

HIST-499-001
Senior Seminar: Disasters in History
Spring 2023

This class meets (most weeks) in-person in Peterson 1109. Exceptions noted below.

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Horizon Hall 3165 ~~ Office Hours: M 11-12:30, or by appointment

Course Description and Objectives:

Senior seminar is the capstone course for the History major. In this seminar, each student will conduct research on a specific historical topic that is in some way related to the course's overall subject, "Disasters in History." Students are free to choose an event that happened in any geographical location. The chronological period is also open, though your sources likely will be more accessible if you select a disaster—or some aspect of a disaster—that occurred after roughly 1750.

Whatever topic you choose must fit current scholarly definitions of "disaster," which are admittedly fuzzy. Some experts favor quantitative measures—the number of fatalities or the dollar amount of property losses—as criteria for deciding whether an event qualifies for disaster status. Others argue that certain qualitative features—geographic scope, duration, length of forewarning and speed of onset—are disasters' defining attributes. Nearly all scholars, however, see "disasters" as bad things that happen which result in substantial and *unintended* losses of lives and property (thereby excluding things like battlefield losses and murders) *and* include both so-called natural and human-made disasters—a distinction that most scholars reject as both misleading and facile.

This course meets the Synthesis requirement of the university's General Education program, which aims to encourage students to draw on knowledge and skills they have attained through their General Education courses and to demonstrate advanced skills in their written work and oral presentations. In other words, this seminar offers you the opportunity to pull together the results of your educational experience by demonstrating mastery of research, analytical, and communication skills by applying those skills to a particular historical project. This course also counts toward the writing-intensive requirement for the History major.

Finally, HIST-499 is an RS (Research & Scholarship Intensive) course, which means that students will do authentic scholarly work and have the opportunity to disseminate the results of their research beyond the classroom. In this section of HIST-499, students are encouraged to present the poster they create based on their projects at the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium.

Course Requirements: Students are expected to adhere to the course schedule. As the schedule indicates, sometimes the class will meet as a group, while other days are set aside for self-directed research or individual meetings with the instructor. Please note that because this class meets infrequently and because it uses a participatory seminar/workshop format, missing class will lower your grade significantly.

Written work: Each student will write a major research paper (20-25 pages, double-spaced, plus endnotes and bibliography), which will be the culmination of a multi-stage process that includes several graded assignments, all of which are detailed in the course schedule below. Research papers will be graded according to the following criteria:

- Clarity and originality of the paper's research question and thesis
- Use of primary sources in support of a thesis statement
- The degree to which the work is situated appropriately in the existing literature of secondary sources (i.e., historiography)
- Use of diverse sources
- Sophistication of historical analysis
- Organization and quality of writing
- Proper use and formatting of endnotes and bibliography

Oral work: Students will do one formal oral report, besides participating regularly in class workshops and discussions. Because discussion and in-class work are integral to this course, attendance will be taken.

During the last class meeting, students will do oral presentations (8-10 minutes) on their research projects, using the poster format that is sometimes featured at scholarly conferences (including Mason's own CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium). A video explaining how to create this poster is here: <https://library.gmu.edu/tutorials/research-poster> (and also in the Assignment section of Blackboard).

Blackboard: Directions for graded writing assignments are posted in the Assignments section of the Blackboard course site. Students should access these assignments and also submit their work on Blackboard unless otherwise noted. Late submissions will be penalized a minimum of one letter-grade.

Required Texts: There are no required texts to purchase for this course. All required class readings are listed in the course schedule below and are posted in Course Readings tab on Blackboard.

Grading: Course grades will be determined as follows:

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| ➤ Secondary source analysis 1 (due Mon. 30 Jan.) | 10% |
| ➤ Secondary source analysis 2 (due Mon. 6 Feb.) | 10% |

➤ Research proposal (due Mon. 6 Mar.)	15%
➤ Historiography (due Mon. 3 Apr.)	10%
➤ Draft of final paper (due Sat. 15 Apr.)	15%
➤ Peer review (due Mon. 17 Apr.)	10%
➤ Final research paper (due Mon. 8 May)	15%
➤ Participation (including presentation)	15%

Finally, please note that all students are subject to the George Mason University Honor Code (see <http://jju.gmu.edu/catalog/apolicies/honor.htm>). The penalty for cheating or plagiarism on any assignment will be—at a minimum—a grade of F for this course.

Course Schedule:

Mon. 23 Jan.: Introduction. Read John C. Burnham, "A Neglected Field: The History of Natural Disasters," *Perspectives* (April 1988): 22-24; Andy Horowitz and Jacob A. C. Remes, *Critical Disaster Studies*, Introduction (available on Blackboard).

Mon. 30 Jan.: Foundational Reading I (disasters before 1870)

Jacob F. Field, "Charitable Giving and Its Distribution to Londoners after the Great Fire, 1666-1676," *Journal of Urban History*, 38 (2011): 3-23.

Whitney Barlow Robles, "Atlantic Disaster: Boston Responds to the Cape Ann Earthquake of 1755," *New England Quarterly*, 90 (2017): 7-35.

Christienna D. Fryar, "The Moral Politics of Cholera in Postemancipation Jamaica," *Slavery & Abolition*, 34 (2013): 598-618.

J. G. Burke, "Bursting Boilers and the Federal Power," *Technology & Culture* 7 (1966): 1-23.

- What historical question is the author posing (and attempting to answer)?
- What types of primary sources do they use to find evidence to answer this question? (Letters? Diaries? Court records? Legal codes? Newspapers? Maps?)
- What is the author's thesis (i.e., the concise answer to the research question)?
- Which arguments of other scholars does the author address, and why? (Be sure to read the footnotes, as well as the text, to complete this part of the assignment.)
- How does the author answer the "So what" question? What big issues are addressed? How does the author make a case for the importance of the article?

Note that this week's work--and next week's, too--should help you to pose historical questions that may lead to your own research topic. These exercises will also force you to think analytically about secondary sources, an essential skill for writing the required historiographical essay.

Submit a secondary source analysis of one of the assigned articles for this week, following the instructions in the Assignments section of Blackboard.

Mon. 6 Feb.: Foundational Reading II (disasters after 1870)

Gareth Davies, "The Emergence of a National Politics of Disaster, 1865-1900," *Journal of Policy History*, 26 (2014): 305-26.

Caroline Grego, "Black Autonomy, Red Cross Recovery, and White Backlash after the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893," *Journal of Southern History*, 85 (2019): 803-40.

Ellen Wiley Todd, "Remembering the Unknowns: The Longman Memorial and the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire," *American Art*, 23 (2009): 60-81.

Jean-Germain Gros, "Anatomy of a Haitian Tragedy: When the Fury of Nature Meets the Debility of the State," *Journal of Black Studies*, 42 (2011): 131-57.

- What historical question is the author posing (and attempting to answer)?
- What types of primary sources do they use to find evidence to answer this question? (Letters? Diaries? Court records? Legal codes? Newspapers? Maps?)
- What is the author's thesis (i.e., the concise answer to the research question)?
- Which arguments of other scholars does the author address, and why? (Be sure to read the footnotes, as well as the text, to complete this part of the assignment.)
- How does the author answer the "So what" question? What big issues are addressed? How does the author make a case for the importance of the article?

Submit a secondary source analysis of one of the assigned articles for this week, following the instructions in the Assignments section of Blackboard.

Mon. 13 Feb.: Individual meetings to formalize student topics. Submit your preliminary topic and the research question you are asking (in the form of an actual question, please) in writing to me via email at least one hour before we meet.

****Some good advice for picking a topic:** At least initially, your topic should be as narrow as possible. (Hint: If someone has written an entire book on a subject, that subject is far too broad for a 25-page paper.) For instance, you cannot write a paper on the Chicago Fire of 1871, but you could write one on how newspapers reported the fire in urban and rural areas throughout the Midwest. (Were rural people less sympathetic to urban fire victims, many of whom were immigrants?) Similarly, the role of women in disaster relief work is far too big a topic, but the experiences of one woman (or of women relief workers in the aftermath of one disaster, such as the Johnstown Flood) would be reasonable options.

Mon. 20 Feb.: Library Orientation and Info Session with Dr. George Oberle in Fenwick 1014A.

Mon. 27 Feb.: Proposals, Notes, and Bibliographies. Read directions for the research proposal and the History Citation Guide in the Course Reading section of Blackboard.

Mon. 6 Mar.: Research proposals due. Submit electronically via Blackboard, but also bring a shareable version (electronic or paper) to class.

****Spring Break****

Mon. 20 Mar.: Primary sources. In-class research and database review. Also in-class discussion/workshop on historiography.

Mon. 27 Mar.: No class meeting. Research week. Request an appointment if you have questions and/or need help.

Mon. 3 Apr.: Historiographical essay on your topic due. Submit electronically via Blackboard, but also bring a shareable version (electronic or paper) to class.

Mon. 10 Apr.: No class meeting. Writing week. Request an appointment if you have questions and/or need help.

*****Saturday 15 April (noon): Drafts (minimum 12 double-spaced pages and a detailed outline of the remainder of the essay, plus correctly formatted foot/endnotes and bibliography) must be submitted to me to me via Blackboard.** I will immediately forward drafts to the appropriate peer reviewers to prepare for them for in-class peer review. The idea is that each student will have at least two sets of comments—including one from me—to help revise the paper.

Mon. 17 Apr.: Peer review of drafts of final essays. Reviewers should read and comment on their classmate's paper in writing, using the Paper Assessment Rubric, and submit their comments before class on Blackboard. Also "Creating a Research Poster."

Mon. 24 Apr.: Individual meetings to discuss revisions.

Mon. 1 May: Oral presentations/Posters. Please submit completed posters on Blackboard before coming to class.

****Final papers due (on Blackboard) on Monday 8 May by 5:00 p.m.****