The Blacksmith in Society

Lesson Plan Supplement - Suggested Additional Activities

Teacher Background

The blacksmith was an integral part of the community until modern technology rendered many of his functions obsolete. The fact that blacksmiths were seldom mentioned in newspapers indicates that most were law-abiding citizens who had enough business that they did not need to advertise. Information recorded in census records, historical narratives and reference books can be used as base information for projects that are thought provoking and teach basic research techniques.

Using Census Records

Certain historical census records provide a wealth of information about racial demographics, financial status and occupations of adult males as well as locations and types of businesses. (The 1850 Census for Frederick County, Maryland is very complete and has been reprinted as A Bridge in Time, a volume available in Maryland Public Libraries.) These records are an excellent resource for the following activities:

- Skilled craftsmen typically passed their trade and business to their children. Trace the lineage of a selected blacksmith using census records. Did several generations practice the same craft? Obituaries from period newspapers can provide additional information.
- Are any of your students descendents of blacksmiths? Have them check their genealogical records if any are available. If not, introduce them to the methodology used to trace family lineage. Family bibles, cemetery records, birth and death records can be introduced as possible information sources. Can your ingenious students find additional potential sources? (Genealogists sometimes place their findings in local libraries as well as on the internet.)
- 19th century census records state the country of origin and the racial background of adult males. Using this information, plot the locations of the various races and ethnic groups on a map. How have the demographics of the selected area changed over time? If communities or neighborhoods have changed dramatically, speculate on the reasons for the change.
- Census records can be used to trace immigration patterns. Did people immigrate to the selected area because they were attracted by industry, terrain, weather, etc., or do records indicate that immigrants were encouraged to come to the area because their particular skills were in demand?

Let's Fill in the Details of our Heritage

It is unfortunate the blacksmiths who worked in the Catoctin Mountain Park blacksmith shop have been mostly forgotten because they did not document their work and activities. Help us determine their identity and learn more about their daily tasks. Have students talk with family members to find out more about relatives who were WPA or CCC alumni. Encourage the students to record their findings, including pictures when possible. Compile your results. Donate a copy to your local library or post to the internet to share with other researchers.

Don't Let Yourself Be Forgotten

Some historical eras are well documented because letters written by loved ones during times of separation tell much about the times and lifestyles. The blacksmith seldom traveled far from home and worked long hours at his trade. He usually had little formal education and kept few, if any formal records. He was a vital part of the community, yet, little is known about the daily lives or accomplishments of individual smiths. Don't let your class suffer the same fate! Countless students pass through each grade every year, but looking back, what do we know about the daily lives of students from years past? Start a class journal, assigning documentation of each day to individuals on a rotating basis. Encourage students to keep a personal journal documenting their activities and those of family members. Take it further by posting daily listings on the internet or saving them in a time capsule.