HST 292: Doing Digital History

Smith College, Spring 2020
Instructor: Dr. Jordan E. Taylor
Class meeting: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:50am–12:05pm, Seelye 212.
Office: Dewey Hall 212
Office hours: Thursday 3:00–5:00pm and by appointment.

Course description

Digital history is an (ever-)emerging field that combines computational methods with historical research, analysis, and presentation. It is fundamentally public, collaborative, and interpretive. In other words, digital historians work together to interpret the past using digital tools for broader audiences.

This course will, in turn, be public-oriented, collaborative, and interpretive. We will create a digital project for a public history organization. We will work together in groups. And we will use digital methodologies to interpret the past in ways that were not available to historians in decades past.

Format

Roughly speaking, this course is divided into thirds. The first third will introduce you to the major computational modalities of digital history. The second third will provide context and skills for working toward your final project on abolitionism in western Massachusetts. The final third will consider the ways that digital tools can allow historians to engage with the public in interesting ways.

This course features less assigned reading and writing than most 200-level history courses at Smith College. Instead, you will be devoting your time to doing research, collecting and inputting data, working with and helping team mates, and learning how to use new tools.

Learning objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:
- Demonstrate their understanding of digital history as a field and methodology.
- Analyze historical sources using the methods of digital history.
- Engage with public audiences.

Readings

Our core readings for this class are available online on our course WordPress site. Any supplementary readings for your final project should be available from the library.

Grading:

- Meeting with instructor
- Participation (10%)
- Annotations (10%)

- Tool expertise and application (20%)
- Abolitionism project (50%)
- Reflective essay (10%)

Meeting with instructor

You are required to find meet with me one-on-one within the first four weeks of class. This meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss your expectations and hopes for the class, your learning needs, and any concerns. We may also discuss how this class can help you with your course of study and your future. I generally start with questions such as where you're from, what you study, anything you're worried about, etc.

This conversation does not need to be long. It could last anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour. We may speak in office hours, before or after class, or at another time depending on your availability. You are responsible for either attending office hours or setting up another time to meet with me during the first four weeks of class. I expect you to have either met with me or scheduled a time to meet with me by **February 25**. This assignment is ungraded, but will result in a 5% deduction to your final grade if you do not meet with me.

Participation (10%)

Most of our class sessions will be oriented around discussion and exploration. Participation is therefore essential. Your participation grade will suffer if you… do not attend class; do not join in class discussions; disrupt the class; abuse electronics; arrive late or leave early on a consistent basis; distract others. Your participation grade will improve if you: come prepared to class; participate in group discussion; participate in small ground discussions or activities; attend office hours; ask thoughtful questions ("I don't understand this" is a great question to ask, and counts toward participation); email me for clarification in a respectful way.

Annotations (10%)

Instead of reading responses, this class will use a program called Hypothes.is to collaboratively annotate our readings. Please sign up for Hypothes.is online and follow instructions to get started. Collaborative annotations will allow us to share ideas, connections, answer questions, and identify areas where we need help. Please use the Hypothes.is filter DDH292.

We have a variety of readings for this course: step-by-step guides to a piece of software; secondary sources written by historians; blog posts written by digital humanists. Each of these requires a different kind of reading and annotation. For example, you might annotate a how-to guide by asking your fellow students (and myself) about a point where you got stuck. For a secondary source, you might annotate something to point out an idea or piece of information that could be useful for your projects. Finally, you might use annotations to draw out connections between blog posts. You are not required to annotate readings marked "explore" in the schedule.

Every week you must make at least three substantial annotations across your various readings. Annotations such as "Wow!" or "This is so interesting" do not count as substantial. Instead, something like "This paragraph reminds me of X reading, because…" or "I don't understand what

the author is saying here. Is she saying X or is she saying Y?" would be considered substantial. Your annotations will be graded based each week. If you complete three substantial annotations, you will receive full credit. If you complete only one, you will receive one-third credit.

Annotations are due by class time. You may turn in your annotations late on one week without explanation.

Tool expertise and application

Following the conclusion of our first unit, you will explore and develop competence with a particular form and tool for computational analysis. Suggestions for starting points, especially for beginner-level tools, can be found on our course WordPress site. Those of you who enter the class with more technical experience are encouraged to work with intermediate or expert-level tools.

You will demonstrate competence with your particular tool by creating a small-scale prototype for a digital history project. This should use real historical subjects or data. Please send me an email by the end of the day on **Feb. 20** to let me know what tool you will be working with as well as any ideas you may have for topics or data that you may apply it to. I will provide feedback and ideas. On **Feb. 25**, you will collaborate with students working with similar tools to troubleshoot, overcome barriers, and define opportunities.

You will turn this in as a blog post on our class WordPress site by the end of the day on **Feb. 27**. Your blog post should document your process, including any challenges and technical issues that you encountered, with screenshots and a text narrative. It should provide some indication of what the final product looks like, as well as how it might have looked with more time and resources.

Abolitionism Project

Our class is partnering with the David Ruggles Center, located about two miles from Smith College's campus. This community organization focuses on the history of abolitionism in western Massachusetts, and particularly on Florence and Northampton. For your final project, you will be creating a digital project that will be embedded as a digital exhibit on their website. Based on my discussions with them, groups of three to four will each focus on one of the following five topics:
1. Self-emancipation and fugitive slaves in Western Massachusetts.
2. The Northampton Association of Education and Industry.
3. David Ruggles in Florence/Northampton.
4. Lydia Maria Child in Florence/Northampton.
5. Sojourner Truth in Florence/Northampton.

Your final project should include the following elements:
- A well-researched and fully-documented **StoryMap** on your topic for the David Ruggles Center.
    - This will include a significant amount of research, writing, and documentation.
- Integrated into the StoryMap will be at least one work of **computational analysis**, such as a topic model, network analysis, or a data visualization.
    - Note that I will help each group to identify potential topics and/or data sources.

- A **public project**, such a twitter bot, a walking tour, a blog post, or a well-developed Wikipedia entry. You should discuss this with me.
  - Included with the public project should be a 500-word explanation of what you're aiming to accomplish, what your audience is, and what you learned from creating it.

The folks at the David Ruggles Center and myself will review your final project and provide feedback and suggestions for revisions. I will grade it on the basis of the following criteria: 1) the extent of its engagement with historical sources; 2) the cogency and clarity of your presentation; 3) its meaningful incorporation of digital history techniques and methods; 4) the degree of effort demonstrated.

On groupwork: I will occasionally check in with you through a form to ask about your group. I will ask you, among other things, about the degree of equity in the group. Is one person sitting on the sidelines? On the other hand, is one person doing everything? Neither of these are good dynamics. If you find yourself sitting back and letting others take the lead, step up. If you find yourself dominating proceedings, take a step back. Your final project will be graded as a group. However, I will adjust individuals' grades based on feedback from these forms.

I will attempt to minimize the amount of work you need to do for this project outside of class. On days marked "Practicum" on the schedule below, you will be working together in class while I offer advice and support. You may choose your own roles, workflow, and collaboration process. I recommend using shared Google Docs for assembling the text for your StoryMap.

Reflective essay (10%)

In an 800–1,000-word essay, respond to the following question: What are the most important promises and perils that digital tools offer for historians?

This essay will be graded based on 1) the strength and coherence of your argument; 2) engagement with course materials; 3) the clarity of your writing.

Course Policies

I believe you**:** My default position will be to trust you when you share something with me. I understand that life can be very difficult. If you find yourself sacrificing your mental or physical health for this class, please get in touch with me so that we can work together to avoid that.

Identity: This class respects students' rights to determine their own name(s), pronouns, and identities. If you feel that these rights are not being respected, *please* speak with me.

Religious holidays: This course respects students' observance of religious holidays. Email me.

Email communication: I expect all students to regularly check email. For simple queries, please consult the syllabus before emailing me. I expect you to communicate professionally over email.

Plagiarism: Using someone else's words or ideas as your own, without clearly quoting and citing them, is plagiarism. It is a violation of the Honor Code. I will follow the college's procedures about plagiarism, which means bringing the matter to the Class Dean and the Honor Board.

Racist language: Because our course deals with the history of race and slavery in America, some of our readings and materials may use racist language. It's important to acknowledge and study this material, but we will not repeat racist language in the classroom.

Reading for this class: Our readings will consist primarily of short blog posts, essays, and some academic articles and book chapters. As you read, try to identify the major claim or argument of each piece. Moreover, try to draw connections between the various readings. Use annotations to keep track of this, and help each other draw connections with your annotations. What themes and topics recur across multiple essays? What is different about particular essays from the others that you have read?

Community standards: Near the beginning of our course, we will have a class-wide discussion about several topics, including: late work and extensions, discussions and respect, electronics and attention, and trauma and content warnings. Together, we will craft a list of "community standards" that will consist of our values and expectations for this class, which I will circulate once it's finished.

Productive failure: DH is experimental, and some experiments fail. I have personally failed with a few DH projects, either because they were ill-conceived or because of technical challenges. Some degree of failure is inevitable. In fact, intellectual growth is impossible without failure. If you fail to follow through on your ambitions for a project in this class, document it and talk to me. We can discuss instead what you learned from this failure, and we can use that knowledge going forward.

Resources

Sexual Misconduct: I am a responsible reporter regarding incidents of sexual violence and misconduct. That means that I am required to report incidents of sexual violence to our campus's Title IX Coordinator. In that event, the Title IX Office will work with a small number of others on campus to ensure that appropriate measures are taken, and resources are made available to the student. Protecting a student's privacy is of utmost concern, and all involved will only share information with those that need to know to ensure the University can respond and assist. See **https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/title-ix**

Accessibility: It is important to me that everyone is able to succeed in this course. I will work with all students to accommodate any disabilities. We are lucky to have an excellent Office of Disability Services (ODS) at Smith. Note that they will work with you even if you don't have a formal doctor's note. Please submit requests for accommodations to ODS as soon as possible. They will generate a confidential letter that indicates the specific kinds of support that you need in the classroom. Please know that you don't need to disclose your specific disability to me, and ODS will not unless you ask them to. **https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/disability-services**

I try to make this course as accessible as possible. My understanding of what accessibility means is always evolving. Please help me by letting me know if I can do anything, even if it seems small, to make the class more accessible at any point in the semester. You can do this through email, in

person, or through this anonymous Google form. When you submit to the Google form, I will get an email with your request but with no personal information.

Writing center**:** The Jacobson Center for Writing is an incredible resource that offers appointments and walk-in peer tutors to help you to develop your writing abilities. They are prepared to help students with public writing. **https://www.smith.edu/jacobsoncenter/**

Technology Help: For help with WordPress, contact either myself or Travis Grandy (tgrandy@smith.edu). For help with StoryMap, consider attending the open lab hours for the Spatial Analysis lab.

Unit 1: Introduction to Digital History

Jan. 28: Course introduction

Jan. 30: What is Digital History?
- Skim: Hockey, "The History of Humanities Computing," (2004).
- Read: Scheinfeldt, "The Dividends of Difference," (2014).
- Read: Blevins, "Digital History's Perpetual Future Tense," (2016).
  - Read, explore, or skim at least one project or piece of writing that Blevins cites.
- Read: American Historical Association, "Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship by Historians," (2015).

Feb. 4: Data and History
- Read: Owens, "Defining Data for Humanists," (2011).
- Read: Guldi and Armitage, "Big questions, big data," *History Manifesto* (2017).
- Read: Johnson, "Markup Bodies," (2018).
- Read: D'Ignazio and Klein, "The Numbers Don't Speak for Themselves" (2018).

Feb. 6: Data Visualization
- Read: Theibault, "Visualizations and Historical Arguments" (2013).
- Read: Graham, Milligan, and Weingart, "Principles of Information Visualization," (2013).
- Explore: Slave Voyages.
- Explore: American Panorama.
- Explore: Magazine of Early American Datasets.
  - Pick a dataset. Examine the data. How might you imagine visualizing it?

Feb. 11: Spatial Analysis
- Read: White, "What is Spatial History?"
- Read: Blevins, "Space, Nation, and the Triumph of Region," (2014) and companion site.
- Read: Bond, "How Is Digital Mapping Changing The Way We Visualize Racism and Segregation?" (2017).

Feb. 13: Spatial Analysis
- Guest lecturer from Spatial Analysis Lab.

Feb. 18: Textual analysis
- Read: Blevins, "Topic Modeling Martha Ballard's Diary," (2010).
- Explore: Robots Reading *Vogue*.
- Explore: Text Creation Partnership.

Feb. 20: Networks
- Read: Graham, Milligan, and Weingart, "Networks in Historical Research."
- Read: Weingart, "Demystifying Networks," (2011).
- Read: Healy, "Using Metadata to Find Paul Revere," (2013).

- Read: Casey, "A Committee of the Whole," (2019).
- Due: proposal for tool expertise and application due by email at end of day.

Feb. 25: Practicum

Unit 2: Abolitionism Project

Feb. 27: Abolitionism project introduction
- Read: Sinha, "Interracial Immediatism," from *The Slave's Cause* (2016).
- Due: Tool expertise and application exercise.

Mar. 3: Abolitionism
- Read: Sinha, "Abolition Emergent."

Mar. 5: Visit spatial analysis lab
- Explore: Hyman, The Oak of Jerusalem.

Mar. 10: Abolitionism
- Read: Griffin, "Antislavery Utopias," (2018).

Mar. 12: Abolitionism
- Read: Laurie, "Introduction: The Setting," from *Rebels in Paradise* (2015).
- Read according to group:
  - Group 1: Laurie, "Sylvester Judd: Skeptical Abolitionist"
  - Group 2: Laurie, "Erastus Hopkins: Idealist as Politician"
  - Group 3: Laurie, "David Ruggles: A Blind Man with a Vision"
  - Group 4: Laurie, "John Payson Williston: Abolitionist as Prohibitionist"
  - Group 5: Laurie, "Erastus Hopkins: Idealist as Politician"

[Enjoy your Spring Break]

Unit 3: Digital Publics

Mar. 24: Digital archives
- Read: Putnam, "The Transnational and the Text-Searchable," *American Historical Review.*
- Read: Thompson, "Why Don't Archivists Digitize Everything?"
- Read: Terras, "Digitisation's Most Wanted." (note: you don't need to read all the updates)
- Explore: Colored Conventions Project.
- Explore: Boston Public Library Antislavery Collection.

Mar. 26: Practicum

Mar. 31: Social media and blogging
- Explore: #twitterstorians.

- Read: "How Tweet It Is!" Library of Congress blog (2010).
- Read: "Update on the Twitter Archive at the Library of Congress," LOC blog (2017).
- Skim through: "Beginner's Guide to Twitter Data." (follow along if interested)
- Explore: Nursing Clio.
- Explore: Black Perspectives.

Apr. 2: Practicum

Apr. 7: Access
- Read: Berlin Declaration (2004).
- Read: Wulf, "Open Access and Historical Scholarship," (2015).
- Read: Williams, "Disability, Universal Design, and the Digital Humanities," (2012).

Apr. 9: Practicum
- Due: full draft of StoryMap.

Apr. 14: Podcasting
- Read: Beasley and Stein, "Podcasting History," (2014).
- Listen to an episode of one of the following academic history podcasts (or email me about another option):
  - BackStory
  - Ben Franklin's World
  - New Books Network
  - Nostalgia Trap
  - Ottoman History Podcast
  - Past Present
  - Who Makes Cents?

Apr. 16: Practicum

Apr. 21: Wikipedia
- Read: Wolff, "The Historian's Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia."
- Read: Martha Saxton, "Wikipedia and Women's History," (2012).
- Explore: at least two Wikipedia articles related to your abolitionism project. How have they been revised? Has the "Talk" page featured any interesting discussion?

Apr. 23: Practicum

Apr. 28: Presentations
- Due: Final draft of StoryMap.
- Due: Public project.

Apr. 30: Presentations

May 5

- Due: Reflective essay