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Seminary Ridge provides virtual lessons

By Adam Michael Times Assistant Editor

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Virtual museum visitors can learn about battlefield medicine in the time of the Civil War at www.seminaryridgemuseum.org/education.

Submitted Photo

Located just north of the Mason-Dixon line, Adams County has a rich history of stories of escaped slaves, Civil War heroics and the United States during a period of great change.

Its location is also impossibly far for many of the country's citizens to travel.

Now, with the click of a button, students, teachers and history buffs across the globe can access interactive tales of self-preservation and heroism. Over the last month, Seminary Ridge Museum, 111 Seminary Ridge, Gettysburg, crafted seven detailed lessons allowing learners of all ages to immerse themselves in the centuries-old culture of a maturing country.



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“Many of the groups we see come from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York,” said Peter Miele, the museum’s chief operating officer and director of education. “This gives us a much wider reach, literally all over the world. Anyone with an internet connection can learn these lessons.”

The Rotary Club of Gettysburg sponsored the creation of the new digital lessons by awarding \$5,000 to the museum. The grant was originally intended to underwrite visits to the museum for Adams County schools. Following the statewide shutdown of all schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Miele and the club decided to redirect their educational goals.

The museum was prepared to do so, thanks to another donor, who provided support to build an educational center a little more than a year ago. That endowment included money for iPads and the development of interactive programs within the museum.

When the virus wiped out any hope of a strong spring season, Miele and two staff members went to work putting their vision together in a digital platform.

“This is usually the busiest time of year. We’re outside working almost every day with school groups,” Miele said. “We’d been thinking about it for a while now, but we’ve really worked to get it out there this past month.”

The website, www.seminaryridgemuseum.org/education, features five lessons for middle school students: James Pennington's Quest for Freedom; Making Sense of the Gettysburg Address; Reasons for Southern Secession; Follow a Wounded Soldier; and Slavery and Freedom on the Border. There are also two geared toward high school students: States' Rights and the Legal Battles over Slavery; and Civil War Emergency Care.

Each section features a series of slides, quizzes, polls, photos, videos and open-ended questions constructed to mimic stories Miele and his staff would tell during in-person visits.

"Thinking of this area eight miles from here as a fault line between slavery and freedom, it tells a story that we think of as a national story at a local level," said Miele.

A series on battlefield medicine asks students to imagine themselves as 29-year-old George McFarland, a school principal from McAlisterville, Pa., and father of two who commanded the 151st Pennsylvania regiment. Photos taken inside the museum show a cramped hospital room with bloody and injured soldiers scattered on chairs, beds and worse. McFarland recalled spending three days on the floor before being treated. McFarland eventually had his leg amputated. Even after being transported home in September, two months after the battle, it's another 42 weeks until he can leave his bed with the assistance of crutches.

"It's really inspiring what we can learn about American medical history as a whole," Miele said. "We can draw larger conclusions that can be applied to the Civil War and present day."

Each web series has taken staffers between 10 and 20 hours to convert to an online format, Miele said. More time-intensive ones have required new video content and research, he said.

Teachers have visited the site independently, but Miele was uncertain if they'd been used in a classroom setting since the start of the pandemic. He was excited to provide free, accessible content in a time when teachers are most in need.

"It's a challenge to translate some of our stories using videos, but it's also fun to think of engaging activities to challenge students," he said. "We ask them to take something they're seeing and use it to create something new, like writing their own law to restrict slavery, how they'd incorporate it and why. Instead of being spoken to or spoken at, we try to create opportunities to show us they're learning."

Dr. Bradley Hoch, Rotary Club of Gettysburg president, spearheaded the move to find funding for the project, Miele said. Though it's changed its look from the start, both men were proud of the way it's come together.

"With the development of this digital learning platform, the internationally acclaimed Seminary Ridge Museum and its staff now have the ability to expand their educational reach throughout our entire nation and the world," said Hoch in a press release. "I applaud their foresight, their creativity and professionalism."

Miele has plans to continue growing the online database. Eventually, he hopes to provide digital tours with real-time question and answering sessions. Photo scavenger hunts and classroom sessions are also on the horizon, he said.

Though developing the digital platform has been engaging, Miele looks forward to the time when the museum on the hill is bustling with inquisitive students once again.

"At the beginning of March, I'd have given anything to have a month to work at home," he said. "Now we're hoping we'll be back in business soon."