

# Hitchcock Versus Shaker Chairs:

by Ronald V. Morris

*“I did not know there were so many difficulties in starting a factory. I like living now rather than living back then in the Industrial Revolution.”—Eric, 4th grade*

Students in an elementary gifted class use discovery to learn about life in industrial New England. Taking multiple days to analyze this topic, students use artifacts (chairs), discussion, and primary sources to explore the politics of the 1830s. They examine the workings of Hitchcockville, CT, and a Massachusetts Shaker colony. Students must use evidence to see the rise of industrialism and the reactions society had to it; the chairs reflect the geography, history, economics, and politics of the Age of Jackson. Students examine a parallel Shaker community that lived and worshipped together—people who rejected the industrial age and attempted to insulate themselves from the problems of the age.

# Artifacts to Teach About the Rise and Rejection of Industrialism in the Young Republic

## Rationale

*“It was hard to live in the Industrial Revolution. You would have to make tough choices.”—Tyler, 4th grade*

During this process, gifted students unite in examining two artifacts and make discipline connections demonstrating the interrelatedness of the content. The artifacts or cultural materials are dependent upon student interpretation through critical thinking. In order for students to think, they must engage deeply in content rather than attempt to cover vast quantities of material in a short time span. They engage in select cases and with systematic guidance reflect upon the study with the intention of building awareness of the tools of analysis employed (Parker, 1991). Once students know how to think, they need to turn their thoughts toward societal problems.

From primary to secondary classrooms, social studies educators have

turned to literature, debate, folk tales, drama, current events, music, and service learning to help students examine social problems (Dundon, 2000; Hickey, 1995; Houser, 1997; Leland & Harste, 1999; Leland et al., 2003; McGeown, 1995; McGowan, 1996). The most powerful of these programs help students develop their own voice and consider advocacy as social actions opposed to passivity. The teacher’s philosophy must contain social criticism, interdisciplinary analysis of social issues, and the purpose or role of social education as a cultural transformation (Dotson, 1996; Lybarger, 1991). If the teacher is to be able to empower the student to become an agent of change and to see hope in the world that the student belongs to both now and in the future, the teacher must help the student create a classroom climate of questioning and challenging conventions. This approach is in tension with the conservative role of the school, which is usually to maintain

the status quo. Enabling students to really create, however, depends upon the detached perspective of looking at a structure as an outsider who is looking within.

Through education students can learn how they can act to change their community and improve society. While students learn to do this, they can forge important connections to their community and learn strong thinking skills. Teachers should expect students to be critical of society, whether this criticism is based in social policy, economics, or foreign relations (Stanley, 1992). In the cases examined in this article, two groups who lived at the same time took different approaches toward living in the Industrial Revolution—they experienced the same event, but had different reactions.

Students examine these events, become critical of society at that time, and act as societal critics to discuss the danger of unrestrained capitalism (Blake, Phelps, & Comp, 1994;

Corcoran & Sievers, 1994; Hargreaves & Fink, 1998; Henley, 1995; Mohrman, 1994; Payne, 1998; Siu-Runyan, 1996; Wyatt-Smith & Murphy, 2001). Students of environmental education tend to use social criticism, but social criticism is also used with writing, literature, art, and history. In each of these areas, social criticism provides a means for critical thinking, questioning, and visualizing hope for a positive future. Social reconstruction of both society and education focuses on the vital role of education in changing and improving the community (Darden, 1997; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996; Rugg, 1931, 1936; Stuhr, 1994). The role of social education in a democracy is to help citizens perpetuate a better community for the next generation. Applications abound for students using social reconstruction in geography, art, and service learning.

Gifted students learn to think in social studies class so they can apply those skills through decision making to social problems. Students need this critical skill for problem solving. When students work with cultural and societal issues, they need to be able to reflect on them in both the present and the future. Many gifted programs integrate decision making into their curricula (Levin, 2001; Matthews, 1999; Treffinger, 1994). While students think about artifacts, they also explore historical examples of social problems with connections to the present in the process. Students involved with gifted programs are expected to demonstrate competency as decision makers. Some researchers point to decision making as an indicator of creativity in gifted children (Fishkin & Johnson, 1998). Other researchers see the ability of gifted children to learn in primary classes as

important in developing decision-making processes (Bentley, 2001).

### Procedure

*"We make furniture in my town, but it looks a lot different from this. I was surprised that they advertised their chairs, too."—Ryan, 4th grade*

### Getting Started

The teacher determines the direction of the lesson after checking the National Standards for History (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996) and determining a content standard (e.g., "Expansion and Reform") and a thinking standard (e.g., "Historical Analysis and Interpretation"). First, the teacher looks for a group, issue, or set of polices that had or have some element of controversy embedded in them, such as the Industrial Revolution and the societal concerns that accompanied it starting in the early 1800s. Next, the teacher selects several artifacts that represent that particular age, such as interior decorations from a boarding house in the Lowell National Historical Park or furniture from the Trustees Office of a Shaker Community, or selects just one item, such as a chair (Morris, 1998, 2000, 2002). With the advent of online antique trading, it is much easier for teachers to locate and acquire artifacts. Teachers must carefully plan what ideas about society the students can realistically gather from the artifacts, and they must think about appropriate questions to help guide students toward the information. When students practice comparing cultures, they see both the positive and the negative elements in a culture; they can then act as social critics to determine the best and worst

points of each. With practice in social criticism, students can think about the decision they would need to make as a citizen in a democracy.

When students start this project, they can meet in small groups to gather background information about the Industrial Revolution and the Shakers from texts, videotapes, reading packets of published primary sources, and photos. From each of these sources, they can identify problems and advantages of the Industrial Revolution on a T-chart and list ideas that they find before sharing them with the whole class. Students write lists of ideas that surprise them from the sources and turn these ideas into questions that are written on sentence strips, which are then posted on the front board for the class to see. Students become accustomed to looking for positive and negative attributes of a group when they read critically. The Shaker religion provides an interesting foil that students can use to see people embracing or rejecting the factory system in their society.

### Hitchcock Context

*"Lambert Hitchcock was a really smart man to figure out how to make chairs, organize a factory, and sell his chairs."—Jacob, 4th grade*

The students need to rely on information from the artifact, their background knowledge, and their reading packet of primary sources when they brainstorm social problems associated with industrialization. Students may need to think first of government programs that seek to alleviate suffering and move backward to the problem that the program seeks to address. Students bring a wide variety of experiences into the

classroom with them, and the pooled knowledge of the group helps students explore the lives of other people. Many students have first-hand experiences with economic problems that impact society. Drawing upon the students' past experiences prepares them for their next experiences in interpreting artifacts and primary sources.

New England had a plentiful supply of falling water to spur industry with inexpensive power. Lambert Hitchcock established a factory in Connecticut where he could make wooden chairs that he could sell across the region, but, of course, he needed good employees. The social issues of the time came into play when considering the rapid and spreading effect of early manufacturing and the need for good factory workers. It was neither mere coincidence that Horace Mann's vocational education in the Massachusetts common school occurred or that the voluntary pledge of the temperance movement arose at that time. Both schools and temperance helped ensure a population of competent employees for employment in factories.

Students need to determine the qualities they would look for when hiring employees, and then they need to differentiate between the qualities needed to build and run a mill. The students determine the knowledge and skills needed in addition to the physical characteristics required of the workers. Students need to decide what habits and behaviors would be detrimental to workers at the mill. Finally, students must evaluate the schools and the temperance movement to see if those social forces would change the nature of the work place.

The social, economic, and political questions Lambert Hitchcock

dealt with include supply and demand, advertising, distribution, and transportation. A consignment peddler travels to the customer with a knocked down chair. Some peddlers start with a pack on their back, gather resources to purchase a pushcart, move up to a horse and wagon, or, like Gimbals, establish a store. To help merchants and manufacturers, Whig proponents argued for many internal improvements, including canals, railroads, macadamized roads, harbor improvements, and removing river obstructions. In an age of cumbersome or absent transportation, manufacturing and merchants determined internal improvements to be essential in establishing the commerce for the nation.

Students look for examples of early internal improvements and create maps of early roads, canals, and railroads, and their approximate routes. Next, they create bar graphs showing the numbers of miles of roads, canals, and railroads built per year. Finally, students can determine the results of the internal improvements boom; for example, New York prospered, but Illinois went bankrupt. They need to understand why some of the projects worked well and some of the projects failed. Students also need to understand how extensive these projects became, why people voted for them, and how they changed each state.

Business progressed well, so leaders needed to enlarge the factories, but they had nowhere to turn for money. Families, partnerships, and corporations could not raise the needed cash. Banks were private and were subject to collapse when the economy failed. Supporters of a national bank proposed to make loans with some government and corporate money and stepped up the cir-

culcation of money. Business leaders determined that a national bank would help speed up national commerce.

Students know that business leaders must have capital to expand their business, and if they cannot raise the money then they must borrow from the United States Bank. Students consider the role of government in creating a national bank and compare that bank to the role government takes now in commerce and regulation of banking and finances. Students use a Venn diagram to show how the Bank of the United States acted as a corporation and how it acted as a branch of government, or how it helped the nation and how it helped its investors. Students speculate about what would happen to people who borrow money if the bank suddenly called in the loan. Students also critique the implications the following facts had for the citizens of the nation: First, the Bank of the United States had only one fifth of its deposits from the government, and, secondly, only one fifth of its board of directors came from the government.

The threat of foreign competition caused a need for a tariff to protect domestic goods; manufacturers needed relief from overseas goods that could undersell domestic goods and put local factories out of business. Advocates for high tariffs pointed to the dependence on foreign manufacturing and raised money for the indebted nation. Reducing the dependence of foreign goods meant that in time of war the nation would be more self-sufficient. In peace, it meant that money would stay within the nation and not flow from American pockets into foreign pockets. Domestic manufacturers wanted not only a high tariff, but also a pro-

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protective tariff to keep foreign goods out of the country. The first half of the 19th century found people divided over the issues of tariffs, national banks, and internal improvements. The students identify the key issues between the Whigs and the Democrats in the Age of Jackson. Students now examine to see if each party represented a strong or a weak national government, strict or loose interpretation of the Constitution, industrial or rural segments of the country, or the northern, eastern, western, and southern sections of the country. In rushing into economic independence through manufactured goods, the young republic embraced industrialism starting in New England and moving into the rest of the nation. These issues remained the defining political questions from 1800 until the advent of the Civil War.

### Hitchcock Chair

*“My Dad has a woodshop, and I am going to try to build a Hitchcock chair. It looks hard[,] but I bet it will be easy. I think it will be a fun project.”—Nico, 4th grade*

When students enter the classroom, they see a Hitchcock chair sitting on a small platform in the middle of the room surrounded by their desks (see Figure 1).

When working with the chairs, the students depend upon the teacher to use guiding questions (see Appendix A) that get progressively more difficult to help students discover more information. The students discover connections from their background knowledge, observations, and their preparatory experiences. For example, when presented with a Hitchcock chair, the first question is, “What is it?” Students obviously recognize it as a chair and associate it with many other types of chairs from their homes, schools, or chairs found in businesses. The students must judge the aesthetics of the chair; other questions then lead to methods of manufacturing. Chair manufacturers knew how to use a combination of green and seasoned wood to get a secure chair with little hardware or glue. When students are able to establish time and place, the chair will either look familiar to them or exotic and foreign. The students may judge the chair as contemporary to their time or as an antique from the past; furthermore, they work with their prior experiences to interpret and arrange artifacts within their existing mental context.

Teachers can easily locate primary sources in university libraries and state or local historical collections. Using a reading packet of primary sources, teachers provide



Figure 1. A student looks at a Hitchcock chair.

information not provided by the artifact. The teacher prepares these packets by using primary sources and by including advertisements, diaries, letters, maps, folk art, illustrations, photos, ledgers, and schematic drawings (see Resources). Teachers help class members divide the readings amongst themselves and then report what they have learned to their peers. Teachers update their collections of source materials from year to year by adding to and improving their reading packets.

The primary sources must help students focus upon the ideas of the time, interpret these ideas, and reflect upon how the artifact fits into that period and with those ideas. Students report on what they selected to read from the reading packets from the previous day, as well as any additional information they may have found through their own research (see Figures 2 and 3). Students provide information that helps to interpret the chair, raises questions, and finds answers to the questions they have raised through their access to both primary sources and text material. First, students share open-ended questions such as asking their peers what they found interesting; student questions then drive the next part of the discussion concerning how the chair relates to the issues of the time. The students write both comprehension and eval-



Figure 2. Students search for resources about the chairs, manufacturer, and time.



Figure 3. A student investigates the topic by reading.

uation questions about their primary sources and art from the time included in their packet. To finish this part of the discussion, the students then write the political issues in the Age of Jackson on large sheets of paper; students then get a new reading packet about the Shakers.

### Shaker Context

*“It is absolutely amazing how much stuff the Shakers accomplished. They did everything.”—Nick, 4th grade*

The Shakers emerged from the English Industrial Revolution both as a reaction to it and as an attempt to ameliorate its effects. The Shakers rejected standardization to celebrate the creative merits of the members of their society. Shakers invented the circular saw, metal pen nib, straight broom, packaged seeds, and creatively adapted both herbs and canning to their economic production. The Shakers put beauty into every job done by hand, and they replaced spiritual loss of the industrialism with the joy of creation. Many utopian societies prospered at this time to promote communal living as an antidote to social ills. Although people are transient, the work of the Shakers lives on into the present.

The members carried their religious energy into all of their daily activities, including eating, labor, worship, and sleeping. Shaker worship involved jumping in the air, twirling, dancing in lines, singing, and falling on the ground with fervor. God had come to the world as a man in Jesus and as a woman in Mother Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers; the imminent end of time seemed near when they expected both to return as one and rule over a sexless society. The Shakers lived their lives as if the end of time were at hand; therefore, there must be vigilance, restlessness, and wakefulness. The life of the Shaker was not for the lax or weak; it took energy, purpose, and much discipline.

The students must design a graphic organizer to display their information before sharing it with the class. Many students create a chart with the title “Industrial Revolution Problems” on one side and “Shaker Solutions” on the other. Other students make a chart displaying “Shaker Beliefs” on one side and “Shaker Practices” on the other. Students explain how Shakers organized their lives around their beliefs to create a life different from that of the student. Students orally compare their life to that of the Shakers and then evaluate it.

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The Shakers were essentially a classless society. The trustees took care of business concerns and Elders looked over spiritual matters; both males and females provided leadership and the genders separated the work. They lived as brothers and sisters in Christ. They provided security, housing, community, food, care, employment, medication, and clothing. To join the Shakers meant that members provided cradle to grave security and spirituality for one another.

Students provide evidence documenting how Shaker religious beliefs and communal life rejected industrialism. Again, students write on large sheets of paper explaining how the Shakers tried to insulate themselves from the problems of the Industrial Revolution. They can compare their notes on the Age of Jackson to those they took on the Shakers. Students also evaluate the Shakers and a laborer in the 1820s to determine which life they would rather lead—one of security with regimentation or independence with risk.

The Shakers held all property in common; their reaction to consumer goods and wanting things was to give up owning all things. Shakers shared possessions rather than having something become the sole domain of any one brother or sister. The Shaker workshop where individuals built one chair at a time looked very different from the Hitchcock factory where multiple people produced many chairs. These were not chairs for a casual life in a comfortable family room; instead, they were for a formal and austere life. By giving up individual ownership, they freed themselves to rise above material needs.

Students must write a two-paragraph description comparing a day of working in a Shaker furniture shop and a day working in the Hitchcock furniture factory. They must include working conditions and speculate on their future. Continuing their roles as Shakers, students describe their community. Students practice the role taken in this exercise and present a summation of everything they have learned about the community. Students point out how the Shaker religious belief influences each of the actions of the day.

### Shaker Chair

*“I would like to meet a Shaker—their furniture is very pretty, and they were very creative, inventive, and cool.”—Byrd, 5th grade*

For the next section, a Shaker chair replaces the Hitchcock chair in the middle of the classroom (see Figure



Figure 4. A student looks at a Shaker chair.

4). When working with the chair, the students depend upon the teacher to use guiding questions (see Appendix B) that get progressively more difficult to help students discover more information. Students learn abstract concepts and thoughts from discussing the time and the place the chair was created. Students notice that even though the chair is simple, it is also elegant and graceful. The students explain how the Shaker beliefs show through the design and production of the chair. Upon observing the very simple chair, students must find different examples of how people used tools to make the chairs. To establish construction techniques, students feel how smooth the oil and wax finish slides under their fingers and discover amazingly that craftsmen created it completely by hand. Students see no nails in the chair, and they only see wood as a structural element. When the teacher asks, “When was this made?” students may guess earlier in history because of the reactionary rejection of factory techniques in favor of individual craftsmen producing one chair at a time.

The students compare the Shaker chair to the Hitchcock chair (see Figure 5) and also address Shaker religion and daily life from their reading packet. Students cannot explore some aspects dealing with



Figure 5. Students compare both chairs.

Shaker communities by looking only at the chair; the reading packet can be particularly valuable in examining these topics. The students discuss the ideas they could not find by looking at the chair that they found in the reading packet. Once again, the teacher prepares these packets by using primary sources and by including advertisements, diaries, letters, maps, illustrations, photos, ledgers, and art (see Resources). The teacher helps the class members divide the readings among themselves and then the students report to their peers what they learned. Students can describe how Shakers marketed and decorated the chairs after reading the packet of primary sources and art.

Students can explore Shaker community life even when an artifact does not directly interpret it. Students use their primary sources to create a map showing the location of Shaker colonies and can color-code them by establishment dates to show how the Shakers spread from New England. Students further use the primary sources to create a map of a Shaker community on which they label the buildings, streets, and land usage. The students must also plot the possible daily movements of a Shaker within the community on the map. Students thus get a view of the Shaker movement, the structure of a commu-

nity, and how an individual moves through the community.

The Shakers enjoyed nationwide respect for their medical care. A letter may illustrate the cleanliness of the community, the medical practice, and their nonparticipation in war. The Shakers did not participate in the Civil War, and because of their pacifist beliefs soldiers from both sides recuperated at Shaker communities located near army camps. Students use their reading packet to find examples of how their distinctive dress and unusual beliefs made them a feared and disliked curiosity to their neighbors. Students encounter prejudice and a lack of religious toleration toward a group of people whom few would consider dangerous.

## Conclusions

*“Mr. Hitchcock and the Shakers made really pretty furniture. I wish they still made this kind of furniture. I would like it in my room.”—Elaine, 5th grade*

Many times students start with an idea or a time period, go to a historic site, look at a building, and then focus on an artifact. Doing this process backward would allow a student to take an artifact, reconstruct an image of the people who constructed it, and discover what was occurring at the time it was constructed in national or international events. Gifted students have studied history in reverse before, starting with current events and researching their causes, but this use of artifacts will allow students to start with the concrete and move into the abstract (Greenwood, 1997).

Gifted students find using artifacts important because it allows them to make connections between physical objects and ideas. They can think about these ideas to make evaluations when they compare two cultures. The reactions of the two groups to the Industrial Revolution give students opportunities to critically examine unrestrained capitalism. Students take on the role of social critic when examining an object that reflects two groups from the past. In a democracy, students need to practice this role so that they can make decisions in community events.

Teachers need to develop introductory experiences that help gifted students become social critics. Teachers also need to provide students with opportunities to develop thinking skills; they can use artifacts to help students learn in depth while thinking about a particular topic. Once teachers have designed thinking experiences,

the teachers next need to think about how students can become social critics. While teachers use capitalism in this example, teachers could build experiences to criticize social policy or foreign policy. When teachers give students focused opportunities for thinking at a young age, those students will be able to apply thinking and learning to future experiences, and they will then be prepared to think critically about the problems of society.

In a democracy, citizens depend upon one another to work toward solving community problems. These citizens must be able to think about issues and problems and solve them in the context of society. Citizens must also be social critics who can see and identify problems; they must be vocal and want to engage in civic life. The community members expect education that prepares students for the future in a democracy. Society expects that citizens will work on community problems, identify the problems, and think carefully about them. [GCT](#)

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## Resources

### Hitchcock Chairs

<http://ah.bfn.org/f/fstyles/fed/index.html>

<http://www.equinoxantiques.com/inventory/m200137-lg.jpg>

<http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/athome/1800/objects/1furniture.htm>

### Shaker

Advertisements: <http://www.hancockshakervillage.org/old/shakers.html>

Art: <http://www.nga.gov>

Diaries/Maps: <http://www.shaker.lib.me.us/library.html>

Illustrations: [http://www.wmf.org/wmf\\_shaker/future.htm](http://www.wmf.org/wmf_shaker/future.htm)

Ledgers: <http://www.passtheword.org/SHAKER-MANUSCRIPTS>

Letters: <http://www.izaak.unh.edu/specoll/mancoll/shaker.htm>

Photos: <http://www.shakerworkshops.com/shaker-workshops-photography-competition/shaker-workshops-photographygallery.htm>

## Appendix A: Hitchcock Questions

What materials and tools did workers use to make this chair?

When did workers make this product?

What culture made this chair?

What power sources did workers use to make this?

Where could factory owners find those power sources?

Who will work for Hitchcock?

How can Hitchcock get good workers?

How can you market your goods?

How do goods get to market?

Where can a business owner get a loan?

Who can put you out of business?

## Appendix B: Shaker Questions

What is this artifact?

How does it compare to the Hitchcock chair?

How did the Shakers make their chairs?

What tools did the Shakers use to make it?

What are the aesthetics of the chair?

What does this tell about their religion?

How might the chair reflect the worship of Shakers?

How might the chair show the spiritual work focus of the Shaker community?

How might the chair reflect the celibate life led by the Shakers?

How might the chair reflect their Millennialistic position?

How might the chair show the rejection of industrialism by the Shakers?

How might the chair reflect the communal society?

How might the chair show the equality in the community?

How might the chair show the inventive nature of the Shaker community?

How do the Shakers ameliorate the problems of the Industrial Revolution?

How might the chair show the cleanliness of the Shaker community?

How might the chair show the pacifist nature of the Shaker community?

How can you market your goods?