

**History of American Environments to 1893: The Colonial Era to the  
Frontier Thesis**  
**Department of History, Davidson College**

HIS 458  
Spring, 2014  
Chambers 2196  
M, 1:30 pm – 4:20 pm

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

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and inaugurated the study of American environmental history. This course explores the history of American environments from the colonial period to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the different historiographical traditions that have informed American environmental history between Turner and the present.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

*Command of information*

- Familiarity with changes in the American environment over time between colonization and the frontier thesis
- Familiarity with Americans’ changing ideas about the environment over time
- Familiarity with arguments for an environmental approach to history.
- Familiarity with major debates in environmental history.

*Historical skills*

- Ability to frame a familiar historical issue in terms of environmental historical approaches.
- Ability to craft a proposal for a research project on an environmental historical topic.
- Ability to clearly express ideas and arguments through writing and speech.
- Ability to read, digest and analyze scholarly work on American environmental history.
- Ability to use and critique the use of primary sources in making historical arguments.

**ORGANIZING QUESTIONS:**

- How does an environmental approach to American history highlight, obscure, or offer alternative perspectives on familiar historical events?
- How have American attitudes towards space (that identified as “natural” and otherwise) changed over time?
- What themes are common among American engagement with the environment?
- What does it mean to be “natural” or “wild” (and conversely, “unnatural” or “tame”)?

**EXPECTATIONS AND RULES:**

*E-mail and Moodle forum:* I will be communicating with you via e-mail and the Moodle forums (updates to which can be forwarded to your Davidson e-mail address). Make sure you check these regularly. You are responsible for course updates/changes/notifications circulated in this

manner.

*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. 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 as soon as possible:  
(<http://sites.davidson.edu/ctl/learning-service/disabilityresources/>)

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 discussions 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.** While walk-ins are welcome, you are *strongly* encouraged to schedule an appointment via the link on the course Moodle or <http://shrouta.appointy.com>.

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.

**ASSESSMENT:**

<b>Blog posts (10)</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Participation/attendance</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Discussant (2)</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Supplementary reading comment</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>Final paper components</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Final paper</b>	<b>20%</b>

**\*You MUST pass each of these categories to pass the class\***

*Final paper project.* The final assessment can take multiple forms:

- 1) An historiographical paper which reviews the state of the literature on some aspect of American environmental history, stakes a claim about that literature and suggests future directions for research, inclusive of a detailed discussion of the kinds of sources you might use to undertake that research. Basically, this paper asks you to pick some aspect of American environmental history, read scholarly works on it, come to your own conclusions about the state of the field, ask a question that furthers the state of the field, and either answers the question or explains how you might use some sources to answer that question.
- 2) An alternative project or presentation which stakes a claim or position about American environmental history.

Regardless of the kind of project you do, over the course of the semester you will be asked to turn in:

- Identification of topic
- Identification of historical questions
- Identification of possible primary sources
- Draft historiographical review
- Draft final paper
- Final paper

*Reviews of weekly readings.* For **TEN** weeks of your choosing, students will write a short (~500 word) response to the week’s readings. These might include (1) identification of the book or articles’ argument, (2) kinds of sources used, (3) the place of the book within the broader historiography (either drawing on previous readings or on the authors’ own characterization of their place in the historiography) and (4) your own response to the reading.

These responses should be posted to the course blog **by midnight the day before the class meets**, in order to give me and your fellow students time to read them. Consider your colleagues' posts to be part of the week's assigned reading.

These are meant to be informal responses to the week's reading. Pictures, references to external material, and recent historical events are welcome. You will not be graded on form.

*Supplementary reading comments.* Students should write one extended book review discussing that week's core readings along with the supplementary reading for that week. Extended reviews should be approximately 1,500 words. Reviews are due **by midnight the day before the class meets**. For the weeks they complete extended reviews, students should **NOT** also write a blog post, but should be prepared to discuss the secondary text in class.

These longer comments should also be submitted to the course blog, so that your colleagues can become familiar with the supplementary reading.

*Discussant.* **TWICE** during the semester, students will lead discussion of the core texts in class. For most weeks, there will be two discussants, and these students should work together to come up with a list of questions that they feel are essential for understanding the readings in the context of the course. Plan for between 6 and 8 questions overall (3-4 for each student) and be prepared to lead a brief class discussion based on your questions.

*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 one absence each semester. If you do not take that absence, your lowest participation grade will be dropped. More than one absence will impact your final grade. No student with more than five 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.

#### **RULES FOR WRITING:**

*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 (though turning in a paper more than three days late will result in failing with a 50. Not turning in a paper at all will result in failing with a 0)

*Drafts:* I am happy to look at drafts, 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 **TUESDAY** before the assignment is due, and will meet with you during my normal office hours on Wednesdays.

#### **READINGS:**

- J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (eds). *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (1998)
- Alfred Crosby. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (2004)
- William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1992)
- Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (2001)
- Karl Jacoby. *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (2003)
- Lisa M. Brady. *War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War.* (2012)\*
- Slotkin, Richard. *Fatal Environment* (1998)
- Ted Steinberg. *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (2002)
- Ted Steinberg. *Nature Incorporated.* (2004)

## WEEKLY TOPICS:

### Week 1 – January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Introduction to the course; Some major themes in American environmental history

- Donald Worster, "Doing Environmental History," in Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 289-307. (moodle)
- William Cronon. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative," in *Journal of American History*. Vol. 78, No. 4 (1992) (JSTOR)
- William Cronon. "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner" in *Western Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 18, No. 2 1987 (JSTOR)
- Frederick Jackson Turner. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/chapter1.html>)

### Week 2 – January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – MLK break

- Sometime between weeks 1 and 3, students will write a short think piece about wilderness, nature and the Davidson campus (~500 words). These should draw on your own explorations of campus as well as the maps from the Davidsoniana room. This will count towards your total blog posts, but is not optional.

### Week 3 – January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Ideas of American Wilderness

- *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. Groups of students each take a section

#### Supplementary text:

- Roderick Nash. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. (2001)

<b>Identification of three possible paper topics due by FRIDAY, JANUARY 31<sup>st</sup>, 5:00 PM</b>
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### Week 4 – February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 - Contact and American Environments

- Alfred Crosby. *Ecological Imperialism*

#### Supplementary text:

- William Cronon. *Changes in the Land*. (1983)

### Week 5 – February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Rural and urban in early America

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

#### Supplementary text:

- James D. Drake. *The Nation's Nature: How Continental Presumptions Gave Rise to the United States of America*. (2011)

<b>Identification of final paper topic due by FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14<sup>th</sup>, 5:00 PM</b>
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**Week 6 – February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Early Republican cities – the urban/rural divide; altering landscapes; problems particular to urban environs**

- Richard Bushman. *Refinement of America*.

Supplementary text:

- Lawrence N. Powell. *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans*. (2013)

**Week 7 – February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Extraction and new environments; commodification; buffalo**

- Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920*

Supplementary text:

- Jennifer L. Anderson. *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America*. (2012)

**Preliminary bibliography due by FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28<sup>th</sup>, 5:00 PM**

**Week 8 – March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 – SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS**

**Week 9 – March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – The Frontier**

- Slotkin, Richard. *Fatal Environment*

Supplementary text:

- Richard White. *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America*. (2011)

**Week 10 – March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – The Civil War and the Environment**

- Lisa Brady. *War Upon the Land*.

Supplementary text:

- Megan Kate Nelson. *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (2012)

**Preliminary identification of primary sources due FRIDAY, MARCH 21<sup>st</sup>, 5:00 PM**

**Week 11 – March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Water Politics**

- Ted Steinberg. *Nature Incorporated*.

Supplementary text:

- Donald Worster. *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West*. (1985)

**Week 12 – March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014 – Industrialization and commodification in the West**

- William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis*, Parts II and III

Supplementary text:

- Samuel P. Hays. *The Response to Industrialism, 1885-1914* (1995)

**Preliminary historiography due by FRIDAY, APRIL 4<sup>th</sup>, 5:00 PM**

**Week 13 – April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Gilded Age disasters – Johnstown Flood; Chicago and Peshtigo fires; Galveston; rumblings about regulation; blaming nature**

- Selected readings from Biel's *American Disasters*.

Supplementary text:

- Ted Steinberg. *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (2006)

**Week 14 – April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Politics of Preservation**

- Karl Jacoby. *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*

Supplementary text:

- Keller, Robert, and Michael Turek. *American Indians and National Parks*. (1998)

**Week 15 – April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014 – EASTER BREAK – NO CLASS**

**Rough draft due by FRIDAY, APRIL 25<sup>th</sup>, 5:00 PM**

**Week 16 – April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – American environmental history today**

- Ted Steinberg. *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*

Supplementary text:

- Mike Davis. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. (1998)

**Week 17 – May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – Final paper presentations**

**Final paper due by WEDNESDAY, MAY 14<sup>th</sup>, 5:15 PM**