

The Emergence of Modern America

21H.102 Spring 2003

FINAL PAPER ASSIGNMENT: The Historical Research Paper

In the first paper that you wrote for this class, you examined questions of historiography—how historians who have interpreted the past have come up with very different explanations of the same events. In the second paper that you wrote, you developed a historical interpretation based on primary source material. The final paper asks you to combine these two approaches in a historical research paper. **In ten to twelve pages**, explore a theme or topic of your choosing through a close analysis of a document or small set of documents in conjunction with at least one other secondary interpretation.

This is a research paper that requires you to base your argument on primary material not on the class syllabus. You should develop a base broad enough to make substantial historical claims, but not so much that you cannot incorporate all of it. One significant document may be enough. You should also find a document that has been studied by other historians. The central question of your paper should revolve around the extent to which you agree or disagree with the secondary interpretation, and how your approach to the material shapes your interpretations. We will discuss this in greater depth along the way.

This is not the kind of paper that you can write in one night, and so the requirements for the paper are set up to prevent you from trying to do that. In Class #20, we will have a discussion on issues of writing and conceptualization to get you to start thinking about your topic if you haven't already done so. This is also the time to do background research. Leave time for dead ends.

In Class #23, you should hand in a brief description of your paper that describes the primary source material that you will use, the secondary historical source, and the questions that you think you will address. You don't have to have a thesis statement, an opening paragraph, or an outline, but you might find it useful to draft something like that. You should definitely have some sense by now of what your paper will ultimately be about, and whether the source material you've found can help you address those questions. **This is required**, and counts for 5% of your final grade. Bring what you write with you to class that day, and we will spend some time doing brainstorming. You will turn them in that day and I will respond to them by email.

The final paper is due in Class #26. I encourage you to share your draft with a peer editor or a writing center staff member during the last couple of days. Bring your paper with you and be prepared to talk about it in class. This will not be a formal presentation of your topic, but you should put some time into thinking about how you would explain your paper to others.

What Are Some Kinds of Primary Sources?

The following are taken in part from a series of essays on "Recovering the Past" in Gary B. Nash, et al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (1994). They are meant to suggest the wide range of things that historians examine.

Think about: newspapers, magazines, congressional records, census data, architecture, autobiographies, sermons and speeches, military records, paintings, novels, poems, foreigners' travel narratives, personal diaries, scrapbooks, and letterbooks, maps, public monuments, labor or radical pamphlets, ethnic newspapers (especially if you read other languages), photographs, political cartoons, government wartime propaganda, advertising, social scientific surveys, court decisions, fashion, and film.

Tracking Down Materials

There are a number of collections of primary sources in American history from which you could put together a list of sources. The *Annals of America* series and the *Major Problems in ...* series are particularly good. MIT has a remarkably good collection of magazines and newspapers of the twentieth century, some on microfilm and others in the RetroSpective Collection. Use reference works like *Poole's Index* (for 19th-century magazines) or the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* (after 1900 or so). If you are focusing on a specific person, it would be worth your time to look him/her up in something like the *Dictionary of American Biography*, *Who's Who*, or *Notable American Women*. The *Blackwell Companion to American Thought* is useful for intellectual and cultural trends. Those working in literary sources should consult the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* for the authors they are considering. The *Grove Dictionary of Art* has excellent entries on hundreds of American artists from the period. Other works like Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, or Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History* can give a multicultural perspective. A good starting place for any research is *The Reader's Companion to American History*, edited by Eric Foner and John Garraty. Exercise particular care with the use of material from the worldwide web.

Reference Librarians. These folks are very helpful, particularly with such issues as identifying on-line sources, working with microfilm and microfiche, or navigating the various article indexes. You can always work with the reference librarian at the desk (during hours when it is staffed), but it may be a better idea to set up an appointment in advance.

Extensions. You have plenty of time to plan for the paper in advance; extensions should not be necessary except in case of emergency. I have set the paper deadline at the end of the term in order to give you time during the exam period to focus on your other classes. Please remember that computer-related crises are not valid reasons for an extension; leave yourself a cushion of time in case something breaks or will not print. Please be careful to cite the sources of information and ideas that you use in your paper, both primary and secondary. You may use any of the standard methods of citation (footnotes, endnotes, parenthetical references, etc.), as long as you are complete and consistent.