

# Teaching Economic History

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UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project

The state of our nation's economy is a central theme in daily news stories and in conversations between friends, but how often do teachers focus on economic history in the U.S. History classroom? Teachers of grades 4, 5, 8, and 11 in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District faced this question last year as they tackled "Economic History" for their Teaching American History Grant's yearly theme. This grant, which partners Mt. Diablo with the UC Berkeley History-Social Science Project, focuses on providing teachers with content lectures from university professors, workshops on historical thinking, reading and writing skills in history, and collaboration time to create classroom lessons that feature historical content and academic literacy strategies.

Hannah Farber's talk, "The Economy of the Early Republic," inspired 5th grade teachers to create a lesson on the rise of homespun manufacturing prior to the American Revolution. In this lesson, students analyze primary sources as they gather evidence to answer the lesson focus question, "How was consumption and production a response to the Townshend Acts?" Other notable presentations included "Jackson and the Bank" by UC Berkeley Professor Robin Einhorn and "Reorganization of the Southern Economy after 1865" by UC Davis Professor Clarence Walker. These talks informed the 8th grade teachers as they developed a lesson around the question: "How did the development of the cotton gin impact the economy of the agrarian south and lead to the increased dependency on slavery?"

With the focus on economics, grade 4 teachers developed a lesson about the expansion of the railroads, which was driven by the question: "How did the growth of railroads affect California's economy in the late 1800s?" Students analyzed passages from the textbook and deconstructed the political cartoon, "The Curse of California," (see image) which features Leland and Stanford as the eyes of the railroad monopoly octopus. This rich image allows students the opportunity to discuss all the groups who were impacted by the railroads.



G. F. Keller. *The Curse of California*. *The Wasp*. 19 August 1882.

An 11<sup>th</sup> grade team of teachers created a lesson around the focus question, "How did the economic costs of the Vietnam War impact Lyndon Johnson's Great Society?" After examining President Lyndon Johnson's "guns and butter" plan to fund a military engagement abroad while also funding domestic Great Society programs at home, students investigate the economic pros and cons of the mounting expenses for Vietnam and Great Society programs from a finite amount of resources.

Once completed, these economic-infused lessons were field tested in the teachers' classrooms. Teachers then examined student work and prepared final revisions. The grant's theme has shifted to "Cultural and Intellectual," for 2011-2012, but our year examining

"Economic History" proved to the teachers that economic historical narratives are anything but dry.

For access to all MDUSD TAH grant-created lessons, visit the grant website at: [www.tah4all.org](http://www.tah4all.org)