

HIS 254 – DISASTERS OF THE AMERICAN GILDED AGE

Department of History, Davidson College

HIS 254
Spring, 2014
Chambers 2198
12:15 pm – 1:30 pm T, R

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Office hours: W 12:30-5:30 or by
appointment

From the 1631 Boston fire that led to North America's first recorded smoking ban, to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2011, to the earthquakes, tornados, hurricanes fires and floods that struck across America in 2013, disasters (sometimes violently) reshape the lives, politics, societies and spaces they strike. This historical methods workshop explores the disasters that impacted Gilded Age America – which remain the deadliest, most expensive and most destructive disasters in American history. We will question the relationship between “natural” events like storms and earthquakes; biological crises like epidemics; and man-made catastrophes like the sinking of the Titanic. Students will investigate the ways in which disasters are understood at different historical moments, how people place blame for disasters, and how disrupted environments are re-built. The class will be taught as a series of case studies, investigating particularly destructive, expensive and deadly disasters from the seventeenth century to the present. This approach introduces students to the history of particular kinds of disaster events. It also provides opportunities to discuss the different approaches that historians have taken when discussing individual disasters, or types of disaster.

200-level courses in the History Department are meant not only to explore a particular topic, but to provide students with an introduction to the professional study of history. Consequently, much of this course will be student-driven. Class participation—and to whit, attendance and careful preparation—constitute its most important element. Students will be required to make several presentations to the class on particular topics related to the larger subject of the day. There will also be several short papers. Finally, students will work on independent projects resulting in a final research paper. We will move deliberately through the various stages of writing such a paper, from the identification of a topic through the assembling of sources to the framing of a thesis and, in the end, the writing of a paper and its formal presentation to the public (in this case, the class). Some of this work will be collaborative, in that students working on similar or related topics will be clustered in groups in which they will share, support, and critique each other's work.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Command of information

- Competency in major political, social and economic events, movements and turning points in American history during the Gilded Age
- Competency in the disasters that characterized Gilded Age America.
- Competency in different explanations and interpretations of American disaster history.

Historical skills

- Ability to link events and themes from the past with current events.
- Ability to clearly express ideas and arguments through writing and speech.
- Ability to read, digest and analyze scholarly work on early American history.
- Ability to locate and select primary and secondary sources
- Ability to use and critique others' use of primary sources in making historical arguments.

EXPECTATIONS, POLICIES AND RULES:

Computers: Computers in class are discouraged. They provide many opportunities for distraction, and click-click of typing is a distraction for other students, so students using computers should sit together, at the front of the classroom. Anyone who engages in electronic communications or entertainment of any kind during class (texting, phone calls, emailing, Facebook web browsing, games, etc.) will be regarded as absent.

Accessibility: Davidson College is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability (or think you may have a disability) and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in this class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the College's programs or services, contact the Academic Access and Disability Resources office (<http://sites.davidson.edu/ctl/learning-service/disabilityresources/>) as soon as possible. To receive any academic accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with AADR, whose staff works with students confidentially and does not disclose any disability-related information without their permission. The AADR serves as a clearinghouse on disability issues and works in partnership with faculty and all other student service offices.

Many of us learn in different ways, and this course is designed accommodate each student differently. For example, you may prefer to process information by speaking and listening, so while lectures are quite helpful for you, some of the written material may be difficult to absorb. Please talk to me as soon as you can about your individual learning needs and how this course can best accommodate them. If you do not have a documented disability, remember that other support services, including the Writing Center and the Center for Teaching and Learning and the Speaking Center, are available to all students (<http://sites.davidson.edu/ctl/students/>).

Contact and office hours: I encourage you to come by office hours to check in during the term – feel free to discuss concerns or drafts, or to ask questions about things we have covered in class. Please plan to come see me sometime during the first two weeks of class to touch base, say hello and talk over any expectations or anxieties you have about the class.

I can be reached by e-mail during normal business hours (9-5, m-f), and will generally respond to e-mails received during those hours within 24 hours of receipt. I will strive for, but cannot guarantee speedy responses outside of those times.

Academic honesty: Integrity and honor, as exemplified by the honor code (<http://www3.davidson.edu/cms/x8918.xml>) is the college's most fundamental commitment. Plagiarism of any kind will be penalized to the fullest possible extent. There is no mitigating

circumstance, ever, for plagiarism.

Whenever you draw upon somebody else's words *or ideas* to make a point, give them credit in a footnote. The most common causes of plagiarism are not deliberate dishonesty. Often it is careless note-taking. Make sure that in your notes you distinguish clearly your thoughts on the reading and the words you have copied from a secondary source. Waiting too long to do the research and the stress and confusion that may result from that rush to finish may produce mistakes that in public represent the most serious violation of academic values. You are, therefore, strongly encouraged to start assignments well in advance of the deadline. If you are uncertain about how to deal with a question of fair credit, ask me. You are also encouraged to consult writing center tutors if you have writing questions.

Writing guidelines: You are expected to master the citation style that is common among historians. This style is known as Chicago Style. The Chicago Manual of Style is available online, and in the Davidson College Library.

Please follow the history department's style guidelines, found at:
<http://www.davidson.edu/Documents/Academic%20Department/History/writing-style-guide.pdf>

Good writing is central to the practice history. That includes the questions of form, and it certainly concerns good grammar. But most historical writing differs from other academic disciplines by its concern for style. Generally history is written in a plain style, not flowery writing with an excess of verbage. Good writing is clear and succinct with the argument clear. A very little book by William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* is generally accepted as the best available guide to such writing. Purchase this book and read it carefully, especially the second chapter, on "Elementary Principles of Composition."

For help with writing, please review the writing and style guide posted on the course moodle, and visit the Writing Center at Chambers Building, North Basement, Room B039. Website: <http://sites.davidson.edu/ctl/students/tutoring/writing/>. Hours: Sunday through Thursday, 2-4pm and 8-11pm

Late Assignments: Late papers lose 1/3 of a grade per day. E.g., a B paper submitted the morning after it was due, will receive a B-. Papers more than 72 hours late will receive an F.

Drafts: I am happy to look at one draft per primary source assignment, but in order to get my comments you must come to meet with me in person. These drafts need not exhibit correct citation form, but must be completely cited. I will look at drafts sent to me by the **MONDAY** before the assignment is due, and meet with you during my normal office hours on Wednesdays.

EVALUATION

Attendance and participation	25%
Preparatory assignments	25%
Reading responses	25%
Research Proposal	25%

You cannot pass the class unless you pass each of these categories.

Readings: You are expected to read, digest and consider all of each week's readings. Since this is a course in historical methodology, you will be expected to locate all of the assigned articles for this course using JSTOR or the library website. If you have trouble locating any given article, get in touch with me or with your classmates. Not having located or downloaded the readings is no excuse for not having read them.

Attendance and Participation. An essential component of the craft of history is expressing yourself clearly in a variety of ways, including orally. In this course, your learning depends upon your regular, informed and thoughtful participation in discussion, writing and blog posts. In order to participate fully you *must* have completed all of each week's reading.

Attendance therefore is essential to participation, and it is expected that you attend all class meetings. You are permitted up to two absences each semester – for every student, their two lowest participation grades will be dropped. More than two absences will likely impact your final grade. No student with more than seven absences will pass the course. Regardless of your reason for missing a class, you will be responsible for the material covered that day. Please let me know in advance if you will be missing class.

I understand that speaking in class can be a stressful or daunting experience for some students, so I expect that everyone contribute to making the classroom a comfortable and respectful intellectual environment in which everyone can participate. If you have anxiety about public speaking, please arrange a meeting with me ASAP.

These policies take effect from the first day of class, regardless of when you begin attending the course. For example, if the first time you attend class is during the second week of the semester, you will have already been marked absent from two class meetings.

Blog responses: Before **TWELVE** classes of your choosing, you will write a 250~500 word response to all of the week's readings. These responses should be posted to the course blog **by 7 PM before the class meeting**, in order to give me and your fellow students time to read them. Through these response papers, you will develop the skills necessary to critically read primary and secondary historical sources. Every response should:

- Identify the central questions that inform the readings
- Identify the argument of the reading
- Identify the evidentiary base for the readings (these can be either primary or secondary sources)
- Convey your impressions, likes, dislikes about the readings
- Provide 1-3 keywords as tags for your post (these can be new, or can draw on tags that other students have already used)
- (After the first week) *substantively* reference one of your peers' responses in their own work each week. This means doing more than saying [person] wrote about [x] on [date]. You should explain how your peers' commentary adds to your own interpretation of the week's reading.

- If you are looking for a good place to start your response, feel free to use the week's focus question as a prompt.

This blog is meant to be a conversation amongst scholars (you and your peers). Feel free to include images, music, video, or references to current events in these responses.

While you are required to post twelve times during the semester, you are both permitted and encouraged to post other items of interest. These will be counted as extra credit.

Preparatory assignments: Divided between two primary source analyses, a book report, an annotated bibliography and an historiographical review. Together, and with revisions, these papers will constitute your final research proposal.

Final paper: The final paper will take the form of a research prospectus for a project on some disaster of America's Gilded Age – either one we've covered in class or another that you are interested in. The final paper will contain a topic statement, a series of historical questions that remain to be answered on the topic, a review of the relevant historical literature and discussion of how you arrived at those historical questions, a discussion of the kinds of sources you might use to answer those questions.

TEXTS

Main readings: available the bookstore and on reserve at the library

- Steven Biel. *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster* (W.W. Norton and Co., 1996)
- Leavitt, Judith Walzer. *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public's Health*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996),
- Erik Larson, *Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* (Vintage, 2000).
- David G. McCullough, *The Johnstown flood* (Simon and Schuster, 1987)
- Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 6th edition (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010)

CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK 1 – INTRODUCTION

Tuesday, January 14th – Introduction to the Course

Thursday, January 16th – What is disaster history?

- Bergman, J. "Disaster: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *History Compass* 6, no. 3 (2008): 934–946.
- Kenneth Hewitt, *Regions of risk: A geographical introduction to disasters* (1997). Introduction pp. 1-16

Focus Question: What are different historical approaches to studying the history of American disasters?

WEEK 2 – WELCOME TO THE GILDED AGE

Tuesday, January 21st – What was the Gilded Age?

- Charles W. Calhoun. “Moving Beyond Stereotypes of the Gilded Age” in *OAH Magazine of History*. Vol. 13, No. 4, Summer 1999.
- Rampolla on historiography (paged TBA)
- “Introduction,” Chapters 1 and 2 from *New Spirits*

Thursday, January 23rd – Gilded Age historiography

- James Connolly “Bringing the City Back in: Space and Place in the Urban History of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* , Vol. 1, No. 3 (Jul., 2002), pp. 258-278
- Richard Schneirov, “Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873-1898.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* , Vol. 5, No. 3 (Jul., 2006)
- Rebecca Edwards “Politics, Social Movements, and the Periodization of U. S. History.” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* , Vol. 8, No. 4 (Oct., 2009)

Focus Question: What are the central questions of histories of the Gilded Age?

In 500 to 700 words, write a primary source response to one of the art pieces in the *State of Emergency* exhibition. Your paper should include a bit of background on the disaster (or type of disaster) being reacted to, as well as what kind of argument you think a piece of art like it could be used to make. **Due on the course blog by 5:00 PM ON FRIDAY, JANUARY 24th**

WEEK 3 – PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Tuesday, January 28th – A particularly disastrous age?

- Stephen Biel. *American Disasters*. Introduction
- Christopher N. Matthews. “Gilded Ages and Gilded Archaeologies of American Exceptionalism” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* , Vol. 16, No. 4 (December 2012)
- Kevin Rozario. “What Goes Up Must Come Down” in *American Disasters*
- Shiela Holmes: “Distant Disasters, Local Fears” in *American Disasters*

Thursday, January 30th – The Frontier Thesis

- Frederick Jackson Turner. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/chapter1.html>)
- William Cronon. “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner” in *Western Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 18, No. 2 1987 (JSTOR)

Focus Question: Were the possibilities of natural, human and other disasters built-in to the structure of Gilded Age/Expansionist American Society?

In 700 to 1000 words, write a formal assessment of the historiography we've read so far on *either* disasters in American history, or on Gilded Age historiography more generally. In doing so, make sure to make a concrete argument about what the central questions of the literature are, how those questions have shaped historical arguments, what questions seem to remain unanswered, and where you would like either field to go in future. Your historiography review should include no fewer than **THREE** of the articles or chapters we've read in class to date. **Due by 5:00 PM on FRIDAY, JANUARY 31st.**

WEEK FOUR – NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTS

Tuesday, February 4th – NO CLASS

Thursday, February 6th – “Taming” the West

- William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis*. Part I

Focus Question: How did nineteenth-century Americans understand their environments and the natural world? Should we think of the stripping of the plains as a natural disaster?

WEEK FIVE – CHICAGO AND PESHTIGO FIRES

Tuesday, February 11th – Experiencing the fire

- Review “The Great Chicago Fire” website (<http://www.thechicagofire.com/>)
- Peter Pernin. “The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account” in *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*. Vol. 54, No. 4 (Summer, 1971)

Thursday, February 13th – Interpreting the fire

- Smith, “Faith and doubt: the imaginative dimensions of the Great Chicago Fire,” in *American Disasters*, ed. Steven Biel, 2001, 129–169

Focus Question: What was the relationship between American ideas about the environment, and the “Great” fires?

In 700 to 1000 words, write a formal analysis of the collection of primary sources related to the Chicago Fire. This essay should situate the sources in the time and place of their production, as well as in the historiographical literature we've read so far. In doing so, make a concrete argument about the fire. **Due by 5:00 PM on FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14th**

WEEK 6 – INDUSTRIALIZATION

Tuesday, February 18th – 11:00-12:00 – Common Hour discussion of disasters. ****EXTRA CREDIT**** for attendance and post to the course blog.

Tuesday, February 18th – The rise of Industrial America

- Chapters 3 and 4 from *New Sprits*

Thursday, February 20th – Challenges of Industrialization

- McCullough, *The Johnstown flood*. Chapters 1-3

Focus Question: What was the relationship between American industrialization and the conditions that led to the Johnstown Flood?

In 400 to 500 words, write a polished paragraph describing the subject of your final paper proposal. This paragraph should include a snappy title, an announcement of the topic, two or three historical questions (see Rampolla for a discussion of what makes good historical question) and a brief discussion of potential primary sources. **Due by 5:00 PM on FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 21st**

WEEK 7 – LIBRARY SESSION/INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS

Tuesday, February 25th – Library session

Thursday, February 27th – Individual meetings

For the blog post this week, please post an update on the status of your research project. This post will count towards your total required posts, but is compulsory.

WEEK 8 – SPRING BREAK (NO CLASS)

Write a short annotated bibliography (10) items on your chosen topic. Feel free to include apposite readings from the course **Due by 5:00 PM on WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12th**

WEEK 9 – JOHNSTOWN FLOOD

Tuesday, March 11th – The Inundation

- McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood*. Chapters 4-6

Thursday, March 13th – The reaction

- McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood*. Chapters 7-9

Focus Question: In what ways was the Johnstown Flood an archetypical Gilded Age disaster? In what ways was it not?

WEEK 10 – GALVESTON HURRICANE

Tuesday, March 18th – Storms and Storm forecasting

- Larson, *Isaac's Storm*.

Thursday, March 20th – Storm recovery

- Patricia Bellis Bixel, ““It Must Be Made Safe”: Galveston, Texas and the 1900 Story,” in *American Disasters*

Focus Question: How did the Galveston Hurricane shape American ideas about disaster preparedness?

Write a book review of one monograph, which may be one of the assigned readings. **Due by 5:00 PM on FRIDAY, MARCH 21st**

WEEK 11 – THE SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE

Tuesday, March 15th – Race and Quake

- Phillip L. Fradkin. *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself*. Part II

Thursday, March 17th – Meanings of earthquakes

- T. Steinberg, “Smoke and mirrors: the San Francisco earthquake and seismic denial”, *American Disasters* (2001).
- Mike Davis, *Ecology of fear: Los Angeles and the imagination of disaster* (Vintage Books, 1999). Introduction

Focus Question: How did San Francisco’s racial and urban politics play into disaster response?

WEEK 12 – TITANIC/LIBRARY

In preparation for our library session. Write down, and bring to class with you a list of primary source types that you might possibly use for your final project. Be prepared to introduce your final project in a sentence or two

Tuesday, April 1st – Library session

Thursday, April 3rd – An unsinkable ship?

- Biel. *Down with the Old Canoe*. Part I

Focus Question: How did the politics of race, class and gender inflect expectations about the Titanic?

Write an analysis of one primary source for your final project. **Due by 5:00 PM on FRIDAY, APRIL 4th**

WEEK 13 – DISASTER RESPONSE

Tuesday, April 8th – Reacting to the impossible

- Biel. *Down with the Old Canoe*. Part II

Thursday, April 10th – **NO CLASS**

Focus Question: How did the politics of race, class and gender inflect responses to epidemics?

WEEK 14 – CLASS POLITICS

Tuesday, April 15th – Progress presentations

Thursday, April 17th – Immigration politics

- George Soper. “Typhoid Mary”
- Judith Walker Leavitt. *Typhoid Mary* [SELECTIONS]

Historiography Review. (600 to 700 words) Write an essay in which you explore the scholarship that has been done on your chosen research proposal topic. Place the writings of different scholars in conversation with each other and to your historical question. Be sure to articulate a clear argument for what you see as successful or unsuccessful approaches to the topic. **Due at 5 pm on FRIDAY, April 18th.**

WEEK 15 – PEER REVIEW

Thursday, April 22nd – EASTER BREAK – NO CLASS

Thursday, April 24th – Peer review exercise

WEEK 16 – DUST BOWL

Tuesday, April 29th - NO CLASS

Thursday, May 1st – The politics of water

- Clayton R. Koppes. “Dusty Volumes: Environmental Disaster and Economic Collapse in the 1930s.” *Reviews in American History*. Vol. 8, No. 4 (December 1980)

Focus Question: Was the dustbowl an epilogue to the story of Gilded Age disasters, or the start of a new disasterous epoch?

Rough draft (Introduction+historiography+primary source analysis+discussion of further primary sources) due on Moodle by **5:00 PM on FRIDAY, MAY 2nd**

WEEK 17 – WRAPPING UP

Tuesday, May 6th – Telling historical stories

- William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative.” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (March 1992)