

## **HIST-615-10: American Disasters Fall 2012**

Prof. Cynthia A. Kierner

Robinson B343; ckierner@gmu.edu

Office hours: Monday 2-3, Wednesday 1:30-2:30, or by appointment

What constitutes a “disaster”? What do changing explanations of the causes and costs of disasters, and differing responses to them, tell us about the larger contours of American history?

Proceeding from three assumptions, this readings-based seminar will examine disasters as lived experiences and cultural constructions from the colonial period to the industrial era. First, the course assumes that so-called natural disasters are never entirely “natural” phenomena. Second, storms, fires, and other destructive forces become “disasters” only when they intersect with human lives. Third—and most important for our purposes—our readings will show that case studies of disasters provide compelling insights into their cultural and social contexts.

**Course Requirements:** This class meets once weekly. Students should do assigned reading before coming to class and be prepared to participate in discussions.

**Written requirements** are three short papers chosen from the weekly assignments listed below, a longer final paper, and an annotated bibliography of the final paper's sources. Short papers should be 5 pages, excluding notes. The final essay, a research paper that places a specific disaster in the context of the historiography of the course's readings, should be a minimum of 15 pages, excluding notes and the annotated bibliography.

Please note that historians use “Chicago” or “Turabian” style footnotes or endnotes, and that this form of annotation (done correctly!) is required for work submitted for this course. For proper citation formats, consult Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers* (many editions). Brief overviews and examples are also widely available online—e.g., [http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/RES5e\\_ch10\\_s1-0001.html](http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/RES5e_ch10_s1-0001.html).

Due dates for all written work are noted in the course schedule below. Students must submit written work (preferably as Word files, via email) on or before scheduled due dates. For all assignments, late papers will be penalized a minimum of one letter-grade.

**Oral requirements** consist of attendance and participation in weekly discussions, an informal presentation of the final paper, and leadership (or co-leadership) of class discussion for one predetermined week during the semester. Each week, class leaders should be prepared to raise questions about the assigned reading to spur debate and discussion. (Of course, I will be there to help, if needed, but ideally leaders should be able to generate and guide the class discussion.)

All books are available at the GMU Bookstore, as well as at amazon.com and other online booksellers. All articles are accessible in electronic format via JSTOR or other electronic databases, or on eReserve from Fenwick Library, as noted below. (To access eReserves for our course use this password: disasters.) Most journal articles that are accessible via databases are also available at the university library in their original paper form.

Course grades will be calculated as follows:

- Short papers (3 x 15%) 45%
- Annotated bibliography 10%
- Final essay 30%
- Participation (including leading discussion) 15%

### Course Schedule

Monday 27 August: **Introduction.** Read Jonathan Bergman, "Disaster: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *History Compass*, 6 (2008): 934-46. (Sent as pdf via email.)

\*\* Labor Day\*\*

Monday 10 September: **Interdisciplinary Approaches to Historicizing Disasters.** Read Kevin Rosario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America*, pp. 1-29 (on eReserve); Anthony Oliver-Smith, "Theorizing Disaster," in Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith, eds., *Calamity and Culture*, pp. 23-47 (on eReserve); Noah Heringman, "The Style of Natural Disasters," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 66 (2003): 97-133 (JSTOR); Uwe Lübken and Christof Mauch, "Uncertain Environments: Natural Hazards, Risk and Insurance in Historical Perspective," *Environment and History*, 17 (2011): 1-12 (Environment Complete database).

Monday 17 September: **Climate Change and History.** Read Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History, 1300-1850*. Paper topic: Write an essay in which you explain (and elaborate on) Fagan's subtitle and assess the extent to which he proves his thesis. (4-5 pages)

Monday 24 September: **Hurricanes and Earthquakes in Anglo-America.** Matthew Mulcahy, *Hurricanes and Society in the British Greater Caribbean, 1624-1783*. William D. Andrews, "The Literature of the 1727 New England Earthquake," *Early American Literature*, 7 (1973): 281-94 (JSTOR). Paper topic: Drawing on the assigned reading, assess the relative importance of religion and science in explaining storms and earthquakes in English colonial America. (4-5 pages)

Monday 1 October: **Disease and Famine in Revolutionary America.** Read Elizabeth Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-1782*; Alan Taylor, "'The Hungry Year:' 1789 on the Northern Border of Revolutionary America," in Steven Biel, ed., *American Disasters*, pp. 39-71 (on eReserve). Paper topic: Using Fenn's and Taylor's work as examples, write an essay describing how disaster studies might inform the scholarly approaches to eighteenth-century military and diplomatic history? (4-5 pages)

Tuesday 9 October: **Disease, Politics, and Policy in Antebellum America.** Read Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1844, and 1866*; Henry M. McKiven Jr., "The Political Construction of a Natural Disaster: The Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1853," *Journal of American History*, 94 (2007): 734-42 (JSTOR). Paper topic: How, why, and to what extent did disease become a matter of public policy during the nineteenth century? (4-5 pages)

Monday 15 October: **Find a Disaster.** Research instruction session with Jason Byrd, History Liaison, Fenwick Library. We will meet in Fenwick, A-214.

Monday 22 October: **War as Disaster.** Read Drew Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*; Robert Jackson, "The Southern Disaster Complex," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 63 (2010): 555-70 (Proquest Research Library); Paper topic: Posit a well-informed and workable definition of the term "disaster" and, using the assigned reading, argue for or against its applicability to the Civil War and its aftermath. (4-5 pages)

Monday 29 October: **Social and Cultural History of Fires.** Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874*; Matthew Mason, "'The Fire-Brand of Discord': The North, the South, and the Savannah Fire of 1820," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 92 (2008): 443-459 (JSTOR); Scott Gabriel Knowles, "Lessons in the Rubble: The World Trade Center and the History of Disaster Investigations in the United States," *History and Technology*, 19 (2003): 9-28 (Academic Search Complete) Paper topic: Drawing on the three assigned readings, write an essay surveying different approaches to the history of fires and the benefits and drawbacks of each. (4-5 pages)

Monday 5 November: **Flood Story.** Read David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood*. Paper topic: This week's reading, *The Johnstown Flood*, was written by David McCullough, a best-selling popular (i.e., non-academic) historian. Using McCullough's book and the work of one or more academic historians we have read this semester, write an essay comparing the approaches and methods employed in academic and popular history and assess the strengths and weaknesses of both genres. (4-5 pages)

Monday 11 November: **Insects.** Read Jeffrey Lockwood, *Locust: The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect that Shaped the American Frontier*; James C. Giesen, "'The truth about the boll weevil': The Nature of Planter Power," *Environmental History*, 14 (2009): 683-704 (Oxford Journals database). Paper topic: How, if at all, does the study of environmental disasters alter historians' understanding of rural society and culture in nineteenth-century America? (4-5 pages)

Monday 18 November: Stephen Biel, *Down with the Old Canoe: A Cultural History of the Titanic Disaster*; Andrea Stulman Dennett and Nina Warnke, "Disaster Spectacles at the Turn of the Century," *Film History*, 4 (1990): 101-11 (JSTOR Arts & Sciences V). Paper topic: Why do disaster stories appeal to wide audiences? Why does the *Titanic* story, specifically, arguably loom larger in the popular imagination than that of other disasters? (4-5 pages)

Monday 26 November: **Summing Up.** Read Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*; Lawrence N. Powell, "What Does American History Tell Us about Katrina and Vice Versa?" *Journal of American History*, 94 (2007): 863-876.

Monday 3 December: **Presentation of Student Papers.**

*Final papers due (via email) by Friday 14 December at 5:00 p.m.*

### Instructions for final paper:

- Find a disaster. Ideally, your disaster should have occurred in North America, between 1690 and 1920. Places to start could include some rather bizarre online lists (e.g., [http://disasters.albertarose.org/us\\_disasters.html](http://disasters.albertarose.org/us_disasters.html); <http://www3.gendisasters.com/>) or passing references in the assigned course reading, in either the text or notes. For this paper, you would be better off choosing a relatively obscure disaster, rather than one that has already received detailed treatment in the secondary literature.
- Conduct primary source research on your disaster, beginning with some of the big digital databases--e.g., *America's Historical Imprints*, *Accessible Archives*, *Nineteenth Century Masterfile*, *New York Times Index*, etc.--which are available through Fenwick Library. Jason Byrd, the library's History Liaison, will walk you through some of these databases at our 15 October meeting. Come to this session with some ideas for research topics.
- Do additional research in primary and/or secondary sources to fill in the gaps in your narrative and place it in its appropriate historical context. For instance, for a paper on a steamboat explosion off Long Island in 1840, you would need to learn about the people involved, and you should have some knowledge of the steamboat business in antebellum New York and the laws that governed it.
- Write a paper that places your story in its appropriate historiographical context, focusing on the issues considered in the course readings. What made your disaster unique and/or representative for its era? Your paper should consider the disaster as both an actual historical event and a cultural construction.