

2026 Washington, DC Report

Holocaust and Social Justice Education Program of Chautauqua County Day 1:

National Archives and Peoples House



Day one of our Washington, D.C. trip was filled with exploration, flexibility, and a lot of enthusiasm from our students. We began at the National Archives where students participated in a scavenger hunt and explored several of the newer exhibits, giving them a chance to engage with important moments in American history. Unfortunately, the Founding Documents were temporarily unavailable for viewing, which was disappointing for everyone, but students still found plenty to discover throughout the museum. From there we visited the People's House, an interactive experience about the White House that was a huge hit with the group. The hands-on exhibits and immersive displays gave students a chance to learn about the presidency and the history of the White House in a really engaging way.

In the afternoon we headed out for a walking tour of the area. Because access around the White House was restricted, we had to make a few adjustments on the fly. While we weren't able to get as close as planned, we still made our way through the area and reached the Washington Monument, where students were able to take in the scale of the National Mall and the surrounding landmarks. We wrapped up the evening back at the hotel with a pizza party and some bonding games, which gave everyone a chance to relax, laugh, and reflect on the day together before heading into another full day of learning and adventure.

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US Holocaust Memorial Museum, The Capitol and Night Tour

Day two of our trip was one of the most powerful and meaningful experiences for our students. We began the morning at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where students spent several hours thoughtfully moving through the exhibits. Many chose to slow down, carefully reading testimonies, examining artifacts, and absorbing the difficult history of the Holocaust. The experience encouraged deep reflection as students encountered personal stories that helped them better understand the human impact behind the historical events they study in class.

One of the most profound parts of the visit was the opportunity to meet and speak with Holocaust survivors. Hearing their stories directly was incredibly powerful and brought history to life in a way that no textbook ever could. Students listened with great respect, asked thoughtful questions, and recognized the extraordinary privilege of learning from individuals who experienced this history firsthand. After completing the exhibits, students had time for personal reflection, which proved both meaningful and necessary as they processed the emotions and lessons of the morning.



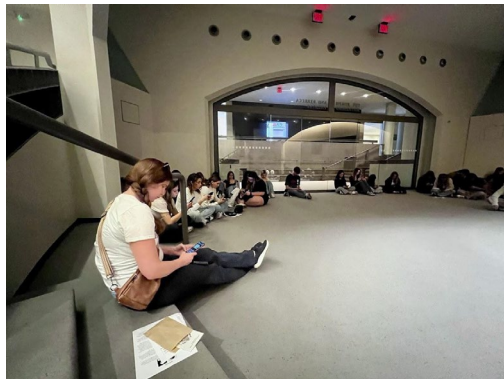
Following lunch on the National Mall, we traveled to the United States Capitol for a guided tour. As they moved through the historic halls and chambers, students engaged in thoughtful conversations about the symbolism within the building, with many commenting on the lack of representation of marginalized groups reflected in the statues and artwork.



In the evening we had dinner at Silver Diner, where our tour guide Larry met us before leading an incredible night tour of the monuments including Jefferson, Lincoln, Vietnam, Korea, FDR, MLK and Iwo Jima along with other memorials across the city. Larry's humor, energy, and storytelling brought the sites to life and made the **experience memorable for everyone. He sends his best to all—especially Maureen, who we all missed very much on this trip.**

Holocaust and Social Justice Education Program of Chautauqua County Temple Rodef Shalom, Unexpected

Free Time and a Memorable Bus Ride



Day three began with an incredible and meaningful morning at Temple Rodef Shalom, where we were warmly welcomed by Renee and Bill Andrews. Students had the rare opportunity to see and learn about the Torah scrolls up close while exploring Jewish traditions and practices. They learned about the care and respect given to the Torah and other sacred items, and the conversation was both thoughtful and engaging. One moment that especially stood out was when students learned that if a Torah is accidentally dropped, the community traditionally observes 40 days of fasting. This led to plenty of concern for Fred, our teacher, who was showing us the scrolls during the visit! It was a truly unique experience and a generous gift of time and learning that students received with great curiosity and respect.

Later in the day we returned to the National Mall to continue learning. Our plan to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture changed unexpectedly when the building was fully evacuated just as we arrived. The group quickly pivoted and made the most of the

afternoon by exploring other Smithsonian museums, including the National Portrait Gallery, the National Museum of American History, the Hirshhorn Museum, the Sculpture Garden, and the National Museum of Natural History. With beautiful weather and so many options nearby, students embraced the opportunity to follow their interests and discover more of the National Mall.

The adventure continued even on the way home when our bus broke down about an hour from school. Fortunately, the strength of small school communities quickly became clear. District leaders jumped into action, making calls and coordinating with neighboring districts, who generously sent drivers and buses to rescue us and bring everyone home safely.

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Trip Evaluations

Reflections from the evaluations demonstrate the powerful impact this experience had on participants. The overwhelming majority described the trip as *very meaningful* for their understanding of history, social justice, and civic responsibility. Many shared that visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, hearing directly from a Holocaust survivor, and learning about Jewish traditions at Temple Rodef Shalom were among the most impactful moments of the trip.

For many, this experience represented far more than a capstone trip. Several participants had never traveled to Washington, DC before, some had never stayed in a hotel, and had never encountered Jewish religious life firsthand. Hearing survivor testimony and engaging directly with historical artifacts transformed classroom learning into a deeply personal experience. Students repeatedly described the trip as “eye-opening,” “life changing,” and something they will carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps most importantly, students reflected on the civic lessons embedded throughout the experience. Many wrote about the importance of speaking out against injustice, recognizing patterns in history, and understanding the dangers of hatred and misinformation. These reflections demonstrate that the trip not only deepened historical understanding but also strengthened students’ sense of responsibility to stand up for others and work toward a more just society.

What is one new insight or idea you gained from this experience ?

Grace– “I gained the insight that it truly is important to speak out because we saw many examples over the weekend of what happens when you don’t.”

Piper– “I’ve realized that most of these horrible events were only able to grow so significantly because we allowed it to happen. Ignorance is a scary but powerful tool that dictators and evil people have no problem taking advantage of.”

Telaney- “Everything inside of a synagogue. Before the trip, I had quite literally no idea what went on in the actual religion and in services so I didn’t understand the meaning that goes behind everything.”

Kaydence– “I learned that your voice matters even when you think it doesn’t.”

Anthony“No matter who you are you are able to stop bad things happening. Your voice matters.”

Angela – “I learned that no matter how much something has hurt a nation and people, history can repeat itself.”

Peyton– “This experience made me rethink my views on Judaism and antisemitism. After our experiences with the Jewish-centered activities of this trip I feel compelled to become more educated on the religion and its impact.”

Lilly – “It was powerful to see how Jewish culture continues on when at one point people thought it would end.”

Emily– “This experience opened my eyes and made me realize how lucky I am to have the opportunities and life I have today.”