

Imagine if we taught what history is really about

It is not often that I have the dubious pleasure of two displays of historical deficiency within a single weekend.

The Associated Press (AP) can usually be counted on every week or two for at least one historically insufficient *EO* article, but two weeks ago Michele Bachmann enabled a double opportunity to despair for our ignorance of history.

The AP story, about daylight savings, clocks and the measurement of time itself, was actually quite cute as far as it went. But Bachmann, in New Hampshire to open her campaign for the presidency, managed a doozy, expressing her enthusiasm for the “state where the shot was heard around the world at Lexington and Concord.”

The “shot heard ‘round the world” – a quote from poet Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Concord Hymn” – actually refers to shots fired by English troops trying to seize munitions stored for the local militia at Concord, Massachusetts in 1775. (The first shot was fired at Lexington.)

Since the “Tea Party” for which Bachmann’s political movement is named, took place just 20 miles away in Boston, one might have hoped for better.

The problem for me as a professional historian is that even the AP article misses the opportunity to teach what history is really about: not names, dates, and places (some of which you have to know) but why things happened and what they meant for the future -- causes and consequences.

The AP article touches on the railroads’ interest in consistent times and reduced costs for printing schedules, but the railroads were far more important than that: They created time zones to enable travelers to adjust to the now-rapid, 24-hours per day movement of trains across a newly conquered continent.

Even better would have been an explanation of why we have time and clocks at all.

The short answer is that factories needed to schedule their workers to all be there at the same time. In the pre-industrial world, people went to bed when it got dark, got up and often ate during the night and went back to bed until sunrise. Most lived flexibly by the sun in an agricultural society.

Indeed, we may be so whacked by time changes today because we are already whacked by the whole idea of scheduling eight hours of sleep before we get up and go to scheduled work or school. Our infamous “circadian rhythms” may not be “natural” at all.

That’s history. Why, how and what consequences. Ideas in action. Ever-reconsidered explanations. Not just names, dates, and places.

The first day of class in my Early American history courses, I used to ask my students the names of Columbus's three ships. Most of them would know. I would say, "I don't care."

The real history of Columbus's sailing to what came to be called "America" is why it changed the world when many others had gone before him without changing the world. It is about why he went west to go east. It is about the technology that enabled it.

Columbus is about the transformation of European diets – most of the fruits and vegetables we eat today, including the "Irish potato." Columbus is about the enormous profits from gold, silver, slavery and sugar that eventually financed the industrial revolution – and thus time and clocks as we know them.

Columbus is about a bunch of backwater English colonies which, largely ignored for 150 years by their imperial "mother," developed a startling tradition of local democracy which they decided, in the 1760s and 70s, they did not want to give up. (The tea thrown into Boston harbor was not in opposition to taxes but taxes decided by neither the people nor their representatives.)

Knowing that the Boston Tea Party, the Boston Massacre, and the "shot 'heard round the world" all happened in Massachusetts is important – and exciting – because those facts tell us not only about ourselves as Americans but about 20th century imperialism in Africa and democracy in the Middle East.

I am sorry for all our children stuck with history as just names, dates and places. I cringe for that kind of statewide high school history competitions. Likewise I doubt on-line history classes.

I love real history.