

# The Digital Past

History 390.002 (ver. 7.2)

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## Introduction

This course helps prepare you to use and understand a wide variety of current and emerging digital technologies in the service of doing history (and other things). We will also spend time on ethics for historians in the digital age and the importance of the challenges posed by the trade-offs between digital access and the need for data security. You will learn something about how we as a society became so enamored of and dependent on these knowledge and information tools, and a few new tech skills you can use later in your academic and employment career. Understanding a new technology requires not just knowing its technical aspects, but also understanding how new technologies transform the societies that embrace them and why technologies succeed and later fade.

## Learning Goals

Specific goals: Throughout the course we will focus on particular IT skills through the examination of a historical topic or historical research skill. During the semester you will learn to use the more sophisticated features of digital tools and media, ranging from word processing software (which you almost certainly already know), to databases, websites, and interactive digital maps. You will come to understand basic digital media technologies and concepts and be able to analyze content you find in digital form. You will learn about computer security and how to protect yourself in an open and connected digital world. Finally, you will learn how we can apply all of these skills to questions of sustainability as historians see them.

## Learning By Doing

The course largely emphasizes the acquisition of both historical methods and information technology skills through doing rather than just reading, listening to a lecture, or watching a video. Throughout the course you will engage in making or doing something historical using digital tools and networks.

## The General Education Information Technology Requirement

This course satisfies the [University's information technology requirement](#), which has the following five goals:

1. Students will be able to use technology to locate, access, evaluate, and use information, and appropriately cite resources from digital/electronic media.

2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Students will demonstrate the ability to communicate, create, and collaborate effectively using state-of-the-art information technologies in multiple modalities.
5. Students will understand the essential issues related to information security, how to take precautions and use techniques and tools to defend against computer crimes.

This course teaches the fundamentals of information technology within the context of a history course rather than as a set of abstract principles or discrete skills tied to particular software packages.

### **Course Requirements**

In addition to keeping up with the readings, I expect you to be an active participant in class discussions in class and online. Failure to participate in our discussions will not only have a negative impact on your final grade, but will also make the class less enjoyable for you and for everyone else. Class participation means talking, not just showing up for class. And, you should have something to say when you speak, which requires you to keep up with the assigned readings. Grades for class participation will be based both on the regularity of your participation and the quality of comments you offer.

You may also contribute to the class discussion through our Slack channel (hist390f17.slack.com). I have to invite you to the channel, so don't worry that you haven't been invited yet. I will invite everyone the week before classes begin. [Slack](https://reclaimhosting.com/) is a communication platform that allows a wide variety of conversations to happen simultaneously, and is the kind of project/team communication platform that you might actually encounter in the work world, unlike BlackBoard, which you'll never touch again once you graduate from college.

**Your Domain:** If you don't already own your own web domain, you need to create one. If you need to create one, do it at Reclaim Hosting, a hosting service developed at the University of Mary Washington: <https://reclaimhosting.com/>. **Do not use other services.** Why? Reclaim Hosting's pricing, services, and their customer support are all superior. And it's necessary that everyone in class be using the same platform – unless you already have a domain, in which case you are used to the one you have, which is fine.

Before you create your domain, think! Is MillsIsAwesome.com the web domain you want to use for the rest of your life, i.e., show to potential employers, etc.? Think.

**Final Project** – Throughout the semester we will focus on building the skills you need to complete the final project (see Appendix A). This project will give you the opportunity to demonstrate your mastery of what we’ve learned and of some of the ways that historians think about thorny problems. **Please note:** The final project requires you to visit one of 10 different national/state parks in the greater DC area, loosely defined. This means that you will have to organize your time to make such visits possible, including arranging transportation. I will be working with you to help make that happen, but not visiting one of these parks is not an option. If you have other commitments (job, athletic team, etc.), start organizing your time now.

### **Grading**

Your grade for the semester will be based upon the following criteria:

- Domain established? – 5%
- Blog posts — 15%
- Class participation — 20%
- Midterm exam — 25%
- Final project — 35%

Because students often ask me how class participation will be graded, here’s how I do it. I judge both the quantity and the quality of your participation in class. That means three things. First, if you don’t come to class, you can’t participate, so attendance counts. Second, coming to class and not saying anything is not participating. You need to join in our discussions, either in the small group interactions or in the class-wide interactions. Finally, asking, “Can you repeat that?” or “What page was that on?” is not participating. It’s clarifying. I expect you to contribute something substantive to our discussions. Not every day, because some days you just won’t have anything to say. But you should come to class prepared to contribute every day, and when you do, what you say or ask should move our discussion forward, raise a new point, help us think about something in a new or different way, etc. If you want more detail on this, ask me in class so everyone benefits from my answers.

### **Course Policies**

Attendance: Because each topic lays the groundwork for the progressively more sophisticated work that we will be doing as the semester goes along, it is imperative that you come to class, keep up with your assignments, and stay engaged with the rest of the group.

ADA: Any student who requires special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me to make necessary accommodations (before September 6, please). Students should present appropriate verification from the [Office of Disability Services](#) (703-993-2474). All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office. **Please note:** There are often ODS forms that must be filled out and signed by me. It is your responsibility to get those forms to me for signing.

Medical and Other Excuses: Every semester someone is forced to miss either an examination or the due date for an assignment as the result of an illness or due to a personal or 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: Don't. Plagiarism and cheating are much easier in the digital age, but finding cheaters is even easier, especially when you know computers and the Internet as well as I do. Besides, the university expects students to demonstrate a high code of personal honor when it comes to academic work. Please read the [George Mason University Honor Code](#) if you have any questions about what is expected of you in this regard. Penalties for academic dishonesty are severe. In short, you are at extreme risk for failing the course from just a single act of plagiarism or cheating, and your academic career will be put in jeopardy. Also, future employers will ask you about that course you failed for plagiarism or cheating.

How Not to Plagiarize: If you are copying and pasting text that someone else wrote, you might be plagiarizing. Pasted or manually retyped text is not plagiarized only when all of the following three conditions are true: 1) the pasted text is surrounded by quotation marks or set off as a block quote, and 2) the pasted text is attributed in your text to its author and its source (e.g., "As Jane Smith writes on her blog . . ."), and 3) the pasted text is cited in a footnote, endnote, and/or a bibliography (e.g., "Smith, Jane. Smith Stuff. Blog. Available <http://smithstuff.wordpress.com>. Accessed August 1, 2012.") Conventions for copying and pasting computer code are less strict, but even when you copy and paste code, if you can identify the actual individual who wrote the code, you should give the coder's name and the source of the code in a code comment. If you find and use images, audio, or video on the web, you should also cite the creator (if known) and the source (at the very least) of that media file, usually in a caption as well as in a footnote, endnote, or bibliography. Note that reproducing someone else's text, image, audio, or video file in full on your own public website may constitute copyright infringement, even with proper attribution. And, of course, copyright infringement is against the law.

Communication: In general, the best way to get hold of me is via our Slack channel or by email; I will usually respond within one business day. Please be aware that I spend a lot of time off the grid (in places with no connectivity), so if I don't respond the same day, don't worry. I will get back to you as soon as I reconnect. I'll give you my cell number in class. If you text me, which is fine, be sure to identify yourself, because you won't be in my contact directory and I might wonder just who you are. Also, state privacy rules and various laws dictate that I cannot send you any grade related information over text.

Enrollment Status: You are responsible for verifying your enrollment status in this (and every) course. Any change in that status is your responsibility and must be made by

the dates listed in the *Schedule of Classes*. After the last day to drop a course, withdrawal from the course must be approved by the Dean and will be approved only for nonacademic reasons. Attempting to add a class after the last day to add is all but impossible. Undergraduate students wishing to drop a class after the drop date may choose to exercise a selective withdrawal. See the *Schedule of Classes* for [selective withdrawal procedures](#).

Cell phone ringers: 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. However if your phone is your primary access point to the Internet, then by all means use it. But tell me first and just be sure you are using it for class purposes. Really.

Laptops/Tablets: I am not one of that growing legion of professors who ban laptops or tablets from class ([see my blog post on this](#)). In fact, I encourage you to bring your laptop or tablet to class. But if you are clearly checked out ([Anyone? Anyone? Bueller?](#)) to SnapChat, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitch, League of Legends, or wherever, expect me to call on you. A central theme of this course is being connected, so connect, but to academic material!

Food, Drink, Tobacco: No eating in class. It's disruptive and results in ants, roaches, and other beasties infesting the classrooms. Drinks are fine, so long as you don't slurp or burp loudly. No tobacco products of any kind.

### **Important dates**

September 4 – Labor Day – No class

Last day to add or drop classes without penalty: September 5

September 27 – No class meeting. I'm in Berlin.

Final drop deadline: September 29

October 11 – Midterm. Bring a blue book.

October 23 – No class. I'm in Bucharest.

Last day of class – December 6

Final projects due: **December 7 by noon.**

Projects submitted after noon that day without a documented medical (or similarly severe) excuse will suffer a substantial grade penalty. No exceptions.

## Course Outline

### August 28-30 – The Digital Landscape

Where did the Internet come from? How is the Internet structured? How did we get where we are today, with our almost ubiquitous access, vast data sources, and intrusive social media?

For Wednesday: Read: [As We May Think](#) (Vannevar Bush, *The Atlantic*, July 1945).; Watch: [History of the Internet](#); Read: [Evolution of the Smartphone](#). Come to class on Wednesday, prepared to discuss all three and what you wrote about them in your blog (see below).

**Final Project, Step 1:** Go to <https://reclaimhosting.com>, set up your domain. Then create a blog for our class by installing WordPress on your domain (see Reclaim's dashboard). By Wednesday, publish your first blog post 1) introducing yourself to the class; 2) identifying the most important or interesting part for you in the assigned material; and 3) explaining why that part is important or interesting from where you sit. For a tutorial on WordPress, try Lynda.com via <http://lynda.gmu.edu>. Search for "WordPress Essential Training."

### September 6 – The Architecture of Information

What is metadata? How does it run our lives? How can we understand it? How can we use it?

Read: [Metadata](#) (Wikipedia); Watch: [The Power of Metadata](#) (TedX Cambridge); Use: [Immersion](#); Watch: [What is Metadata](#) (The Australian).

For Monday: Save your immersion visualization as an image file and post it to your blog or print it and bring it to class if you want to keep it private. Either is fine. Be prepared to discuss what you learned about metadata and about yourself.

For Wednesday: Search the [Library of Congress Catalog](#) for an item related to the historic site you might want to focus on. Record the meta data available in the catalog record for that item. Now search the [Digital Public Library of America](#) website for another item related to that historic site. Record the meta data you find there. Bring your results to class.

**Final Project, Step 2:** Select a new theme for your class blog. You will find new themes by clicking on the Appearance link in the WordPress admin dashboard menu.

### September 11-13 — Digitization, Searching, and Finding

How do we find what we want online? Why does our search engine show us what it shows us? Is the first entry the best entry?

For Monday – Read: [How Search Works](#) (Google); Watch: [Beware Online Filter Bubbles](#) (Eli Pariser); Search: “Causes of the Civil War” and snapshot the results on your screen (the entire first page of results). Note the following information: date, time, computer used, i.e., work, laptop, library, etc. Post an image of your results to your blog and come to class prepared to discuss.

For Wednesday – Read: The [EasyBib](#) page on evaluating sources; Use, the [Website Evaluation Tool](#) linked on that page on one of your favorite websites and record the results; Write about what you learned in your blog.

**Final Project, Step 3:** Select the historic site you intend to use in your research. Then go to the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database, available via the [Mason library](#) website under the databases tab (search for “ProQuest Historical Newspapers”), and the [Flickr Commons](#). Find one item from each database related (at least tangentially) to your historic site. Be prepared to discuss the results in class.

### **September 18-20 — Digital Sources With Analog Origins**

What happens when we digitize things that previously existed only in the analog world – books, non-digital photographs, works of art, etc.? How is all this digitizing accomplished? What are the advantages? What is lost?

For Monday: Read: [Google Books](#) (Wikipedia); Read: [The Secret Of Google's Book Scanning Machine Revealed](#) (NPR); Read: [Torching the Modern Day Library of Alexandria](#) (James Somers, *The Atlantic*). Come to class prepared to discuss these materials.

For Wednesday: Judge a Wikipedia article on a historical topic by looking at its sources, discussion, and history. Make at least one editorial correction to the entry that improves the entry in some way. This requires you to create a Wikipedia account. Write a brief account of your experiences in your blog. Come to class prepared to discuss what you did.

**Final Project, Step 4:** Tweak your theme by changing the header image, the color scheme, the font, or some combination of the three.

### **September 25 — Ethical, Legal, and Social Issues in a Digital Age**

Who decides what is and isn't shareable? How do copyright and fair use laws dictate what we can and cannot do online?

Read: [Owning the Past?](#) (Dan Cohen & Roy Rosenzweig), sections 1-3; Watch: [A \(Fair\(y\) Use Tale](#); Read: [How Mickey Mouse Evades the Public Domain](#). Come to class prepared to discuss.



For Monday: Come to class prepared to discuss what is and is not okay to use and share on your website. What don't you understand about copyright?

For Wednesday: Come to class prepared to discuss the consequences of copyright restriction on our digitally-enabled society.

**Final Project, Step 5:** Select three historical images you want to use on your site. Examine and be ready to answer questions about any copyright issues that might arise.

### **October 2-4 — Securing Information**

The practical problems of computer security and how one weak link compromises the network and all the computers connected to it. We will discuss what informed users can do to protect against this.

For Monday: Read: Mat Honan, "[How Apple and Amazon Security Flaws Led to My Epic Hacking](#)"; Read: [Good Security Practices](#); Read: [Passwords Under Assault](#). Evaluate your own computer security practices. Write about them in your blog, without revealing anything!

For Wednesday: Read: [Timothy Boostrom is not Real](#); Find and read at least one scholarly, i.e., non-partisan, analysis of the hacking of American electoral politics in 2016. Come to class prepared to discuss what you read.

**Final Project, Step 6:** Think carefully about the navigation scheme you are going to use on your site. Why do you want to do it that way and not some other way?

### **October 11 – Midterm. Bring a blue book.**

### **October 16-18 — Maps, Spatial Analysis & History**

Mapping historical data and information has gone digital in a big way. But to what result? How can digital mapping improve our understanding of the past? How does it obscure the answers we're looking for? How can we use maps to help make the points we want to make?

Read: [Putting Harlem on the Map](#) (Stephen Robertson); Explore: [Enchanting the Desert](#) (Stanford) and [The Spread of U.S. Slavery](#) (Lincoln Mullen) or [New Orleans Historical](#).

For Monday: Write a post in your blog in which you discuss how digital mapping of historical data can/does change the way we think about the past. Come to class prepared to discuss what you wrote.

For Wednesday: Using Google MyMaps, create a map of your historic site. Add at least two images with text annotations that you wrote. Embed your map in a page on your



website. Come to class prepared to discuss what you did and why you chose those images.

### **October 30/November 1 – Text Analysis**

What is “distant reading” and how do we do it? How can we make sense of billions of words in millions of books? How does being able to do that change how we understand the past and the world around us?

Read: [An Attempt to Discover the Laws of Literature](#) (Joshua Rothman); [It’s About Russia](#) (Dan Cohen); Play with the [Google NGram](#) viewer.

For Monday: Write a post in your blog about the possibilities and pitfalls of reading hundreds or thousands of historical texts. What can we learn? What can’t we learn? Create a Google NGram related to your historic site and embed it in your site. Come to class ready to show it off.

For Wednesday: Pick a text or group of historical texts that relate to your historic site. Write down the title, permanent URL, and what you think the text is about/what its main themes are. Then go to [Voyant Tools](#) and use the tool to create a visualization of your text(s). [[Getting Started](#) guide] Be prepared to discuss what you learned from the visualization you created.

Something to think about: [All Stories Are the Same](#) (John Yorke)

Something else to think about: [The Hermeneutics of Screwing Around](#) (Steve Ramsay)

### **November 6-8 — Quantification, Graphs, and History**

Read: [Quantitative History Makes a Comeback](#) (Marc Parry) and Whitney Erin Boesel, [Data Occupations](#) (Whitney Erin Boesel); Scan at least one [Feltron report](#).

For Monday: Come to class prepared to discuss the differences between “quantifying the past” and “quantifying the self.” Also, think about a set of data you want to collect that is related to your historic site. Be prepared to discuss what you might collect.

For Wednesday: Create an interactive chart using data you collected on your historic site. Embed it on your website. Come to class ready to show it off.

### **November 13-15 —The Visual Communication of Information**

Read: Edward Tufte, “[PowerPoint is Evil](#)” and Peter Norvig, “[The Gettysburg PowerPoint Presentation](#)”

For Monday: Using the slideware program of your choice, create a three-slide presentation on a moment in history. You are limited to three slides because a good presentation should be concise even as it is visually rich.

For Wednesday: Complete the selection of images for your site, add them to your site, and come to class prepared to show them off.

Additional Visuals: [The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes](#) (Slate); [Star Wars: Their Careers Awaken](#) (The Economist); and [A Visual Guide to 75 Years of Major Refugee Crises Around the World](#) (The Washington Post).

### **November 20-22 — Making History**

Read: [On Building](#) (Steve Ramsay); Explore: [Smithsonian 3D](#); Read: [Author, 17, Says It's 'Mixing,' Not Plagiarism](#) (Nicholas Kulish)

For Monday: Come to class prepared to discuss this statement: "There's no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity." (It's in one of the readings)

For Wednesday: We will meet at the Mason M.I.X. in the old part of Fenwick Library, where we will learn about ways you can use the M.I.X. to (re-)create historical objects.

Extra Credit Opportunity: Find a 3D scan of a historical object, or create your own, and print it. Bring it to class and show it off. Due no later than December 4. After that date – no extra credit.

### **November 27-29 — Final Project Work**

We will spend both Monday and Wednesday problem solving your final projects.

### **December 4-6 — Final wrap-up and review**

We'll spend class time resolving design, user interface, and other final issues related to your site.

For Fun: Solve the [Blockly maze](#)

Final project URLs should be submitted via email to me **no later than noon on December 7**. Projects submitted after that day/time will be late and graded down.

Design notes: The font used in this syllabus is Myriad, created by Robert Slimach and Carol Twombly in 1992 for the Adobe corporation. <http://typedia.com/explore/typeface/myriad-pro/>. Want to think more about the design of your site? I suggest reading [this essay](#). This [website](#) will tell you more about the history of digital fonts.

**Appendix A**  
**History 390, Final Project**  
**Due via email by 12:00, December 7**

In this course we are going to spend a lot of time working with various digital tools and thinking about issues (legal, ethical, technical, financial) that these tools bring to the fore. Now you are going to get to use what you've learned to create a final product.

The goal of this project is to examine one aspect of the history of one of the following area national or state parks:

Mount Vernon  
 Gunston Hall (not really a national park, but that's ok)  
 Prince William Forest Park  
 Manassas National Battlefield Park  
 Shenandoah National Park  
 MLK Memorial (in DC)  
 World War II Memorial (in DC)  
 Harpers Ferry National Historic Park (in WV)  
 Pope-Leighey House (also not a national park, but so what)  
 Viet Nam Veterans Memorial (in DC)

Your examination of some aspect of the history of one of these parks will require you to go to that place and examine it in the analog world. Some of these parks can only be reached with a car, others can be reached via public transportation, so if you don't have access to a car, pick one of the public transportation accessible parks, or con/bribe a friend into driving you. Oh, and while you're there, take some pictures, at least one of which includes you in a clearly identifiable part of the park so I know you were actually there. No PhotoShopping yourself into the picture. Seriously. I'll notice.

In addition to visiting your park in the analog world, you will create a portfolio of digital products (maps, charts, visualizations, text) that is clear, easy to read/follow, and compelling. And this portfolio of digital products must make some sort of historical argument about some aspect of the history of your park.

Because there are many more people in the class than there are parks, many of you will be working on the same park. Feel free to work together, with this proviso – you must produce different projects on different historical questions.

Every final project must include each of the following:

1. Two or more interactive maps showing substantive geographical data or other geospatial elements related to your topic.

2. Two or more interactive graphs, charts, or other visualizations that tell a story with data about your topic. These must be charts/visualizations that you make not charts/visualizations you find elsewhere and use.
3. Two or more interactive analyses of texts related to your topic using text mining tools.
4. The equivalent of three double-spaced pages of text, i.e., 750+ words. This text should consist of a historical argument supported by or commenting on your digital materials and putting them into historical context. Your 750 words of text can be in the form of a short essay, or as blocks of text in the project website. We'll discuss this as the semester proceeds.

All the claims you make in this portfolio of products should be supported with properly attributed evidence. As you are compiling everything, think carefully about your audience (not me, some hypothetical audience out there on the web) and ask yourself if they can make sense of the argument you are making via the materials you have created? If the answer is no, think harder about what you are going to create and eventually turn in.

You should post all items on your website and email me the link when the project is posted.

I am more than happy to look at early drafts of your work. Just don't write to me with 36 hours to go and expect that I can rescue you from a bad case of procrastination. This is not, repeat, **not**, a project you can whip together in the last day or two before it's due. If you want feedback, you need to give me time to examine, think about, and comment on your work.