

FEATURE



CAMERA READY: CAPTURING A DIGITAL HISTORY OF CHESTER

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Armed with digital cameras, voice recorders, and movie cameras, students from Thomas Dale High School have been exploring neighborhoods, interviewing residents, and collecting memories of their hometown. As our state celebrates the four hundred years of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America, we are also marking our own significant milestone this June—the one-hundredth commencement of Thomas Dale High School.

We are proud that our roots go back to 1611. Our school is named for Sir Thomas Dale, credited for sternly leading the Jamestown settlement through its hardest times. Subsequently he established a second settlement, Henricus, on the James River in 1611, and our school district includes Henricus Park <www.henricus.org> is our school district.

This project began as a collaboration between head librarian, Kathy Lehman, and communications teacher, Jim Belcher. Our “Digital



Re-enactment at Henricus Park
Photographed by Caitlan Partin, a photography student, spring 2006.

History of Chester” has grown to include photography, journalism, and film students. As this article goes to press, we are working to pull all the pieces together in time to create a commemorative DVD to be part of the one-hundredth Commencement celebration.

In the beginning

Kathy and Jim facilitated an initial brainstorming session with students to decide what information we

The project has given us all an opportunity to find meaning in the simple things that make Chester special. To hear people discuss what Chester means to them helps me appreciate the town I grew up in.

— Thomas Dale High School senior

would include, where we would need to search, and who we should interview to gather information. We projected a graphic organizer on a wall to help visualize our task. Students divided themselves into interest areas and began contacting potential sources for stories and memorabilia to photograph or scan. Students were directed to photograph their interview subjects and the places mentioned in the interviews using digital still cameras with voice recorders or digital video cameras. For example, when Mabel Boyd, now in her late nineties, mentioned playing basketball at the Methodist Church, a picture of the church was included in her story. If a landmark



Chester Hotel. Guests came to Chester to escape the summer heat of Richmond.

Chesterfield County Historical Society photo

mentioned no longer existed (such as the Chester Hotel) students searched books and primary sources for old photographs. We discovered that primary sources abound in our school and county libraries, the county historical society, and attics of our families and neighbors.

Looking for resources and advice beyond our building, we turned to the StoryCorps project, a national project whose mission is “to instruct and inspire people to record one another’s stories in sound” <www.storycorps.net>. Their participation module became our model for interviews. Using their question generator, students compiled lists of higher-level thinking questions such as “How would your classmates remember you?” for their interviewees.



The Gay Family Home sits on the edge of Sunset Memorial Cemetery and served as a confederate hospital during the Civil War.

Photographed by Amanda, a communications student in 2006



First graduating class
Chesterfield County Historical
Society photo used with permission

The school library’s digital recording equipment was distributed, and they were instructed in the use and care of digital cameras, movie cameras, and voice recorders. Our district’s technology integrators guided students in transforming pictures, audio recordings, film, and stories into final Windows Media files. Free software used included Audacity for sound editing, PhotoStory 3 for transforming still pictures into videos with music and voiceovers,



1911 Baseball team coached by Mr. Tyler, principal
Chesterfield County Historical
Society photo used with permission

and Windows Moviemaker for final compressed video Windows Media Video (WMV) files. Then each group’s segments were combined with transitions, music, and voiceovers into a thirty-minute film by a senior as an independent study project. (She is now enrolled as a film student in the North Carolina School for the

Arts and has remarked on how much this project helped prepare her for college.)

The project grows

Although the project began in communications class, the librarian worked to involve other disciplines. The photography class was enlisted to collect current pictures of the community. A stunning series of pictures of a reenactment day at



Corn Club [nd]
Chesterfield County Historical
Society photo used with permission

Henricus Park was contributed by one student. Student Book Club members conducted interviews in the community and researched facts at the Chesterfield Historical Society. Journalism students report on every aspect of the one-hundredth commencement in the *Knightly News*, our school newspaper. For the commemorative edition of the yearbook, student staff members are contacting alumni for vintage shots to intersperse with current photographs.

The culminating activity for the 2007–08 school year is being undertaken by film students. Over the summer, film teacher Sonja Mix collaborated with librarian Kathy Lehman to design the opening curricular unit for her advanced and independent-study students.



1920s girls basketball team ball marked CHS for
Chester High School.
Chesterfield County Historical
Society photo used with permission

These students are interviewing staff who are either alumni or who have been at Thomas Dale for many years. When places are mentioned in the interviews, students search library and historical society archives for pictures. After several alumni mentioned hanging out at the drugstore after school, a picture was found and scanned from an old yearbook. Over and over we hear students remark with amazement about the vibrant history they have uncovered in their own hometown.



1935 team
Yearbook photo

In their own words

About our town:

Spencer: “Now I know why some things are the way they are. I know about the railroad in Chester, the houses of Chester, what students our



*Sixth-grade agriculture class early 1920s
Chesterfield County Historical
Society photo used with permission*

age did for fun in Chester.”

Lana: “I didn’t realize how rich the history is here for such a small town.”

Dan: “The project has given us all an opportunity to find meaning in the simple things that make Chester special. To hear people discuss what Chester means to them helps me appreciate the town I grew up in.”



*New Thomas Dale High School built 1942
Yearbook photo*

Of teachers interviewed:

Zach: “They were once students, and now we are students, and it doesn’t seem so distant.”



*Junior Class Officers pose for 1954 yearbook.
Yearbook photo*

Sean: “After listening to how Thomas Dale played such a huge part in so many lives, it really changes the way I look at my time here at school. In a way, I’m part of a continuing legacy.”

So what have the students discovered?



*Thomas Dale today
Photo by Kristen Johnson.*

- Our community goes back to 1611 when Henricus was established on the banks of the James River by Sir Thomas Dale, acting royal governor of the Virginia Colony.



*Dan and Sean editing film.
Photo by Kathy Lehman*

- We grew into a small country town surrounded by farms.
- Chester is on the eastern seaboard’s main north/south corridor (Route 1 and I 95) midway between Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia.
- To bring tourists to Chester, a hotel was built in 1840 next to the railroad.
- During the Civil War a battle



*Lana locates and scans pictures.
Photo by Kathy Lehman*

fought at Chester Station tore up the tracks.

- With both northern and southern armies fighting in and around Chester local homes served as both Union and Confederate hospitals.
- 1906—Chester High School was established as a public school.
- 1908—Chester High School graduated four women.
- 1910—CHS Became the Agricultural High School for the Third Congressional District of Virginia.



*Spencer researching primary documents at the
Chesterfield County Historical Society.
Photo by Kathy Lehman*

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series of complex steps, so students need more direct instruction from the teacher.

In summary, this collaboration between the art teacher and school librarians has wide academic benefit for our students. They develop information literacy skills such as the ability to search a basic reference source, to develop a research plan, and to extract relevant information for a need. They apply visual literacy lessons to incorporate text and images into a creative visual product. Students see that library research has practical uses beyond traditional products such as essays. Our collaborative planning, teaching, and assessment supports both the art teacher's and our key goals for entering students.



Joel Shoemaker is a teacher librarian at South East Junior High School Library in Iowa City, Iowa. Joel is a past

president of YALSA and is series editor for the *Teens@the Library* professional books by Neal Schuman Publishers. When he is not reading he is gardening, remodeling or motorcycling.



Elizabeth Schau is a teacher librarian at South East Junior High School Library in Iowa City, Iowa. Elizabeth is currently

working on efforts to increase reading and participation in the Iowa Teen Award at South East Junior High. She is the mother of William (2½) and Lucy (6 months).



Rachael Ayers is the Art Teacher at South East Junior High School Library in Iowa City, Iowa. Rachael is also a painter

and photographer. She recently finished a show at a local coffee house. She is the mother of Elizabeth (5) and Jack (2½).

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- by the Virginia General Assembly.
- 1920s—Agricultural classes were phased out by 1928 and the name was changed back to Chester High School.
- Basketball styles changed for the girls over the years
- In 1942 a new High School was built next to the original school and renamed Thomas Dale High School. Elementary classes were held in the old building.
- In many interviews, the drug store was remembered as a

favorite hang-out for students:

- In 1964, the existing building became known as Chester Intermediate School and a “new” Thomas Dale High School was built on the present site.
- In 2000 renovations were completed. Thomas Dale is home to over 2,500 students.

Our students are actively learning more about Chester and Thomas Dale High School every day, and the work they create will be a digital legacy for generations to come.



Kathy Lehman, a National Board Certified Teacher and Librarian at Thomas Dale High School, presented this

project at the 13th Annual AASL Conference in Reno, Nevada. As chairman of the high school's 100th Commencement Committee, she is busy organizing monthly events at her school which involve students, parents, staff, alumni and community leaders in this year-long celebration and digital history project.

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