

# THE DIGITAL PAST

## HIST 390 (20989), SPRING 2021

Dr. Gretchen Beasley

Class Times: Thursdays, 7pm to 9:40pm

Zoom: <https://gmu.zoom.us/j/98067028411>

Virtual Office Hours: Sign up via Calendly

[gbeasley@gmu.edu](mailto:gbeasley@gmu.edu)

Slack: [hist390-thursdays.slack.com](https://hist390-thursdays.slack.com)

**WELCOME TO THE DIGITAL PAST!** 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. You will learn about Digital History, the Digital Humanities, popular opensource software, and how to use these tools to aid in the interpretation of historical data.

While this course will not have an overarching historical theme, we will discuss an array of historical topics/problems each week that correspond with provided datasets to master each tool.

### **In this course you will:**

- Learn the history of digital history/humanities
- Learn how to discover and analyze primary and secondary sources online by reading metadata efficiently and understanding how search engines work
- Examine your “Digital Self”
- Explore and use digital software/tools
- Successfully develop and publish historical scholarship on the web, offering multiple analytical perspectives on research question of your choosing.
- Work collaboratively with other people towards a common goal. This type of collaboration will have life-long implications as you build professional skills.
- Create a professional personal website
- Keep up a course blog/discussion board

It is the goal of this course to teach you the basics of a plethora of digital tools. These include online exhibition projects by using Omeka/Scalar, mapping historical data/places, how to digitize historical objects for online use, how to create and examine networks, and understanding the basics of OCR and transcription. While learning these digital tools are important to this class, we will also explore the history of digital history, as well as ethics, and the future of the digital humanities in academia. Through learning by doing, you will gain both digital skills and the skills of a historian; skills which will be useful to you throughout your university career and in your future work.

Over the course of the semester, you will use these technologies to create and publish an individual project. 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 week will be like:**

The course will be taught virtually, meaning that we will follow a weekly schedule that meets at a particular time. All assignments must be completed in the schedule listed; this includes completing assignments and posting to our discussion board on Slack or via a course website/blog.

### **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 doing the weekly work – including the reading and any other preliminary assignments. If you miss part of the course work, you'll have a hard time keeping up.

### **This course satisfies the University's IT requirement, which includes:**

1. Students will understand the principles of information storage, exchange, security, and privacy and be aware of related ethical issues.
2. Students will become critical consumers of digital information; they will be capable of selecting and evaluating appropriate, relevant, and trustworthy sources of information.
3. Students can use appropriate information and computing technologies to organize and analyze information and use it to guide decision-making.
4. Students will be able to choose and apply appropriate algorithmic methods to solve a problem.

## **THE FINE PRINT: MASON POLICIES & DATES**

**Accommodations:** If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please contact the Office of Disability Services at 703-993-2474 or <http://ods.gmu.edu>. Please particularly consult the updated policies and FAQ in response to COVID-19: <https://ds.gmu.edu/response-to-covid-19/>

**Communication:** The best way of reaching me quickly is via Slack. If you email, I will respond to you promptly within 24 hours. I will hold office hours by appointment on Zoom.

**COVID 19 Response:** For medical emergencies and questions, please consult your medical provider and the Student Health Services site: <https://shs.gmu.edu/>. Please also consult the Frequently Asked Questions for a Safe Return to Campus: <https://www2.gmu.edu/safe-return-campus/faqs-for-safe-return> Please let me know if there are any medical issues that I need to know about.

**Diversity Statement:** “George Mason University promotes a living and learning environment for outstanding growth and productivity among its students, faculty, and staff. Through its curriculum, programs, policies, procedures, services, and resources, Mason strives to maintain a quality environment for work, study and personal growth.

An emphasis upon diversity and inclusion throughout the campus community is essential to achieve these goals. Diversity is broadly defined to include such characteristics as, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation. Diversity also entails different viewpoints, philosophies, and perspectives. Attention to these aspects of diversity will help promote a culture of inclusion and belonging, and an environment where diverse opinions, backgrounds, and practices have the opportunity to be voiced, heard and respected.

The reflection of Mason’s commitment to diversity and inclusion goes beyond policies and procedures to focus on behavior at the individual, group and organizational level. The implementation of this commitment to diversity and inclusion is found in all settings, including individual work units and groups, student organizations and groups, and classroom settings; it is also found with the delivery of services and activities, including, but not limited to, curriculum, teaching, events, advising, research, service, and community outreach.

Acknowledging that the attainment of diversity and inclusion are dynamic and continuous processes and that the larger societal setting has an evolving socio-cultural understanding of diversity and inclusion, Mason seeks to continuously improve its environment. To this end, the University promotes continuous monitoring and self-assessment regarding diversity. The aim is to incorporate diversity and inclusion within the philosophies and actions of the individual, group and organization, and to make improvements as needed.”

**Medical issues:** Please consult Student Health Services or another physician if you need medical attention: <https://shs.gmu.edu/> Please let me know if there are any medical issues that I need to know about.

**Counseling and Psychological Services:** <https://caps.gmu.edu/>

**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 not possible. 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.

**Honor Code and Academic Integrity:** Please consult the resources from the Office of Academic Integrity, including the GMU Honor Code, here: <https://oai.gmu.edu/>

If you aren’t familiar with it, please also consult the “Understanding Plagiarism” tutorial created by GMU Libraries: <https://library.gmu.edu/tutorials/plagiarism>

## IMPORTANT DATES

**Last day to add classes:** February 1, 2021

**Last day to drop classes without penalty:** February 12, 2021

**Last day to drop with 50% refund:** February 16, 2021

**Unrestricted withdrawal period:** February 17 – March 1, 2021

**Selective withdrawal period (100 % penalty):** March 2 – April 1, 2021

**Midterm evaluations (100 and 200 level classes):** February 21 – March 24, 2021

**Last day of class:** April 30, 2021

**Final projects due:** May 8, by midnight

## THE FINE PRINT: COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES

### TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS:

**1. Computer and internet access.** This is an online technology course, and we will use and reflect about the use of technology. You will need to have regular, reliable access to a computer and a stable broadband Internet connection with a consistent 1.5 Mbps [megabits per second] download speed or higher. You can check your speed settings using the Google or another speed test. If you don't have regular computer access or a stable Internet connection, please let me know so that I can accommodate your needs.

**Platforms:** We'll use a variety of platforms: In addition to Blackboard, we'll use Zoom, Mural for collaboration, and small group meetings/discussions in Slack. I will distribute further instructions in our class.

**2. As part of our course, you will set up a website and blog.** If you don't already own your own web domain, you will need to create one for our course. You'll have two options:

**Reclaim hosting:** You can either use Reclaim Hosting, a hosting service developed originally at the University of Mary Washington especially for students and faculty: <https://reclaimhosting.com/>

The total cost for the student/personal plan is \$45. Reclaim Hosting is popular among Mason Hist 390 faculty (and beyond) because of its pricing, services, and customer support. You'll use Reclaim to install Word Press and will have the option to install a podcasting plug-in if you plan to produce a podcast. If you already have a domain and Word Press website, please talk with me to make sure that it meets the functionality we will need for class. Since you might want to use your domain name down the road, as well I recommend choosing a timeless name.

I will distribute a step-by-step guide on how to set up your domain and website/blog in class.

## UPPER DIVISION HISTORY COURSES:

This is not an introductory history course. As an upper division elective, the course requires that you demonstrate some significant analytical skills in the course of doing historical research. Furthermore, the course demands effective use of primary sources, the synthesis of existing historical scholarship, and the crafting of clear and convincing arguments about the past. The pool for our historical work this semester will be your choice, with my approval. You will be free to pursue a well-formed research question that reflects their individual interests during the course of the semester.

## WORKING IN AN ACTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:

This course takes place in an Active Learning Environment, which mean you **MUST** participate and you **MUST** come prepared to work, albeit virtually, every class. Every class period will be used for productive collaboration with your classmates. During our time together, you will gain experience doing history, developing information technology skills, and working with a range of tools that will be useful to you outside the context of this course.

- Reading and viewing of all materials for the day must be completed prior to the class session/week (except when noted).
- You must come prepared to work with the materials and tools that we will concentrate on for the week. This means having fully reviewed the tutorials for the week and having done some initial experimentation with the tools.
- Group work is not optional. It is a central element of doing digital history. It needs to be approached as an integral part of your work for the semester.
- Work that does not demonstrate engagement with the course materials and a good-faith effort to work with the tools will not be given credit.
- For full credit, all work must fulfill the minimum requirements for completion by the date it is due. *Late work will be graded down.*
- Written work must be supported by direct evidence from primary and/or secondary sources. That work also must be fully documented using standard Chicago Manual of Style citations.

## CLASS PARTICIPATION & ASSIGNMENTS

### WORK TOWARDS YOUR NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

Some of you just want a C to fulfill a Mason requirement. Some of you want a B to maintain a solid GPA. Some of you want an A because top grades are really important to you. You all already know what your own average, good, or excellent effort feels like. So put in the work that justifies the grade you want for each assignment.

### ASSIGNMENTS:

**Setting up your domain and WordPress (website/blog):** You will establish your own website through Reclaim hosting and WordPress. (5%)

**General Participation:** Included project peer review, and participation in class, including creating reading questions and moderating discussions. **(10%)**

- This will be an important part of your grade, and I expect you to engage in our synchronous and asynchronous online discussions on Slack throughout the semester.

**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 the start of the following week's class (unless otherwise noted). Late posts will not be counted for grade submission. **(20%)**

**Weekly Blog Comments:** Collaboration is key to digital work; therefore, throughout the semester I will ask you to look at and comment on your peers' work. The idea here is to facilitate a discussion about the course material and allow you to get to know your classmates. You will comment on at least two posts within your assigned group.

Commenting on your peer's posts is worth **10%** of your grade. **Due dates are due two days after the initial blog is due, unless noted otherwise.**

Your comments such be substantive and add to the conversation. Your comments should elaborate on the post with further comment or observations based on course material. Comments are graded on a credit/no credit basis. Posts that add to the conversation in a substantial manner will get full credit while posts that are merely complimentary or are not substantive and fail to engage with the material at hand will get no credit. **(10%)**

**Tools & Skills Projects:** You will note that this class contains no midterm or final exam. The vast majority of the class will be based off of a variety of class projects.

- The requirements and expectations for each project will be posted on the course website. These projects include: a mapping project using StoryMap JS, a transcription project, and other exercises offered throughout the semester.
- You may tailor these exercises to your own interests and needs – in addition to the options provided by me, you may also propose your own small tools & skill exercise(s). So, if there is a specific application that you want or need to learn in the course of this semester, you'll have the option to do this after consulting with me. **(25%)**

**Final project, including proposal:** In this course, we are going to spend quality time working with various digital tools and thinking about the myriad issues (legal, ethical, technical, historical) that these tools bring to light. Over the course of the semester, each of you will use your newly-found digital skills to create and publish an original digital history project due at the end of the semester. **(30%)**

## GRADING SCALE:

- A: 90-100%
- B: 80-90%
- C: 70-80%
- D: 60-70%
- F: <60%

In short, it's very easy to get whatever grade you want in the class by just keeping up with the basic work, but the grade awarded depends on you. There is no huge midterm or final that is a large percent of your grade, so make sure you budget your time to fulfill the weekly assignments.

## WEEKLY SCHEDULE

\*Schedule subject to change

Week 1: Getting Started (January 28)

Week 2: What is Digital History? and Building an Online Presence (February 4)

Week 3: Doing Digital History (February 11)

Week 4: Historical Research Methods & HTML (February 18)

Week 5: Making Sense of Evidence | Finding & Using Sources (February 25)

Week 6: Copyright & Fair Use (March 4)

Week 7: Transcription (March 11)

Week 8: Building the Pieces – An Archive (March 18)

Week 9: Building the Pieces – an Exhibit (March 25)

Week 10: Building the Pieces – Timelines (April 1)

Week 11: Text-Mining (April 8)

Week 12/13: Publishing Spatial Data and Working with Historical Maps (April 15/April 22)

Week 14: Revising Your Thesis/Final Wireframe for Project/Workshopping (April 29)

That's a Wrap – Final Project Due May 8, 2021 by midnight