

School Programs
At the
Mercer Museum

Self-Guided Visit at the Mercer Museum



Dear Educator:

Thank you for choosing the Mercer Museum for your field trip destination. We hope it will be both educational and fun for your students. The Self-Guided Visit to the museum includes an Orientation for your group. This orientation is about 10-15 minutes in duration and explains the history of the museum and the collection, and Henry Mercer's role in founding both. The Mercer Museum houses Mercer's vast collection of early American everyday objects. Mercer had the forethought to collect tools from pre-industrial trades to help future generations appreciate "everything it took to make America."

The following are suggested pre- and post-visit activities for students visiting the museum. The activity suggestions were created to make their field trip to the museum more meaningful and focused.

We would be interested in any feedback you can provide us as to how to make your visit, and these materials, more valuable and useful. Please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

Melissa A. Jay

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Henry Chapman Mercer Facts

- ◆ Tile maker, archaeologist, antiquarian, artist and writer
- ◆ Leader in the Arts & Crafts movement
- ◆ Born Bucks County 1856, died at his home, Fonthill, 1930
- ◆ Graduated Harvard 1879
- ◆ One of the founding members of the BCHS, 1880
- ◆ Studied law at University of Pennsylvania, admitted to Philadelphia Bar but never practiced law
- ◆ Interests turned to archaeology
- ◆ Curator of American and Pre-historic Archaeology at University of Penn Museum 1894-1897
- ◆ Became interested in making PA German pottery; by 1899 was producing architectural tiles that would become world famous
- ◆ Built Fonthill 1908-12; Moravian Pottery and Tile Works 1910-12; Mercer Museum 1913-16, to house early American artifacts
- ◆ Wrote *Ancient Carpenters Tools* and *The Bible in Iron*
- ◆ Fond of animals and birds; developed large arboretum on Fonthill grounds

The following is an excerpt from the book, The Mercer Mile: The Legacy of Henry C. Mercer published by the Bucks County Historical Society:

"On a spring day in 1897 Henry Chapman Mercer's life took an abrupt turn. Searching for a set of fireplace tools in the barn of a junk dealer, he gazed upon a jumble of objects made obsolete by the introduction of power machinery: plows, flax breaks, spinning wheels, and the like. Suddenly he was struck by the fact that there before him lay the very evidence that future archaeologists would one day be searching for. Determined to save these decaying objects from oblivion, he began "rummaging bake-ovens, wagon houses, cellars, hay lofts, smoke-houses, garrets, and chimney-corners" for similar items, often acquiring the forgotten artifacts of the 18th and early 19th centuries as "penny lots" at local auctions.

That fall, he exhibited his collection at a meeting of the Bucks County Historical Society, of which he had been one of the founders in 1880. Since the Society at that time occupied a small room in the Courthouse, he was given the use of the largest courtroom for the occasion. Grain cradles were set up in the prisoner's dock; iron mould board plows overflowed the radiators, and lighting devices were arranged on the dais. After Mercer explained the significance of the objects to a rapt audience, the program concluded with demonstrations of the antiquated implements by 'fellow citizens of a past generation' - an idea then considered novel."



Supplemental Information

“He called his collection ‘The Tools of the Nation Maker,’ because “in the largest sense the story of Eastern Pennsylvania and of it Bucks County is that of the whole nation. Though it was considered by many to be nothing more than an accumulation of ‘junk,’ to him it was ‘history presented from a new point of view.’ The Centennial celebration of 1876 in Philadelphia had launched a groundswell of enthusiasm for Americana, but Mercer felt that interest had been confined to the decorative arts, to what he called ‘bric-a-brac.’ He contended that ‘if we are going to collect old furniture, porcelain, and candlesticks, why not go a step further and gather hoes, axes, tin kitchens, scythes, forks, plows and bee-hives?’ From this point of view, one was ‘out of mantel decoration and knee-deep in science.’ His collection would be ‘worth its weight in gold a hundred years hence,’ he predicted.”



Henry Chapman Mercer's 1897 "Tools of the Nation Maker" exhibit



Activity- Henry Mercer's Collection

Henry Chapman Mercer thought it was very important to preserve the past. He started collecting hand tools from *pre-industrial* America due to his fear that these objects would be forever lost to future generations. He began to collect these objects while there were still people alive to tell him what the objects were and how they were used. Henry documented all of this information in the *exhibits* on display throughout the museum.

Allow the students to view the following three images. Lead students in a discussion by asking the following questions:

- ◆ What does each object tell us about the past?
- ◆ Why is it important to preserve them?
- ◆ How do studying objects like these help us?
- ◆ In your opinion, which object do you find the most interesting? Why?



Pre-Visit Materials: Self-Guided Visit

Images from Mercer Museum Collection



Sewing Machine, c. 1880



Child's Rocking Chair, c. 1845



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Pre-Visit Materials: Self-Guided Visit



Hand-pulled and Pumped Fire Engine, John Agnew, Philadelphia, c. 1850





Activity 1- A New Perspective

Some of the objects at the Mercer Museum are displayed in an unusual manner (see image below). Henry Mercer displayed them this way for a few reasons, but one very important reason was so that we could look at everyday objects from a new or different *perspective*.

In your classroom, hang an everyday object in an unusual way. Discuss with your students what they are able to see differently, from different view-points.



Activity 2- Archaeologists of the Future

Have the students look at a fast food container, (or another everyday object). Ask the students to imagine that 100 years in the future an archaeologist discovered this object. If this object was discovered on an archaeological dig 100 years from now, what questions would we need to ask about it? What could it tell people in the future about our lives today?