

Creating NHD Research Questions Based on an Object

Strong National History Day projects start with strong research questions and objects can help spark historical questions. Think about how you see this year's theme reflected in an object. There might be an obvious connection that jumps out at you, or it might take some digging. Either way, be sure to consider the object from a variety of perspectives. For instance, you might think about:

- People, organizations, and communities who participated in creating or using the object.
- People or communities who supported or opposed the creation or use of the object.
- Places where the object was made, used, or kept once it was out of use.
- Local and national historical events connected with the object.
- Ways the object's meaning for different communities changed over time.

Once you're familiar with the object from multiple angles, develop a few questions that could guide further research into the connections between the object and this year's theme. Keep in mind that strong historical questions are...

- **Clear.** Be mindful of the language you use in questions; it could be loaded with assumptions. Make sure the words you use are really getting at the question you're trying to ask. For example, "why was mining important in Wisconsin" is a fairly broad question that includes the assumption that mining was important in Wisconsin. Asking "how did lead mining shape communities in southwestern Wisconsin" is more specific while creating more space for analysis.
- **Open-ended.** Questions should have more than a yes/no or one-word answer. We want to get at questions that aren't just asking to clarify facts but are analyzing the past. An excellent question can be legitimately answered in more than one way, that is, reasonable people could have different answers to it. Questions like "when did Scandinavian immigrants first come to Wisconsin" have finite answers while questions like "how did Scandinavian immigrants' food ways influence Wisconsin culture" could have lots of reasonable answers.
- **Answerable.** While you want open-ended questions, you also want historical questions that can be answered. It's good to have questions you don't already know the answer to, but avoid questions that are simply unanswerable. This would include fictional questions such as "what would have happened if Gov. Nelson had never lived?" It might be an interesting question, but there is no evidence to support any answer since it didn't happen. Be sure to think about what kinds of sources might exist as you pose questions.
- **Expandable.** Develop research questions that reach beyond the specific situation they investigate. Think about historical issues and themes broadly. What does your object say about Wisconsin or American life? The communities that live here? The ways people interact with their environment?
- **Interesting to you.** The best research questions are the ones that connect to your interests, not least of all because you're unlikely to spend a lot of time researching something you find dull. Think about what stands out to you about the object and theme, and build questions from there.