

## LESSON PLAN: RINCON HISTORY MUSEUM

### 1. Classroom Preparation for Teachers

#### The Embarcadero

*Imagine the Bay then,  
explore the Bay as it is today*

Stand in that expansive, art-deco room once known as Rincon Annex -- a Post Office Annex of the Main Post Office at Fifth and Mission Streets -- and place yourself in the center of the history of the Gold Rush. In 1848 you are in twenty feet of the waters of the Bay. In 1900 you are in a cattle drive from a pier to a Mission District packing plant. In 1936 you are in an artist's studio, painting a wall-size mural. In 1960 you are in a United States Post Office.

Today you are in one of the City's fabulous and free museums! This room is now just the north side of Rincon Center, a bustling complex of office towers and restaurants and shops between Mission and Howard, Spear and Steuart. It is now officially called a gallery. For on its walls are evocative murals from the pre-World-War II days of the Great Depression. As part of the Works Projects Administration, or WPA, artists were paid to do their part in fashioning the story of the country. Other results of the WPA are somewhat harder to find -- stone work of bridges here and there, the paintings in Coit Tower, other decorative elements of public buildings. The murals at Rincon are intensely WPA.

First a word about the name 'Rincon' itself. In Spanish, it means, simply, "corner," and it was indeed the southernmost corner of the town. The name was transferred to Rincon Hill, which is indeed a corner -- the present western anchorage of the San Francisco Oakland Bay Bridge. But between Rincon Hill and Rincon Center lies a vast amount of history -- and fun. Here you will learn that the 'environment' is more than the great outdoors: the environment is the meeting of the sea and the sky and the land, even in the heart of a great city.

### **The Renaissance of Rincon and the Embarcadero**

It is hard to visualize today, but in the last half of the nineteenth century Rincon Hill was what we now think of as Nob Hill, or even Pacific Heights. Photographs from that era show stately houses, if not mansions, lining the rough-cut streets of a truly prominent hill. We miss that hill today because it was considerably leveled by human hands after the earthquake and fire of 1906. Why? To make it easier to build here. What a shame!

The only remanant of what this area looked like before 1906 is South Park, between Third and Second, Harrison amd Brannan -- and some of the houses here actually bear some resemblance to pre-1906 days. This modest park shows the scale of thinking in that era: we would now consider it, for all its pleasant contours, just an amenity.

But now small businesses are flourishing here, and from here all the way to what is now called South Beach. Well, if North Beach exists without sight of water, why not South Beach, with water all around? The presence of PacBell Park, on the water at the end of Third Street, anchors a massive shift in the development of the City. Once simply an industrial area, interspersed with secondary housing, this whole 'South of Market' arena is now the direction of middle class life -- entertainment, employment, residence.

Preservation of the land, sea, and sky is vital to this development. Preserving the environment means respecting the natural resources that underlie the health and vitality of what we build and what we do in the city.

**Now, explore!**

Our starting point, the Rincon Historical Room, is lined with display cases. Here are artifacts of Chinese and Russian and Spanish and English exploration of this site. Of course, before any western civilizations made their mark here, there were the American Indians. We know them now as the Ohlone tribe of the Costanoans, who inhabited this region since at least the 13th century. This surprising fact has been established by carbon-dating of artifacts discovered in the South-of-Market area.

Imagine! Ohlone Indians fishing on San Francisco Bay centuries before Columbus, before the invention of printing, at about the time of Marco Polo's expedition to the Far East.

Imagine, also, the interaction between these natives of the Pacific Coast and the first Europeans who walked into the spot where you are now standing. But that was not possible! Why? Because this spot where you are standing was completely under water.

Imagine -- water everywhere as far up as Montgomery Street, as far west as First Street. Imagine why First Street was named that!

This whole area was known as the Cove -- a very hospitable location for incoming ships. This is where traders from Spanish Galleons walked ashore... where the Ohlone Indians paddled out in their barks to offer fresh water to their visitors. The Bay was teeming with fish, and the Ohlones had explored it only for their own means of survival. It was a time before the American Revolution -- but it was a revolution in itself.

Take time for a brief examination of the exhibit cases here, where so many artifacts of early California are displayed. Then examine the murals themselves, which tell a consistent story of this land. (An audiotape for use at the site should be reviewed prior to the visit.) And after that, take a stroll to some of the riches that lie along the Embarcadero.

The Gold Rush Trail has identified locations of interest to students in several directions from Rincon Center:

- Hills Plaza, in the direction of the Bay Bridge, and what a great way to see San Francisco's bridges!
- The Audiffred Building, survivor of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906
- The Federal Reserve Building, on Market, where displays about commerce and industry are updated frequently
- the Ferry Building, newly refurbished from top to bottom to match the new sparkle of the Embarcadero

In future visits to this location, you have numerous options for adding interest to your field trip.

## **2. Materials for Reference at the Site**

An audiotape is available to guide the teacher through the visit. This tape walks the group through the large Rincon History Museum, using the murals on the walls and the information in the display cases.

*It's not essential to follow the exact script of the audiotape.* From classroom preparation, the teacher may find that a particular mural or exhibit case holds unusual interest for the students. Let this interest be your guide.

The focus is on history, California history. But there are many *words* that will arise from this visit that may not stand out in a book. Here are some to think about:

**Embarcadero**

**Cove**

**Galleons**

**Barks**

**Murals**

**Settlers**

**Natives**

**Shoreline**

**Missions**

**Weaving**

**Habitat**

**Species**

Now think about people. How many different kinds of people have lived or worked here since the original Native Americans? How many occupations, since the "Indians" first fished here? Here are some:

- The Conquistadors, who explored from Mexico and brought their religion with them, in the form of the Missions
- The Americanos, who rode across the country to find a adventure here
- The Gold Rush men and women, who came looking for gold in 1849
- The Chinese, who came across the seas for a new life and who built a new society

- The railroad builders, who brought commerce from all over the country to California

- Workers from all occupations, who made the buildings and the bridges

**Hints:**

-ask each student to learn just one new word here, and bring it back to the classroom

-ask each student to write one sentence, just one, about anything at this location: "I liked this because...." or "I wish I could see more of...."

-on the visit bring "cue cards" with key words, from complex ones, such as "artifact," to simpler ones, such as "society."

-this visit is a rare opportunity to make a long-lasting impression on a young mind. Focus on ethnic diversity, on opportunity to be a leader, on the water all around us, or any way of expressing the positive aspects of the visual cues in this great room.

-above all, keep it simple. Let the children sop up the many sights and sounds around them. Make it an exploration, not a required tour!

-in terms of exploration, you can plant an item for the students to search for on the site. It can become a treasure hunt. But don't think you have to promise a lot to keep the children interested. It's a brand-new experience!

-above all, let the children ask questions. Give them the time. Give them the opportunity.

-tell the children they should write something about their visit. Just a sentence. Just a paragraph. Tell them this while they are there, so they can start thinking about it.

-let the seventh-graders be heroes. Allow them to aid the fourth-graders in having fun, in finding things. Let the

seventh-graders learn subliminally. Let them learn by explaining things to the fourth-graders.

### **3. After-Visit Classroom Discussion and Evaluation**

The first day after the visit, remind every child of the reports expected: A sentence or two for the fourth-graders to write, maybe something to share from a magazine. The seventh-graders can be given a week or so to prepare a thoughtful evaluation.

The focus is on history, and California history at that, but the visit involves wide-ranging topics. Suggest to the seventh-graders that they might explore:

- how the Bay was filled in, and what effect filling has on the environment: a science question

- how tall buildings are anchored in the mud of the Bay: an engineering question

- how shorlines change with the addition of piers

- how the habitat of birds and fish changes as a bay is filled in around its shoreline

Create lists of things seen on the visit:

- the different kinds of jobs shown in the murals

- the nationalities of people shown in the murals

- the "mosts" observed: most interesting pictures, most unusual stories told in the murals, most unexpected thing seen on the visit, etc.

Use existing classroom materials, such as books, to tie-in with what was seen. For example, ask the students if what they learned on the field visit is something they read about before.

Finally, ask for suggestions about what the students want to see next. This can become a bridge for future visits.

Be sure to accept criticism. Was there something that could have been done better? Was the visit too long, too short? Was there time to see everything?

Most visits involve lunch or a snack. For younger children, especially, make sure there are opportunities to use bathrooms. Write your own report of how the visit went. Offer suggestions for improving the lesson plan.

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