

**Development of the Project and
How-To Guide**
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This project is an outgrowth of the work of Professor Cecelia Gross, chair of the History Department at Springfield Technical Community College. For years she and her students searched through primary sources in libraries and archives in order to reconstruct the history of African Americans in Springfield, Massachusetts. An oral history project on local sites along the Underground Railroad evolved into the idea of an African American Heritage Trail marking spots downtown where escaped slaves were able to rest and receive nourishment from both black and white supporters committed to the cause of ending slavery.

Professor Gross' work on the African American Heritage Trail grew into a larger project to investigate the history of diversity and the development of the idea of pluralism in the United States by focusing on the city of Springfield and the Connecticut River Valley of western Massachusetts.

"Our Plural History" recognizes that, in the United States, different ethnic groups, languages, community customs, religious beliefs and cultural practices come into contact with each other. American society requires a consensus around common principles in order to counter the disagreement and dissension that inevitably arises from such cultural diversity. In pursuit of those common principles Americans must engage in the practice of pluralism. Ultimately, pluralism involves the development of and a commitment to the values of toleration, with everyone working towards respecting differences and overcoming prejudice and discrimination based upon ignorance and stereotypes.

We considered several different approaches to organizing the website. We decided against separating the material into sections devoted to particular ethnic and immigrant groups—African Americans, Irish, Italian, etc.—as this approach tends to convey fragmentation and emphasizes the boundaries that divide different groups. We wish to emphasize instead the admittedly difficult, but always possible, reconciliation of contending group identities.

In the end we chose a more integrative approach, organizing the website around themes arranged in chronological order. This allowed us to trace the development of a plural society over time, and to compare the experiences and contributions of diverse groups, noting both commonalities and contrasts. For our history of ethnic groups and immigrants in the Connecticut River Valley of western Massachusetts, the chronological-integrative approach allowed us to include human communities from before the arrival of Europeans ("First Peoples"), the colonial period up to the Civil War ("The Colonial Period" and "Resisting Slavery"), and the period of industrialization through to the 21st century ("Industrialization and Immigration" and "Recent Arrivals").

We next had to consider how we would address the themes of diversity and pluralism within each period in light of local history. Because pluralism in practice was little in evidence during early American history, we began by describing the cultures of the indigenous First Peoples of the Connecticut River Valley. This allowed us to introduce some of the ways that cultural communities can differ from one another. For instance, the customs of native groups varied in terms of their means of subsistence, their uses of local flora and fauna, the kinds of tools available and their settlement patterns.

With the arrival of European colonists in North America, the theme of cooperation and conflict between diverse cultures becomes apparent. Initial contact between native groups and European settlers in the Connecticut River Valley produced some mutual benefits, though ultimately the Colonial Period witnessed the displacement of native communities and the destruction of indigenous populations by disease and warfare. Each group's conception of the other was a product of their various interactions combined with misperceptions and reactions arising from seemingly incompatible cultures.

Our chronological-integrative approach allowed us to trace the development of a plural society over time, and to compare the experiences and contributions of diverse groups, noting both commonalities and contrasts. For example, the section devoted to the theme of Industrialization and Immigration includes essays on economic and technological change, sports, and the migration of African Americans to the city of Springfield, Massachusetts. There are also essays on the creation of distinctive immigrant communities and the challenges of assimilation. Polish, Greek, and Jewish immigrants faced similar difficulties in adjusting to life in the United States, but each group faced those challenges with its own particular set of cultural and communal resources. Moreover, industrialization, technological change and urbanization transformed American society and culture as a whole, shaping the lives of immigrants and the native-born alike. The modern sport of basketball, originating in Springfield, provided a distinctly "American" forum in which members of an increasingly multicultural society participated together. As the website demonstrates, an account of the experiences of particular ethnic and immigrant groups in the context of broader economic, social and cultural forces fosters an understanding of how we are different, and how much we have in common.

Our approach is intended to be applicable to any locality and inclusive of any and all racial, ethnic, religious and/or cultural groups. For instance, a discussion of settlement patterns, departures and arrivals, and the evolving ethnic character of a particular location does not limit us to a certain time period or to any one ethnic group. In place of "Connecticut River Valley" one could easily write "central Texas," "the Pacific Northwest," or "Memphis." Similarly, consideration of the economic life of any town or neighborhood would address matters of social class, family life, technology and workplace arrangements that are not limited to the experiences of any particular group in society.

The selection of groups to include in a similar project elsewhere will be guided by the history and social characteristics of the location under study. Some points to consider:

- What is known about the earliest settlements in the area?
- Does the area, city or town have a particular “identity”? How did such an identity originate?
- What are the origins of place names? Do street names or signage indicate an influence from particular cultures?
- Are there identifiable ethnic enclaves?

Information about ethnic and immigrant groups in a particular area can be gathered from long-time residents, census data and historical records, libraries, museums, churches and community organizations.

To investigate the arrivals and departures of different groups and the establishment of different communities, consider why and when different groups came to the area.

- What groups came to the area in different periods?
- Why did they come? What political, economic or religious factors encouraged them to leave somewhere else to come here?
- Were people drawn by particular kinds of economic activities, agricultural or industrial?
- Did earlier-arriving family members or friends encourage others to come?
- Have local businesses or churches sponsored immigrants or refugees coming to the area?

Local libraries may have a local history sections or genealogical information that can provide useful resources. Town officials, local historians and area professors with a specialty in local cultures or immigration are also valuable sources.

An understanding of the issues of diversity and pluralism requires the investigation of the interactions between different groups and the responses of earlier-arriving groups to later-arriving groups. Newspaper archives can give clues as to the reception given to newer members of the local community. Are some groups mentioned more frequently than others? What kinds of conflicts arose between different ethnic groups? How are past political, economic and social controversies understood in cultural terms?

A variety of resources can be used to illustrate issues of diversity and pluralism. Oral histories and interviews conducted with long-time local residents can reveal perceptions and impressions not always apparent on the surface. Church histories can reveal the evolving character of local congregations and the shifting identities of local neighborhoods. Cultural centers and institutions devoted to particular ethnic and immigrant communities are a rich resource for discovering the memories and impressions that shape group identities. Cultural festivals and local media geared toward certain cultural groups are also a valuable source of contacts and information on how members of such groups perceive their place in the larger community.

Monuments and the built environment reveal how the presence of and interaction between diverse groups shape the landscape and the cultural identity of a locality.

- What kinds of buildings and styles of architecture give a place a particular ethnic or cultural flavor?
- What do monuments and historical markers reveal about local communities?
- What does the location of parks, memorial gardens and social clubs indicate about the prominence of certain groups or the marginal status of others?
- Do different cultural groups put their mark on a town or city in different ways?

Finally, in order to describe how cultural diversity and the practice of pluralism have shaped the locality in the past and continue to develop, the following questions should be kept in mind:

- What are the particular sources of conflict between cultural groups?
- Do the sources and types of conflict change over time?
- Around what common interests do groups find cooperation mutually beneficial?
- What activities, customs or endeavors encourage cooperation among groups?
- What kinds of differences have been hardest to overcome?

Such a project benefits from the contributions of many individuals and institutions. For the project at Springfield Technical Community College, we assembled a team of students, professors and researchers to compile, evaluate and present the history of ethnic and immigrant groups in the Connecticut River Valley of western Massachusetts. Professors with knowledge of and research interests in local history helped guide the selection of topics and groups to be included. Students and graduate researchers uncovered important primary and secondary sources and wrote material for the theme item essays. Our relationship with local historical museums and libraries provided us with access to key materials and shaped our understanding of local history. Community cultural centers and local churches also supplied useful information on the history of particular groups. Our grant from the Ford Foundation allowed us to hire the design specialists at S2N Media to build the website.

Any similar project undertaken elsewhere will benefit from the contributions of professionals and specialists in local history, immigration and cultural diversity. Schools, colleges, museums and libraries can provide advice and materials. Students and members of the local community can both contribute to such a project and gain much in the understanding of their own community by their participation. Interviews and oral histories draw upon the collaboration of questioner and interviewee to illuminate issues of culture and history. Family stories can also serve as a basis for local histories.

Specialists are helpful but not essential in building a website. Commercial software, such as Dreamweaver, provides step-by-step assistance, or students with technology and computer science experience can build a website from scratch. Content for the website can be developed by students in history, the social sciences, literature and other classes. Local artists and photographers can be counted on to supply visual content.