

## Leaders in Learning: Hands-on with History

*Paul LaRue is using primary source materials and broadband technology to connect his students to their community's past, present, and future.*

**By William Weber**

Paul LaRue has two strong beliefs that are borne out of 26 years' experience in the classroom. The first is that every community has a history. And the second is that, with access to primary source materials and a bit of technology, a teacher can turn that history into powerful lessons for today's students that have in impact well beyond the classroom.

"Everybody's got interesting local stories and rich history if you bother to flush it out," LaRue says.



*LaRue (in cap) and students installing headstones in cemetery.*

For this high school social studies teacher from rural Washington Court House, Ohio, lessons in his Research History course have taken the form of mapping a turn-of-the-century cemetery, writing texts for state historical markers, lobbying for an entry in Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C., interviewing World War II veterans for the Library of Congress, and much more.



# cable in the classroom

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Along the way, LaRue and his students have earned an Innovation in Education Award from the History Channel, an Ohio Preservation Award, and a grant from Time Warner Cable, among several awards. His students have given testimony in their state capital. And their class work has become a valuable resource for local officials, community historians, and Ohio genealogists. LaRue recently learned he also is the recipient of the 2011 Citizenship Education Teacher Award from the Ohio Veterans of Foreign Wars.

### Personal Connections

LaRue's own history with these efforts goes back more than a decade, when he was looking for a way to get his students out of the classroom with a hands-on history project. He found it in research about the Underground Railway in Ohio and in the story of African-Americans who fought in the Civil War, known as United States Colored Troops (USCT). Starting in 2001, seniors in LaRue's Research History classes began a county-by-county registry of known burial sites of USCT soldiers. That effort continues today as each year's new crop of students add names and data to the USCT Buried in Ohio website, [<http://usctohio.org>] which has become a rich repository of information for Ohio historians. And the timing couldn't be better. As our nation heads into the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, the USCT website provides details on soldiers' gravesites broken down by county and township across the entire state.

Work on the USCT project led LaRue to the story of the Gist Settlement, a group of African-American communities dotted throughout Ohio that were

established by Samuel Gist, a British slave owner who, upon his death in 1815, freed more than 500 slaves, providing them with land and homes throughout Ohio and creating financial trusts for their families. For LaRue, a Gist Settlement in neighboring Highland County gave a perfect opportunity for hands-on history learning.

Still occupied today, the local settlement is a living link to African-American history and life in rural Ohio before and after the Civil War. LaRue arranged for his students to assist a team of professional archeologists led by Dr. Jarrod Burks in using ground-penetrating radar and magnetics to map the site and then dig and sift for artifacts spread across the 200-acre complex, which at one time included a church, a school, and a cemetery. In addition to the field work that unearthed household objects, tools, pieces of clothing, and the foundation of the original schoolhouse, the students did research using county records, read old newspapers accounts of the community, and interviewed family and other community members who had once lived at the settlement.

“It turned out that two of my students were Gist descendents,” LaRue says. “Brian, he had known this because of his family history. But Janelle, she didn’t know. She found out her great-grandfather was buried in the cemetery... she never made the connection till she told her mom what she was going to be doing for field work one day. So she was literally working on ancestral land.

“High school students aren’t usually that interested in genealogy,” LaRue adds. “It just isn’t on their radar. But afterwards, Janelle interviewed her grandmother, and learned that her grandmother had lived in the settlement. It became very real to her.”

### Technological Advantages

The results of the students’ work eventually were brought together in a set of websites that are now an important community asset (see Related Resources).



*Students using ground-penetrating radar.*

“When we first did our website in 2003, [[http://www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/Senior\\_High/GIST\\_Pages/The%20Gist%20Settlement%20Archeological%20Project.htm](http://www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/Senior_High/GIST_Pages/The%20Gist%20Settlement%20Archeological%20Project.htm)] I wasn’t really thinking Web or digital at the time,” says LaRue, who jokingly notes that he’s “no technology guru.” “I was thinking of maybe a bulletin board! But one of my students said, ‘If you don’t make me read any more microfilm, I’ll build a website for you.’ And this was back before it was easy to do that. But he and two other students built this thing with all that crazy code.

“Things have changed so much,” LaRue adds. “My students who are editing the site now, they’re lives are so much easier. And I’m so proud that we’re able to build on that. We’ve had a digital presence the entire time.”

Today, the website features the students’ ongoing research on the Gist Settlement, articles they’ve written about the Gist community’s Civil War veterans, maps of the grounds, and photos from their field work. That initial field work and exploration of primary

source materials paved the way for new research—one at the Gist Settlement and the other, a new statewide project.

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LaRue's students are also working with Dr. Burks to map Washington Cemetery. This began as an attempt to locate the burial site of a particular Civil War officer—Captain John Bell, who drowned in a local river and was buried in a metal coffin—and has evolved into work with township officials to plan for future use of the cemetery.



*Students installing headstones.*

“Captain Bell, who was from our community, drowned November 16, 1861—that's 150 years ago this November. For students who are 15 or 16 years old, that's a big number!” LaRue says. To piece together Bell's story, students read old newspaper accounts on microfilm, researched other written documents, and then contracted with Dr. Burks to assist on the field work. “We were trying to see if we could find a signature of Captain Bell's metal coffin without digging him up—which we had no intention of doing!” LaRue laughs. “It was neat, because we used two different tools—the ground-penetrating radar and a magnetometer—that, generally outside of maybe a college setting, they're not going to get to use. It's a neat way to make that story very real for the students.”

The results of their work will be posted soon on the class website this winter, and are being given to the township.

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“The Gist cemetery has an interesting problem,” LaRue notes. “It's historically an African-American cemetery and they have a large number of unmarked graves. And the township trustees are very interested; there's an older gentleman from the community, who has worked with my students, and they are very concerned about what happens when this gentleman passes, because there are no records for the cemetery past the headstones, and they know the headstones don't represent the entire community.”

“Interestingly enough, there are a few people still actively being buried there,” LaRue adds. “The truth is, because there aren't records, that has become problematic. So this was a neat way to use the technology and, because I'm a service-learning guy too, it was good to provide a service for the township trustees.”

### **Census Data**

The Gist and Civil War connections led LaRue's class to a new project that is focused on the 1890 Census.

Sounding very much like the enthusiastic history teacher he is, LaRue explains, “What's cool about the 1890 Census is that it burned up in a fire in 1921. [Most of that period's census data was destroyed in a fire in the Commerce Building in Washington, D.C.]

“It's the only US Census that doesn't exist—except they did a supplemental census on Civil War veterans,” he explains. “So we bought a copy of the microfilm from the National Archives. And it's kind of cool, because it will note the person's disability, like, this guy was

shot through the left leg. So there's some really rich narrative past a person's name.

"The students are really excited about putting this on the website for other people to see as part of their own family history. And they'll be writing narratives of some of the people they're researching."



*Well excavated by students.*

### **Cable Connection**

Funding for some of these projects came in part from Time Warner Cable through its science-and-technology initiative Connect a Million Minds.

[\[http://connectamillionminds.com\]](http://connectamillionminds.com)

"Sometimes in social studies we feel like STEM is off limits," says LaRue, "but STEM applies to us just like anybody else."

"Last spring, my students were in their chemistry class, and Dr. Burks came in and gave an explanation of the technology he uses and how it works. He really put it in a science context. And then from there, he said, 'Using this, we're able to do historical interpretation.' And that's the key – we're using the technology to interpret history."

Another way LaRue's students have interpreted history by combining primary sources and digital resources was their campaign last year to nominate a new Ohioan to be memorialized in Statuary Hall in the nation's capital.

As states sometimes do, the Ohio legislature last year decided to replace one of its two statues. The one in question honored Governor William Allen (1803-79), a prominent slavery proponent and staunch foe of President Abraham Lincoln. To select his replacement, the state opened a public nomination process.

"My students put forth James Ashley, who was an abolitionist," LaRue says, explaining that to identify their choice and prepare their case, the students did extensive research online and through the History Channel's programming and Web archives.

"Ashley was Lincoln's floor manager, who pushed the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment through. You may have never heard of the guy, but he did an important thing."

"My students found themselves lobbying against Dayton, who was pushing the Wright Brothers; Ohio State University was pushing Jesse Owens; Milan, Ohio was pushing Thomas Edison. We were actually the only high school class that was working on this," he notes proudly. "We hosted the legislative group when they came down, and two of my students went to the State House to give testimony—at the same time that Warren G. Harding's great nephew was giving testimony."

From an initial list of more than 90 nominating teams, the kids from Washington Court House made the cut into the top 10. "That was like winning the sweepstakes," laughs LaRue, who earned an Innovation in History Award from the History Channel for this initiative. [Editor's note: In the end, Thomas Edison was selected, although further action has gotten hung up in the legislature.]

"Some of the candidates had way more name recognition—like Edison or Jesse Owens—but they were all great stories,"

he says. "So, it was a great project—my kids got to do lobbying; they were at the State House; they found themselves speaking with professors. Those things really resonate with the students."

### **Making History Accessible**

For LaRue, all of the different projects he has run through his Research History classroom have a common thread – taking local history and making it come to life.

It's not about having the greatest tools or the biggest budget or even the widest audience (or as he jokes, "We're not BritneySpears.com!"). It's about giving students the chance to learn first hand about their community's history and see their place in that timeline, and it's about providing connections within that community that enrich everyone. Like the occasional assignment his students take on to create site markers for the state Historical Society, which turns serious research and polished writing into a community asset, the lessons are tangible and something to be proud of ("the kids get to see their words literally in bronze," he notes).

And for other teachers, LaRue says that the greatest lesson to be learned in these projects is just how accessible they are.

"People think it takes a lot of money and a lot of resources to do these things, but the truth is that none of us really have that," he explains. "It's really all about working and making connections. And technology is a great way to do some things and look pretty slick. You can connect with a lot of people without a ton of resources."

All photographs courtesy of Paul LaRue.

### **War Stories: Preserving Veterans' History**

Another historical resource close at hand for nearly every community, says LaRue, is the personal stories of living U.S. military veterans. Working with the History Channel's Take a Veteran to School Day

[\[http://www.history.com/topics/take-a-vet#a5\]](http://www.history.com/topics/take-a-vet#a5) initiative, since 2003 LaRue's students have researched and recorded interviews with 65 veterans from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam that are now part of the Library of Congress Veterans History Project archives in Washington, D.C. [\[http://www.loc.gov/vets/\]](http://www.loc.gov/vets/)

LaRue, who has created teachers' guides for this project for the History Channel website (see Related Resources), says, "Students have to do research in advance, both on the individual and on their particular wartime circumstances. We have a standard script we've developed for the interviews, but you have to do your homework. And then you have to tape the interview and make a transcript out of it. Talk about a labor-intensive project!"

But the results of the effort are valuable from both a historical and personal perspective. Some interviewees are complete strangers to the students—such as two students who recently interviewed the outgoing president of the Ohio State Senate, who was a Vietnam combat veteran—and sometimes their subjects are family members. "One of my students just finished the transcript on her grandfather, who was a Vietnam veteran. It meant a lot to her."

And, LaRue adds, noting a particularly timely aspect of the project's importance, "15 of the people we've interviewed have passed away since we did the interview. But their stories of their service live on."

## Research History class websites

### USCT Buried in Ohio

<http://www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/mapsite/index.htm>

### Gist Settlement Project

[http://www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/Senior\\_High/GIST\\_Pages/The%20Gist%20Settlement%20Archeological%20Project.htm](http://www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/Senior_High/GIST_Pages/The%20Gist%20Settlement%20Archeological%20Project.htm)

### Freedom Fighters

<http://www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/mapsite/usctcw/index.htm>

### Emancipation Day Project

[http://www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/Senior\\_High/Emancipation\\_Day/EmancipationDay.htm](http://www.washingtonch.k12.oh.us/Senior_High/Emancipation_Day/EmancipationDay.htm)

## Cable Websites:

**Connect a Million Minds** (Time Warner STEM initiative)  
<http://connectamillionminds.com/>

**Take a Veteran to School Day** (History Channel)  
<http://www.history.com/topics/take-a-vet>



Artifacts collected by students.

## Teachers' guides by Paul LaRue: Promoting Historic Preservation in the Classroom (pdf)

[http://www.history.com/images/media/interactives/promote\\_historic\\_preservation.pdf](http://www.history.com/images/media/interactives/promote_historic_preservation.pdf)

## Ten Tips for Getting Started on a Veterans Oral History Project

<http://www.history.com/images/media/pdf/TipsforInterviewing.pdf>

## United States Colored Troops

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/teachers/lesson-plans/united-states-colored-troops-lesson-plan/united-states-colored-troops-lesson.html>

## Life of a Soldier After the Civil War

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/teachers/lesson-plans/life-of-a-soldier-after-the-civil-war-lesson-plan/whats-in-a-name.html>

## The Battle of Saltville

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/teachers/lesson-plans/the-battle-of-saltville-lesson-plan/the-battle-of-saltville.html>

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**Paul LaRue teaches social studies at Washington High School in Washington Court House, Ohio.**

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