Washington History Matters

History 615, section 3. George Mason University. Spring 2006

Mondays, 7:20 pm - 10:00 pm. Arlington Campus 242
Course wiki: http://chnm.gmu.edu/dc/wiki/index.php?title=Main_Page

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Office Hours: Wednesdays, 2-4 pm, and by appointment.
Syllabus revised: January 10, 2006

Introduction

This course is a graduate practicum in digital public history. Students and instructor will collaborate to build a new website, "Washington History Matters," featuring primary sources on the history of Washington, D.C. The website's primary audience is George Mason University undergraduates, but in the long run we hope to serve anyone with a serious interest in the subject. The website is planned to grow year by year, but in spring 2006, students have the unique challenge of building the first modules.

Our initial focus is the Washington's built environment, encompassing issues of planning, architecture, and historic preservation. We will explore the historiography of Washington and other cities, models of digital history, and technical issues of digitization. Much of the work of this course will take place at the Department of Special Collections, Gelman Library, George Washington University, and students will often work unsupervised.

No specific background in web development is required, but because of the course's experimental format, comfort with computers, individual initiative, and a sense of humor are prerequisites. Because this course requires access to primary materials not held by the George Mason University libraries, students will need some flexibility in their schedules to visit George Washington University or other libraries during those libraries' regular hours.

Goals

In this course, you will:

1. Gain hands-on experience using digital hardware and software to make primary sources available to a wide audience.

2. Learn techniques of archival research in urban history.

3. Make a lasting contribution to the teaching of the history of Washington, D.C.

Books

The following two books have been ordered at the university bookstore. Additional readings will be posted on-line or placed on electronic reserve.

Daniel Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig. *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

Max Page. *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940.* Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Requirements

- Essays (10% each; total 50%). In five essays, you will document the process of building a digital teaching resource.

- Wiki contributions (10%). On one occasion, you will join other students to synthesize all the essays on a topic onto a single entry for the project wiki. Wiki contributions are due one week after the corresponding essays.

- Final project (30%). By the end of the course, working alone or with a partner, you will build a module of roughly 15 – 40 documents of various media, along with accompanying introductory material, assignment questions, and bibliographic information. The project grade will reflect all of these elements.

- Participation (10%). Your participation grade will reflect your raising significant questions about the process of building the website, offering suggestions for questions raised by others, and offering constructive criticism of others' modules.

Policies

All assignments are governed by the George Mason University **honor code,** online at http://www.gmu.edu/departments/unilife/honorcode.html. You are expected to work independently and to acknowledge all sources, including assigned texts and materials found online. Consult Gordon Harvey's "Writing with Sources," http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources for instructions on when and how to cite, and ask me if you need clarification. In general, any sentence in your work that can be traced to a single sentence in someone else's work should bear a footnote. Any collaboration, such as consultation with the Writing Center, should also be acknowledged. Violations of academic integrity will be reported to the administration and may result in grade penalties, including failure of the course.

In case of **inclement weather**, please call the main switchboard at 703-993-1000 or consult the main web page at http://www.gmu.edu/ to see if classes are cancelled. I expect to cancel class only when the university cancels all classes.

If you are a student with a **disability** and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

All students are expected to check their **gmu.edu e-mail** regularly and are responsible for information sent to their GMU addresses.

Schedule

Aside from the first and last weeks, the semester is divided into three types of classes. Discussion classes are traditional seminar meetings, in which students will discuss assigned readings or the lessons they have learned from their archival work. Workshop classes are training sessions, in which students will be shown the procedures for archival research, digitizing material, and posting to the website. In weeks slated for individual work we will not have group discussions, but I will be on hand to answer questions about the process of digitization. The class will end with an open house that will mark the official launch of the website.

January

23. Introduction.

30. Discussion: The creative destruction of cities

- Read: Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940.*
- DUE: Personal statements (not graded).

February

6. Discussion: The creative destruction of Washington

- Read. Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty,* chapters 5-9; Schrag, *Great Society Subway,* chapters 6 and 8.
- ESSAY #1 DUE: The sources of urban history. Based on your reading of Page, Gillette, and Schrag, explain what types of sources historians use to tell the story of a city's built environment, and suggest which sources would be most valuable if digitized.
- Assignment of topics. Each student or pair of student will be assigned one manuscript collection at George Washington University, from which they will select items to be scanned and posted to the web. If a student's schedule makes it impossible for her to spend enough time at GW to work with their collections, she may instead work with congressional testimony concerning the District of Columbia. However, since the Mason libraries do not hold this material, this option will still require considerable library time at GW, the Library of Congress, or another library that holds the hearings.

13. **Meet at GW.** Workshop: Introduction to the archives.

- ESSAY #2 DUE: Chronology. Using the Washington Post (online in ProQuest Historical Newspapers and Lexis-Nexis), write a brief description of the events that produced the collection you are working on.

20. Discussion: Digital History

- Read. Cohen and Rosenzweig, *Digital History,* chapters 1-4.

    ESSAY #3 DUE: The design of digital history. Find a website (other than American Memory) that presents primary-source material in American

history. Using the criteria set forth by Cohen and Rosenzweig, evaluate that website and one collection from American Memory < http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>. What elements should we borrow? What should we avoid?

27. Individual work: Selecting and scanning.

March

6. Individual work: Selecting and scanning

13. NO CLASS (spring break)

20. Individual work: Selecting and scanning.

27. Discussion: what makes a good document?

- ESSAY #4 DUE: Reflections on selecting and scanning. Explain what you have learned about selecting and scanning documents for the website.

April

3. Workshop: Encoding and posting the documents.

10. Individual work: encoding and posting.

17. Individual work: encoding and posting.

24. Discussion: what makes a good module?

- ESSAY #5 DUE: Reflections on encoding and posting. Explain what you have learned about encoding and posting documents for the website.

May

1. Open house: launching the website