“Breaking Barriers in History”

The 2020 National History Day theme will connect to topics from every part of the world and area of history. The theme may inspire you to think of physical barriers - like walls or rivers - but barriers can take many forms.

**Identifying the Barrier**

One definition of barrier is *something physical that blocks movement or access*. These physical barriers may have been created by humans, or exist naturally. Topics like the Berlin Wall, Japanese Internment Camps, Apollo 11's moon landing, or the quarantine of patients during Polio outbreaks would connect to this type of barrier.

Barriers can also be non-physical. You can’t see this type of barrier, but *something like an idea or law also has the power to separate*. Women broke through a legal barrier when they gained the right to vote. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier when he became the first African American to play major league baseball.

- China’s 1982 Constitution said citizens had the duty to practice family planning. The Chinese government said that families should only have one child. How did this legal barrier shape Chinese society?

**Understanding the Barrier**

You might begin your research knowing what broke a barrier, but that’s only part of the story. If the barrier was created by humans, be sure to consider *how and why the barrier was created*. A barrier might have helped some people and hurt others. Did it preserve something? Prevent actions or events from happening? Was the barrier created to block or restrict access to something?

- Rondo was a financially independent African American neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. The construction of Interstate 94 broke the barriers of the community. How were Rondo citizens impacted?

**Breaking the Barrier**

*Breaking a barrier can take many forms.* It can be the first time in history something happens. It could be a breakthrough in science, technology, art, or politics. It can be the physical crossing of an obstacle. It can be intentionally disobeying a law to bring about social change. How a barrier was broken is important, but *why a barrier was broken* is just as important.

- In 1930, Mohandas Gandhi led the Salt March as a protest of British colonial rule in India. This was one of many demonstrations that eventually led to Indian independence. Why did the British government impose barriers on salt and production? Why did Gandhi choose this barrier to break?

**Showing Change**

So what? You should be able to show *why your topic was important in history*. Your topic doesn’t need to be in a history textbook to be important, but it needs to have had an impact, even locally. Think about how your topic connected or contributed to larger movements in history. *Consider what changed right away and in the long-term.*

- Ella Baker worked with many civil rights organizations. She broke barriers when she helped students to form their own group: the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). How did breaking this barrier change the civil rights movement? How did it affect how students organized for change then and in later protest movements?

**Point of View Matters**

Be sure to consider how different groups of people were affected by the existence and breaking of a barrier. *Look for multiple viewpoints throughout the project:* before, during, and after. Also consider which sources you are using for your research. Have you looked for sources to help understand multiple points of view? Sources whose authors represent those points of view?

- The Transcontinental Railroad broke the natural barriers of mountains and deserts that had limited travel between the West and East coasts of the United States. Looking at the story from only the perspective of business leaders would represent just part of the story. Sources about and by the Chinese workers who built the railroad are important as well.

**Good luck and happy researching!**