

The Digital Past

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George Mason University, HIST 390, Spring 2015

N.B. The only authoritative version of this syllabus is available online. Please refer to the version at <http://lincolnmullen.com/courses/digital-past-2015/>.

Welcome to “The Digital Past” at George Mason University. Below is a description of our class. Please feel free to [e-mail me](#) with questions or to make arrangements to talk in my office.

About this class

In this class, you will learn to do history using digital tools. The course—which satisfies the university’s IT requirement—teaches the fundamentals of information technology by applying them to practical problems in history. Throughout the semester, you will work individually and with classmates on a research project about American history from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of World War I. You will learn how to do research online, but also how to put those sources in the context of other scholarly work. You will gather data, learn how to question it, analyze it, summarize it, and interpret it. You will create visualizations of datasets, especially maps. You will learn how to present visual and textual sources online in web exhibits, and you will learn how to write and publish effectively online. Through learning by doing, you will gain both digital skills and the skills of a historian. This combination will be useful to you throughout your university career and in your future work.

On the first day of class you will pick a city in the United States. You research for your final project and many of your assignments along the way will focus on this city. More on this in class. You will make something each week in class that builds towards a final exhibit that showcases your work throughout the semester.

What each class meeting will be like

We will meet once per week. The classes will build on one another, so your attendance at each class is vital. **Bring a laptop and its power cord to every class.** Before class each week, you will read about both history and digital technology. You may also be asked to gather data or do historical research. During class, we will begin by discussing the readings. Then we will have a hands-on session to learn how to use some digital technology as a historian; everyone in the class will follow along. Then you will work in small groups to master the same skill. We will wrap up class with a discussion of what we learned. The day after class, you will write a blog post where you share what you created in class and reflect on what you have learned.

How to do well in this class

First and foremost, please ask me for help for any reason, whether you are stuck, or whether you want to learn more about what we're doing in class. Second, be persistent. Be willing to experiment, and be willing to make mistakes. Some of your best blog posts might be about what you learned by making a mistake. Third, remember that your goal is not to learn tools but concepts. Look for the skills and ideas underlying the specific technologies we will work with. Fourth, keep up by coming to class having done the reading and any other preliminary assignments, then reflect on what you learned the next day. If you miss class, you'll have a hard time keeping up.

What you will learn

In this class you will learn a mix of historical and digital skills. In particular you will meet all of Mason's [IT requirements](#).

1. You will learn how to do historical research and scholarship using a range of tools and resources that are available on the web.
2. You will successfully develop and publish historical scholarship on the web.
3. "Students will be able to use technology to locate, access, evaluate, and use information, and appropriately cite resources from digital/electronic media." (IT Requirement #1)
4. "Students will understand the core IT concepts in a range of current and emerging technologies and learn to apply appropriate technologies to a range of tasks." (IT Requirement #2)

5. "Students will understand many of the key ethical, legal and social issues related to information technology and how to interpret and comply with ethical principles, laws, regulations, and institutional policies." (IT Requirement #3)
6. "Students will demonstrate the ability to communicate, create, and collaborate effectively using state-of-the-art information technologies in multiple modalities." (IT Requirement #4)
7. "Students will understand the essential issues related to information security, how to take precautions and use techniques and tools to defend against computer crimes." (IT Requirement #5)

Assignments

Assignment weights

Assignment	Weight
class participation	20%
weekly blog posts	35%
final project	40%
presentation	5%

Class participation

Class participation requires you to attend class, but is not defined by attendance. You will not be credited for participation in weeks that you miss class. I expect your active participation both in class discussions and in the hands-on portions of class. To participate fully you will have to come to class having thoroughly prepared all preliminary assignments.

Weekly Blog Posts

Each week you will write a blog post about your work for that week. You should write a minimum of 400 words each week, and include whatever images, maps, visualizations, or the like you have created each week. Blog posts should be written to the same standards as academic papers with proper diction, correct grammar, accurate citations, cogency of argument, and thoughtful organization.

Blog posts must be posted by 10 p.m. the day after class (i.e., Thursday)

by 8:00 a.m. on the Saturday after class. No late posts will be accepted. I will frequently provide feedback on what you have written. At least four times during the semester I will assign you a formal grade.

Final Project

For the full description, see the [final project page](#).

The final project is **due May 6 by 10 p.m.** Make sure that your project is available online, then send me the URL via e-mail.

Presentation

You will give a presentation about your final project, including slides, during the last two weeks of class. Don't be boring. Your date and additional instructions will be provided later in the semester.

Schedule

Week 1 / Jan 21: Getting Started & Internet Presence

Before class:

- Megan O'Neil, "[Confronting the Myth of the 'Digital Native'](#)," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 21, 2014.
- Miriam Posner, Stewart Varner, and Brian Coxall, "[Creating Your Web Presence](#)," *ProfHacker*, February 14, 2011.
- Ryan Cordell, "[Creating and Maintaining a Professional Presence Online](#)," *ProfHacker*, October 3, 2012.

During class:

- Sign up for a [WordPress.com](#) blog. See the [documentation](#) for help in customizing your site.
- Take the [digital native quiz](#).
- Write a "hello world" post about where you are in your career as a student.
- Sign up for a city.

After class:

- Write a substantive post on the potential uses and possible pitfalls of an online presence. Flesh out your site as you deem appropriate, and explain your choices in the blog post. [Fill out this form](#) so that I know where to find your blog.

Week 2 / Jan 28: Digital History & The Internet

Before class:

- Dan Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, "[Promises and Perils of Digital History](#)" and "[Getting Started](#)," in *Digital History*, online edition (Center for History and New Media, 2005).
- Miriam Posner, "[How Did They Make That?](#)," August 29, 2013. Click through to all of the projects listed in this post.
- Pew Research, "[The Web at 25 in the U.S.](#)," February 27, 2014.
- "[How the Internet Works in 5 Minutes](#)"
- "[History of the Internet](#)"
- Timothy Lee, "[Everything You Need to Know About Network Neutrality](#)," *Vox*, May 21, 2014.
- Vannevar Bush, "[As We May Think](#)," *The Atlantic* (July 1945).
- "[Reconstruction](#)," ch. 15 of *The American Yawp*.

In class:

- In a group, investigate at least three of the projects below. What do they have in common? What is different about them? What arguments do they make? What sources are they based on? Who created them, and who did what work? Who funded them? What technologies do they use? How do they communicate?
- [Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States](#)
- [Digital Harlem](#)
- [Geography of the Post](#)
- [Gulag: Many Days, Many Lives](#)
- [Her Hat Was in the Ring](#)
- [Histories of the National Mall](#)
- [HistoryPin](#)
- [Hurricane Digital Memory Bank](#)
- [Language of the State of the Union](#), [Mapping the State of the Union](#), and [The State of the Union in Context](#)

- [Locating London's Past](#)
- [The Lost Museum](#)
- [Mining the Dispatch](#)
- [Mozilla Digital Memory Bank](#)
- [Old Bailey Online](#)
- [Orbis & Orbis version 2](#)
- [Papers of the War Department](#)
- [PhilaPlace](#)
- [Railroads and the Making of Modern America](#)
- [Redlining Richmond](#)
- [Sapping Attention](#)
- [September 11 Digital Archive](#)
- [Serendip-o-matic](#)
- [Spread of U.S. Slavery, 1790–1860](#)
- [Valley of the Shadow](#)
- [Virginia Secession Convention](#)
- [Visualizing Emancipation](#)
- [Voting America](#)
- [Women Writer's Project](#)

After class:

- [What city will you work on?](#)
- [Anything that you want me to know?](#)
- Review one of the projects that you investigated in class, comparing it to other projects. How might it serve as a model for your work in this class? Be sure to cite the project according to the [*Chicago Manual of Style*](#) conventions.

Week 3 / Feb. 4: Finding Information

Before class:

- Install [Zotero](#) and read/watch the [quick start guide](#).
- Sign up for an account at [Feedly](#) and try adding a few websites.
- Explore Google, "[How Search Works](#)."
- Common Craft, "[RSS in Plain English](#)" (2007).
- Begin searching for items about your city in [ProQuest Historical Newspapers](#).

- Explore the [Digital Public Library of America](#)
- Sam Wineburg, “[Thinking Like a Historian](#),” *Teaching with Primary Sources Quarterly* 3, 1 (Winter 2010).
- Errol Morris, “Which Came First?,” *New York Times*, 2007: [part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#).
- “[Industrial America](#),” ch. 16 of *The American Yawp*.

During class:

- Find primary sources about your city on the [DPLA](#). Use both the map and search.
- Find at least five sources in [African American Newspapers](#). (See also [ProQuest Historical Newspapers](#).)
- Find secondary sources about your city from [JSTOR](#).
- Use at least one other of the databases listed in the Mason library’s [history guide](#).
- Find primary or secondary sources about your city in the [Mason library catalog](#). Check out at least one book for next week’s reading.

After class:

- [Anything that you want me to know?](#)
- What sources did you find? Use Zotero and correct Chicago citations to help you list them. What did you learn from reading these sources? After reading those sources, what direction might you take your final project? What did you learn about finding primary and secondary sources online?

Week 4 / Feb. 11: Copyright & Open Access; Reading & Attention

Before class:

- Dan Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, “[Owning the Past](#),” in *Digital History*.
- Explore ALA, “[Digital Copyright Slider](#)” (2012)
- Corynne McSherry, “[Court Upholds Legality of Google Books: Tremendous Victory for Fair Use and the Public Interest](#),” Electronic Frontier Foundation, November 14, 2013.
- Nate Harrison, “[The Amen Break](#)” (2004).
- George Mason Copyright Office, sections on [copyright](#) and [fair use](#).

- Read about [Creative Commons licenses](#), including the “license deed” for each license.
- Watch Alan Jacobs, “[The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction](#),” lecture, Hudson Institute, June 3, 2011.
- During the week, set aside parts of three days to experiment with a “digital fast.” Each of those three days, go some place where your computer, phone, television, etc. aren’t. Turn them off if you can. For as long as you can, read the book you checked out about your city without referring to those technologies. (The [codex](#) is, of course, a technology too.) Make notes about the time you started and stopped, why you stopped, how much you read, and most of all what you learned about your own attention. Keep track of how your experience varied from day to day.

After class (pick one):

- Add a copyright notice and, if you wish, an open-access license to your blog. (You should do this for every website you create in this course.)
- Which level of copyright/open access have you selected for your blog? What do you plan to select for your final project? Why? What copyrights and licenses have been assigned to the sources you’ve used so far in this class? (Go back and look.) What potential limitations will you encounter for your final project?
- Describe the results of your digital fast. What did you learn about attention and technology as a result of this experiment? How could you be a better user of both print and digital technologies?

Week 5 / Feb. 18: Metadata & Omeka

Before class:

- Sign up for an [Omeka.net](#) site.
- Miriam Posner, [Up and Running with Omeka](#), *The Programming Historian* (2013).
- Explore Dublin Core, “[Metadata Basics](#).”

During class:

- Create a metadata record for at least three of the sources that you have used so far.
- Install the SimplePages plugin and create an about page.
- “[Conquering the West](#),” ch. 17 of *The American Yawp*.

After class:

- What did you learn about metadata? What sources did you use to find metadata for your items? What kinds of fields are most significant for the sources you included?

Week 6 / Feb. 25: Mapping 1

Before class:

- Richard White, “[What is Spatial History?](#)”
- Jim Clifford , Josh MacFadyen and Daniel Macfarlane, “[Intro to Google Maps and Google Earth](#),” *The Programming Historian*, December 13, 2013.
- Sign up for an account on the Harvard WorldMap [WARP](#).
- Take the book you read about your city and compile a list of places mentioned in a spreadsheet. You should record the following kinds of information, each in a separate column: address, city, state, date, description, people or groups involved, page number, source. We will use this data in class.
- “[Capital and Labor](#),” ch. 18 of *The American Yawp*.

During class:

- Pick a map (or several) of your city in the [David Rumsey Map Collection](#).
- Begin mapping the points that you have found.
- Georectify a historical map with [WARP](#).

After class:

- Post the maps that you created. What did you learn by mapping the sources that you had already read? What were the challenges in creating the maps?

Week 7 / Mar. 4: Mapping 2

Before class:

- Stephen Robertson, “[Putting Harlem on the Map](#),” *Writing History in the Digital Age*, edited by Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (2012).
- Install [QGIS](#). This can take time; don’t wait to the last minute.
- Signup for an account at [NHGIS](#). If you can, download shapefiles and data files (we will do this in class).
- Walk through tutorials on QGIS from Fred Gibbs: [part 1](#), [part 2](#).
- “[American Empire](#),” ch. 19 of *The American Yawp*.

During class:

- Download data of interest to you for several decades from [NHGIS](#).
- Create data maps using QGIS and the NHGIS data.
- Add the georectified map from last week.

After class:

- What did you learn about mapping data? How will this help you be critical of maps created by other people? What did your maps show you about history and space?

Week 8 / Mar. 18: Visualization

Before class:

- Explore the visualizations created by [Mike Bostock](#).
- John Theibault, “[Visualizations and Historical Arguments](#),” in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, edited by Kristen Nawrotzki and Jack Dougherty (University of Michigan Press, 2013).
- Read the [FAQ for Palladio](#).
- “[The Progressive Era](#),” ch. 20 of *The American Yawp*.

During class:

- Create several types of visualizations using [Palladio](#) with the data provided in class.

After class:

- Post your visualizations to your blog. Be sure to include titles and captions, with citations to the data. What did your visualizations show you that you didn't see before? What kinds of literacy do your visualizations require.

Week 9 / Mar. 25: Text Mining

Before class:

- Ted Underwood, "[Where to Start with Text Mining](#)," *The Stone and the Shell*, August 14, 2012.
- Dan Cohen, "[Searching for the Victorians](#)," October 4, 2010.
- Experiment with the following:
 - *New York Times* [Chronicle](#)
 - Google Books [Ngrams Viewer](#)
 - Brigham Young University, [Corpus of Historical American English](#) and [Time Corpus](#).
 - [Bookworm](#), especially *Chronicling America*
- Gather a set of at least five primary sources in plain text. This will be explained before class.

During class:

- Use [Voyant](#) to explore the set of texts provided.
- Use Voyant to explore the data set that you created.

After class:

- Post your best visualizations from Voyant. What did you learn from this distant reading of texts? How might this approach contribute to your final project?

Week 10 / Apr. 1: HTML; Security, Sustainability, and Ethics

Before class:

- Dan Goodin, "[Why passwords have never been weaker](#)," *Ars Technica*, August 20, 2012.
- Kieran Healy, "[Using Metadata to Find Paul Revere](#)," June 9, 2013.

- James Baker, "[Preserving Your Research Data](#)," *The Programming Historian*, April 30, 2014.
- Mat Honan, "[How Apple and Amazon Security Flaws Led to My Epic Hacking](#)," *Wired*, August 6, 2012.
- Mat Honan, "[How I Resurrected My Digital Life After an Epic Hacking](#)," *Wired*, August 17, 2012.
- Roy Rosenzweig, "[Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era](#)," *American Historical Review* 108, 3 (June 2003): 735–762.
- Library of Congress, "[Personal Archiving](#)," part of the *Digital Preservation* site.
- Explore the [Internet Archive](#), especially the [Wayback Machine](#).
- Read the [introduction to HTML](#) at W3 Schools.

During class:

- Create an HTML page from scratch.
- Add CSS styling.
- Try adding basic JavaScript from the [examples at W3 Schools](#).

After class:

- Use some of what you have learned about HTML and CSS to improve the pages at your final project.
- What did you learn about web security? Who has access to your information? What is the significance of government surveillance? of corporate surveillance?

Week 11 / Apr. 8: Exhibits and Story Telling

Before class:

- Yoni Appelbaum, "[The Great Illusion of Gettysburg](#)," *The Atlantic*, February 5, 2012.
- Find five photos from your time period and city. Arrange them to tell a story. Sketch out the text that could connect them.
- Install the ExhibitBuilder plugin on your Omeka site, and read through the [tutorial](#).

During class:

- Begin creating a test exhibit of the materials that you have gathered so far.

After class:

- What is the narrative arc of the exhibit you will create for your final project? What techniques of digital storytelling do you wish to incorporate? What materials will you have to gather in your research?

Week 12 / Apr. 15: Programming

Before class:

- Matthew Kirschenbaum, "[Hello Worlds](#)," January 23, 2009.
- Jeff Atwood, "[Please Don't Learn to Code](#)," *Coding Horror*, May 15, 2012.
- Ian Bogost, "[The Cathedral of Computation](#)," *The Atlantic*, January 15, 2015.
- Lev Manovich, "[The Algorithms of Our Lives](#)," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 16, 2013.
- Sylvie Rose and Jay Rosen, "[A Teenager Gets Grilled By Her Dad About Why She's Not That Into Coding](#)," October 29, 2014.

During class:

- Experiment with programming in R.

After class:

- You have read admonitions to learn to code and reasons why not to. Now that you have actually coded a bit, what do you think? What did you learn about algorithmic literacy?

Week 13 / Apr. 22 & Week 14 / Apr. 29: Presentations

Before class:

- Edward Tufte, "[PowerPoint Is Evil](#)," *Wired*, September 2003.
- Read Zach Holman, [Speaking.io](#).

After you've given your presentation:

- What did you learn about giving a presentation? Were you boring? What were the main points that you wanted to communicate? Did you get them across? How did your visuals help or hinder.

Final Project

What is the final project?

Throughout the semester you will create an [Omeka](#) website and exhibit. This exhibit will be focused on a city of your choice, and it should uncover some aspect of the city's history during Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era (from 1865 to 1914).

How do I pick a city and a topic?

You will have to find a city that is of interest to you AND for which you can find sufficient sources. All things being equal, cities that were bigger during our period will be easier than smaller cities.

You should also look for a topic that will unify your research. For example, creating an exhibit about Boston as a whole is too large a project. But creating an exhibit about Catholics in Boston is far more manageable. You will discover a suitable topic by looking for sources about your city and seeing what you find interesting. You may also look at our textbook (*The American Yawp*) to see what the most important questions are. The topic/question will determine what sources you include and what arguments you make. The best projects will have been tied closely to their topics.

What should the final project include?

Your final project should include:

- two maps, including one interactive map
- either a visualization from text-mining or a visualization from quantitative sources
- a minimum of 5 primary sources, marked up with metadata including contextual descriptions
- an exhibit that ties the sources, maps, and visualizations together, including approximately one thousand words of introduction and contextualization, with appropriate references
- an about page with a copyright statement

You are of course free to include other materials that are relevant.

How does my work on the project relate to my work in class?

The work we do in the classroom is designed to walk you through the process of being a digital historian, from creating a research question, to finding information, to interpreting it with various tools, to presenting it on the web. Each week's assignment is designed to help you make progress on your project by (1) learning skills and (2) doing some of the actual work. By the end of class each week you should have learned the *basics* of whatever skill was presented, though you will have to practice on your own to get better at it. And many weeks, you should be able to create work during class that you will become a draft of your final project.

In other words, if you come prepared to class each week, you can expect to complete a lot of the work for the final project in class. The final project is similar to a portfolio, in that it gathers together the work you are doing in class.

What should I be working on each week?

- Weeks 1–2: Become familiar with digital history and some of the projects that scholars have created.
- Weeks 3–4: Form a basic question about a city of your choice. Begin investigating sources at the DPLA and other databases to see whether your research question is feasible. By the end of week 4, you should be have found enough sources that you can settle on a particular city and question.
- Week 5: This is a crucial week, because during this week you will learn how to create the Omeka.net site that will host your final project. By the end of this week, you should have a site and the beginning of content for it. You can begin adding primary sources with the appropriate metadata.
- Weeks 6–7: During these weeks we will focus on mapping in class. By the end of this week you should have georectified a map of your city and started creating an interactive map of places of note. Both of these will be embedded in your final project.
- Weeks 8–9: During these weeks we will make visualizations in class. You should use census data about your city. If you have found some other quantitative information, use that too. By the end of these weeks, you should have created the visualizations mentioned above.
- Weeks 10–12: During these weeks we will focus on creating exhibits in Omeka to tell a story or make an argument. You should create an

exhibit that ties together the materials on your site, and you should begin drafting the introductory essay. By the end of these weeks, all of the materials for your project should be on your site, and you should have begun to tie them together.

- Weeks 13–14: During these weeks you will give a brief presentation on your project, which need not be finished when you present. You should use the time to put the finishing touches on your project.

What do I do if I get stuck or feel like I’m falling behind?

Feel free to e-mail me with questions (lmullen@gmu.edu), or we can arrange a meeting to help you make progress. You can also ask me to look at your work in progress to see if it is going in the right direction.

When is the project due?

The final project is **due May 6 by 10 p.m.** Make sure that your project is available online, then send me the URL via e-mail.

Fine Print

Acknowledgments

Versions of this class are taught by several faculty at Mason. This syllabus is indebted to [Stephen Robertson](#), [Mills Kelly](#), [Sharon Leon](#), and [Dan Cohen](#). The mapping assignment is based on Brian Croxall’s “[Mapping Mrs. Dalloway](#)” assignment and conversations with [Chris Cantwell](#).

General policies

See the [George Mason University catalog](#) for general policies, as well as the university [statement on diversity](#). You are expected to know and follow George Mason’s policies on [academic integrity](#) and the [honor code](#). Please ask me if you have any questions about how these policies apply to this course. Please note the dates for dropping and adding this course from the [academic calendar](#).

Getting help and accommodations

There are many ways that you can get help at Mason. If you have any question about what kinds of help are available, please contact me.

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Office of Disability Services at 703-993-2474 or <http://ods.gmu.edu>. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

Plagiarism and cheating

There will be many opportunities for group work, but unless otherwise specified, you should work on your own for assignments. If you do receive help or cooperate on an assignment, all such work should be acknowledged explicitly.

In general, every source that you use should be acknowledged in a note or bibliography entry. Sources must be adequately paraphrased, meaning (at a minimum) that word choice, sentence and paragraph structure, and the order of ideas must be made your own. Whenever you use others' exact words, you must mark them as such by quotation marks or block quotations with accompanying citations.

Phones, computers, tablets

While computing devices are welcome and encouraged in the classroom, they are to be used for course work and the tasks at hand. Students who use their devices to engage in activity that is not directly related to the coursework will not receive credit for participation that week.

Assignments

Please plan on doing all the readings, working through all exercises, completing any assignments, and installing necessary software before the start of each class.

I may change due dates or assignments. I will always give you plenty of notice of changes, which will always be intended for your benefit. Students must satisfactorily complete all assignments (including participation assignments) in order to pass this course.

Attendance

Participation will be a significant part of your grade. Your attendance is expected at every class. If you must be absent, I request that you notify me by e-mail in advance of class meeting. Even if you are absent, you must turn in assignments before the time when our class meets. After the first absence from class, the relevant portion of your grade for the class will be lowered for each absence. If you must miss a due date or an exam because of a medical or other emergency, fairness to the other students requires proper documentation.

Communications

I am always glad to meet with you in person. You can make an appointment for office hours by [e-mailing me](#). For most communications I prefer e-mail. I will reply to your messages within one business day (but never on a Sunday). I will send official course communications to your George Mason e-mail address, which you should check regularly. I will discuss grades only in person.

The online syllabus is the only authoritative version. Please consult it regularly.

Privacy

You will be required to make some of your work publicly available. If you wish, you may do so under a pseudonym to keep your identity private from the public, though I and the other students in the course will have access to your work.

Late work

I am willing to grant extensions for cause, but you must request an extension before the assignment's due date. For every day or part of a day that an assignment is late without an extension, I may reduce your grade. Unexcused late work will almost certainly not receive any substantial comment or help. No work (other than final exams) will be accepted later than the last day that the class meets unless I have agreed otherwise.

License

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