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National History Day Students Preserving History

Wilmington, DE – Two Cab Calloway School of the Arts students have created a website for National History Day on a little-known maritime disaster - the worst in American history - that has many in Arkansas taking notice.

Sophia Block and Jessica Smith presented their research on the explosion and sinking of the Sultana Steamboat on April 27, 1865 so well that an organization which commemorates and tries to publicize the event will take over the website as their own when the competition is completed and invited the students to speak last week at their reunion. (Photo attached)

“I saw the website and said ‘Oh Wow! This is pretty good,’” said Norman Shaw, president of the Sultana Descendants Association. “This is the reason we get together, to tell the story of the Sultana.”

Telling the story of the Sultana through a website is just one of the projects that will be featured at the Delaware National History Day competition on Saturday, May 4, 2019 at the Gunning Bedford Middle School in New Castle, DE.

National History Day® is a nonprofit educational organization that promotes the teaching and learning of history in middle and high schools around the world through a variety of programs, the largest being the National History Day contest.

Often called a “science fair” of history education, the National History Day Contest encourages more than half a million middle and high school students around the world to conduct original research on historical topics of interest.

Students choose a historical topic related to an annual theme and conduct extensive research using libraries, archives, museums, oral history interviews, websites, and primary sources. Students first compete at the school level before advancing to the state contest. The Delaware competition has been sponsored and organized by the Delaware Historical Society for more than 20 years. The winners from the state contest will advance to a national competition at the University of Maryland in College Park, MD, which will take place June 9 – 13, 2019.

This year, more than 80 Delaware students will address the theme “Triumph & Tragedy in History” with research papers, websites, dramatic performances, multimedia documentaries and imaginative exhibits.

Guided by Cab Teacher Erin Sullivan, Block and Smith began their search for a topic by googling “unknown tragedies in US history.” They were struck by the story of the doomed Sultana.

Soon after the end of the Civil War, an estimated 2,200 Union soldiers were released from Confederate prison camps and crammed onto the steamboat, whose capacity was listed at 376. The boat was bringing soldiers home to the Midwest, churning up the Mississippi River, and was seven miles north of Memphis, TN when a leaky boiler blew up, igniting two more. The boat went down in flames.

Though an estimated 1,800 people died – 300 more than on the Titanic disaster – it got little notice in newspapers of the day. Headlines on the day after the disaster reported that John Wilkes Booth had been arrested for the recent assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, as the fallen president’s funeral train crossed the country.

For the tragedy side, the girls noted the irony of the soldiers surviving war and prison camp, only to perish on their way home. The triumph, they believe, were the efforts of local residents to try and save those on the Sultana, despite having been at war just weeks prior.

Block and Smith went above and beyond, said their teacher, tracking down authors of books on the topic, and family members of men who had survived, and died, on the Sultana. It was work that didn’t go unnoticed by the director of an Arkansas museum devoted to the disaster.

“We were very excited that another generation was starting to learn the story of the Sultana,” said Louis Intres, Ph.D., director of the Sultana Disaster Museum in Marion, Arkansas, where the ship went down. “The story is just now getting national news.”

About the Delaware Historical Society

The Delaware Historical Society owns and operates the Delaware History Museum; the Jane and Littleton Mitchell Center for African American Heritage; a nationally recognized Research Library; Old Town Hall; Willingtown Square, four 18th-century houses surrounding a picturesque urban courtyard located in downtown Wilmington; and the National Historic Landmark Read House & Gardens located in New Castle. For more information, call (302) 655-7161, email deinfo@dehistory.org, or visit www.dehistory.org.

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