

Women's History Comes to Life at GSE Summer Institute

Secondary school teachers from across the country investigate ways to teach history by uncovering history

By Alvin Powell
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Abigail Rawson smiled primly before speaking. Standing stiffly in a sweeping black, floor-length dress with lace at the cuffs and collar, she clasped her hands in front of her and looked out from beneath her bonnet. A handbag hung quietly from the crook of her left elbow.

In a quiet but firm voice, Rawson began telling the audience about the 1st National Woman's Rights Convention, held in Worcester, Mass., in 1850. She spoke of the stirring speeches by women's rights pioneers like Lucy Stone and Sojourner Truth, and of the then-controversial ideas of women's suffrage, anti-slavery, and temperance that often went hand-in-hand at the time.

Rawson's audience, a group of 25 history and social studies teachers from secondary schools across the country, hadn't hopped into a time machine; they were attending a session of "American History: New Scholarship on Women," a month-long Summer Institute held by the Graduate School of Education for teachers wanting to learn more about ways to teach the role of women in America's past.

The program, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Graduate School of Education, is one of several continuing education programs, called Programs for Professional Education, held at the Graduate School for teachers, superintendents, and principals.

In her other life, Abigail Rawson is Karen Moran, a teacher of 25 years, currently at Auburn Middle School in Auburn, Mass. Moran resurrected Rawson, who really existed, as a way to bring history to life for her students. Using letters, newspaper articles, and other historical data, Moran re-created Rawson and her life as an upper-middle class wife of a Worcester confectioner.

Moran, who attended the Institute in the early 1990s, is not just an example of how a teacher can inspire students, she's an example of how the Institute can inspire teachers.

During the program's four weeks in July, participants work with leading scholars in women's history and use the extensive manuscript collection at Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America to develop document-based teaching activities for their students.

"They are being hands-on historians, which is not something teachers get a chance to do," said Institute Director Sally Schwager, an education historian at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. "It's their chance to be research scholars."

The lessons don't just focus on finding historical documents, however. Program participants get in-depth discussions of how to interpret source



Photo by Kris Snibbe

To aid her teaching, Karen Moran acts the part of real-life woman's rights advocate Abigail Rawson during a session of a recent Graduate School of Education summer institute.

material and how those interpretations affect the history that gets recorded. For example, different interviewers may elicit different responses from the same person, even though they ask questions about the same topic. To accurately interpret a person's responses, the context — not just of the broader historical period, but of the interview itself — must be considered.

In addition, the Institute provides instruction on using the Internet for research, organizes trips to area historic sites, and gives participants a chance to listen to teachers like Moran who have found innovative ways to bring history alive and to involve students in documenting it.

The program's aim is not just to help participants become better teachers, but to help them become better historians. And, once back in the classroom, it aims to help them get their students to become historians as well.

"The Institute changed my life. It changed how I teach," said Susan Rhodes, chair of the History Department at Shady Side Academy in

Pittsburgh, who attended the program in 1988 and who now co-teaches it with Schwager. "It gave me an eye for the 'other.' Instead of saying, 'Here's what I have in front of me that I have to get through.' Now I say, 'Here's what I have in front of me, what's left out?'"

After attending the Institute, Rhodes embarked on her own project. She mentored a student doing research on women who made wings for glider planes in the H.J. Heinz Co. plant in Pittsburgh during WW II. Though many of the women were still alive and living in town, the fact that they had contributed to the war effort at a local plant better known for pickles and food products was all but forgotten.

Rhodes and her student tracked down the women and put together a half-hour documentary, *Women in the Wings*, introduced by former President George Bush.

A video history project like *Women in the Wings*, while remarkable, is not unique. A past participant in the Institute's projects, Ron Adams, a seventh-grade teacher in Quincy, Mass.,

guided his students through a project documenting the lives of women who helped build Navy ships at the local shipyard during World War II.

The five-minute video that resulted began as an assignment gone awry, said Adams, who presented the results of his students' oral history project to this summer's participants. He had given students several possible project topics, one of which was to write about the local women who, as was commonly known, worked in the Fore River shipyard in Quincy.

One student selected the topic, but found no books or articles on it, something Adams said he should have researched before giving the assignment. Faced with a glaring hole in the documentation of local history, Adams decided to send his students out to interview women about their shipyard experiences.

Adams, Rhodes, and Moran were just three of several scholars and fellow teachers who visited this summer's Institute. Others included Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Harvard's James Duncan Phillips Professor of Early American History and professor of women's studies, Susan Ware, visiting scholar at Radcliffe College and former chair of women's studies at New York University, Ellen Fitzpatrick, associate professor of history at the University of New Hampshire, and Carol Hurd Green, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College.

Ulrich taught a workshop, "What We Can Learn from Cloth," and discussed how to interpret material culture, the subject of her current research. Ulrich also talked about aspects of her earlier works, *Good Wives* and *A Midwife's Tale*, which explore the lives of American women in the 17th and 18th centuries.

After years of teaching, participants in this year's Institute found the chance to be students again, a refreshing change of pace. Claire Griffin, a teacher in the all-girls Sacred Hearts Academy in Honolulu, said she's been to training programs before, but nothing so stimulating.

"I don't want it to end," Griffin said. "I've never been in anything quite so intense, concentrated, and enriching. I'm overwhelmed by the intellectual stimulation and pedagogical challenge."

Institute leaders said it's important to train teachers about the nuances of history so that children don't simply learn the history of the elite, the focus of most history books. Projects where students do historical research themselves teach the students by involving them in the discovery and preservation of history.

"I don't think you can get kids to understand history as a socially constructed narrative unless they do historical investigation themselves," Schwager said. "They have to question the limitations and possibilities of information they are handed and receive."