

History Day at Middle Tennessee State University

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Abstract

Middle Tennessee State University has educated thousands of people since its founding in 1911. In addition to its focus on academic courses for collegiate students, the University has sponsored several programs that educate people throughout Murfreesboro and the surrounding communities. There is a rich history of history competitions on our campus that dates back to 1971. In 1974, National History Day was founded. Middle Tennessee State University has a long history with this competition from its beginnings in Tennessee up until the present day. This essay investigates the University's commitment to supporting history education programs since the 1970s

The National History Day contest at Middle Tennessee State University has affected many students' lives since its creation in 1974. National History Day is an educational competition in which students create historical projects based upon the contest theme, which changes annually. Students compete in two divisions that are judged separately at all levels of competition. The Junior Division is for sixth through eighth graders, and the Senior Division is for ninth through twelfth graders. The students are then divided as to whether their project is an individual project or a group project of two to five students. The eight categories in which students can compete include: "paper (individual only), individual exhibit, group exhibit, individual performance, group performance, individual documentary, group documentary, [and] website (individual and group combined)." Entries in every category other than papers must include three copies of the title page, process paper, and annotated bibliography to give to the judges.¹ These basic rules serve as the structure of the competition. With the profound impact National History Day has had on so many students, one question comes to mind: How did it get started?

National History Day is much more than a simple history contest and has a history all of its own. Dr. Cathy Gorn, Executive Director of National History Day, has many years of experience with the program because of her time spent as a graduate student at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. Gorn explains the creation of this educational phenomenon in an interview with journalist Stephen Goode. As Gorn noted, "Basically, it was a group of historians sitting at lunch one day, lamenting the devalued nature of the humanities in general and of history in particular. . . . They decided that the students could write a paper or do a tabletop exhibit on a subject from history, and they had 129 kids in the Cleveland area participate in the first year."² The leader of this group of pioneering educators was David Van Tassel, who later served as Gorn's mentor and dissertation advisor.³ The first year's contest that Gorn referred to happened on May 11, 1974 at the Western Reserve Historical Society and Case Western Reserve University and focused on the topic of "Ohio and the Promise of the American Revolution."⁴ Van Tassel had perfect timing by starting the contest a few years before America's Bicentennial Celebration in 1976. The growing interest in the country's history at this time and the allure of a new history contest surely contributed greatly to the success of History Day.

The program continued to grow and finally caught its first big break in 1979. The History Day Program was "incorporated into a nonprofit organization under the name National History Day, Inc."⁵ The event that signified National History Day's major success happened the following year. In 1980, nineteen states participated in the first national

1 National History Day, Inc., *Contest Rule Book Revised 2009/2010* (Clarksville, TN: Jostens, 2008), 6-9.

2 Stephen Goode, "Gorn Helps Make History Come Alive," *Insight on the News*, (October 15, 2002): 1-3.

3 Kathy Gorn, "A Tribute to a Founding Father: David Van Tassel and National History Day," *History Cooperative* (February 2001): 4.

4 Kathy Gorn, "Building Interest in Studying History," *OAH Magazine* (April 1985): 14.

5 David D. Van Tassel, *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, s.v. "National History Day, Inc."

contest that was held at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.⁶ This increase in participation continued, and the contest had to be moved to its current home. The national contest is now held at the University of Maryland at College Park every year in June.⁷ On June 15-18, 1983, more than fourteen hundred participants gathered for the national contest.⁸ The large number of participants in the national contest only reflected a portion of the students who were competing across the nation by the mid-1980s. In 1984, participation skyrocketed nationwide with one hundred and fifty thousand students from 43 states competing in the contest.⁹ The growth the contest had in its first ten years is mind-boggling and clearly showed that National History Day was there to stay.

During its existence, National History Day, Inc. has only had three different Executive Directors. The first Executive Director, Dr. Lois Scharf, served from 1979 to 1992, Dr. Gordon McKinney served from 1992-1995, and Dr. Cathy Gorn, the present Executive Director, has served since 1995.¹⁰ Sponsorship for the contest has grown over the years and now includes two major sponsors, Jostens and the History Channel.¹¹ Several Presidential Libraries became district or state sponsors for National History Day in the 1990s, such as the Eisenhower Library, the Johnson Library, and the Truman Museum and Library.¹² Sponsorships like these greatly benefited the program and allowed it to continue to grow. In 2000, tragedy struck at the heart of National History Day when its founder, David Van Tassel, passed away. That year's national contest happened not too long after his death and an astounding 2,112 students from all fifty states competed.¹³ If this participation boost was not tribute enough to Van Tassel, the number of students who competed the next year definitely was. According to an article by Michael Simpson and Steven S. Lapham, "In the 2000-2001 school year, more than 700,000 students and 40,000 teachers participated in the contest at the district, state, or national level."¹⁴ History competitions like this are vital to students' success in studying and comprehending history. National History Day's continued growth and longevity over the years are testament to the great importance of the program.

Van Tassel's brilliant idea in 1974 has grown into a wonderful program that reaches many students each year; however, he was not the first person in the 1970s to organize a

6 Ibid.

7 National History Day, Inc., *Contest Rule Book Revised 2009/2010* (Clarksville, TN: Jostens, 2008), 4.

8 Lois Scharf and Pamela Zoslov, "National History Day: A Learning Experience for Students and Teachers," *The History Teacher* (November 1983): 89.

9 David Wallace Adams and Marvin Pasch, "The Past as Experience: A Qualitative Assessment of National History Day," *The History Teacher* (1987): 179.

10 David D. Van Tassel, *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, s.v. "National History Day, Inc."

11 National History Day, Inc., *Contest Rule Book Revised 2009/2010* (Clarksville, TN: Jostens, 2008), 27.

12 Lee Ann Potter, "Education Programs in the Presidential Libraries: A Report from the Field," *The Public Historian* (2006): 134-135.

13 David D. Van Tassel, *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, s.v. "Van Tassel, David D."

14 Michael Simpson and Steven S. Lapham, "NHD National History Day," *Social Education* (September 2001): 320.

history competition for students. In fact, one such contest happened at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The *Tennessee Blue Book 1973-1974* provided facts about Middle Tennessee State University from that year and noted that, “The campus serves as the site for Volunteer Girls State, the Aerospace Workshop, the Summer Institute for Teachers of United States History, the National Science and Mathematics Institute, and a variety of professional workshops, conferences, symposiums, and athletic tournaments.”¹⁵ Although this list includes a mention of a program for history teachers, it does not include a campus event that was started a few years earlier by the Middle Tennessee State University History Department. According to Dr. Fred Colvin, in the late 1960s, Dr. James Huhta contacted local schools about promoting the study of history and created the Tennessee Congress of American History Teachers. The purpose of this organization was to “create a type of contest to recognize achievements of good history students in local high schools and provide opportunities for teachers themselves to further their own knowledge and expertise through various activities.”¹⁶

One of those “various activities” was the creation of the History Department’s own competition through a history test. In 1971, Dr. Colvin and Dr. Robert Jones developed the test that covered American history. It was a multiple-choice test consisting of about 100 questions and included an essay portion for the students to complete. The test was revised every three to four years, and eventually, a second test about Western Civilization was added. The contest was held the week after final exams at Middle Tennessee State University each spring while the participating schools were still in session. Students would pre-register for the contest and check-in that morning. They then went to Room 221 of the Ned McWherter Learning Resource Center, where the test and essay were administered at 10:00 and lasted until 12:00. While the students were testing, teachers were treated to educational workshops taught by members of the History Department. Because of time constraints and the large number of participants, the students’ essays were not graded unless it was to break a tie on the multiple choice test. At 2:00, everyone met for the awards ceremony. Awards, in the form of certificates and plaques, were given to high-scoring individuals and groups of students.¹⁷

As Dr. Colvin said of the contest, “This provided the University—our department—a way to reach out to regional high schools.” The contest became fairly competitive among several schools including Warren County, Coffee County, Tullahoma, McGavock, Franklin County, Franklin High School, Riverdale High School, Lincoln County, and Bradley County. Several private schools entered the competition including Webb School, Memphis University School, Baylor, Saint Cecilia, and McCallie.¹⁸ The contest grew in popularity,

15 Joe C. Carr, “Tennessee Blue Book 1973-1974,” ed. Rita A. Whitfield, 1974.

16 Fred Colvin, interview by author, Murfreesboro, TN, February 25, 2010.

17 Ibid; According to Dr. Haskell Greer, a teacher from Warren County, over time, two versions of each test were created, one for Advanced Placement students and one for regular students (Haskell Greer, interview by author, McMinnville, Tennessee, March 24, 2010).

18 Fred Colvin, interview by author, Murfreesboro, TN, February 25, 2010.

and 276 students from 21 area high schools competed in 1989.¹⁹ Unfortunately, in the mid-1990s, Dr. Jones moved to an administrative job with Student Affairs, and Dr. Colvin decided to take a hiatus from the contest in the false hopes that someone would take its place. Although the contest served as a good recruiting device for the History Department over the years, it came to an end.²⁰ Even though the History Department's History Competition was short lived, it made way for the emergence of a new National History Day competition at Middle Tennessee State University.

Although Middle Tennessee State University's real success with National History Day occurred within the past decade, the school's involvement with the contest goes back to 1979. When Tennessee students first competed in National History Day, Dr. Robert Jones was the Editor of *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*. In the Spring 1981 edition of *Quarterly*, Jones wrote about National History day on the editor's page. He said that in 1980, approximately 450 students competed in district competitions across Tennessee. The district winners then competed in the state contest on a designated history day. Those winners competed in at the first national National History Day contest in Washington, D.C. with 594 other students. In an even more impressive feat, three of those Tennessee students placed first in the national contest that year. Jones speculated that in 1981, Tennessee could have as many as 750 students compete in seven district contests. He also wrote, "Realizing the value of this program in fostering an interest in history in our young men and women, the Tennessee Historical Commission lent its financial support to the endeavor last year and has increased its commitment this year. Governor Lamar Alexander has given his endorsement, designating the date of the state competition, May 9, as History Day and proclaiming that a 'careful and thoughtful examination of our history' provides 'invaluable guidance' in the 'development of a strong and prosperous future for our state.'"²¹

Dr. Jim Huhta and Dr. Ron Messier—both from Middle Tennessee State University—were the first state directors for Tennessee History Day. They established the regional and state contests about which Dr. Jones wrote in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*. Dr. Jerry Brookshire was asked to become the state director for 1980-1981. He recalled his experiences as state director in an e-mail. Brookshire wrote:

Basically, I managed by taking over an existing well-run organization. At that stage, we had an off-campus grant (probably from the national History Day) of approximately ten thousand dollars. Most of it was spent on the regions and their contests, some on the state contest held at MTSU, and a little left over on chartering a bus to take some of the state winners to the national contest held in Washington, D.C. . . . I remember trying and failing to obtain outside funding for Tennessee History Day for the next year. During my period as state director, the key people were

19 "History Competition," *MTSU History Department Newsletter*, 1989.

20 Fred Colvin, interview by author, Murfreesboro, TN, February 25, 2010.

21 Robert B. Jones, "The Editor's Page," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 2.

the regional directors or co-directors. . . . Some were able to get modest outside funding for their regional contests.

Brookshire was only state director for one year. He stepped down due to time constraints and lack of assigned help from department staff and student workers. The position was then given to Dr. David Rowe. Rowe only held the position for a short time because outside funds for the contest were depleting.²²

With such success, support, and recognition in National History Day's first two years in Tennessee, the next chapter of the contest's history was quite shocking. Dr. Janann Sherman was the former State Coordinator for Tennessee History Day. In an e-mail, Sherman wrote:

The U[niversity] of M[emphis] sponsored the first West Tennessee district competition in 1980. Two years later, after the grant ran out, MTSU dropped History Day and the district system, ostensibly established under the purview of MTSU with the assistance of that grant, collapsed. The U[niversity] of M[emphis] picked up Tennessee History Day rather than let it disappear altogether. For the next 20 years, the only History Day in Tennessee was the state competition hosted by the University of Memphis. In 1999, I took over as coordinator and [was] determined to build a truly state-wide History Day system. The districts were established and completed in time for the 2002 contest.²³

Sherman stated in another e-mail that while the state contest was held at the University of Memphis before the redevelopment of the districts, that it only involved local Memphis students.²⁴ With such dramatic changes within the first few years of Tennessee History Day's existence, the almost twenty-year stint in Memphis provided stability for the contest.

In addition to the competition she continued in Memphis, Sherman ultimately helped create three other district competitions within the state in Chattanooga, Knoxville, and Murfreesboro. Britt Brantley, former Executive Director of the Chattanooga Regional History Museum, explained to Rebecca Conard in an e-mail that before hosting the Regional Competition in Chattanooga for National History Day, the museum just had a history fair that mostly consisted of second through fourth graders competing.²⁵ The first Chattanooga Regional History Day was held at the Chattanooga Regional History Center in 2002.²⁶ East Tennessee History Day had its first competition on March 15, 2002, at the East Tennessee History Center with eighty-seven students competing that day. Lisa Oakley was in charge of organizing the event and wrote in the East Tennessee History

22 Jerry Brookshire, e-mail message to author, May 2, 2010.

23 Janann Sherman, e-mail message to author, April 16, 2010.

24 Janann Sherman, e-mail message to author, March 26, 2010.

25 Britt Brantley, e-mail message to Rebecca Conard, February 26, 2003.

26 Rebecca Conard, "MTSU Public Service Grant: Project No. 230240, Final Report: National History Day, MTSU Competition," June 5, 2003: 2.

Day Dispatch, "In 2003, the East Tennessee Historical Society entered into a partnership with the University of Tennessee's Department of History to co-sponsor East Tennessee History Day." From 2002 to 2009, a total of 1,606 students took part in East Tennessee History Day.²⁷

The other person that Sherman recruited to her History Day cause was Dr. Rebecca Conard at Middle Tennessee State University. Conard had previous experience as a judge at National History Day at Wichita State University.²⁸ On February 5, 2001, Sherman sent a letter to Conard asking her to join the Tennessee History Day Advisory Committee.²⁹ Being on this committee got Conard involved with the contest in Tennessee, and later that spring, she was at a cocktail party where she was introduced to Dr. Cathy Gorn.³⁰ Fortunately for Conard, there was a school district in Middle Tennessee that had already been gearing up to compete at the state contest in 2001. According to an interview with Sherman filmed at the 2001 State Contest, there were 21 schools at the contest that year.³¹ Thanks to the efforts of curriculum specialist Judy Butler and an assistant principle, Tracy Lamplly, Williamson County Schools got involved in National History Day, and the contest no longer included just Memphis students. Their labors proved fruitful, and almost 300 students competed in the county level contest in 2001.³²

With the success of Williamson County Schools' first competition in 2001, Dr. Conard sought to bring the contest to Middle Tennessee State University the following year. Williamson County Schools was willing to contribute \$2,000 to the contest that year, and Dr. Conard asked for \$1,500 from a MTSU Public Service Grant on January 24, 2002.³³ Rosemary W. Owens sent an on-campus memo to Dr. Conard on February 22, 2002, which stated that the Public Service Committee approved \$840.00 for the contest with the restriction that a formal evaluation must be done.³⁴ With these funds in hand, the Williamson County Schools District Competition for National History Day was held at the Keathley University Center on March 8, 2002. Thirty-eight judges and about 300 students were present for the contest. The students brought 119 total entries in the categories with 81 exhibits, 18 documentaries, ten performances, and ten papers. The total cost of the event was \$4,500, which was covered by Williamson County Schools, the MTSU Public Service Committee, the MTSU History Department, and the Office of the Dean of the MTSU

27 William E. Hardy and Lisa N. Oakley, *East Tennessee History Day Dispatch* (Summer 2009): 7.

28 Rebecca Conard, interview by author, Murfreesboro, TN, March 26, 2010.; On September 3, 2009, the Wichita State University History Department posted this announcement on their website: "Due to budget cuts at the state level, the Department of History regretfully announces that there will be no History Day at WSU in 2010" (Robert M. Owens, "History Day 2010," (September 3, 2009)).

29 Janann Sherman, letter to Dr. Rebecca Conard, February 5, 2001.

30 Rebecca Conard, interview by author, Murfreesboro, TN, March 26, 2010.

31 "History Day Saturday, March 3, 2001, The University of Memphis Student Center," VHS. 2001.

32 Rebecca Conard, "Public Service Grant Application Middle Tennessee State University": 2.

33 Rebecca Conard, "Public Service Grant Application Middle Tennessee State University": 3.

34 Rosemary W. Owens, on-campus memo to Dr. Rebecca Conard, February, 22, 2002.

College of Liberal Arts. The contest was well-received on campus, and Dr. Sidney McPhee, Middle Tennessee State University President, even attended the awards ceremony.³⁵

Dr. Conard thought that by having Middle Tennessee State University host the regional competition, high-achieving students would be more exposed to the University and all it could offer to them.³⁶ In an effort to establish Middle Tennessee State University as home to the regional competition, the History Department and the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts gave History Day a budget.³⁷ This budget came from what Dr. Conard called Dr. Thad Smith's "major and timely contribution" to History Day. He went to the Dean, Dr. McDaniel, and asked that he set aside a budget for the contest. The Dean agreed to give annually \$6,000 from his discretionary funds.³⁸ In addition to this budget, the regional contest also received aid from the Teaching American History Grant. The grant sponsored teacher workshops until the fall of 2005 for "schools in the Cumberland River Valley Consortium (Bedford, Cannon, Coffee, Marshall, Maury, and Warren counties)."³⁹ Also because of the partnership with Teaching American History, Perky Beisel was assigned to help with History Day at Middle Tennessee State University. Beisel was the Project Assistant from Teaching American History and provided much needed assistance for the contest.⁴⁰ With the dedicated budget and help, the contest continued to grow and was spared the fate of the contest that was at Middle Tennessee State University in the early 1980s.

On March 21, 2003, the first MTSU Regional History Day Competition was held. Twelve teachers came to the contest and brought with them 90 students, 82 of whom participated and 8 who were just there to observe. Unfortunately, snow caused the event to be postponed so approximately thirty students withdrew. Although the first regional contest experienced a decline in student participation, it was acceptable because it included students from more than just one county. 24 judges judged the entries that came from Maury County Schools, Metro Davidson County Schools, Rutherford County Schools, Warren County Schools, and Williamson County Schools.⁴¹ By the next year, the contest grew tremendously in popularity. The second annual competition occurred on March 5,

35 Rebecca Conard, "MTSU Public Service Grant: Project No. 230240, Final Report: National History Day, MTSU Competition," June 5, 2003: 1-2.

36 Rebecca Conard, "Public Service Grant Application Middle Tennessee State University": 2.

37 Rebecca Conard, "MTSU Public Service Grant: Project No. 230240, Final Report: National History Day, MTSU Competition," June 5, 2003: 2.

38 Rebecca Conard, interview by author, Murfreesboro, TN, March 26, 2010.

39 Rebecca Conard, "MTSU Public Service Grant: Project No. 230240, Final Report: National History Day, MTSU Competition," June 5, 2003: 2.; Note that two of the Cumberland River Valley Consortium school systems (Coffee and Warren) were also two systems that participated in the MTSU History Department's old History Competition.

40 Rebecca Conard, interview by author, Murfreesboro, TN, March 26, 2010.

41 Rebecca Conard, "MTSU Public Service Grant: Project No. 230240, Final Report: National History Day, MTSU Competition," June 5, 2003: 2.

2004. It attracted 283 students with 119 entries, 17 teachers, 38 judges, and 14 volunteers.⁴² Middle Tennessee State University has continued to host the Middle Tennessee Regional History Day, and numerous regional winners have gone onto the state and national contests. In 2008, the state competition gained a new sponsor, the Tennessee Historical Society. The Tennessee Historical Society hosted the event with financial support from the Tennessee General Assembly.⁴³ When the state contest finally moved from the University of Memphis to Nashville, Tennessee in 2009, 230 students competed.⁴⁴

As National History Day grows in popularity in Tennessee and throughout the nation, it is important to stay proactive in seeking funding and new ways to help the program survive. All supporters of the program should be as bold as Dr. Cathy Gorn when asking for help. On April 2, 2009, she spoke to the members of the Tennessee State Senate and said, “In the race for math and science education, history education has been left behind, and when we are talking about the future of democracy, we can’t allow that any longer. History Day is filling the gap, and I hope you will help us do that.”⁴⁵ Although National History Day was not the first history competition even at Middle Tennessee State University, it has had a positive and lasting impression on the lives of thousands of students.

42 Judy Butler and Susan Kuner Ed.D., “MTSU Regional History Day Competition March 5, 2004 Evaluation Report,” (2004): 3.

43 Carroll Van West, ed, “News from the THS: Tennessee Students Compete for Honors at National History Day Contest,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 108.

44 William E. Hardy and Lisa N. Oakley, *East Tennessee History Day Dispatch* (Summer 2009): 2.

45 William E. Hardy and Lisa N. Oakley, *East Tennessee History Day Dispatch* (Summer 2009): 11.

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