

[This course was for junior and senior students at William & Mary, some of whom were history majors. The main assignment was a major collective research project, which involved oral interviews and archival research. If I were to do it again, I would narrow the subject of the course to more closely match the research paper. Though most of the students said they liked the broad focus, it felt to me (and the non-majors) like two courses in one. I've included some of my instructions to students and a copy of the rationale I had to write for the human subjects committee. The paper can be viewed at <http://dspace.swem.wm.edu/handle/10288/411>]

### **Workers in American Life**

History 490C-08  
Tuesdays 2:00-4:50 p.m., Blair 219

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Office Hours: Normally, Thursdays, 1-3, by appointment, or on the spur of the moment. Feel free to drop by my office. If I'm too busy to meet, we can schedule a meeting at another time.

This seminar concerns four related topics: the history of work in American life since the mid-19th century; the role of classes and class consciousness in American society; the history of the American labor movement, and the history of work at the College of William and Mary. Over the past 170 years or so, labor unions have tried to transform the relations of power in American workplaces, but they have never succeeded in bringing a majority of Americans into the union fold. Indeed they haven't always tried to do so. The percentage of American workers who were trade union members peaked at about 32% in the 1950s but fell thereafter to about 13% in the 1990s. Thus while the history of labor unions will be an important part of the story we'll study in this class, it won't be the whole story. Another important concern will be the everyday experiences of ordinary Americans like us. Work is, after all, what most of us do all day. The readings we'll do in common will generate (and maybe even suggest answers to) questions like: How much has work and relations among employers and employees changed over the past 175 years? Along the way, we'll consider lots of other questions: Was there ever a distinct and self-conscious "working class?" Do women experience "class" the same way men do? Why are women's wages general lower than men's? What is the relationship between class and color in American life? Why did so few Americans join labor unions?

I think you'll agree that this is one of those cases in which the past has obvious relevance to the present. That should make the class interesting. At the same time, we have to remain aware that, as playwright Lesley Poles Hartley put it, "the past is a foreign country." We have to avoid, as much as possible, imposing our perceptions, values, and concerns on people who lived long before us. To highlight the modern relevance of labor history while, at the same time, listening for the dissonance between the past and the present, we're going to do something unorthodox for a history class. Instead of starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and working our way up to

the present, we're going to start in the present and then take a great leap backward into the nineteenth century. That will probably be jarring enough to keep us on our methodological toes.

Another reason for studying the history of the present is that we can talk to our sources. The difficulty with writing the history of ordinary folks is that they rarely deposit their personal papers in archives. They—we!—generate paper all the time—we take tests, write letters, leave wills—but we rarely think we're important enough to drop off our stuff at the local library for safe-keeping. Studying the very recent past, however, permits us to use oral history to investigate our subjects, to interview live people about their own experiences, past and present.

Once we've spent a few weeks studying our own time, we will jump back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and then work our way forward. Hopefully, we won't be excommunicated from the History Department in the meantime.

### **Work, work, work**

In addition to the assigned readings, there are three short writing assignments, a research you'll do at the front end of the class, you'll be working collaboratively on a group research project on the labor history of the college in the era of the civil rights movement. See below for more information.

Each week we will meet once for almost three hours to discuss a common set of readings, view the occasional film, and discuss your research and writing. The assigned reading load is fairly light for an upper-level history seminar, but that's because you'll be doing additional reading as part of your research. I didn't want to pile too much on in advance. You'll find the books on sale at the bookstore and, hopefully, on reserve at the library. Please bring the readings and excellent notes to class on the day they are assigned. See attached my "Tips on Reading and Remembering."

Each of you will also take a turn leading the discussion of the assigned readings. Don't panic; you won't be running the class for three hours. Your job will be to get things going and to steer the discussion in intelligent directions for the first part of class. Your classmates and I will bail you out if you flounder but it's not hard. See my advice on Blackboard under Assignments. You'll sign up for your week today.

### **The research project**

Your major research paper for the class will be the product of a collaborative research investigation into the labor history of the college. As far as I know, this will be the first such research ever done. The University Archives has some oral interviews of retired administrators but no staff. Professor Terry Meyers has been working on the history of slaves owned and used by the College, and he's going to come to our class to talk to us about his research, but I know of only one other investigation involving staff, and that was a study of staff, students and faculty involved in the recent Living Wage campaign. My plan is to have you interview retired staff, faculty, administrators and maybe some alumni to investigate the history of work at the college in the era of the civil rights movement. You'll supplement these recorded interviews, at least one of which you'll transcribe and another of which you'll index (I'll explain this later), with research in other sorts of primary sources (government documents, manuscripts in the University Archives, newspapers, etc.) and secondary sources (books and articles by other historians).

While the research portion of the project will be collaborative—you will pair up to do the oral interviews, share your recordings and other research findings with each other—I'm presuming that you'll divide up to write the individual sections of the paper. As the project takes

shape, you can decide who will write each part. So, for example, one of you might do the background section on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and employment discrimination. Another person might work on a section on the integration of clerical workers on campus. Another might focus on housekeepers.

Eventually, the idea is, you'll put all these mini-chapters in between a collectively-written introduction and conclusion, and share it with the subjects of the study. If this sounds daunting, don't worry; we will spend considerable time in class discussing and planning this work, and you will also have the able assistance of the librarians at Reference, Government Documents, and Special Collections to help you.

## Evaluation

Evaluating the first couple of assignments will be fairly straight-forward. I will evaluate them on the basis of how thoughtful, persuasive, creative, and well-written they are.

Evaluating students on leading discussion is harder but most students do very well. Evaluating students involved in a group assignment is a bit trickier, but if you write separate sections of the paper, it will be easier to assess at least part of the final product individually. Since the success of the project will depend heavily on energetic participation in and out of class, your participation grade will be large. I'll start by assuming that everyone's participation grade will be an A because working together will be a whole lot more fun than working separately. I'm pretty sure I'll be able to recognize and reward intellectual, conceptual, organizational, and research creativity and energy on your part. You can always correct me, if you think I've gotten it wrong.

Leading discussion	5%
Response papers	20%
Participation in class and group project	20%
Online Research Journal (wiki)	5%
Transcript and indexes	15%
Research Paper Section Draft	10%
Research Paper Section Final Version	<u>25%</u>
Total	100%

## How to make this class really great.

First, talk. I can't emphasize enough that **this is a seminar, not a lecture course**. If all goes well, you will do most of the talking.

Second, come prepared. If you don't, the class will be a flop, and there won't be a darn thing I can do about it.

Third, take responsibility for how the discussions go. If the discussion is lagging, try to get it going. If someone is monopolizing, politely chime in. If some students are not participating or seem to be having trouble getting a word in, invite them to say what they think.

Fourth, listen and learn from your classmates. Since I'm not going to lecture, you're going to be learning principally from each other. This means you have to pay attention and respond to what others are saying.

Fifth, be respectful of your classmates. If you disagree with someone, by all means say so—the class will be dull if you don't. But do so respectfully. Please, no sneering, sighing, eye-rolling, fisticuffs, eye-gouging, etc.

Six, show up. When a class meets once a week, missing a day means missing three days. More than one missed class may have a devastating effect on your participation grade and it will annoy your classmates, who will have to compensate for you in your absence.

Seventh, come see me with suggestions, complaints, confusion and protests (it is a labor history class, after all).

Finally, tackle all course assignments with enthusiasm, creativity, and as much skill as you can muster.

### **Books to buy at the bookstore or read on reserve:**

Geoghegan, Thomas. *Which Side Are You On?: Trying to Be For Labor When It's Flat on Its Back*. Plume, 1993.

Nelson, Scott R. *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry: the Untold Story of An American Legend*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Striffler, Steve. *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food*. New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 2005.

Coursepack readings are marked with BB.

### **Schedule**

#### **Day 1(September 4): Introductions, discussion of syllabus, division of labor.**

#### **Day 2 (September 11): On the Job**

**Have Read:** Barbara Ehrenreich, "Maid to Order: The Politics of Other Women's Work," *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 300, No. 1799 (April 2000), 59-70(BB); Larry Brown, *On Fire*, 1994 (New York: Warner Books, 1995), 1-22(BB); 83-92, 96-106(BB); Ben Hamper, *Rivthead: Tales from the Assembly Line*, 1986 (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 15-44(BB); Pierce Walker, "Working the Land," from Studs Terkel, *Working* (New York: New Press, 1972), 3-14(BB); Scott Adams, *Fugitive from the Cubicle Police*, (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1996), 11-24(BB); Barbara Garson, *The Electronic Sweatshop* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 17-38(BB).

#### **Day 3 (September 18): Thinking about class**

**Have Read:** Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* (New York: Touchstone, 1983), 24-75(BB); Norman Podhoretz, *Making It* (NY: Random House, 1967), pp. 3-27(BB); Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (revised ed., NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 60-69(BB); Peter Calvert, *The Concept of Class: An Historical Introduction* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 58-73(BB); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (NY: Vintage, 1966), 9-11(BB).

#### **Day 4 (September 25): Modern Times/Discuss Research Project**

Have Read: Striffler, *Chicken*

Visit from Prof. Terry Meyers. Discussion of Slavery at the College of William and Mary.

**Day 5 (October 2): Swem Special Collections, Gov't Docs, University Archives, Electronic Search tools, etc.** Meet at Swem Special Collections. Walk into Swem, through the Information Commons, and then turn right. Keep going until you get to the glass doors. Go in there.

**Day 6 (October 9): Back to the Past**

Have Read: Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man*.

**(October 16): No Class. Fall break.**

**Day 8 (October 23): Standing at Armageddon/Divide list of interviewees?**

**Have Read:** Have Read: James Green, *Death at Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, The First Labor Movement and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 17-84 (BB); Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*, 41-92 (BB).

**Day 9 (October 30): Engendering Labor/Discuss research**

Have Read: Jeanne Boydston, *Home & Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), ix-xx (BB); Catherine E. Beecher, *Miss Beecher's Domestic Receipt-Book* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc, 2001, originally pub., 1858), iii-viii, 204-208, 234-241 (BB) Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 6-32(BB); Tera Hunter, "Work That Body": African American Women, Work, and Leisure in Atlanta and the New South," in *The Black Worker*, edited by Eric Arnesen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 72-93.

In class, see: "1900 House."

**Day 10 (November 6): War, Upheaval, Repression, Conciliation**

Have Read: *Who Built America?*, ch. 5 (BB); Cindy Hahamovitch, "Work or Fight," from *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 79-112.

**Day 11 (November 13): Depression, Upheaval and Reform**

**Have Read:** Have Read: *Who Built America?*, pp. 317-423; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Verso, 1997), xiii-50; reread, *Steel Drivin' Man*, chapter 8.

**Day 12 (November 20): World War II and the Cold War: Crucible of the Modern Labor Movement (or lack thereof)**

**Have Read:** *Who Built America?*, ch. 10(BB); Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," reprinted in *The Black Worker*, edited by Eric Arnesen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 222-249(BB); William Powell Jones, "Simple Truths of Democracy"; African Americans and Organized Labor in the Post-World War II South," in *The Black Worker*, 250-270(BB).

**Day 13 (November 27):**

**Have Read:** Nancy Maclean, "The Hidden History of Affirmative Action: Working Women's Struggles in the 1970s and the Gender of Class," *Feminist Studies*, 25 (Spring 1999), 43-78(BB).

**Day 14 (Dec. 4): Last class What Modern Labor Movement?**

Thomas Geoghegan, *Which Side Are You On?: Trying to Be For Labor When It's Flat on Its Back* (Plume).

**Advice on Leading Discussion**

The trick to running a good discussion, if there is such a thing, is to ask questions that have more than one answer, perhaps even questions you haven't quite answered yourself. If you ask a question with one right answer, everyone will sit and look at you as soon as the question has been answered. If you ask a meaty question that is open to debate, the discussion will be off and running.

I'd recommend going directly to the sort of questions that provoke debate, instead of starting with the informational "what does the author say about x?" sort of questions. Asking (what did so-and-so say about this or that?) will get people to talk, but it won't usually start a discussion that runs on its own steam. If the conversation seems too abstract or vague, you can always ask people for examples or say, "where did you see that?" You can always go back to your "what does the author say about x?" questions.

Don't panic at the sound of silence. Give your classmates time to think. If they still look blank, don't answer your own question. Try rephrasing it. Or let them talk to the person next to them for a minute. Sometimes students want to sound out their ideas before offering them in public.

Be prepared to throw away your prepared list of questions. If the discussion goes well without it, let it happen. But listen closely. Not all talk is useful talk. If you think the discussion has been stuck too long on one issue or is missing an important point, get back in there! If you really get stuck, I'll be there to help keep things going.

Be creative. If you think it would be helpful to have the class pair up, gang up, debate, color, or sculpt, that's ok, so long as we delve deeply into the readings. Note that on some days, we'll have a set of readings, rather than a book. Try to get the class to take those readings as a whole or as sets before tackling them one-by-one. Here again, we'll want to go deeply into the readings, but we'll also want to try to pull out the themes that unite the readings or divide them. Starting with that may be more provocative than going about it reading by reading.

In any case, if you want to discuss your plan with me before you implement it, come see me, email or call.

### **Hahamovitch's Tips On How To Read and Remember**

You probably know how to read but reading in a way that will help you pick out an author's main points or remember details later is different than just reading the words from start to finish. At this level, it is not enough to read a book or article, jot down the information you gleaned from it, and decide whether you found it interesting. One of my first college teachers used to say, "I don't care if you liked it; what do you think about it?" Your professors will want to know, not just what the author said, but why you think he said it, or what evidence she had to back up her claims, or what assumptions underlay the author's argument. In other words, you have to evaluate what you read *critically*. That doesn't mean that you have to find something in it to criticize; you may have loved the reading. It means you have to read closely, analytically, actively, thoughtfully.

Here, then, are some tips on how to read critically:

Read through each assignment relatively quickly at first, trying to get a sense of the text as a whole and marking those passages which seem most important. Then, go back through a second time, looking for answers to the following questions:

1. What is the **subject** of the reading? Think: who, what, where, when?
2. What is its significance? Think: why does it matter? So what?
3. What is the author arguing about this subject? In other words, what is his or her **thesis**?
4. What sort of evidence does the author use to support his or her claims?
5. Does that evidence seem adequate?
6. Do you think the author is downplaying or ignoring issues that would undermine his or her argument?
7. Did the author approach the subject with assumptions that shaped his or her findings?
8. Who is the author's intended audience? How does that affect the author's product?
9. How is the book/article/chapter organized? Why did the author set it up that way?

Pay attention to how you're responding as you read. Does anything

1. surprise you?
2. challenge your assumptions?
3. confirm or contradict what you have learned from other readings or what you knew before taking this class?

If you're delighted, bored, frustrated, or puzzled, ask yourself why. If you find yourself drawn to or repelled by a particular character, event, idea, or theme, try to figure out why.

### **Taking Notes**

Now, write a brief summary of the reading and add to it your answers to the most relevant of the questions above. If the author's audience or organizational strategies don't seem like big issues, don't bother with them. Use the questions above to help you sort out the reading's biggest strengths and weaknesses and note those in addition to the reading's main points. If we discuss the reading in class, you might have other revelations about the reading. Don't forget to add those to your notes.

This sort of note-taking will be much more effective than simply underlining or highlighting in the text or trying to take notes on everything you read. Most students can remember what they highlighted long enough to make sense the next day (or hour) in class but two months later on the final, forget it. If you take good notes, however, you'll

have much better recall of the material and you'll find that you have more to say about it. You'll also have great notes that you can use to inform your essays on the mid-term and final exams.

## Response Paper Assignment

You're going to write response papers on two of the three books I've assigned: *Chicken* by Steve Striffler, *Steel Drivin' Man* by Scott Nelson, and *Which Side Are You On*, by Thomas Geoghegan. Or you can opt to write on all three, and I'll drop the lowest of the three paper grades. These papers will be short (2-3 pages) but they're tough to do. You must write two reviews (worth 10% each), but you may opt to review all three, in which case I'll drop your lowest review grade.

### Deadlines

If you are reviewing a book, the paper is due to me and the person leading class discussion by noon on the day before we discuss the book in question.

### How to begin

To start, keep in mind that a response paper is not the same thing as a book report. A book report is usually a summary of a book, perhaps with a little commentary tacked on to the end. In a response paper, the proportions should be reversed. You'll devote a little bit of space to an explanation of what the book is about, what it argues, and how the author supports the claims he or she makes, but the bulk of your paper should be devoted to your critical analysis of the book.

Let me explain what I mean by "critical." To write a good, sharp response paper, you don't have to criticize the book. You might love it, but if you do, you'll have to explain why. What about the book works so well? What makes it so persuasive? If, on the other hand, you disagree with the book, you'll need to explain that too. In other words, it's not enough to say you liked it because you enjoyed or disliked it because it was boring. A really bad book can be fun to read and a dull one can change your life. Engage the book at the level of argument, evidence, or maybe even the author's prejudices and preconceptions. Dig deep.

If you feel like you're not in a position to make those kind of judgments, don't panic. The questions that follow may help you dissect the book and think about it analytically:

First, separate the subject from the thesis. What is the book about? That's the subject. What argument does the author make about that subject? That's the thesis. Does the author support the thesis adequately? What is the nature of his or her evidence? Is it weak in places?

Why did the author write this book? For example, you might ask whether the author is writing for a particular audience, taking issue with another author, or trying to influence social policy. Did the author's purpose shape his or her findings?

Who might object to this book? Would the critics have a case or is the author's evidence ironclad?

What kind of evidence does the author use? Might other sorts of sources have led to different conclusions? Could the author's evidence be read another way?



How is the book organized? Is this a problem?

Did the author leave out issues you think are important? How would inclusion of those issues change or undermine the author's argument?

How important is this book? What impact might it have if lots of people read it?

Obviously, in 2-3 pages you're not going to cover all these issues, nor would I want you to. Pick the issue (or, if necessary, issues) you think is most important or interesting and design your paper around that. That'll be *your* thesis.

When you quote or make reference to things the author said, please cite him or her properly using footnotes or endnotes. This is very easy to do in Word. If you don't know how, ask me or another student in the class. Historians use the *Chicago Manual of Style* citation method. The Chicago Manual is available at the reference desk in Swem and in the History Writing Resources Center. Kate Turabian's style guide is a sort of condensed and cheap version. You might want to pick one up.

#### Sitting down to write

There's no formula for writing response papers but if you feel the need for guidance, try the following:

- Begin with a hook that draws your reader into the subject
- Follow by summarizing the book briefly and relating the author's main point or thesis.
- Turn to your thoughts about the book's strengths and weaknesses.
- Conclude with a final evaluation of the book. You might discuss the book's potential impact or who might find it useful.

If you have any questions, feel free to email or come see me. I'm also always happy to read drafts of papers before they are due. Two response papers=20% of course grade.

### Labor History of the College of William & Mary Human Subjects Informed Consent Proposal

#### Description and Rationale

The fifteen or fewer students of History 490C-08 (Workers in American Life) will be working collaboratively on a research project investigating the labor history of the College, which will, by necessity, require oral interviews as part of the research process. My plan is to have the students focus on the period before and after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to see what impact Title VII of the Act had on the campus, the community, and the employees themselves. This was the period, for example, when black women first gained access to clerical jobs in the South, but other jobs--such as housekeeping--seem not to have been integrated. The course will allow students to consider the extent to which the Civil Rights movement opened up possibilities for African Americans and women in the workplace. There are some government documents and a small amount of archival materials available from that period, but the students' key sources will be former staff members, students, and administrators. My plan is to have the students tape and transcribe their interviews and (with the interviewees permission) deposit them in Swem Special Collections for future researchers' use. The University Archives has a small oral history collection that contains

interviews with past administrators but no staff members. The university archivist is very excited about the prospect of developing this aspect of Swem's collection.

#### Procedures

Students would be working as individuals or in pairs, beginning with a small list of names that I provide for them and then expanding that list as their research progressed. They would enter the interview with a set of preliminary questions, but with the hope that the subject would talk freely. The students would, if necessary, follow up with additional questions devised on the spot, or return for a follow-up interview at a later date. All tapes or transcripts of interviews would be made available to other members of the class. If the subjects give their permission, tapes and transcripts would also be deposited at Special Collections in Swem Library at the completion of the class.

#### Risks

Since the interviewers will be concentrating on the 1950s through the 1970s (roughly), most of the campus employees the students will interview would have long retired from the College, and wouldn't have much, if anything, to risk by speaking openly about their experiences. There are some current campus employees who have been at the college as long as fifty years, however. If they are willing to be interviewed, they may want to be more circumspect about their experiences and opinions. Students would have to be sure that such interviewees were either comfortable using their names, or take pains to anonymize them in their papers. Since I will be reading drafts of all papers, I can ensure that this is done. Such interviewees might want University Archives to seal the tape or transcript of their interview until after they retire from the College. This could be easily arranged.