

Reading, Writing, and a Revolution at Valley Forge!

- by Diana Berklich, '02 Writing Institute, '03 Literature Institute

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The Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project partnered with Valley Forge National Historical Park staff many years ago to host a children's writing camp for two weeks each summer. The first year of the partnership proved to be such a success that it extended to National Parks throughout the country. Subsequently, each summer students from area schools across the country experience reading and writing in a hands-on, place-based learning environment.

At Valley Forge, children built table-top log huts, held flag raising ceremonies, marched and drilled as continental soldiers, explored the museum collection, learned from historical re-enactors, toured historic sites, and researched primary source documents to inspire daily writing about national history.

The children earned Junior Ranger badges in recognition of their two weeks as park historians, scientists, curators, archivists, artists and "litterateurs."

The children wrote narratives, recipes, paragraphs, poetry and letters among their daily creative tasks. Students even learned the minuet from his Excellency General George Washington! On the final day of camp, the children's parents participated alongside the students in guided reading and writing activities, a tour of Washington's Chapel and surrounding grounds, and participated in Junior Range pinning ceremony. The parents enjoyed the learning activities, the behind the scenes tours, and the exploration of historic documents.

This summer, taking advantage of the park's scenic 3,500 acres, the second week of camp was dedicated to environmental studies. Keeping in mind that the strength of the program has been hands-on, place-based experiential learning, students became active members of the Crayfish Corps and Weed Warriors! They also went on tour of one of the hiking trails and Valley Forge Stream where they learned about native plants and trees.

The students were provided the necessary training by National Park Service staff in order to join them in the battle to suppress the rusty crayfish populations by physically remov-

ing them from the creek. This was accomplished by using hand nets, hip boots, and getting in the stream and getting wet! Given that the day they were in Valley Forge stream was the hottest day of the summer, getting wet made it a perfect day!

As members of the Weed Warrior crew, the students and a parent worked with ranger volunteers to remove an invasive climbing vine from Varnum's picnic area, which is near the von Steuben Statue and General Varnum's Quarters. They happily collected over 10 bags of vegetation.

In addition to writing their rough drafts and final pieces, students have always used their journals as a means to remember the many terms, vocabulary, names of people and places. This year we wanted to refine the journal so that it fit both historic entries as well the scientific portion of the camp. Using the structure of the journal developed by the Long-

wood Gardens site, we had the students divide their journals into two pages each day, using both the front and back of each page. On the first day of camp we instructed the students to fold the first page in half, then draw a faint line down the crease of both sides of the paper. The first page headings were *Words/Vocabulary* on one side and *Field Notes* on the other. The back or second page headings were *Reactions* and *Summary*. The heading for the second page was *Drawing & Writing*. The fourth or second back page was blank for their final copies.

Students began each day preparing their journals for the day's activities, and they became quite adept at setting up their journals. Students adapted to the routine, and it worked well for each activity regardless if they were writing about history or removing crayfish from the creek or weeds from the woods. We found that the second page, *Drawing and Writing* was especially useful when drawing and labeling the invasive weeds or a Rusty Crayfish.

The relationship between Valley Forge and PAWLPhas been a worthwhile and exciting partnership for children, parents, and PAWLPhellows.



What Little Things Thrive: The Power of Inquiry in Place-Based Education

- by Patty Koller, '92 Literature Institute

Writer's notebook in hand, Emma recorded notes and sketches of the plants and insects she found intriguing as she and fifteen of her fellow youth writing camp participants sought to discover the mysteries awaiting them within the Longwood Gardens setting. Revisiting her entries two mornings later, Emma selected the Madagascar Periwinkle to further explore in part, she confessed, for the mere pleasure she found in saying the plant's name.

Madagascar Periwinkle by Emma

Just another lowly, simple species of flower? No so! Not only is the Madagascar Periwinkle aesthetically pleasing, it serves another purpose as well. Madagascar Periwinkle leaves contain qualities that help children affected by leukemia. With the introduction of this new solution, the number of children who survive increased by 60%! Alkaloids in these leaves can also help recover victims of Hodgkin's Disease. Although animals look at it with disgust and people see it as a mere plant, this miniscule flower has saved kids' lives. I think it's not to be overlooked!



Striving to keep the youth writing camp at the Longwood Gardens location fresh and exciting for students and teachers alike, Andi Ries and I developed a new theme for our upper elementary students focusing on the mysteries of the gardens. Although excited about the changes we had made to our program, I was worried. In an attempt to appeal to both boys and girls, we promoted our youth writing camp as an experience filled with "mysteries, treasures and discoveries." Would the words we used to describe the camp evoke images of pirates and buried treasure? If so, would the students be disappointed to discover that the treasures we were referring to were actually plants and insects in the garden?

Amazingly, the answer was no. The students eagerly accepted our forays into the garden with open minds and genuine engagement. They were as fascinated as we were by David M. Schwartz and Yael Schy's book, *What in the Wild?*, which we selected as a mentor text for its intriguing content and format, both of which we would model in the writing of our anthology. These young writers stretched their thinking as readers, writers, scientists and poets as they explored the writing of many additional authors through read-aloud, mini lessons, and shared and independent reading. They used the insights they gained to create and refine their blended genre writing pieces, which they proudly submitted for publication.

By sharpening our focus on inquiry within this amazing garden setting our student writers exceeded our expectations in their engagement, their sense of discovery and their final writing projects, reinforcing for us the power of inquiry in place-based education.

Wind

by Emma

*What soul would notice what little things thrive
Nameless to most, worthy of but a glance
Before continuing on to other things?
What soul would notice what little things thrive
Dependent upon the light and water
And wind to carry my song, my rose-colored petals?
What soul would notice what little things thrive
In silent rejoice, knowing
That I have dragged little ones away from the jaws of death
That I have healed their wounds
That they will carry on in happiness
And wind to carry their song?*

