

Who cares about history?

Learning History feels like a prescription for prunes to most Americans.

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The staff at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond tells this one: one day a woman toured the whole place to learn about the leadership of the Southern states during the Civil War and at the end she asked the tour guide:

"Well, if Jefferson Davis was the president of the South, who was the president of the North?"

Yeah, it hurts, but in 2007 does it really matter that she doesn't know Abraham Lincoln? It was a war a long time ago in a textbook far, far away. You can spend a \$5 bill just fine without knowing whose portrait is on it.

We live in a world in which History and its understanding are drowning under a wave of other information. A lot of adults think fantasy baseball stats are more important than the timeline of the Civil War. No one needs to remember the Proclamation Line of 1763 because Google can spit out the answer in a second on the Web. And why spend your vacation driving hundreds of miles to connect the dots of historic museums when a resort will give each family member their own flavor of fun for a week?

There seems to be little room for History in a culture where a cell phone from two years ago is considered obsolete.

Even the nation's oldest college is abandoning the field: Last week Harvard University's faculty gave final approval to a new set of undergraduate requirements that sidesteps History classes. Students will take courses in eight categories, such as "Ethical Reasoning," "Science of Living Systems," and "Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding" in a push to make a Harvard education more relevant to the modern world.

Is History history?

The answer is important to Virginia's tourism industry and affects the whole nation's voter participation, education and relationship with other cultures in the world.

The Daily Press will spend the rest of 2007 asking that question and examining Americans' spotty knowledge about their own story and the impact that has on our society.

We in this corner of the country have a unique view of the problem. Thousands of jobs in Hampton Roads are dedicated to historical preservation and education. History swirls around almost every street sign. It binds us together, from Virginia natives who can trace their family to a Colonial plot of land to the come-here's landing here instead of Florida because they love Virginia's historical ambiance.

Virginians have a huge stake in the future of History. A 2003-04 survey by the Virginia Tourism Corp. of tourists to Virginia showed that about 20 percent of them came to see a historic site or museum. That adds up to about 6 million households a year coming for our heritage tourism. Getting a statewide economic impact is hard, but take this example: the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation estimated in 2006 that it contributed \$93 million to the Williamsburg area economy.

We as a newspaper have devoted a lot of resources to the coverage of the Jamestown 400th commemoration, the opening of the Monitor Center at the Mariner's Museum, and countless smaller, localized efforts to keep the stories of the past alive. We have stood at the Jamestown well with the

archaeologists. We have studied the artwork about the Native American genocide. We have used a talking crab cartoon to teach the next generation these stories. As the daily paper covering Jamestown, Yorktown, Williamsburg, and the Peninsula where soldiers and sailors have trod for four centuries, History is our beat.

There is reason for concern. The surveys pop up in the news from time to time, like report cards sent home from an unseen teacher:

A poll of 14,000 college students found 73 percent of them couldn't say where our nation got the idea for a wall of separation between established churches and the government. (Thomas Jefferson used the phrase in a letter.)

Another survey said 41 percent of Americans could name 2 of the 3 "American Idol" judges on TV, but only 0.1 percent could name all five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution. That's 1 in every 1,000 people.

In the same poll 21 percent said the First Amendment guaranteed the right to own pets (It doesn't). About the same number said it guaranteed the right to drive (Cars weren't invented until 100 years after the Constitution was written).

Last week the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that the lowest-performing students have improved their history test scores since 1994. But that may be more a reflection of improved reading and test-taking skills. The results still showed that only 24 percent of fourth-graders could explain why people settled on the western frontier and only 1 percent of eighth-graders could say how the fall of the Berlin Wall affected America's foreign policy.

The whole Jamestown 2007 marketing effort started in 2004 with a press release that 74 percent of adults nationwide couldn't name the first permanent English-speaking settlement in North America.

Those numbers sound right to Dick Cheatham, who talks to hundreds of thousands of tourists a year as a costumed character for the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. In his 18 years of experience, he has heard a lot of myths from visitors - when they can call to mind anything at all about the history they are visiting.

"The background that Americans have about American history is abysmally bad," he said. "I believe Americans are almost in a state of amnesia about knowing who they are and how they got to be who they are."

Kurt Squire, professor at the University of Wisconsin, said, "People hate history because it's just names, dates, places. There's no sense of the conflict or debate about history." He added, "We need a Sputnik-like effort on history and voting and political engagement."

That would be hard, given the preparation of teachers who give kids their first big overview of American history. A 2005 survey of social studies teachers found only 17 percent of fifth grade teachers had more than 10 courses in history or the social sciences while they were undergraduate students themselves. Only 10 percent of second grade teachers had more than 10 courses in history as undergraduates.

The same survey asked teachers what their greatest needs were for professional development. Of eight choices, the top two were: to learn how to present content better and to learn more subject matter themselves.

"You can't teach well what you don't know," wrote the study authors in the September 2006 issue of *Social Education*, the journal of the National Council for the Social Studies.

We love to laugh at the people Jay Leno catches on the street who think the name of the ship's captain in the novel *Moby Dick* is "Captain Dick." But we're glad that camera isn't taping us. Few adults could get

through a school history exam now - as Fox is proving with its popular new gameshow, "Are You Smarter Than A Fifth-Grader?"

Of course, few adults could get through a high school biology exam or Algebra exam, either.

"I don't think those polls are necessarily fair markers of (history knowledge)," said Jeremy Stoddard, a professor in the education school at the College of William and Mary. "If a question is put on someone, 'How many can name the different families and genomes in biology?' what's really important for people to know?"

If we're trying to go to Mars, why is the study of Reconstruction relevant? Why is it a national crisis if people can't immediately call to mind when, where and why The Federalist Papers were written?

Colin Campbell, president of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, said, "It's not only important for you to understand but also for your future and the future of this great experiment. We talk about how the next generation is always faced with the possibility of letting it go awry."

He spoke at the famous Chautauqua Institution in New York last summer about the "duty" Americans have to know their history.

"It's not a word I use a lot. Yesterday I gave a talk that used the idea of responsibilities. The founders used the words 'rights' and 'responsibilities.' The focus in this country has been on rights for decades," he said. "I can see where talking about 'duty' can be off-putting if you become lecturing or preachy, and maybe I was, but at the end of the day if we don't accept our responsibilities, there's the possibility of dissolution."

History affects our lives. It determines how and why we go to war, how much tax money we spend on school budgets and whether or not we preserve the 1878 building in the face of a developer's plan for new condos.

Yet it is one of the things people complain about like we complain about the weather, the media or the Redskins - "Oh, I hated History in school." Most American classrooms have treated History as a should - a duty akin to eating prunes or exercising more. And Americans hate to be told what to do.

History has the same problem as voting in the United States. We believe in a voluntary democracy. One of the choices on Election Day is "don't go to the polls at all." But not voting has its risks. So does treating History as a recreational choice.

The American consumer's choices about History have doomed some of the local historical jewels. The Carter's Grove plantation of Colonial Williamsburg was never jam-packed with tourists. It was a sprawling property that broke important ground in the presentation of history. But just five months before the 400th anniversary of Jamestown, Colonial Williamsburg announced it would sell the property that displayed the remains of a Jamestown-era town, featured an archaeology museum and explained the river-based plantation culture the Jamestown settlers created.

The Jamestown anniversary itself never picked up the major sponsors it sought. This spring it did get great coverage in the national media, but the Anniversary Weekend crowds this month were about two-thirds of what was anticipated.

Even the Jamestown movie, "The New World," flopped in 2005.

If a Thomas Jefferson interpreter speaks in an empty room, does he make a sound? It's a tough sell to get people out of their plasma screen home theater cocoons once they finally get done with their errands. They know they need to get milk and pick up the prescriptions, but what does reading Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln by Doris Kearns Goodwin get you?

For most Americans, History is a trivial pursuit. 1607. 1861. 1920. Knowing those dates may get the

yellow pie on a family board game, but it doesn't get you a job or make your family safer or pay the medical insurance. Knowing 1865 is on par with knowing the starting lineup of the 1969 Mets - the kind of detail that's treasured only by a small sect of specialists.

"We don't do things where we can't perceive a profit," said Cheatham. "There's a broad presumption that studying History isn't going to get you anywhere. It's just entertainment."

A pile of new brick and mortar history galleries are trying to help Cheatham make the case for History. Millions of dollars are being spent in the face of online communication and falling historical tourism numbers and those bone-shaking history ignorance poll numbers. Will these buildings full of video screens and "immersive environments" capture Americans' attention - or prove to be white elephants?

For example, a \$26.5 million museum about World War I just opened in Kansas City. HUH?

"At dinner parties I was going to, people were asking, 'Isn't this too much, too late? You're spending \$26.5 million and there are only 35 World War I vets left,'" said Steve Berkheiser, executive director of the new facility.

His answer was to force visitors to ask themselves: would they have gone to Europe to fight in 1917? How would they react to a military draft and to President Woodrow Wilson's restrictions of personal freedoms during the war?

"You take World War I as a learning laboratory. Sure, you could build a museum just doing the firsts - it was the first use of weapons of mass destruction, it was the first use of airplanes and tanks, etc. But we're asking why a nation goes to war, how do you set your goals for that war and how do you know you've met those goals. We couldn't live in a time that makes that more relevant than we do today," he said.

The living people who can connect those dots are your grandparents. They're easy to ignore in your daily life of rushing from work to the doctor's office to the auto parts store to the grocery to soccer practice. But then you're sitting with the grandparents at Easter dinner and they find a way to let you know: they've been where you are. They've seen it before. And they have lessons for you, if you'll hear them.

Cynthia Rudh came from California to visit the Jamestown 400th last weekend. But her commitment to History is a recent development. For years she heard family stories about her connection to a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Family members urged her to file her paperwork to join the Daughters of the American Revolution.

"I was always like, 'Yeah, yeah, two bits and that will get you a cup of coffee.' Who cares?" she said.

She put her paperwork in this spring.

"I had to turn 60 and have two health scares in the last year and touch my mortality to get in touch with my roots," she said. Now she's hooked.

"Why don't Americans do more about their own history? Why don't they do more with their own events? It's important. That's why I'm here."

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