

Local History Research Methodology



John Edwards' water cart on Walnut Street in Morgantown, c. 1892. Source: West Virginia and Regional History Center.

HIST 613 | Spring 2025
Wednesday | 4:00 – 6:50PM
Woodburn Hall 105

Instructor: Dr. Michael Allen
Office: Chitwood Hall 220
Office Hours: Monday/Tuesday, 10:00AM – 12:00PM
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INFORMATION

Description

This course explores methodological techniques for researching the local, specific, and particular. For historians and public historians, research, interpretation, and writing are intimately linked. As such, the class will cover research and writing techniques, as well as strategies for linking local stories to larger historical narratives. Class meetings will be conducted across discussion-based seminars, workshops and field sessions. The goal is for students to become confident researchers and writers, with the ability to persuasively demonstrate why local history matters. This semester, we will focus our inquiry and output on the West Virginia Botanic Garden, an intriguing site local to our home here in Morgantown.

Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to apply a wide range of research strategies to their own research projects.
- Students will be able to analyze scholarly publications and public history projects, and will assess the research methodology and storytelling techniques employed.
- Students will create original works of local/micro-history.
- Students will develop engaging public history products that communicate local stories and interpret their historical significance to the public.

Office Hours

Office hours exist to support your learning, and not all learning can occur during the regular course time. I strongly encourage students to make use of individual meetings to cover questions, concerns and curiosities. I am amenable to meetings outside of office hours, including by phone or Zoom.

Academic Policies

Please familiarize yourself with WVU's academic policies, including those pertaining to academic integrity and standards, inclusivity, COVID-19, class recording, and mental health, among others. You can find these statements here:

<https://tlcommons.wvu.edu/syllabus-policies-and-statements>

Course Delivery and Organization

This course is an in-person seminar driven by discussions, activities, lectures and field work. There will be no virtual sessions or virtual attendance options. Course readings and assignment documents will be posted to eCampus, and assignments can be submitted either by email or on eCampus. The syllabus includes the set schedule and required readings, but may change as the semester unfolds to accommodate guests, field work dates and other activities.

Attendance and Participation

Attendance is mandatory, but can be excused with instructor permission. Excuses will be made for health and mental health reasons as well as personal crises, and can be made for travel or activities

related to other courses or university activities. Please confer with me as soon as possible about any requests for an excuse, and do so *before* the session you would need to miss. Unexcused absences will proportionally affect the “Attendance and Participation” portion of your course grade. Given the single weekly meeting time, the class cannot function without your arriving prepared and ready for discussion.

Use of Technology and Artificial Intelligence

While the use of electronic devices is necessary to access eBooks and PDFs, as well as to enhance learning by looking up things to share with the class or looking up terms and phrases (or translating if English is not your first language), it can be distracting if activity is unrelated to learning. I reserve the right to request that you put electronic devices away if I feel that your use is problematic.

The use of AI is not prohibited, not discouraged – but also not enthusiastically embraced. Generally, AI is useless for historic research, and even more so for regional or local histories. It has some application for historical research yet. Also, the carbon footprint of a ChatGPT query is ten times that of a Google search, so use of AI in mass actually threatens historic sites by negatively impacting carbon emissions. The use of ChatGPT to generate course writing is not allowed.

Assignments and Evaluation

Attendance and Participation	10%
Discussion Lead	10%
Reading Responses	20%
Site Analysis Essay	10%
Midterm Paper	15%
Final Project	35%

ASSIGNMENTS

Discussion Lead

You are responsible for leading one class discussion, with assignments made in Week 1. When it is your turn, give a presentation (15 minutes) about the readings. You are encouraged to be creative, argumentative, satiric – just have a clear stake in your readings. You may use video clips or songs in your presentation to underscore points, but they cannot constitute the majority of content presented. In addition to this presentation, come prepared with at least three questions to facilitate class discussion. Important issues to consider include methodological framing, argument and evidence, construction of voice, and apparent bias (if detected). Feel free to circulate discussion questions or other materials to the class before the presentation.

Reading Responses

You are required to submit reading responses for 4 of the 8 required books for this class. These essays are meant to be critical reflections on the authors’ arguments, theoretical framing, and research methodologies. Include your assessment of the CRM issues raised in the readings. Responses should be 300-600 words long. They are due the week the reading is assigned, at the beginning of class.

Site Analysis Essay

An early assignment will be a short analysis of the West Virginia Botanical Garden as a document of local history. The exact prompt will be circulated in week two prior to our first visit, and essentially will ask you to note evident records of local history (interpretive, built forms, place names, etc.) on site and their general decipherability. The essay will be a short form of 750 to 1,000 words.

Midterm Paper

The midterm assignment will require that you each select one book from the two lists that follow (“Texts for Selection #1” and “Texts for “Selection #2”), read each to analyze methods of research, presentation, voice and audience and present a comparative analysis of the two books in an essay. The first list offers more formal and the second list more experimental forms. The exact requirements for this work will be distributed in week four of the seminar. The essay will be 2,000 words. There will be a brief presentation of the work at midterm.

Final Project

The final project will be a research-driven interpretive project for the West Virginia Botanic Garden that will demonstrate ability to undertake local history research as well as present local historic narratives to a public audience. Projects will be developed in collaboration with the Garden staff. The end projects will either be interpretive markers, web or media content or social media output. The exact assignment will be circulated in week eight with project proposals due in week twelve.

Late Work/Extensions

Late work will be reduced by half a letter grade (5 percentage points) for each day that it is late. Extensions will be granted on a case by case basis, without judgment. I encourage you to reach out if you anticipate failing to make a deadline, as it is best for both of us to know that in advance (and for you to get an extension).

Grading Scale

A+	98-100%	B	83-86%	C-	70-72%	F	59-0%
A	93-97%	B-	80-82%	D+	67-69%		
A-	90-92%	C+	77-79%	D	63-66%		
B+	87-89%	C	73-76%	D-	60-62%		

READINGS

All articles and book excerpts will be posted on eCampus. Students must obtain copies of required and selected books.

Required Texts

Tammy Gordon, *Private History in Public: Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2010). Available as eBook via the WVU Library.

David Kyvig, Myron A. Marty and Larry Cebula, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2019).

Lucy Sante, *Nineteen Reservoirs: On Their Creation and the Promise of Water for New York City* (New York: The Experiment, 2022).

Texts for Selection #1 (Choose One)

Jeff Biggers, *Reckoning at Eagle Creek: The Secret Legacy of Coal in the Heartland* (New York: Nation Books, 2010).

Evelyn Gonzalez, *The Bronx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Kenneth Fones-Wolf, *Glass Towns: Industry, Labor, and Political Economy in Appalachia, 1890 - 1930s* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

Charles Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

William Serrin, *Homestead: The Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

Altina Waller, *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

Texts for Selection #2 (Choose One)

Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

Peter Crow, *Do, Die or Get Along: A Tale of Two Appalachian Towns*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

Vivian Gibson, *The Last Children of Mill Creek* (Cleveland: Belt Publishing, 2020).

Lance Holland, *Fontana: A Pocket History of Appalachia* (Robinsville: Appalachian History Series, 2001).

Audrey Petty, *High Rise Stories: Voices from Chicago Public Housing* (Chicago: McSweeney's, 2013).

Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

Jesse Vogler et al., *Charting the American Bottom* (Digital platform, 2016).
<http://theamericanbottom.org>

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1 (January 15): Introduction

Introductions

Week 2 (January 22): What Is *Local* History?

Readings:

Carol Kammen and Bob Beatty, editors, "About Being a Local Historian," *Zen and the Art of Local History* (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2014).

Yi-Fi Tuan, "Attachment to Homeland," *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

Lucy Lippard, "All Over the Place," *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

bell hooks, "A Place Where the Soul Can Rest," *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Week 3 (January 29): Local History, Local Memory

Field Work in Class: West Virginia Botanic Garden

Reading:

David Kyvig, Myron A. Marty and Larry Cebula, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2019), chapters 1-2.

Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," *Representations* (Spring 1989).

Week 4 (February 5): Archives, Sources, Facts

Visit in Class: West Virginia and Regional History Center

Reading:

Kyvig, Marty and Cebula, chapters 3-7.

Site Analysis Essay Due

Week 5 (February 12): Buildings and Landscapes as Sources

Field Work in Class: West Virginia Botanic Garden

Reading:

Kyvig, Marty and Cebula, chapters 8-10.

Peirce F. Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

D.W. Meinig, "The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene," *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

Don Mitchell, "New Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Paying Attention to Political Economy and Social Justice," *Political Economies of Landscape Change* (Springer, 2008).

Week 6 (February 19): How Places Become Historical Records

Reading:

Lucy Sante, *Nineteen Reservoirs: On Their Creation and the Promise of Water for New York City* (New York: The Experiment, 2022).

Week 7 (February 26): No Meeting, Instructor Away

Week 8 (March 5): What Distinguishes Local History?

Readings:

Raphael Samuel, "Local History and Oral History," *History Workshop* 1 (1976).

John Beckett, "W.G. Hoskins and the Founding of Modern Local History," and "Local History Today," *Writing Local History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

Ed Ayers, "All History is Local. But It Can't Stop There." *New American History* (February 26, 2021).
<http://medium.com/new-american-history/all-history-is-local-be096696291b>

Midterm Student Presentations

Week 9 (March 12): Midterm Projects

Midterm Student Presentations

Midterm Paper Due

Week 10 (March 19): No Meeting, Spring Break

Week 11 (March 26): Records of Injustice and Justice

Readings:

Kammen and Beatty, editors, "What's in a Name?," *Zen and the Art of Local History*.

Jennifer Dickey, "'Cameos of History' on the Landscape," *The Public Historian* 42(2) (2020).

David Myer Temin and Adam Dahl, "Narrating Historical Injustice: Political Responsibility and the Politics of Memory," *Political Research Quarterly* 70(4) (2017).

National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, *A Guide to Changing Racist and Offensive Place Names in the United States* (2022).

Week 12 (April 2): Ways of Telling the Stories

Readings:

Tammy Gordon, *Private History in Public: Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2010).

Final Project Proposals Due

Week 13 (April 9): Telling Local Stories

Panel During Class: Producing Local Histories in St. Louis with Janna Añonuevo Langholz, Emery Cox and others TBA.

Readings:

Trevor Paglen, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space," *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2015).

Sarah Kanouse, "Critical Day Trips: Tourism and Land-Based Practice" *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2015).

Gary Walwrath and Robert Weible, "The Case of Historical Markers in the Twenty-First Century," *History News* 61(1) (2006).

Week 14 (April 16): Workshop

Guest: Jill Desimini, Director & Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Connecticut

Field/Research Work TBD

Week 15 (April 23): Workshop

Field/Research Work TBD

Week 16 (April 30): Final Presentations

Final Student Presentations