History of Street Names

Lesson written by Molly J. Jones, August, 2009

Guiding Question
What is the history behind the names of streets in my community?

Background Information
The streets in many cities, towns, and villages have evolved over the life of the communities. Streets have been added, removed, and rerouted to suit the needs of the people. The names of these streets are likely to have evolved and changed to become what they are today. While some street names are practical in nature (Main Street, 1st Street, etc.) and others chosen for possible ease and variety (streets named for trees or flowers for example), many other streets are named for people or events important to the local public. Most communities have streets named after presidents or major historical figures as well. But what of those streets whose names’ origins seem somehow lost to the history files? It is these that we will explore in the lesson here provided.

I recently was able to visit Philadelphia, PA as a participant of a workshop financed by the NEH. While there, I noticed the names of streets we encountered in the Old City and Society Hill districts and heard stories about why some were given their present names. I have added a link below with a fuller history of the names some of these streets bear. I began to wonder about the names of some of the streets in my home town. I know many of them are named for influential people from the past, some national, some local. Who were these individuals? What notable things did they do that prompted others to memorialize them by giving their name to a street many future generations have and will continue to use?
Lesson

1. Begin by asking students to name streets from your area they know. Record these on the board or chart paper for future reference.

2. Show the students the historical maps of Philadelphia from the links provided. Ask students what date each map was created and what they notice about each map (some have street names listed while others do not, some are more intricately drawn, one shades populated areas, etc.) Then ask why the mapmakers may have chosen different designs for the maps.

3. Next show the students a map of modern-day Philadelphia. These may be easily obtained at a large bookstore or from the Internet. How does this modern map differ from the historical maps?

4. Using the modern map, determine where the following streets would be located on one of the historical maps that is unlabeled and add these names: Market Street, Arch Street, Broad Street, Chalmers Street, Dock Street, Philadelphia Alley, and Meeting Street.

5. Now return to the list of local streets the students generated at the opening of the lesson. Find these streets on a local city map. Guide them also to name and locate any other major streets that are in the area.

6. Present the students with background information about the streets’ names. I was able to easily find the link for Philadelphia street names and a site for streets in my area by searching “street names city name” (Ex. street names Philadelphia.)

7. Assign individual students (or small groups if you wish) the name of an individual or event for which a local street was named. The student (or group) should research the
individual or event assigned them in order to write a report to present to the class. You may wish to require the students to create visual aides for their presentations.

**Extension**

The city is trying to name a new street in the area, and a contest is being held. All street name entries must include the suggested street name and 1-2 paragraphs explaining why this name was submitted. Names may be those of important people (local or national) or somehow pertinent to the local area, and may not already exist anywhere within the city or suburbs surrounding it. After all students have submitted their entries, you may wish to hold a class election for the name of the new street or ask other staff members to select the “winner”. Have a small prize for the person who submitted the winning entry, the sillier the better.