History Meets Technology in GeoHistorian Project

Short videos created by area students, accessible on cell phones, Facebook, tell story of a dozen downtown buildings.

by Shannon Simcox
Editor

Cathy Marco knows what can happen when 21st century kids are given the opportunity to showcase the historic buildings in their own neighborhood. Geo, the bearded caricature in a yellow suit holding a lobster, displays the QR codes releasing informational video clips that were put together and narrated by several groups of students in the area in the GeoHistorian Project.

The project launched in May and has since provided information to community members, tourists and anyone with a smartphone. Recently the videos, outlining the history of downtown buildings, have been made available on the GeoHistorian Project for Downtown Mystic Facebook page, increasing the audience reached by the traditional students and independent scholars who participated in the project.

It began in May 2012, when Marco, a member of Mystic River Historical Society, one of the partners in the project, reached out to area instructors to see if they would be interested in participating. Marco was searching for ways to incorporate kids and history when she discovered the GeoHistorian Project, which provided a road map for students to create digital historic content.

The GeoHistorian Project came out of Kent State University’s Research Center for Educational Technology. According to the center’s website, the project is “aimed at educating middle and high school students to become local historians who create digital content for an audience that transcends the walls of their classrooms.”

Groups of students from Mystic Middle School and the Independently Educated Scholars of Mystic and Stonington were paired with historic locations in downtown Mystic. Throughout the year of the project, the students did research, visited the locations and put together videos.

Marco said the project hit the nail on the head for what she was looking for, a project that got students involved and interested in history.

“Mission accomplished,” she said.

Working off of the curriculum of the project creators, Marco got permission from the Mystic River Historical Society to proceed with the project. She created this mission statement: “To meet our society’s need to entice members of younger aged citizens, a (Mystic River Historical Society) project will use the GeoHistorian Project for school students to develop and implement QR codes to downtown buildings as part of our 2013 MRHS Anniversary which will get families, neighbors, friends and schools involved in Mystic History.”

A combined classroom of about 43 fifth- and sixth-grade students at Mystic Middle School, guided by help from Stonington High School media technology students, and two groups

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Cathy Marco, dressed in similar fashion as the GeoHistorian, speaks to the crowd at the launch event.

Photo courtesy of Mystic River Historical Society
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of independent scholars led by Jennifer Pryor, committed to the project. Of the 12 buildings involved, six on the Groton side had movies completed, two by the independent scholars and four by the Stonington students, and six on the Stonington side, all completed by Stonington students. Lauren McGugan led the project for the schools.

Marco, who said she acted as a project manager, a role she knows well from her previous job as one, to keep many groups of people on the same page and on deadline.

“The kids were so cool,” Marco said. “They took on to it like nobody’s business.”

Nine independently educated students who participated in the project were 12 to 14 years old. Pryor said: “The students formed two ‘film crews,’ each with one historic site as subject, and worked cooperatively on each aspect: research, script-writing and fact checking, story boarding, film production, audio recording and editing.”

She added that the students also observed an active film production.

Using information from the historical society, the Mystic & Noank library and other resources, each student had a chance to research, edit or otherwise contribute to their group’s clip.

Jennifer McCurdy, principal of Mystic Middle School, said she was excited for the possibilities of the project from the outset. The benefits for the students were not only learning about local history but working with advanced media and learning from the high school students, she outlined.

Students used writing, technology, speaking and listening skills in the project, McCurdy said.

Along with bringing the students downtown to see their buildings, Marco said she wanted a member of the historical society to help and share information. That person was Curator Emeritus of Mystic Seaport Bill Peterson.

“He became the pied piper,” Marco said. “Without him, I can’t imagine what the project would have looked like; he was so instrumental.”
Local GeoHistorian Project character can be found on a dozen buildings spanning both sides of the river.

Interested passersby will notice the GeoHistorian Project for Downtown Mystic character among 12 establishments.

- **Mystic Drawbridge Ice Cream** building, at 2, 4 and 6 W. Main St. Video by Maddie, Jordan, Sam, Ben and Sami
- **H.J. Smith Building**, located at 22 E. Main St., Video by Ashley, Anastasia, Tim, Andrew and Katie.
- **Asa Fish House**, at 21 E. Main St. Video by Andrew, Hannah, Josh, Mateo, Jackson, Isabella and Emily.
- **George Mallory House**, located at 20 E. Main St. Video by Dan, Cassidy, Heather, Dean, David and Zach.
- **Whaler’s Inn, located** at 20 E. Main St. Video by Tessa, Colby, Alec and Heidi.
- **Puffins Site, located** at 17 E. Main St. Video by Daisy, Kylie, Steve, Claire, Liam and Andre.
- **Mystical Toys site**, located at 4 E. Main St. Video by Gus, Mike, Will, Clara, Meg, Adrian and Cole.
- **Bartleby’s building, 46 W. Main St. Zach, Nathan, Taennyr, Finn and Hadleigh**
- **Tidal River Clothing building**, at 28 W. Main St.
- **Clad In building**, at 24 W. Main St. Video by Alexis, Annika, Jonathan, Aiden, Nathan and Christian.
- **Tift Building, at** 36 W. Main St. Rane, Abi, Noah and Emma
- **Gilbert Block, 1-17 W. Main St., Stonington students**

In celebration of finishing the project, the historical society hosted a launch at Mystic River Park in May.

Marco said the most popular videos are the ones in the buildings next to the drawbridge: Mystical Toys, Gilbert block and Mystic Drawbridge Ice Cream.

Accessibility for those without smartphones led to the videos being posted on Facebook. Additionally, people don’t have to be on site to view the video. The QR codes, displayed on the historic buildings with the GeoHistorian, pull the videos from the Mystic River Historical Society Youtube channel.

The character for the project was one of four and was designed by Stefanie Lantz of Kindspin Design. The participants were given the choice and voted for the final character, known by some as Geo.

Where can the project go from here? Marco said there is much interest and that she thinks it will continue, but is not sure how or in what form it will happen.

“I’d have to say working with the school kids, and I didn’t expect so much interest, and that kind of floored me,” Marco said of her favorite aspect of the project.

The project also has its challenges. Marco said hers were time and coordination. She said someone taking on a project like this one has to be willing to throw themselves into it.

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The GeoHistorian, designed by Stefanie Lantz of Kindspin Design, was one of four characters voted on to accompany the QR codes on the dozen historic buildings.

Photo courtesy of Mystic River Historical Society