

Document-Based Inquiry: Carve the Mountain and They Will Come

Document-based inquiry lessons put primary source documents into the hands of students, allowing them to investigate and explore history for themselves. This student-driven lesson plan will allow students to have an interactive experience with the history of Mount Rushmore without being physically present at the memorial. With historical images, newspaper articles, letters, telegrams and maps, students will dive into the history of Mount Rushmore, explore the motivating factors for creating a large-scale sculpture in the Black Hills, and consider how the choices of South Dakotans in the past continue to impact the lives of South Dakotans today.

Objectives:

1. Students will use primary documents to explore the motivating factors that led to Mount Rushmore's carving.
2. Students will be able to articulate the differing opinions South Dakotans had about a carving in the Black Hills and the reasoning behind those opinions.
3. Students will be able to describe how Mount Rushmore National Memorial tourism contributes to the local economy.
4. Students will gain practice and enhance their skills in reading, interpreting and assessing primary source documents.

Content Standards:

- 5.H.3.1 Explain why individuals and groups during the same historical period can differ in their perspectives
- 5.H.5.1 Summarize how different types of historical sources are used to explain events in the past
- 5.G.1.2 Investigate maps of different types and scales
- 5.G.2.1 Explain how cultural and environmental characteristics affect the distribution and movement of people, goods, and ideas
- 6.H.5.3 Utilize primary and secondary sources and examine the credibility and intent of those sources
- 6.E.4.3 Identify the effects of economic systems on society

Materials for Students:

- One question & answer worksheet per student
- Writing utensil
- With students working in groups of 3-5, each group should have copies of the following materials, organized by phase and enclosed within manila envelopes:

Phase One:

1. Historical photo of Mount Rushmore pre-carving
2. First telegram from Doane Robinson to Gutzon Borglum
3. Borglum's response to Robinson's telegram
4. Image of Mount Rushmore after carving (not to be included in envelope, see Phase One directions for details)

Phase Two:

1. Photo of the Needles
2. Map of railway and highway systems connected to the Black Hills Region
3. Letter from Gertrude Young to Doane Robinson
4. Letter from Cora Johnson to Doane Robinson
5. Newspaper article titled "Hero Shrine Would Bring Rich Return"
6. Letter from Doane Robinson to Mr. Green
7. Legislation for Mt Harney Assoc. - 1925

Phase Three:

1. Newspaper article "Half Nation to Hit the Road" (1930)
2. Newspaper article on SD Tourism (1949)
3. Economic Impact Headline (2017)
4. Graphic of Mount Rushmore's economic impact (2019)
5. Photograph of parking lot full of vehicles (1967)
6. Yearly visitation numbers (3 parts)

Phase One: Initial Inquiry

In the early 1920's, the state historian of South Dakota, Doane Robinson, believed that South Dakotans could earn more money if more tourists came to the Black Hills for their vacations. While the Black Hills were believed by many to be beautiful enough to warrant a visit on their own, Robinson thought that more people would travel to South Dakota if there was a special attraction, such as a sculpture carved into the mountains. By 1923 Robinson was actively looking for a sculptor who would be interested in taking on such a large project.

Split students into small groups and have them study the documents together. Rather than share the above background information at the beginning of the lesson, have the students study the Phase One documents first. They can record their answers to the questions below and share them with their group members. After groups have had enough time to share with each other, ask for volunteers to share their ideas with the whole class. Once the students have made and shared their inquiries, and if they haven't already discovered it for themselves, you can reveal the background information given above.

Documents

1. Image of Mount Rushmore before carving
2. Telegram from Robinson to Borglum
3. Telegram from Borglum to Robinson
4. Image of Mount Rushmore after carving (to be withheld and revealed at end of Phase One)

Questions

1. What do you notice about these documents?
2. What questions do you have after studying these documents?
3. What do these documents remind you of?

Wrap up this phase by sharing the image of the carved, modern-day Mount Rushmore so that students can compare and contrast it with the un-carved mountain. This will also serve to show students what the memorial looks like in the case that they have not seen it before.

Phase Two: Setting the Scene

As news of Robinson's idea spread, it created both fans and critics. While some people agreed that a mountain carving would increase tourism in South Dakota, others did not want the mountains of the Black Hills to be changed by human hands.

For this phase, once again share the following documents with the students. Allow them enough time to read through the articles and letters, with the understanding that working with primary sources can be a slow process. Rather than begin the phase by giving them the background information listed above, allow them to experience the documents for themselves.

Documents

1. Image of the Needles
2. Map of railway and highway systems connected to the Black Hills Region
3. Gertrude Young letter
4. Cora Johnson letter
5. Newspaper article "Hero Shrine Would Bring Rich Return"
6. Robinson letter to Green
7. Legislation for Mt Harney Assoc. - 1925

Questions

1. What do you notice about these documents?
2. What questions do you have after reading these letters/articles?
3. Do these documents remind you of any current events?

After students have had time to study the documents and record their answers to the questions, once again ask for volunteers to share with the class. If no students bring it up, ask them if they were surprised to learn that not everyone wanted Mount Rushmore to be carved. What do they think about the opinions shared by Gertrude Young and Cora Johnson? You might also ask if they were surprised to learn that Mount Rushmore was carved with the purpose of bringing more money into the state of South Dakota. What would they have guessed was the original motivation for carving Mount Rushmore before studying these documents?

Phase Three: Studying the Outcomes

While not everyone was a fan of carving a mountain in the Black Hills, South Dakota's economy was very poor in the 1920's and the chance to bring money to the state through tourism was too promising to ignore. The government approved the project and carving began in 1927. While the sculpture was not completed until 1941, Mount Rushmore became a popular tourist destination almost immediately and has only grown in popularity ever since. Today, Mount Rushmore is a powerful symbol of American democracy and freedom for the entire country. It is also an important

part of the South Dakota economy – nearly 3 million people visit Mount Rushmore each year, and those same people spend millions of dollars at businesses in the state.

In this section, students will study documents that show how the economy of South Dakota has been impacted by increased tourism, thanks not only to the popularity of Mount Rushmore, but because it was easier than ever before for Americans to travel across the country for their vacations. They'll look at articles that span from the 1920s to the 2000s, encouraging them to consider how the choices of South Dakotans in the past continue to impact the lives of South Dakotans today.

Documents

1. Article "Half Nation to Hit the Road" (1930)
2. Article on SD Tourism (1949)
3. Economic Impact Headline (2017)
4. Graphic of Mount Rushmore's economic impact (2019)
5. Photograph of old parking lot full of vehicles (1989)
6. Yearly visitation numbers (3 parts)

Questions

1. What do you notice about these documents?
2. What questions do you have after studying the documents?
3. What do these documents remind you of?

Once again, after students have had time to study the materials and reflect within their groups, ask for volunteers to share observations with the whole class. Ask students to consider what Mount Rushmore's popularity means for the lives of South Dakotans (pros/cons), and how their lives are directly impacted by the choices of South Dakotans such as Doane Robinson nearly 100 years ago. You may find opportunities to discuss some of the larger historical events happening in the United States and the world by studying the visitation numbers – for example, what was happening in 1943, 1944, and 1945 that may have contributed to low numbers of visitors?

Phase Four: Assessment

Now that you've gone through all of the documents in groups, have students work individually in this final phase. You can offer the following prompts and allow students to choose the one they are most interested in, or for groups that may benefit from more reflection, assign multiple prompts as you see fit.

Prompt 1.

Imagine you live in South Dakota in 1924 when Doane Robinson first proposes carving a mountain and the local newspaper is asking for your opinion. Do you think a mountain in the Black Hills should be carved? Why or why not?

Prompt 2.

Tourism is not the only industry that contributes to the economy of South Dakota and the Black Hills. Mining, logging and agriculture are also important parts of the region's economy. All four of these industries make use of the land's natural resources to generate income. How is tourism similar to mining, logging and agriculture? How is it different?

Prompt 3.

Consider the variety of documents you studied in today's lesson: letters, newspaper articles, maps, photographs. These are all primary sources, which are used by historians to better understand the past. Choose two of the source types listed above and explain what makes each of them useful for understanding history.