

2020 Theme Narrative: Breaking Barriers in History

Cathy Gorn, Ph.D., Executive Director, National History Day®

We have a new theme for National History Day (NHD) 2020—*Breaking Barriers in History*. At first glance it seems fairly straightforward; however, sometimes things are not always what they seem. Your first task is to think carefully and critically about what “breaking barriers” means before you choose a topic to research.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a barrier as “something material that blocks or is intended to block passage.” What comes to your mind when you think of physical barriers? Why are barriers built in the first place? Who builds them and what do they hope to accomplish?

Merriam-Webster also defines a barrier as “a natural formation or structure that prevents or hinders movement or action.” What natural barriers come to mind that made movement by people difficult? Rivers, mountains, oceans, deserts, jungles, and more have been barriers in history. How did people come up with ways to break, or perhaps more likely hurdle, such barriers? Why was that important and what were the consequences? How did breaking such barriers influence the development of your community?

The *Dictionary* also explains a barrier as “something immaterial that impedes or separates.” How is something a barrier if it is not a physical barrier? Think about ideas as barriers. In what ways might legislation create or break barriers? Consider the history of your community. How did legal decisions decide questions about social or racial barriers? Were such barriers broken? How and why?

For a barrier to be broken, it must exist in the first place—either naturally like a mountain or created by humans and societies. For example, why was the Berlin Wall built? To protect people? From what? To control people? Why? What impact did it have locally? How about globally? Why did the Berlin Wall come down—why was it broken apart? What impact did that have on people in Berlin and around the world?

So, barriers can be physical, natural, or ideological. When you think of barriers, it is common to assume a barrier is a negative thing—created by people and societies, keeping them from the freedom to move or think for themselves. But are all barriers negative? Let us turn this upside down.

What barriers have had positive consequences in history? How about barriers against the spread of disease? Against pollution? Think about the Constitution of the United States. Did the Founders include barriers to protect democracy? Why did they feel it was necessary? The Founders were careful to consider historical context and understood that they could not predict

the future. Did they create a process to break barriers within the document or add new ones? How and why? How did this process influence the course of the history of the United States?

Think about life in rural areas. How and why was barbed wire used in some places? How did it change the way in which people thought of private versus public property? Were there long-term consequences? If so, what were they?

“Firsts” might come to mind when you hear the theme for 2020. For example, the first to break the sound barrier. Why was it useful to break that barrier? What impact did that have on the history of flight? Of engineering? Of time? Was being first the most important message in this case, or was it the breaking of the barrier that transformed engineering and scientific opportunities and created change? A perennial favorite topic for NHD has been Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman admitted to medical school in the United States. Did she break a barrier or did she put a crack in it?

2020 marks the one hundredth anniversary of women’s suffrage. The Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave women the right to vote. But women (and their male supporters) had been fighting for this right for decades, so why did male politicians pass and ratify the amendment in 1920? What was different from other attempts? Did you know that women in the Wyoming Territory gained the right to vote in 1869? Was this done because men in Wyoming believed women were their equals and thus should have the same privileges? Or was there another, more expedient reason? To understand this question, you must examine it (as you must with any topic) by placing it into historical context.

Can you think of breaking barriers in world history? What kind of a barrier was feudalism in Medieval Europe and for whom? How did it structure society? Why? How long did it last and why was it finally broken? Can you think of political barriers and their consequences in China? In the Soviet Union? What were these barriers designed to achieve? Why? Can you explain how and why political barriers might be overcome?

Rarely is it one individual who breaks a barrier on his or her own; often it takes groups or movements to break barriers. In the year 1215, King John of England was forced to sign the Magna Carta. Why? By whom? What was the document and how did it influence the history of democracy?

Some barriers are theoretical, like state or national boundaries, and many boundaries are redrawn over time. These might be the result of war, treaties, or exploration. How were such boundaries decided? Why? What impact did they have on the

course of history—locally, nationally, or globally? For example, before 1871 Germany was not unified; instead, it was made up of numerous states. What brought these German states together? Why? How did German unification affect Europe and the world? What were the consequences?

Attitudes can be barriers. Some people have experienced physical or mental barriers. Historically, people with disabilities were often considered unfit for society. Today, we are more welcoming and accommodating to people with physical or mental issues. What happened to change such attitudes? What barriers were overcome and how? What was the Americans with Disabilities Act? What were the consequences for individuals and the communities in which they lived? Did attitudes related to race, poverty, or education cause people to create barriers. How? Why? Or how about barriers related to language and communication?

Do not forget about topics related to science and technology. How were attitudes regarding religion sometimes barriers to science? Consider the debate between Galileo and the Catholic Church. Or, you might think about the technological developments that broke barriers. What barrier did the invention of the printing press overcome? What changed as a result? What significance did this invention have in the short and long terms?

Why is historical context important? Considering the time and circumstances in which your topic took place is critical to drawing conclusions about your topic's significance in history. It is not enough to describe what happened; you must explain why your topic was important in history. Why and how did something happen? Most significantly, what were the consequences and how did your topic influence the course of history? This is what historians do and the year 2020 reminds us that our job is to see into the past. We do not have perfect 20/20 vision, but we do have the advantage of hindsight and the ability to conduct research and look at multiple perspectives. And historians have time and distance to examine change, consequences, and significance.

As you consider possible topics related to the theme, check out the essay in this book by Dr. Susan O'Donovan about the steps to researching and creating your NHD project.

Regardless of your topic, whether you chose from local, national or world history, no matter what time period, do not forget to answer the most important question:

SO WHAT?

TO ACCESS MORE THEME RESOURCES, GO TO [NHD.ORG/THEMEBOOK](https://www.nhd.org/themebook).