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## Doing Original Research in an Undergraduate Environmental History Course<sup>\*</sup>

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IF YOU WANT TO GET your undergraduate students engaged in the study of history, there is no substitute for getting them to do their own research using original sources. In practical terms, this involves posing a good question, framing that question in a critical framework for analysis, searching for relevant documents, writing an interesting narrative, rewriting in response to comments, and offering your work to your peers. When students get the chance to do this kind of work in a structured environment, they end up learning what it means to be an historian, and they gain a sense of ownership of their studies as well. In this essay I will describe my experience with this approach to teaching, focusing on a course in American environmental history that I have taught for the last ten years at Hampshire College. 1

Environmental history is an especially appropriate field for this approach to teaching. Developed out of the postwar interest in environmental issues and outdoor activities, environmental history analyzes the human transformation of the natural world in historic context. In America, that typically means looking at the impact of agricultural and industrial capitalism on our use of and our ideas about nature. By putting nature in the foreground of analysis, environmental historians add important intellectual and political dimensions to more familiar narratives of the American experience. In addition, environmental history is necessarily multi-disciplinary, encompassing research materials and methodologies from the environmental sciences, geography, political economy, and other disciplines. This combination of analytical breadth, political relevance, and interdisciplinarity makes environmental history courses appealing to a wide range of students, including those in history and environmental studies. Moreover, the fact that research in this field lends itself to case studies of particular places where the larger forces of political, economic, cultural, and environmental change are mediated in daily life offers a great opportunity for undergraduate students to get a taste of what historians actually do.<sup>1</sup> 2

Hampshire College offers an ideal setting for efforts to incorporate original research in history courses. Students at Hampshire start doing independent research projects with primary material from their first days at the college as preparation for designing and completing individually designed academic programs that lead to a year-long senior project. The college is organized into five multidisciplinary schools, rather than discipline-based departments. This arrangement encourages students to define their interests in genuinely interdisciplinary ways and to work with faculty advisers from a variety of backgrounds. In addition, students do not earn grades and credits but receive narrative evaluations of their course work and independent projects. This important feature allows students the freedom to take risks with their writing and thinking, knowing that they will be encouraged to revise and rewrite rather than being punished with a low grade. The college provides a good deal of institutional support for this research-oriented curriculum, including aggressive research instruction programs in the library, well-staffed centers for developing quantitative and writing skills, and financial support for advanced student research projects. The culture of the college has, from its beginning in 1970, placed independent and original student research among its highest values. 3

Hampshire students enter my intermediate level class in American environmental history expecting to undertake their own research projects. Their readiness for such work is often in contrast to the expectations of the students in the class who come from neighboring colleges in the Five College consortium (Amherst, Mt. Holyoke, Smith, and the University of Massachusetts). Like most undergraduates, these students are not used to being asked to choose and defend a research question of their own or to undertake research in primary documents. Nonetheless, my experience is that both sets of students can successfully do this sort of research within the structure of a carefully designed, semester-long course. This suggests that the advantages of adopting an "inquiry" approach to environmental history can be secured even in a more traditional undergraduate setting, if the sort of research project described below is carefully integrated into a course syllabus.<sup>2</sup> 4

In what follows, I will describe the course and the major research assignment in more detail, noting especially the ways in which I try to structure students' research experience and have it reflect the analytical themes of the course. I will then describe some recent student research efforts in order to capture the imagination and range of interests students bring to a relatively simple assignment. 5

### The Course

In many ways my environmental history course is much like those taught in other undergraduate colleges. The students are a mix of environmental studies and history students in their second or third year, and they come to the class with a range of experience in United States history and historical research. Most are active in environmental organizations and protests, and many work on the college's farm and are committed to sustainable agriculture. They all are actively engaged in outdoor activities. 6

The readings for the course include many of the standard works in the field of environmental history, including books by William Cronon, Donald Worster, Ted Steinberg, Roderick Nash, and John Opie.<sup>3</sup> The syllabus follows a roughly chronological order from colonial encounters to early market activities to the settlement of the West and the development of urban industrial capitalism. I try to develop a clear, critical framework for analysis in lectures and discussion, focusing on the rationalizing and extractive impact of capitalist economic arrangements upon the environments of North America. We pay special attention to the development of property law and to the importance of the underlying cultural understandings of nature, both supportive and critical 7

of Euro-American transformations of the landscape. A secondary theme is the development of efforts to preserve or conserve natural resources and urban environmental amenities, with a focus on the tension between managerial and protectionist strands of environmentalism.

The distinctive part of the course, however, is the major assignment, an environmental history of a specific place of the student's choosing, based at least in part on primary documents. There are several rationales for such an assignment. On the practical level, a case study is typically a project that undergraduates can accomplish within a semester. Case studies have the further advantage of enforcing boundaries on the scope of research while increasing the chance that students will ask a significant question. Moreover, allowing students to choose the place they study increases their sense of ownership of their research since they are likely to choose places that matter to them.

There is an intellectual rationale as well that gets to the heart of what it means to teach environmental history. Our goal ought to be to help students see the ways in which the dominant cultural and political economic institutions have shaped the lives of people in a range of settings, along with their relationships with the natural world. When students are asked to reconstruct and analyze these relationships in a particular, bounded place, they should be able to see in some detail exactly how people in that place—a farm, a town, a factory—interpret and mediate those larger forces in their own daily lives. In a similar vein, Clifford Geertz argues that "Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods...); they study *in* villages."<sup>4</sup> Or as environmental historian William Cronon urged in his portrait of the mining town of Kennecott, Alaska: "The special task of environmental historians is to tell stories that carry us back and forth across the boundary between people and nature to reveal just how culturally constructed that boundary is—and how dependent upon natural systems it remains.... [T]he questions we ask must show us the paths out of town—the connections between this lonely place and the rest of the world—for only by walking those paths can we reconnect this...community to the circumstances that created it."<sup>5</sup>

The actual assignment reflects all these purposes, and reads as follows:

#### Research Project: The Environmental History of a Place

Your assignment is to research and analyze the environmental history of an American place of your choosing.

Environmental historians typically look at the way the large forces of political, economic, cultural, and social change shape the way people think about and interact with the natural world. They want to know how these big forces play out in the lives and decisions of ordinary people—for example, how the spread of market institutions and capitalist ideology changes farming practices or the way people eat and think about what they eat. And they want to know how these changes transform the natural environment and how that environment might shape the choices available to people in a particular time and place.

In brief, we want to know how people in one place are connected to the natural world as well as to the outside human world and how those two relations affect each other.

You should pick a place to study that has been occupied through periods of major change in American history. Your job is to investigate how some of the major forces in our history—European colonization, the development of capitalist agriculture, the rise of industry and urbanization, the spread of romantic and conservationist ideas about nature—have shaped the lives and natural environment of your chosen place. Ideally there will be primary documents on or from your place (personal journals, letters, newspapers, visual images, etc.) available for you to study and analyze.

As the students get started, we spend time in class talking about the nature of historical sources. We look closely at the sources used in the early readings in the class, critically analyzing the way authors have interpreted them. Together, we look at some sample documents from our first topic, environmental change in colonial New England, to see how historians collect and interpret their sources. In preparation for analyzing their own historic materials, students complete a brief written assignment (5–6 pages) describing the views of nature they find in a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century source of their choosing (typically from a magazine or newspaper, though some students choose fiction or collected letters) and placing those views in the context of the intellectual history of notions of nature discussed in class.

It is important to establish a set of deadlines for each step in the research and writing process. For this project, students are expected to keep to the following schedule:

**Week 2:** Individual meetings with each student to talk about likely topics and sources.

**Week 3:** Submit a one or two page description of the place to be investigated, explaining why it has been chosen, offering some preliminary ideas of the forces that have shaped the environmental history of the site, and listing some potential sources of information.

**Weeks 4–7:** Individual research and at least one more individual meeting with the instructor.

**Week 8:** Submit a preliminary outline of the research already conducted, including a detailed bibliography. Each student gives a brief presentation to the class at this point, identifying important research issues and analytical foci.

**Weeks 9–12:** One class session each week is set aside for research presentations. Each student gives a 20–30 minute talk on her research to the class. I tell them that they should think of this as an opportunity to teach, in the context of the whole course, and not just a report on what they have found. Students typically bring in primary materials (documents, photographs, maps, etc.) to illustrate their talks. The class offers a critique of the presentation and the interpretation or analysis offered. At this time, presenting students submit a first draft of their papers. I return these in a few days at an individual conference, with suggestions for rewriting, expanding, and revising.

**End of term:** Students submit the final draft of their papers, along with their own written assessment of their work in the course. Each student receives a narrative evaluation for the official college transcript.

### Examples of Student Projects

Student projects cover a wide range of places. Many choose their hometowns or some other place with which they have a personal connection. Here are some recent examples.

*A River in Braintree, Massachusetts.* Abby went back to an industrialized river in this older Boston suburb, her hometown. The river had been channeled into culverts and moved from its bed to allow for highway construction. Building on a local effort to reclaim the river, Abby used eighteenth-century town meeting records, nineteenth-century local histories, memoirs of local citizens, EPA records, and early twentieth-century picture postcards and maps to recover its history. What emerged was a history of commercial and industrial development, beginning with commercial fishing contracts in the 1790s and continuing through the construction of dams to facilitate factory expansion in the nineteenth century. Abby also made use of visual documents to reveal

that despite this history of abuse, local groups had worked in the early twentieth century to beautify stretches of the river with walkways and scenic bridges. She was thus able to show how shifts in manufacturing and in attitudes toward urban nature had regularly reshaped the river. Since the end of the course, Abby has worked with a local citizens' group on river restoration and is developing an environmental studies curriculum for local schools based, in part, on the river's history. She has also presented a paper based on her research and practical experience at the annual meeting of the American Society for Environmental History.

*A Catskills Mountains Resort.* Dave was interested in the history of a state campground in the Catskills where his family had often gone camping. He went back for a weekend visit and discovered in the local historical society that the site had a history of use that reflected changes in outdoor recreation in New York. Dave discovered the records of a luxury hotel that was opened in the 1830s and that catered to the New York City carriage trade until early in the twentieth century. Dave used these records, along with travelers' accounts from contemporary newspapers and magazines and local histories to describe the glory days of the hotel and to detail the impact of the tourist trade on the region's landscape, comparing this area with others (like Niagara Falls and the Berk-shires) that have been more fully analyzed. The hotel business went into decline as outdoor recreation took more participatory forms and as automobiles extended the range of Eastern tourists. Dave made use of state and federal documents to chronicle the destruction of the old hotel, the state's purchase of the property, and the development of a state park with camping and hiking facilities by the CCC in the 1930s. This project became the basis of Dave's senior thesis on changes in outdoor recreation in the Northeast.

*A Felt Mill.* Caroline grew up near an abandoned felt mill in Greenwich, Connecticut. This nineteenth-century mill had once been the biggest in the country, but it was closed down following a series of corporate mergers and the implementation of the Clean Water Act. In order to reconstruct the history of this mill and its effects on the river that carried its effluent, Caroline consulted two primary sources: the records of EPA investigations of the plant and oral histories of plant workers that were recorded when the mill closed in the 1980s. Caroline supplemented these sources by interviewing local public officials who had been involved with the shut down. She was able to show in detail how the mill's pollution of the river became a local political issue which pitted nearby working class neighborhoods, which fought to keep the plant open, against the local elite, which pressed for clean up and closure. Caroline's paper illuminated the way class and local politics have shaped struggles over pollution control in older industrial areas. Although Caroline was not a Hampshire College student, but came from one of the other liberal arts college in the area, she enthusiastically embraced this opportunity to do in-depth research in her home town.

Other students have looked at places of national importance for which there was an abundance of primary material. One climbing enthusiast, for example, made use of public documents, early climbers' memoirs, and business records of climbing schools to write about the history of climbing at Mt. Rainier. He set this chronicle in the context of broader histories of outdoor recreation in the early twentieth century. Another student was interested in the environmental impact of the Civil War and started to research the effects of the battle of Gettysburg. As he looked into the secondary literature, Congressional hearings, and the treasure trove of illustrations now available on the internet, he realized that the environmental impact of the battle was minor compared to the enormous changes in the landscape and in human uses of the land that have been produced by decades of "protection," "restoration," and tourism. He made fine use of photographic evidence and government reports to document these effects, which he analyzed in the context of changing attitudes toward recreation at sacred places.

These are only a few of the dozens of projects that students have completed over the years. Many students are motivated by the chance to do research on their hometowns or in other places that are personally significant to them. The projects vary in the quality of research, writing, and analysis, of course. Access to writing centers and library reference assistance is important for many students, as is the chance to receive comments on draft papers and do revisions. All students, the good writers and the poor writers both, will benefit from the chance to respond to such feedback. Instructors and teaching assistants can provide some of this help where institutional resources are thin, although there is no question that this approach is rather labor intensive. In a small college with relatively small classes, this kind of assignment presents few problems for teachers and resource offices. Even in a larger lecture class, however, there may be a place for focused student research. The project could be scaled back, the instructor could provide documents, topics could be narrowed to very specific sites, or students could work collaboratively. My experience suggests, however, that giving students the chance to work on topics of their choice and to figure out the significance of unfiltered historical material provides a learning experience that is not easily duplicated.

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\* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Joint Meeting of the American Society for Environmental History and the Forest History Society, Durham, North Carolina, March 28–April 1, 2001.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The field of environmental history can be explored in a number of ways. The American Society for Environmental History publishes a quarterly journal, *Environmental History*, and maintains an informative website at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~environ/>. There are several recent textbooks on American environmental history that provide contrasting approaches to the subject. These include John Opie, *Nature's Nation: An Environmental History of the United States* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1998), Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Carolyn Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> A good source for the theory and practice of inquiry education at Hampshire College is Frederick Stürton Weaver, editor, *Promoting Inquiry in Undergraduate Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1989).

<sup>3</sup> The reading list includes: William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis* (New York: Norton, 1992); Robert MacCameron, "Environmental Change in Colonial New Mexico," *Environmental History Review*, 18:2, Summer 1994, pp. 17–39; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind 4th ed.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); John Opie, *Nature's Nation* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1998); Theodore Steinberg, *Nature Incorporated* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994); Joel Tarr, *The Search for the Ultimate Sink: Urban Pollution in Historical Perspective* (Akron: University of Akron Press, 1996); Elliott West, *The Way to the West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Geertz, Clifford, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books,

1973), p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Cronon, William, "Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town," in William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), p. 33.

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