

HIST 390-003: The Digital Past

Fall 2016: Mondays, 7:20-10p
Robinson B201

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Welcome to the Digital Past!

What does it look like when we apply digital technology to the study and writing of the past? How must we adapt how we study the past when we're faced with millions of digitized primary and secondary sources—texts, newspapers, photographs, artifacts, maps, and more? What tools can help us make sense of this abundance?

As we attempt to answer these questions, this course will prepare you to use and understand a wide variety of current and emerging digital technologies, including maps, data sets, and visualizations. We'll explore these technologies in the context of an upper-division history class, but no background in history is required. We'll discuss how to find and use digital information for research, including how to write and publish effectively online. We'll explore issues of ethics, copyright and information security, and experiment with a wide variety of online tools and technologies. Additionally, we'll cover advanced search methods and online publishing platforms. Over the course of the semester, students will use these technologies to create and publish an individual digital research project (of their choosing) about a sensational trial in American history.

Our [course site](http://teaching.erinbush.org/f16h390/) at <http://teaching.erinbush.org/f16h390/> holds all the information contained in this syllabus PLUS any additional class resources, links, slides, and tools. **You are responsible for checking the course site to stay ahead of the assignments.

Learning Goals

The Digital Past, section 003 has four primary learning goals.

1. You will master the skills that make up the Mason Core Information Technology requirements.
2. Through your thoughtful written work and participation in class discussions, you will learn to communicate effectively.
3. You will learn to conduct historical scholarship using primary and secondary sources, a wide range of tools, and resources that are available on the web in an effort to publish an original, analytical research project about a sensational trial in American history.

4. You will learn to evaluate information online, understand some of the ethical challenges of digital technology, and balance the trade-offs between technical efficiency and data security.

To achieve these learning goals we will use a combination of reading, writing, exploring, and experimenting with digital tools and materials. You will learn some foundational material, but in most weeks you will attempt to make or do something historical using your newly-learned skills.

Persistence and a willingness to try many approaches will be key to doing well in this course. For many, this work with digital tools will be a new experience and it is important to remember that a crucial part of learning is failing. Not every exercise may go successfully, and we may make mistakes. If you are willing to reflect on those mistakes and try again, you will learn from them. **I am always available to help should you find yourself stuck or falling behind.** I'm happy to read drafts and review work in progress, but you have to be willing to communicate with me. You can email me any time and we'll schedule time to meet.

Course Details

Readings

In lieu of a required textbook (all your assigned readings will be available to you for free online), you will be required to purchase a domain of your own and server space--which will house both your blog and your final project--from [Reclaim Hosting](#) for \$25. You should plan to do this before the second week of class.

*While no textbook or background in history is required for this class, I strongly recommend you consult the free online history text, [American Yawp](#), to get some context and refresh your memory about American history, as needed.

Technology

Please bring a laptop or tablet to every class—you'll need it to complete the required in-class exercises. **Please charge your battery or remember to bring your power cord**; our classes are two hours and forty minutes. While I encourage the use of technology, if you are clearly using your

devices for things other than coursework, your participation grade will suffer.

Email is the best way to reach me; I will usually respond within one business day and I will expect the same of you. Mason uses only GMU email accounts to communicate with enrolled students. I will not correspond with non-GMU email addresses.

Computers are awesome, but with any technology, you must expect that you will encounter problems at some point. Back up your work on an external hard drive or in a [Dropbox account](#). Always keep separate copies of your written assignments, essays, and final project. Have a "plan B" for computer use or software access should your primary options fail you. **Computer failures are not acceptable as an excuse for late assignments and will not constitute an emergency.**

Please silence all your devices.

Honor Code

All GMU students have agreed to abide by the letter and the spirit of the [University Honor Code](#) not to cheat, plagiarize, steal, and/or lie about matters related to academic work. All violations of the Honor Code will be reported to the Honor Committee for review.

If you are copying and pasting text that someone else wrote, you might be plagiarizing. Pasted or manually retyped text is accurately cited (not plagiarized) only when all of the following three conditions are true: 1) the pasted text is surrounded by quotation marks or set off as a block quote, and 2) the pasted text is attributed in your text to its author and its source (e.g., “As Jane Smith writes on her blog . . .”), and 3) the pasted text is cited in a footnote, endnote, and/or a bibliography.

Disability Services

Any student who requires special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me to make necessary accommodations (as soon as possible, please). Students must present appropriate verification from the [Office of Disability Services](#) (SUB I, Room 4205; 703-993-2474). All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

Late Work

Deadlines matter. All assignments must be turned in by the date and time they are due. Late assignments will be penalized 1/3 of a grade (eg. From a B to a B-) after the deadline. I will deduct an additional 1/3 of a

grade for each 24 hours that pass before the assignment is completed.

That said, I do recognize that emergencies can arise; if you have a *documented* emergency, please see me and we can discuss other arrangements.

Trigger warning: In this class, we will be covering various types of violent crime, including homicide, assault, and capital punishment. As such, some of the assigned sources can be upsetting or disturbing. If you have specific triggers, please let me know and I will note the assignments accordingly. Please note that these warnings will not release you from the assignment. The trigger warnings are provided to give you the tools you require to complete the assigned work.

Miscellaneous

This is a late class, and sometimes it's the only time you have to eat. Please be mindful of disruptions – including noisy wrappers and spills. Messy food, liquids, and computers don't mix, so please be careful. No tobacco products of any kind.

Your enrollment status is your responsibility.

Come talk to me. I am always happy to discuss history in general or this class specifically. Please come see me if you want to ask questions about or further discuss the course, assignments, tools, discussion points, and/or your performance in the course. Don't be shy.

Assignments and Projects

Grades (100 points total)

Class Participation (10 points): I expect each student to be an active participant in class discussions. Participation begins, obviously, with attendance, but it requires more than that. Please come to class prepared to exchange ideas about the readings or assignments, to raise questions, and to speculate on our topics of discussion. That means you will need to do the readings *before* you come to class. Your grade for this part of the course does not depend just on you showing up. Instead it will reflect upon your thoughtful contribution to our discussions.

Please note that our weekly meetings will include in-class demonstrations and exercises that are designed to ensure that you master the skills we're covering. I will expect you to follow along and practice the skills in and out of class—usually these skills make up the bulk of your blog assignments. Obviously, if you are not in class, you cannot participate and will struggle to keep up with the skills.

Blog Posts (20 points): It is my goal to get you comfortable with writing for public consumption, which is something you may have to do once you've entered the workforce. To help you practice, you will write four blog posts throughout the semester. On your domain, you will be responsible for maintaining a blog where you will chronicle your exercises, your progress in the course, the development of your major projects, or your reflections on the course readings. These blog posts should be **400-500 words**; they should be written in a semi-formal scholarly style (with complete thoughts and correct spelling, grammar, and syntax); and are **due on Saturday by 5pm** each week they are assigned. Partial responses (including responses that fail to meet the minimum word length or clearly fail to answer the prompt) will receive partial credit. Late posts will lose points.

Timeline Project (20 points): Using TimelineJS, a digital timeline tool, you will create and publish a timeline related to a sensational trial in American history. You will work on these projects individually and they will be due on October 24th. We will review the requirements and expectations of this project extensively in class.

Final Project & Proposal (40 & 10 points): Each student will complete a digital project that answers a significant question about a sensational trial in American history. You are required to turn in your preliminary project proposals to me before class on November 7th. This proposal is worth 10 points and is required. These projects are not simply busy work; they will allow you to demonstrate your mastery of the digital skills that are central to the course. We will cover the requirements and expectations for this assignment extensively in class.

Important Dates

- August 29 – First day of class

- September 5 – Labor Day, GMU closed.
- September 6 – Last day to add
- *September 30 – Final Drop deadline*
- October 10 – Columbus Day recess, we meet on Tues., no Tues classes.
- November 23-27 – Thanksgiving Recess
- December 10 – Last day of classes
- December 12 – Reading Day – NO CLASS
- December 19 – Final projects due.

For the complete list of important semester deadlines, please see the [Registrar's Fall calendar](#).

Schedule

~ Week 1 - August 29: Introductions

Course expectations. How the Internet works.

Before class:

- Watch: [History of the Internet](#) by Melih Bilgil, YouTube (approx. 8 min.)
- Watch: [How the Internet Works in 5 Minutes](#) by Aaron Titus, YouTube (approx. 5 min.)
- Read: "The Web at 25 in the U.S.", by Pew Research Center, 2014
 - [Part 1 – How the Internet Has Woven Itself into American Life](#)
 - [Part 2 -- Americans' Views about the Role of the Internet in Their Lives](#)

In-class Workshop:

Please complete the [student technology survey](#).

Think about the domain name you want to use for the course, search domain name/URL avail on [Reclaim Hosting](#).

---- No class on Labor Day, September 5----

~ Week 2 - September 12: Doing History & Web Presence

What is history? How historians view the world and what types of projects do they do? What is digital history? Introduction to HTML; creating your web presence.

Before class:

- Purchase your domain name and 1 year of hosting at Reclaim Hosting for \$25. *You must do this before class!
- William Cronon, ["Getting ready to do history"](#) [pdf] **pages 1-7 only.**

- Douglas Seefeldt and William G. Thomas, [“What is Digital History,”](#) *Perspectives*, May 2009.
- Watch: [Credible Websites?](#) by Harness Library, YouTube. (approx. 4 min.)
- Bookmark & Review: Wordpress.com, [“Beginning HTML”](#)

In-class Workshop:

We’ll review and evaluate a digital history project -- Cornell’s “Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Project” at <http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/>. We’ll evaluate other good and bad digital projects.

We’ll install WordPress on your domains and set up your blog. *You must set me as an admin user on your site. I’ll share details on how to do this in class.

~ Week 3 – September 19: Searching for Sensational Trials

What are sensational trials? What can they tell us about life, culture and society in American history? How might you find them?

Before class:

- Watch: Google, [How Search Works](#) on YouTube (approx. 3 min.)
- Read: Caleb Crain, [“In Search of Lost Crime,”](#) *Legal Affairs*, July/August 2002
- Read: Michael Ayres Trotti, “The Lure of the Sensational Murder,” *Journal of Social History* 35 no. 2 (2001): pp 429-443. [Available through Mason Libraries].
- Browse: Douglas O. Linder, [“Famous Trials,”](#) University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law (2016) and come to class with a few trials (prior to 1960) that interest you.

In-Class Workshop:

We’ll do an online scavenger hunt and learn how to find sources about sensational trials.

Blog Assignment:

Blog Post #1 due Saturday, September 24th by 5pm.

Prompt: Either from Linder’s site “Famous Trials” or generally from what you can find out online about sensational trials in American history, please pick one or two (or three) famous or sensational trials that occurred before 1960 and discuss:

1. your initial interest in the trial(s);
2. other sites, groups or organizations which have written or produced something about the trials. (This can include movies, documentaries, television shows, books, articles, comics, etc); and
3. what you hope to learn by researching this/these trial(s).

~ Week 4 - September 26: Secondary Sources in the Digital Age

Finding and evaluating secondary sources. What is a secondary source? How should you use them?

Before Class:

- Read: Roy Rosenzweig, "[Can History Be Open Source: Wikipedia and the Future of the Past](#)"
- Watch: [Heavy Metal Umlaut by Jon Udell](#) on YouTube (approx. 8.5 min)
- Read: Robert M. Ireland, "Insanity and the Unwritten Law," *American Journal of Legal History* 32, no. 2 (April 1988): pp. 157-72. [Available through HeinOnline via Mason Libraries.] (We will discuss this article, which is a secondary source extensively in class.)

~ Week 5 – October 3: Primary Sources in the Digital Age

Finding and using primary sources. What is a primary source? How are they digitized? Where can you find them? How do you read them?

Before Class:

- Read: Reference and User Services Association's Primary Sources on the Web: [Evaluating](#) & [Using](#) (please read these two short sections.)
- Read: [Visual Literacy](#), UC Irvine Libraries
- Read: [The Basics of Visual Literacy](#), University of Maryland
- Browse: Reference and User Services Association's Primary Sources on the Web: [Primary Sources for American History](#)
- Browse: [GMU Library History Sources](#).

Please read the following primary sources. We will discuss these in class and relate them to last-week's article "Insanity and the Unwritten Law."

- Dr. L. Ray, "The Insanity of Women Produced by Desertion or Seduction," *American Journal of Insanity* 23, (1866): pp 263-274. [available on Archive.org: <https://archive.org/stream/americanjournalo2318amer#page/n279/mode/2up>]
- Please read the testimony of two medical experts during the trial of Mary Harris.
 - *Official Report of the Trial of Mary Harris: Indicted for the Murder of Adoniram J. Burroughs, Before the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, (sitting as a Criminal Court,)* Monday, July 3, 1865 ([available on Google Books](#))
 - To the Public – page 2.
 - Testimony of Dr. Calvin M. Fitch – direct and cross, pp. 49-53
 - Testimony of Dr. Charles H. Nichols – direct and cross, pp. 72-80.

Blog Assignment:

Blog Post #2 due Saturday, October 8th by 5pm.

Prompt: Search the web for primary and secondary sources related to one or more of the trials you discussed in your first blog post. Please craft an essay that discusses:

1. Your trial(s) and what you know about them;
2. The initial research you've done on your trial(s);

3. How has your interest in the topic(s) changed or evolved since your last blog post?;
4. The available secondary sources, papers or books about your topic; does your topic have a Wikipedia page? If yes, then please include an evaluation of the Wikipedia page in your blog post, either by comparison to the secondary source you found, or as an additional section.
5. The available primary sources for your topic; and
6. Any initial questions you have about this topic and how these sources will help you answer them.

~ Week 6 – Tuesday, October 11: Visual Storytelling & Timelines

Introduction to the elements of storytelling online. Thinking about historical narratives. Introduction to TimelineJS. Explanation of Timeline Project, due on October 24th.

Before Class:

- Read: Yoni Appelbaum, "[The Great Illusion of Gettysburg](#)," *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2012.
- Read: [Narrative History](#), Queens College--City University of New York
- Explore: Dr. Quintard Taylor, [United States History Timelines](#), University of Washington.
- Browse: [Using TimelineJS](#), read through steps OR watch the video.

In-class Workshop:

I'll go over the Timeline project assignment, due October 24th and I'll give an introduction to the TimelineJS tool.

Find five photos from your time period and city. Post and arrange them to tell a story. Sketch out the text that could connect them. Publish them to your site and be prepared to discuss.

~ Week 7 – October 17: Copyright & Ethics in the Digital Age

Exploring copyright issues of the content available online. Understanding "fair use" and how it applies to us. We'll explore the ethics and legality of some history sites.

Before Class:

- Read: [Copyright: An Overview](#), Cornell University Law School
- Read: Cory Doctorow, "[We'll Probably Never Free Mickey, But That's Beside the Point](#)," *Electronic Frontier Foundation* (2016).
- Read: George Mason Copyright Office sections on [copyright](#) and [fair use](#).
- Explore: [Creative Commons](#), including the "license deed" for each license.

In-class Workshop:

We'll explore the legality of the following sites:

[Internet History Sourcebooks Project](#)

[Shorpy Historic Picture Archive](#)
[\(Lizzie\) Borden Books & Gifts](#)

*Questions/troubleshooting problems with TimelineJS.

~ Week 8 – October 24: Role of Digital in the 2016 Election

Digital technology and its impact on what we know during an election – social media, data, maps, visualizations.

Before Class:

- Your Timeline Projects are due before class! They must be uploaded to your site before 7:20pm. Late projects will lose points per the course policy.
- Watch: Eli Pariser, "[Beware Online Filter Bubbles](#)," Ted, March 2011. (approx. 10 min)
- Read: Timothy B Lee, "[How the Internet is Disrupting Politics](#)," Vox, March 14, 2016.
- Read: Soo Oh, "[This 'bad' election map? It's not so bad](#)," Vox, June 2 2016.

In-class Workshop:

Review candidates' social activity and websites; review some good and bad maps and visualizations related to the election coverage.

~ Week 9 – October 31: Asking Questions, Building Projects

How historians ask questions about history. Building out your WordPress site to accommodate your final project. We'll review the assignment for your project proposals, due November 7th.

Before Class:

- Read: Po-Yi Hung & Abigail Popp, "[How to Frame a Researchable Question](#)" on William Cronon's *Learning Historical Research*.
- Read: Allan Branstiter's 2016 blog series in *AHA Today* on adapting your research:
 - "[Madness and a Thousand Reconstructions: Learning to Embrace the Messiness of the Past](#)."
 - "[Adapt and Overcome: What to Do When Your Archival Research Hits a Dead End](#)"
 - "[Scalawags and Scandal-Mongers: Intra-party Rivalry and the Complex World of Reconstruction Politics](#)"

In-class Workshop:

We'll start asking questions about sensational trials.

~Week 10 – November 7: Data and Its Uses

What is "big data" and how does it change how we study history? How is data organized for history projects? Playing with some historical data.

**Final project proposals are due! Please turn in a hard copy of your project proposals before class. Proposals will be considered late after 7:35pm and will lose points per the course policy. Please plan to be on time.

Before Class:

- Read: James Grossman, "[Big Data: An Opportunity for Historians?](#)" *Perspectives on History*, March 2012.
- Read: Paul H. Blackman and Vance McLaughlin, "The Espy File on American Executions User Beware," *Homicide Studies* 15, no. 3 (2011): pp. 209-227. {Available through SAGE Journals via Mason Libraries.]

In-class Workshop:

I will share the Espy File on American Executions. We will be working in spreadsheet software (Excel or Google Sheets, etc) to "tidy" the data, then we'll look for patterns in the data.

~Week 11 – November 14: Visualizing Data

Visualizing patterns and data. Using visualizations and patterns to help make historical arguments.

Before Class:

- Read: John Theibault, "[Visualizations and Historical Arguments](#)" in Kristen Nawrotzki and Jack Dougherty eds, *Writing History in the Digital Age* (2013).
- Explore: [Mike Bostock's Visualizations](#)

In-class Workshop:

We'll watch: Neil Halloran, [The Fallen of World War II](#) (approx.. 18 min.). You can also view/download the project's [underlying data set](#).

We'll review good, bad and ugly visualizations and attempt to make some of our own.

- [Visualize Free](#)
- Google Charts
- [Datawrapper](#)
- [Infogr.am](#)

Blog Assignment:

Blog Post #3 due Saturday, November 19th by 5pm.

Prompt: Generally, I'd like you to "read" some data – either data you find related to your projects OR using the data I shared in class – visualize it using one of the programs we learned this week and craft a response which discusses the following:

- What have you learned using this data? What patterns are evident? What do you think they mean?
- How does this new information relate to other primary and secondary sources you've found on the topic – for this piece, you can use Wikipedia or another web-based secondary source.
- Does your new information support or conflict with the expected narrative on the topic?
- What new questions does it prompt about this topic?

You are going to have to do some analysis and perhaps some digging to find information. Practice the skills we went over in class and try to make an argument about the differences between the available sources and what's contained the database. You must embed your visualizations. Please link to your sources.

~Week 12 – November 21: Introduction to Maps

Introduction to Google's My Maps. Thinking spatially.

Before Class:

- Read: Edward L. Ayers & Scott Nesbit, "[Seeing Emancipation: Scale and Freedom in the American South](#)," *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Vol 1 No 1 (2011): 3-24 [pdf]
 - Explore: [Visualizing Emancipation](#)
- Explore: [Rumsey Collection](#)
- Explore: [PhilaPlace](#)

In-class Workshop:

We'll begin to make our own maps using Google's My Maps.

~Week 13 – November 28: Spatial History

Continuation of our exploration of maps. How do digital maps change our historical perspectives? What new questions can maps raise?

Before Class:

- Read: Richard White, "[What is Spatial History?](#)", Stanford University (2010)
- Read: Edward L. Ayers & Scott Nesbit, "[Seeing Emancipation: Scale and Freedom in the American South](#)," *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Vol 1 No 1 (2011): 3-24 [pdf]
 - Explore: [Visualizing Emancipation](#)
- Explore: [Animal City](#)
- Explore: [A Cutting Edge Second Look at the Battle of Gettysburg](#), *Smithsonian Magazine*

In-class Workshop:

Begin to gather relevant geo-spatial information about your trials.

Blog Assignment:

Blog Post #4 due Saturday, December 3rd by 5pm.

Prompt: Create a new map with at least 5 points of interest related to your topic. On your blog, please embed and discuss:

- Please analyze your map and attempt to make an argument about what it's telling you.
- What does it tell you about your topic that is new or interesting to you? Why is it revealing? How can you tie this information back to the sources you are using for your projects?
- How might such a visualization help you with your final project?

These are just sample questions that you can answer, but I want you think critically about your map and attempt to make an argument based on the information contained therein. You must embed your maps. Please link to your sources.

~Week 14 – December 5: Security Issues in the Digital Age & Wrap Up

Epic hacking and security issues. Wrapping up the class. Project work.

Before Class

- Read: Mat Honan, [“How Apple and Amazon Security Flaws Led to My Epic Hacking,”](#) *Wired* (2012).
- Read Mat Honan, [“How I Resurrected My Digital Life After an Epic Hacking,”](#) *Wired* (2012)
- Explore: [GMU’s Basic Security Practices](#).

--There is no exam. Your projects are due December 19 @7pm!--

*This syllabus has benefited from the other scholars who've taught this course, including [Lincoln Mullen](#), [Sasha Hoffman](#), [Sharon Leon](#), and [Lee Ann Cafferata](#).