

Historical Methods: Dead in Virginia (History 300.05/ver. 3.7)

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Office Hours
M 1:30-3:30
or by appointment

WARNING NOTICE (READ THIS FIRST): This course is not your normal historical methods course. While the class meets from 1:30-4:15 on Wednesdays, we will be spending some of our class time elsewhere. In this class you will get your hands, your shoes, and probably your pants dirty. You will be expected to visit cemeteries, archives, county record offices, local libraries as well as major research libraries/archives such as the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and/or the Library of Virginia (Richmond). In other words, you will be required to be a real historian, not just a student finding out what historians do and how they do it.

With the exception of the cemeteries (more on that below), all of the places you need to go can be reached by public transportation. Visiting the cemeteries will require a car, access to a car, or a friend who is willing to drive you a few times during the semester. If none of these is possible for you, I will arrange to drive you where you need to go, but you'll have to let me know that by the end of the second week of the semester so I can organize my schedule accordingly. If you have a mobility issue that will make it difficult for you to do some of what is expected in the course, please see me immediately so we can begin working on what it will take to allow you to do what is expected of you. We'll make it work together without difficulty.

Finally, please note that we have two class field trips (weather permitting) on February 11 and 25. These trips are mandatory. If you are going to have a conflict with these trips (work, sports team, other activity), start working on resolving this conflict immediately. The first trip is the only time all semester we are going into the field as a group and the second will be central to your learning about how to access local historical records in Fairfax.

Introduction

Now that you have read the warnings, I hope you are still with me. Why am I teaching the class this way?

1. The fastest way to make sure you don't learn anything is to lecture. The pile of evidence from cognitive scientists demonstrating that lecturing is the least effective form of teaching (if the goal of teaching is student learning) is so large that it boggles the mind that we still lecture and that you still listen to lectures. I could go on, but it would be a rant—a rant supported by data, but still a rant—so I'll stop there.

2. The best way to have you learn historical methods is for you to be a historian. How do I know? There is an almost equally large mound of evidence that shows that learning experiences that are active, that allow students to actually do what their professor is talking about, that result in a tangible product rather than yet another test successfully completed or paper successfully written, result in significant, measurable learning gains.

For these three reasons, I threw out my old syllabus for HIST 300 and started from scratch. Here's what my old syllabus said about learning objectives:

This course provides history majors with an introduction to the techniques of the historian, including the reading of historical texts, research methods, historiography (the history of history), the various analytical frameworks used by historians today, and the writing of analytical historical prose. We will attack all of these goals in a way that will probably be a little different from what you might have expected when you signed up for the course.

Here's what the new syllabus says about learning objectives:

In this course you will learn the techniques of the historian by being a historian. You will start with a problem, locate evidence that will (you hope) help you solve that problem, will learn how to analyze that evidence as you try to solve your problem, and will need to figure out how the presentation of your answer to the problem fits with the ways historians talk about the past. Along the way you will also learn a little bit about such things as video production, online databases, geolocation of data, image manipulation, county records, local historical societies, genealogy, the use of social media in history, trespassing statutes, folksonomies, ethics, and dirt. You are almost certainly going to get dirty.

Last chance. Bail out now if you liked the old syllabus better. Still Here? Okay then, here's how the class is going to work.

After an orientation to the project we're going to undertake, you have to dive in feet (or head) first. The way we are going to do this is as follows:

1. All across Northern Virginia there are hundreds and hundreds of small family cemeteries that the suburbs have long since rolled over, but which still exist behind their often crumbling or crumbled iron and/or wood fences. In those cemeteries are actual historical artifacts called headstones. Those are the first primary sources you are going to work with and will introduce you to your problem.
2. Once you've located your cemetery, you will then begin the historian's task of trying to answer every possible question one could ask about the people buried there including (but not limited to):
 - a. Who were they?
 - b. Why are they buried there instead of somewhere else?
 - c. Why did they die?
 - d. What was their relationship to one another?

- e. What was their relationship to other people buried nearby (or elsewhere)?
- f. How is their cemetery similar or different from other area cemeteries?
- g. Why is it in good/bad/horrible shape today?
- h. Are any of their descendants still alive, and if so, where do they live?
- i. What did your people do when they were alive?
- j. How did what they did relate to what others in the area did?
- k. What was happening in the local area while they were alive?
- l. Were any of your people historically significant, i.e., did something worth noting by other historians?
- m. What can their lives tell us about the lives of others in the area at the same time?

3. Once you have formulated your list of questions, you will need to try to figure out how to answer them. Answering historical questions requires evidence and so your next important task is to figure out (a) what evidence might help you answer your questions and (b) where you can get that evidence. Then you'll have to go and get it.

4. After you have gathered a fair amount of evidence, you'll need to start analyzing it. As you analyze it, you'll also need to begin to read the secondary literature, i.e., books and articles by historians about things related to the story you are starting to construct about your people.

5. Your evidence will need to be entered into our database (<http://mycemeteries.org>) using the metadata standards of the Dublin Core (more on this later).

6. Once you know a lot about the people in your cemetery, you will select one of them and begin Tweeting on Twitter as that person. To do this well requires a combination of careful research and careful thinking. How can you speak in that person's voice if you don't know a lot about his or her life and what was happening in that person's world at that moment?

7. Finally, you will create your final project, which will be a mix of evidence, displayed online via our database, that blends what you've learned in your research, what you've done on Twitter, and what you've created in the database to present your learning in digital forms that will be increasingly the standard in history in the future.

Sounds easy, right? No? That's where the class sessions will help.

Class Sessions

Because we all (me included) will be working on a similar project, we will use class sessions not for me to talk at you, but for each of us to report out what is happening with our projects—I found this, I couldn't find that, here's a picture of my headstones, I don't know what to make of this evidence, I can't figure out how to get started on Twitter, etc. In the final third of the semester we spend a lot of time together in a workshop environment trying to complete our projects at the highest level of quality we can.

For this class to work, you have to come to class with something to say – either about your own work about the work of others in the class. What you have to say needs to be generative, meaning it takes us somewhere. If it's about your own work, it should be a

question that you need input on. If it's about someone else's work, it should be a useful comment that helps them move forward. If you don't come to class prepared, two things will happen: you will slow us all down because you aren't helping us speed up; your grade will suffer.

Required Readings

I have ordered five books for the course and we will also be looking at a variety of other online resources as we go along. You should also purchase a smallish, hardbound notebook that you can take with you into the field.

Terry A. Barnhart, *On Doing Local History*

David E. Kyvig, *Nearby History*

Wayne C. Booth, *The Craft of Research*

Russ Banham, *The Fight for Fairfax*

Nan Netherton, *Fairfax County, Virginia: A History* (this one has to be purchased online)

Assignments and Grading

Class participation: Every week you must do the assigned readings and come to class ready to talk about them. (20%)

Research product: You will select a local family cemetery and will research it in every way you (and we) can think of. You will also produce an annotated bibliography of at least 10 primary and secondary sources and a two page research statement (more on this later). (35%)

Digital Work: From among the sources you gather in your research, you will decide which are the most worthy for inclusion in our database/website, you will convert them to digital formats, and will enter them into the database following a set of rules handed out in class and impressed upon you in a training session early in the semester. From those raw materials you will create both a Twitter feed for one of your people and a compelling presentation of your findings using a pre-determined format (to make life easier on you). (35%)

Final Presentation: At the end of the semester you will use what you created in the database/website to give a presentation to the class. (10%)

The Lawyer's Chorus

Attendance: Because this is a seminar, I place a high premium on arriving on time. Unlike a lecture course, where you can slip in late, in a seminar, it is the height of bad manners to show up while someone else is speaking, disturbing his or her train of thought. Please extend the same courtesy to others that you would expect when you are the one speaking. Also, because class participation is a substantial portion of your grade, you should plan to attend each and every class this semester. How can you participate if you aren't in class?

ADA: Any student who requires special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me to make necessary accommodations (before February 15

please). Students should present appropriate verification from the Disability Resource Center.

Medical and other excuses: Every semester someone is forced to miss the due date for an assignment either as the result of an illness or a family emergency. If you find yourself in this situation, fairness to all students in the class requires the proper documentation, without which your excuses will not be accepted. If you need to know more about this process consult me as soon as the emergency is taken care of.

Plagiarism and cheating: In a word, don't. I refer every case of suspected cheating and plagiarism to the Honor Committee, so do us both a favor and just say no. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism and/or cheating, please see me.

Consumption: In my classes drink is permitted, but food and tobacco products of all kinds are prohibited. If you must chew, whether food or tobacco, do it before you arrive or after you leave.

Cell phones: Why do I even have to say this? Please turn off your phone or set it to vibrate before you come to class. And if you take a call in class (it's happened), I will penalize you severely in that all important class participation grade.

Laptops: I am not one of that growing legion of professors who bans laptops from class (see my blog post on this: <http://edwired.org/?p=587>). In fact, I encourage you to bring your laptop to class. But if you are clearly checked out (Anyone? Anyone? Bueller?) to Facebook, YouTube, AIM, League of Legends, or wherever, expect me to call on you.

Clothing: A pair of sturdy shoes is recommended but not required. Because we are working on this project outside during the worst of the winter months, a good pair of boots (and some warm gloves) will make life better. I have some pairs of each I can loan out.

Planned Course Schedule

Note: Readings should be completed before class.

January 23 – Class introduction

January 30 – Doing history, formulating historians' questions, working with primary and secondary sources. Read Booth, chapters 3 and 5.

February 6 – Doing Local History – Read Barnhart. Database/Zotero/Twitter training

February 13 – Class field trip to a local cemetery.

February 20 – Library field trip to downtown Fairfax.

February 27 – Doing history – Creating an argument from sources. Read Booth, chapters 7 and 8.

March 4 – Presentation of cemetery choices.

March 11 – No class. Spring Break

March 20 – Doing Local History – Read Kyvig

March 27 – Presentation of locations/research updates (progress reports). Read portions of *Fairfax County, Virginia* that are relevant to your work, be prepared to discuss.

April 3 – Presentation of locations/research updates (progress reports). Read *The Fight for Fairfax*.

April 10 – Research update/conversations about writing

April 17 – Research update (progress reports)

April 24 – Final presentations

May 1 – Final presentations and class party

May 8 – Final presentations (if needed)