

STUDY GUIDES

The **Chicago Humanities Festival** is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The interview “**Teaching the Founding Fathers**” on the following pages was prepared for the 2003 Chicago Humanities Festival: *Saving + Spending*.

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This guide was created by Christopher P. Swanson, education publications editor; with support from CHF staff, including Greg Alcock, education program coordinator; Cris Kayser, vice president; and Laura Diamond, intern.

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500 North Dearborn Street
suite 1028
Chicago, IL 60610
tel 312.661.1028
fax 312.661.1018
web www.chfestival.org

The Founding Fathers

The 2003 Chicago Humanities Festival featured a lineup of programs on America's Founding Fathers. Programs examined Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris (our "founding financier," as he is sometimes called), Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton. One of the participating scholars was Timothy Breen, a prominent historian of the American colonial period. On the following pages, read his thoughts about teaching the Founding Fathers.



John Trumbull's painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence

Bring the *chf* into the Classroom!

Teaching the Founding Fathers An Interview with T.H. Breen

chf: In your experience, what are the biggest misconceptions that students bring with them to college about the colonial period in general and the nation's founders?

THB: Well, this is a question with so many aspects.

One issue is that it's very difficult for young people today to imagine the world of the founders who don't even seem like real people. The leap back more than two hundred years is too much. The problem is due in part to changes in dress and language. Students are prepared to respect someone like George Washington for what he did, yet they also find him faintly ridiculous, in a powdered wig and curious clothes. By contrast, it's not nearly as difficult to imagine the period of the Civil War. The Revolution is in the distant past, whereas the Civil War feels more a part of our world. Breaking down the obstructions between us and the colonial period is very difficult.

A separate but related issue is that young people think of the American Revolution as a story of the Founding Fathers, rather than as a story of ordinary people. This

misperception has been reinforced lately by a series of heroic, prize-winning biographies that millions of Americans have read. The biographies of Franklin by Walter Isaacson and Edmund S. Morgan are only the most recent. It is true that these men were gifted and important individuals, but leaders do not make a revolution. The story of the Revolution is of ordinary people who were doing pretty well for themselves but felt so committed to a body of ideas and principles that they were willing to risk their lives and security, take to the streets, kill, and be killed. Their willingness for serious sacrifice is something modern Americans find almost impossible to imagine. The American Revolution was the second most bloody war in our history, surpassed only by the Civil War.

For me the question is never, How did Jefferson and Franklin make up the Revolution? Instead I ask, How did the American people mobilize in a sufficient strength to take on the mightiest empire the world had ever seen? It was a safe bet that they would lose. They would lose like the Irish lost, over and over. They would lose like the Scots lost in 1745. They would get smashed. And yet, they managed to

T.H. Breen is a scholar of American history, particularly of the colonial period. In his books, he attempts, in his words, "to recreate for the contemporary reader the fabric of everyday life in early America." He is currently the William Smith Mason professor of American history at Northwestern University. Mr. Breen will participate in the Classics in Context program on Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* on Saturday, May 8, 2004.

get it together and sustain a war effort and actually pull it off. It's truly a remarkable story, but it's a story of the people not the leaders.

Ordinary people committed themselves to the Revolution. Blacks petitioned. Women became active in boycott movements.

In my own teaching I try to deflect attention away from the familiar. I ask students to think about how they would react if their families were faced with what the colonists faced. What would they say if someone came to the door and said we have to arm ourselves to preserve our liberties? What patterns of thought would that set off?

chf: Do you ever find that particular students are grossly under-informed or misinformed on particular details?

THB: They generally know something about the founders. They don't know much about the issues that drove the Revolution, or the movement towards the constitution. It was a time of universal conversation among Americans about remaking the world.

My trouble with students is that they see the American Revolution as a bland event, drained of its human sacrifice and radical potential. And that of course is wrong. Our Revolution was complicated and full of promise and potential. If we understood it more fully, it seems to me that we would be more thoughtful when we're faced with revolutionary events throughout the world. We lack perspective on our own history. Have we not in some way become the empire we once struggled to throw off?

chf: What's missing in the way the Revolution gets taught?

THB: To talk about the Revolution meaningfully you have to talk about power. The British Empire has power. Decisions are made in London that could affect the stability of your life. The British have more guns and warships than you do. For me the question is always, How do people understand and resist power?

Historians no longer talk about class antagonism. There were a lot of poor people in the colonies and they had to take part in the Revolution to make it work. That too gets lost. Unfortunately, historians erase these kinds of tensions.

chf: What's the current state of historiography?

THB: There are some American historiographers who seem to feel empowered to accuse the past of its failings. Because we're beyond racism, because we're beyond sexism the past has to be corrected. I find that approach boring and trivial. At the end of the day it tells us more about ourselves than it does about the people that should be the object of our investigation.

chf: So which histories of the Revolution do you recommend?

THB: I consider Edmund S. Morgan's *The Stamp Act Crisis* the best book ever written on the American Revolution. He was one of its greatest interpreters. It's a book about people making decisions in the face of power.

Another book I admire is Gordon S. Wood's *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*. Although it was published several decades ago, it is still the best interpretation of political thought during this period. For traditional political history of very high quality, I recommend

Merrill Jensen's *The Founding of a Nation: A History of the American Revolution, 1763-1776*.

chf: Sometimes the American Revolution is framed as an intellectual event. What's your response?

THB: It really is quite a leap to claim that what twenty guys who went to Harvard thought constituted the American ideology. You have to wonder if the learned, enlightened discourse of the Founding Fathers meant anything at all to the farmers who actually showed up to Bunker Hill with guns.

I've just finished a book that will come out early next year from Oxford University Press that addresses some of these issues. It's called *Marketplace of Revolution*. It argues that ordinary middle class and lower class people were concerned with things like liberty and choice, and shaping their lives within the constraints around them. But they didn't talk in terms of Roman republics or fallen Greek virtue or what not—the kind of discourse that went on in college classrooms.

chf: What strategies do you use in the classroom that you recommend to other teachers?

THB: Generally, I prefer to involve students as quickly as possible in the reading and interpretation of primary documents.

History is an odd discipline in that in most high school and certainly many college courses, you read books by historians. Men and women have gone to the archives, come back, written a book, and that's what you read. But just think for a minute of chemistry or biology. What if you were a young chemist and someone

said to you, "Well look, you can't go to lab, but I'll tell you what we're going to do—we're going to give you lots of books about other people who did go to lab, and you can read about what they did." You'd feel you'd been had. You'd say, "This is crazy. If I don't have hands-on training, I'll never become a scientist." And yet, that's precisely what we do with history: we just give the students books written by other people.

Students have to be trained how to read. By that I mean that reading a primary text is hard business, and students must be taught to understand an author's narrative strategies, argumentation, voice and so on. The greatest rhetorical chameleon of all time was Benjamin Franklin. He never showed you his full deck. Never. When you read something that Franklin wrote, you have to fight with him. You have to know how to read against his own words in order to maintain your own interpretive perspective. The skill that I welcome most in the classroom can be defined in one word: skepticism. I love students who are skeptical, and say, "I don't believe this guy so show me." Research, detective work, and reinterpretation arise from that skepticism.

chf: Do Americans make too much of the Founding Fathers? Is our admiration an impediment to understanding?

THB: Well, the Founding Fathers were special people. We never saw their likes again. But they weren't superhuman either. These were real men who addressed real problems.

The thirteen colonies had enormous difficulties. Some were slave-based economies; others were free. There were religious differences. There was fighting over the frontier. What interests me about

the Founding Fathers is how they managed to make a bundled cause out of such disparity. How did they do it?

I've sometimes wondered, Why are people so horribly shocked when they learn that Jefferson was sexually exploiting a young slave woman on his plantation? The answer, I think, is that he was a Founding Father, and Founding Fathers aren't supposed to do sleazy things. But, alas, they did. Franklin had a dodgy record. Hamilton had some problems that would

probably do in a contemporary statesman.

The object of history is not to paste little gold stars or little black demerits on various personalities of the past, to go back in the past and judge them by our allegedly current high standards. History requires a deep and profound sense of the context in which events happened. It comes back to being able to read primary sources. They are our window into the past.