. Basically, all you do at this stage is share what you know about him (Unfortunately, it is usually a "him". There is not much of a paper trail for women of that period.). I print up a packet with copies and transcripts of all the documents I've been able to find on our "dead guy" and give one to each student. The transcripts are usually necessary because, just as many teenagers have trouble understanding a British accent, they have a hard time reading the copper-plate script of 19th Century handwriting. These packets vary in length. Mine have been as short as ten pages and as long as sixty.

The key here is to really sell the mystery of this person. Every piece of evidence you've been able to uncover about him has probably raised two or three more questions. For example, "your guy's" first wife may have died young and cut him out of her will. Why? What was going on there? Then, census records may show him living alone with a young daughter for the next fifteen years or so. What's up with that? Emphasize how much there still is to learn about this person.

Almost anyone's life is something of a soap opera. If you can convey this mystery with enthusiasm and genuine interest, your students will buy into the project. Most teenagers are

looking for something meaningful to put their energies into. Convince them that this is one of those things and they really will respond. (Okay - not all of them, but a surprising number.)

A useful tool for presenting this material is a T-chart on the board, listing what we know about Mr. Dead Guy on one side and what we don't know on the other. The students will have questions - try to put all of them on the chart, even if you are a little uncomfortable with them. For instance, if a student expresses disbelief that Mr. Guy actually spent fifteen celibate years ("C'mon! Nobody can go THAT long!"), treat that as a serious point. Point out that that really is a mystery. What were the social structures in your town in the 1800s? Would "Dead Guy" have been able to date? Why? Why not? It is important to let the students know that you take their questions seriously, even if they weren't necessarily meant that way to start with.

By the end of a longish class period, you should have thirty or more topics on the right-hand side of your "T", any one of which would make a great project.

For homework, have each student write you a letter choosing three of these topics and why he or she would like to do a project on it. With luck, you should be able to shuffle things so that almost everyone gets one of their top three topics. This is important - the student needs to pick the topic him or herself. (You will be glad later on. When kids start complaining about how hard this research is, you can look them in the eye and say - completely guilt-free - "Hey, you picked this.")

At this time, you will also hand out project instruction packets.

Project Instruction Packets:

It helps to keep students in the loop as to what your expectations are for the project as a whole. It is useful to hand out a list of instructions for each stage of the project and hints for getting the stages done. I also include a sample bibliography and a copy of an article on effective use of search engines. (See sample instruction packet.)

Raising Questions:

Once you have assigned a topic to each student (hopefully one of his or her choices), the next step is to have him or her come up with specific questions on that topic. This is covered in some detail in the student project instruction packet. Any big topic in a person's life is too overwhelming for most adolescents to grasp all at once. It helps for them to break it down into smaller, more manageable chunks. This step also helps a student clarify what he or she really wants to study.

(Once again, see sample instruction packet.)

Student Research:

This can be an exciting and frustrating stage. Many students will say, "I can't find anything". This may actually be true. Point out that historical research can be frustrating that way. On the other hand, it just may be an attack of laziness or lack of inspiration.

Go over the use of key words in research. Most students will only use the internet to look for information unless forced - practically at gunpoint - to use actual books. Unfortunately, most of them aren't very good at it, though that will probably come as something of a shock to them. Explain that typing in an actual question in the query field of Google or Dogpile will not help them. Have them make up lists of words that relate to their "dead guy".

(Notice how, suddenly, it's THEIR dead guy?)

Also, provide as many secondary sources for their use as possible. Here are some of the sources I have found useful:

- The Foxfire Series - if you don't know about this series of books, DEFINITELY look them up. They describe peasant life in Appalachia in great detail. All chapters are written by and for high school students. This can be incredibly useful to your students.
- Antique geography books. These are great at describing the nuts and bolts about a particular area.
- Your town's official history. Almost every town has one and it usually includes a lot of family lineage.
- The American Boy's Handy Book / The American Girl's Handy Book - Available reprinted, these are books written in the late 1800s, describing activities for "average" American boys and girls and give a real feel for what kids were interested in 125 years ago.
- Antique maps of your town. If you are able to find these, they will help enormously. Most towns had tax maps printed at the end of the 19th Century, listing the last name of the householder at each property.

At this stage, it is also a good idea to make friends with the staff at the local library. In many cases, the "staff" will be one, overworked librarian. She is your new best friend, so be extra nice to her and point out to your students that she is THEIR new best friend and that they had better be nice to her. (I usually send flowers when the project is over.)

Help out students who ask for help and certainly stay on their cases about getting work done, but I generally let students sink or swim on their own for a while at this point. It is important for them to take ownership of their projects.

I generally devote at least a couple of weeks of class time to doing research at this point. I also try to reserve our computer lab for a couple of class periods as well. This lets students who are ready to start writing do so, while others are still doing research.

Overall, I give four to six weeks to students to work on this project. About half of that is class time devoted to research and I fill the rest of the time with movies that I was going to show them anyway at some point during the year (in my case, *Roots*). I don't assign any homework during this period, preferring to have students focus on the project.

Picking a Format:

Just as in choosing topics, I think it is important to give students a lot of latitude in deciding how best to present their research. I set two conditions:

1. It has to involve a lot of writing. If a student hands in a series of maps, for instance, that's great, but I also want an accompanying explanation of what the maps mean. If a student shoots a movie, I want a script. One of my school's Literacy standards is that students should write for a larger audience than just family and friends and this project presents a really good opportunity to do so.
2. In our particular case, the project should be in some format that can be presented on a webpage. For instance, maps and illustrations can be scanned to electronic format (preferably by the student - see "Turning it In", below). I am hoping to become web-savvy enough over the next year or so to incorporate streaming audio or video onto our website.

The writing and presentation process is up to you, but I have found that it goes much more smoothly if I coordinate with my students' Literacy teacher (in your case, possibly "English" or "Language Arts"). If he or she has planned a nonfiction writing unit, this project can kill two or more birds with one stone.

Turning it In:

I have students turn all their written projects in to me in an electronic format. This makes it easier for me put together our website, but even if you are producing a printed book, this will still make your life easier. (I generally insist on electronic submission for any written assignments. This lets me print out extra copies if necessary and allows me to use anti-plagiarism software like *turnitin.com*.)

If students have ready access to the computer system at your school, either set up a folder on the server for them to deposit their projects into or have them put them in their own folders where you can access them. Give them a particular title that they should use, such as "Dead Person - Final Draft", to make the projects easier to identify.

If students do not have access to the server, give them each their own floppy disk. These are fairly inexpensive and can probably be paid for out of classroom funds or Social Studies Committee funds at your school.

If students are including pictures in their projects - and they probably should - you will face another problem. Somebody along the line has probably put the fear of God into them about not wasting paper. Most students have been trained to import pictures to a word processing document and print them all out at the same time. While this is normally a very good practice, it will not work well in this case. The pictures usually end up as a lower quality than you can make use of and are difficult to import into the document you end up preparing. Insist that students include each picture as its own *jpeg* or *gif* file.

Insist on this several times.

Then several more - hopefully, half or so will listen.

Dealing with Computer Excuses:

Make it clear at the beginning of the project that you will, under no circumstance, at all, ever, accept a computer-related excuse for the project being late. Of course, in the end you will, but you will minimize "my brother put a peanut butter sandwich in the A-drive"-type excuses, if you set up back-up procedures ahead of time. I give all students my email address and tell them that if they are worried, to email their projects to me as well as handing it in in the regular way. (I generally have them put the text in the body of the email, as opposed to attaching it. My students are geniuses at messing up Word/WordPerfect/text/text-with-breaks formats. If I just have to copy and paste, my life gets a lot simpler.)

Frustration with Slackers:

In spite of the month and a half that you have given your students, a frustratingly large number of them will wait until a couple of days before the project is due to really start work on it. They would do this if you gave them a year's head start. So why give them so much valuable class time?

The thing is this: three or four kids per class - maybe only one - will really get into this project and will make excellent use of their time. You will have that one student who goes way, **way**, **WAY** above and beyond expectations to turn in an unbelievably good project. I think it is worth investing the time to let that kid have that kind of experience. (Who that kid is will almost always come as a complete surprise.)

As to the others? Shrug it off and deal with it. Ask yourself - are the kids better off for having done this project? Have they learned more than they would have otherwise? Usually the answer is yes. I always have to remind myself that it is unreasonable to expect 14-year-olds to be as invested in a project like this as I am. Let it go.

Following Up:

Students should get praise for this project. Lots of praise. Unreasonable, obsequious, maiden-aunt levels of praise.

Here's why - aside from what this will do for students' self-esteem, if they feel this much ownership in their "dead guy", for the rest of the year, they will tie everything you teach them into what they have learned on this project.

- Urbanization? - "Hey! Our dead guy moved to Manchester during this period!"
- Civil War - "Did our guy serve in the war?" "I don't know - DID he? Why/why not?"
- Jim Crow Laws - "Hey! I'll bet that we didn't have those laws when our dead guy was around because there weren't any plantations or freed slaves here!"

At the very least, you will be able to point out - "While this was happening, what was going on for your dead guy?"

No matter what format you choose to present the students' final work, it is important that it is presented to the greater community in some way. In addition to developing our own "Dead Person" website, we burn copies of the web page onto compact disks and give one to each of the schoolboard members, local and school libraries and the local historical society. In addition, students from each class help present their findings to a meeting of the historical society. The validation that students receive from this helps underscore what they have done.

The Amount of Work Involved:

The first year I tried this project, it did not work at all. There was just too much for me to do and I expected too much from my students. The whole project collapsed under its own weight and was never completed.

The next year, it worked very well, but was absolute, unmitigated toil - particularly designing the webpage.

This year, it was a little easier, particularly putting the webpage together, since I had already developed most of the skills I needed and had an idea of how the files should go together. I also have a better idea of how to lay the groundwork with students - having them turn in another project electronically earlier in the year, for instance and working the bugs out of that process.

Over time, I have gotten a better handle on what students can and cannot do (both incredibly surprising). This has made it easier to give and process the assignments necessary to complete the "Adopt a Dead Person" project.

Contact Information:

If you would like to try this project with your class (or some modified version of it), I would be happy to help. Here is how to contact me.

Mailing Addresses:

John Fladd
Deerfield Community School
66 North Rd.
Deerfield, NH 03037

John Fladd
52 Beard Rd.
New Boston, NH 03070

Email:

jfladd@sau53.org or johnfladd@hotmail.com

Telephone: Cell phone - (603) 540-0021

Websites: <http://www.sau53.org/net4/classes/8/8f/index.html>

<http://www.almostgruntled.com/deadperson>