

Roton Middle School's Historic Scavenger Hunts

How it Began

Roton Middle School has two Scavenger Hunts. In seventh grade, students complete the "Beyond Names on a Wall" project. In line with Memorial Day, the project honors the fallen soldiers by exploring Norwalk's memorials. In eighth grade, students complete the "Scavenger Hunt of Norwalk History."

Being a third-generation Norwalker, Dean Vaccaro had the desire to create the scavenger hunts during his first year as a teacher at Roton Middle School. Almost 20 years later, he continues to assign the project yearly.

"There are these really cool historical monuments and markers that parents and students drive by on a daily basis without knowing much about them. I wanted to create a fun, interactive project where students, together with their parents, could explore these monuments and uncover the 'history in their own backyard,'" Vaccaro said.

During his first year, Vaccaro traveled around Norwalk with his wife Tracey and their three children Matthew, Julia and Avery. They explored the local monuments, took pictures, went out to lunch, played at the parks and through that excursion, Vaccaro created the scavenger hunts.

Curriculum

Norwalk has an incredibly rich and interesting history, and it closely mirrors the history of the United States of America. The eighth grade social studies curriculum begins with Colonial America and continues through the Civil War and Reconstruction. The scavenger hunt follows this same time period. Local historians have stated some of the largest battles or attacks in Connecticut during the American Revolution occurred in Norwalk. Norwalk has five or six monuments dedicated by the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.), which students explore through this project.

The scavenger hunt starts with the "Founding of Norwalk", as shown in the Roger Ludlow monument on Gregory Blvd and the famous WPA mural in City Hall of Ludlow and Chief Mahackamo. An extra credit piece has students travel through Colonial times, finding the monument that pays tribute to the "Founding Families of Norwalk" and their original Puritan leader, Rev. Thomas Hanford – most of whom are buried at the East Norwalk Historical Cemetery on East Avenue.

Following this, students engage in role playing, taking on the role of either a Patriot or Loyalist who happened to be tending their cows at Cow Pasture (today's Calf Pasture Beach) on July 10, 1779. They spotted the British ships out by the Norwalk islands as they were getting ready to invade Norwalk with 2,600 British and Hessian troops. The role playing and exploration continues as students travel towards today's City Hall to find the "Grumman's Hill" D.A.R. monument where British General Tryon watched his troops attack and burn the town.

The Scavenger Hunt ends with students helping to fight off the British at the "Battle of the Rocks" D.A.R. monument on France Street, where the local militia heroically fought off the British, forcing them to retreat.

How Students Engage

“What I love about this project is that students get to explore Norwalk’s rich history together with their parents, making it more of a family-oriented learning experience,” Vaccaro said.

Students are encouraged to work in small or large groups with other students, making it an enjoyable shared experience of learning beyond the walls of the classroom. They scavenge to locate the sites and monuments. They role play. They take pictures and/or video to act out specific scenes or events. Many of the questions are critical-thinking questions, calling on students to use their creativity and higher-order thinking skills. Equally important, students and their families enjoy themselves and have fun, meeting up with other Roton families along the way.

Special Mention -- Gerard Horn, Vaccaro’s Former Student

From Vaccaro: “Several years ago, when I assigned the project as usual, I heard a story of a local historian discovering a long forgotten and buried D.A.R. marker about a famous Norwalk Oak Tree. The tree was considered the second largest red oak in the country back then and lived to be 300 years old until it was cut down in the 1970s. Apparently, there was some big ceremony in the 1950s or 1960s, and the marker was dedicated.

When my student, Gerard Horn, heard this story in my class, he decided to make it his Eagle Scout project to clean up the tiny park where the marker is. He cleared all the brush, put up a wooden fence, cleaned up the marker, and added a stone walkway plus decorative white stones. There was a story about this in the Hour.

What I love about this story is that the Norwalk Oak Tree lived to witness every historical event starting with the local Native Americans in Norwalk, to Colonial times, to the Revolution, to the creation of the Constitution, to the Civil War, both World Wars, birth of radio, television, early computers and more, all over 300 years!”