

*Most of the time 3<sup>rd</sup> graders think of history as something that's out there. It's not tangible or it's something that happens far away at Jamestown or in Pennsylvania not something that's right there in their backyard. The kids were so excited about this project because it was about places where they live.*

– Leatrice Woods

## Local History Virtual Tour Tutorial: Harrisonburg

Leatrice Woods is a third-grade teacher at Smithland Elementary in Harrisonburg, Virginia. In 2019 she designed a project to expose her students to local history and see how this history affects us, even to this day. Understanding the backstory of four sites around the city and looking at them through an historical lens, gave them a richer understanding of their city - in which they saw themselves.



Woods teaches 42 kids (21 in the morning and 21 in the afternoon). She collaborated with another 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, Alexa Weeks, on this project. Together, about 60 kids were involved in the project.

Below, Woods outlines her step-by-step design and implementation processes. Hopefully, it can guide other teachers who wish to design something similar for their own students.

### **Curricular Roots for the Project**

I don't even teach Social Studies. I teach Reading and Science, so I knew I was going to have to do some cross-curricular things.

One of the Social Studies units we teach from Kindergarten all the way through elementary school is "Famous Americans," but the kids think of famous Americans as people who have never walked on the streets where they walk. So, it was really neat to learn their history, their local history.

I also connected the project with Language Arts because reading, writing, research, and oral presentations are all SOLs for Language Arts. I was really focusing on biographies and autobiographies because they have to be able to describe them, categorize them, and be able to tell the difference between biographies and autobiographies. The project was premised on biographies as a way to learn history. We realized that a part of Lucy Simms' history related to each of the different sites that we selected. In her biography, we touched on those sites, explaining what they were in the past. Teaching the students that there is history behind familiar places was a tangible way to study history and biographies.

## Planning

Alexa and I planned out what our two weeks would look like.

I chose two sites that the kids already had a connection to: Ralph Sampson Park and the Lucy Simms Center. A lot of the kids go to the Boys and Girls Club at the Lucy Simms Center. Many of them have their birthday parties or soccer practice at the Ralph Sampson Park. Two other sites—Newtown Cemetery and the Northeast Neighborhood as a whole—were both connected to the familiar sites, offering opportunities to expand the story. EV gathered research on these four sites and sent it to me.

Within a week, we had adapted the EV research into student-friendly versions: research sheets for each site. I wanted to make sure the research was concise, using vocabulary they could handle. I highlighted words like "segregation," "desegregation," and "urban renewal" to be the subject of class discussion. This required me to be open to potentially uncomfortable conversations about these difficult ideas. It was all about being intentional, making sure I was building that knowledge so they could access the material.

## Research and Writing in Class

One 50-minute lesson: Lucy Simms is a huge person in Harrisonburg history, so we read the student version of her history as a whole group. I also led conversation on why would we learn about Lucy Simms and how her story uncovers the history of Harrisonburg. The students took notes. They knew they weren't expected to turn them into complete sentences. This was their planning stage. We talked about how this plan will eventually become a research paper, and finally the tour project. We connected it to research writing for which people need to do research for a story.

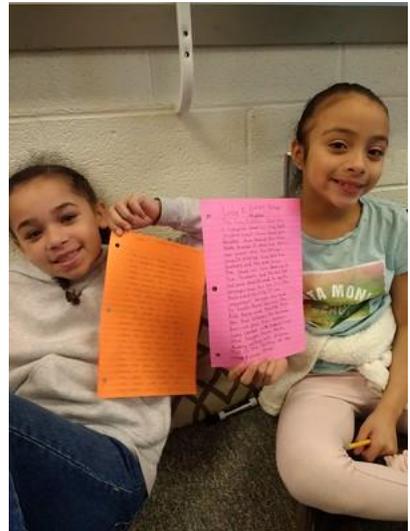
Two 50-minute lessons: They started writing their biographies of Lucy Simms and we edited them. They wrote a ton, more than they had written all year.

One 50-minute lesson: They wrote their final drafts of their Lucy Simms biographies.

The next week we dove into the sites, connecting her biography to each.

Two 50-minute lessons: They read the research sheets and took notes on each site as they related to Lucy Simms. They took notes on pages I created: each question had a box with lines for them to write their findings. They were expected to write their group name, their site, what is it, what's there now, why is it important, how does it uncover the history of Harrisonburg.

- For example, the plantation that she was born on became the Ralph Sampson Park, and also the place where the Lucy F. Simms school was built, and where now the Boys and Girls Club meets. It was nice to know that beforehand because it was easy the next week to say remember that plantation where she was born? Now it's this. Here's the history and how we got here.
- I had critical questions to lead each discussion and guide their research. For example, *Who do you think would go to the Effinger School? Who would teach there?* Very quickly, they figured it



out - *If Lucy Simms taught there because this was in such and such year I bet only black students went there.*

One 50-minute lesson: They got really excited and started choosing which site they wanted to research further. I allowed them to choose their top three sites. Then, I assigned them to the sites based on their top three choices, reading levels, and knowing who would take on the leadership roles. In one of my classes, I intentionally put all of the shy kids together so that someone would have to rise up.

- If during the research they came up with something that was really cool about the cemetery but they were researching urban renewal, they would connect with each other and say, "Hey you should check this out." They were invested in the entire thing not just their site. We researched questions like: How does your site tell the history of Harrisonburg? How does it uncover the story behind Harrisonburg? Why is important? What was there? What is there now?

One 50-minute lesson: From the research notes they went into writing their paper. We talked about how they were writing a nonfiction text, trying to tie it back to the standards that we needed to cover. A lot of them chose to write their paper as a group. Some of them decided that they wanted to write their papers on their own, and then combine the pages to make one. I let them decide what they were comfortable with or excited about. Then, we revised and edited. We edited the pages twice. They edited their own and then switched papers with another group. They got feedback from each other as well. I would conference with them and edit as well. Then, we wrote the final draft.

### **Field Trip**

Two 50-minute lessons.

We all took a school bus to visit the four sites. Going on the bus tour was the best field trip that I've ever been on because the kids were completely connected and involved in it. They knew this field trip was planned especially for them and that it wasn't just for fun, even though they were having fun learning. "I'm here in this park not to play on the slide. But I'm here because I'm a historian." They went with a purpose. They knew exactly why they were there. They knew they were going to get certain information required to complete the project.



They knew what they wanted to take pictures of because they knew what the goal was the whole time. The goal was - we're going to make the virtual tour. They had it all planned out in their minds. The kids took 360-degree pictures of the sites. They recorded themselves talking about the sites.

They were sponges ready to soak up any extra information they could find at the sites. When we went to the Dallard-Newman house, we met with Stephen Thomas. I talked to him before the trip, so he knew we were learning about Lucy Simms. He was able to tell the students that Simms went to the Dallard-Newman house to lesson plan. They got more information that they eventually decided to include in their tours.



### Virtual Tours

One 50-minute lesson.

They went back to their papers and decided which paragraphs they wanted to include in their virtual tours. They used Google's [Tour Creator](#) to make their virtual tours. They uploaded their selected text, their 360-degree images, and historical photographs of their sites. That part of it scared me but they learned the program better than I did! EV staff guided my students through that process.

This slideshow takes you through the process:

[https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1eWvrT7gE5UxKAgCJPJAMQrqWWsl-G\\_WxL8Qa9v6A6TA/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1eWvrT7gE5UxKAgCJPJAMQrqWWsl-G_WxL8Qa9v6A6TA/edit?usp=sharing)



Urban renewal virtual tour examples:

<https://poly.google.com/view/a3HZ7paT7pt>

<https://poly.google.com/view/dyEwMx0umC7>

<https://poly.google.com/view/a3HZ7paT7pt>

### Takeaways

At the outset of the project we established that we were detectives, uncovering history that a lot of people don't know about because it simply isn't taught. They were learning something other people

didn't know. They felt like they had this treasure - and they were privileged and excited to share it with everyone. I got so much feedback from parents saying, "My child is so excited about this. I didn't even know this history existed. They're teaching me a lot." They knew so much about what was going on at school during these weeks because their kids were coming home eager to talk about it. A lot of parents wanted to come on the field trip, so they too could be part of it.