The History of Boston
Through Its
Built and Natural Environments

HIST 14H
Harvard University
Tuesdays, 3-5:45pm
Fall 2018
Sever Hall 112

detail from J. H. Colton, “Map of Boston and Adjacent Cities,” 1857, 38.1 cm by 31.7 cm, from Colton’s Atlas of the World Illustrating Physical and Political Geography [HERE]

Course Description & Objectives

This class challenges students to examine the city around them and connect its social and economic history with its shoreline, glacial hills, city parks, and segregated neighborhoods. Our subject of study will be the city of Boston as well as the inhabitants and builders of the city’s historical landscapes. We will see how the city’s natural and built environments shaped its history, and how Bostonians of all walks of life made and remade the city—sometimes together, sometimes fighting bitterly.

As part of this class we will visit together Georges Island, take a toxic tour of Dorchester, and analyze the historical markers in the Cambridge Common. Two of these class visits will be on Sundays, replacing the class time. You will also visit several of the places on your own. Grading will be based on wiki entries, a course journal, and your final research project.

This course’s goal is to learn how to gather evidence, analyze it, and make a coherent argument about the past. The sources we will draw on will include but not be limited to archival documents, oral histories, maps of all kinds, high art, popular images, newspapers, daguerreotypes and photographs, buildings (both humble and monumental), pollen samples, and objects in museum collections.

Learning Objectives

After taking this class, students will be able to:

- Articulate what adopting a historical perspective contributes to the study of the environment;
- Explain how people in what is now the United States shaped their environment in the past, and how were they shaped by it, with particular attention to the implications of race, gender, and class;
- Recognize how the archives which historians use and construct help to determine the results of their research;
- Identify relevant historical sources and evaluate their possible contributions to resolving historical questions;
- Compose effective historical narratives from fragmentary evidence from the past;
- Communicate their learning with and to others using 21st-century tools;
- Practice ethical historicization with respect to empathy for past subjects and respect for present-day colleagues;

Your Instructors

Zachary Nowak (he/him/his)
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Office Hours: Mondays, 11am-1pm as well as by appointment

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Assessments & Grading

One key objective of this course is for you to be able to evaluate traces from the past and synthesize them into a coherent narrative that has an argument. Another objective is for you to communicate your humanities education using twenty-first-century tools to a broader audience than just me. Your grade in this course is in part several writing assignments. The assignments will be to choose a point in the greater Boston area and create a short entry on the open-source website theclio.com.

In tandem with these written assignments, you will keep a course journal. This notebook should not be pristine, it should be messy: it can have your notes on the various readings if you like, sketches of places we visit if you are artistically inclined, lists of plants you see in the park, quotations from park rangers or museum guides, lists of primary sources, possible archives for projects, outlines of papers, or whatever else you wish to note down. This journal is a place to doodle and try things out, but it will show me your level of engagement with the ideas in the class and the various landscapes of Boston. It substitutes the typical “class participation” component of your grade.

Classroom Technologies

This classroom is a place that supports and encourages student learning. I make a lot of use of our course’s Canvas site and use clicker polling in the classroom, but I see your main learning tools as paper and pens. The research on laptops in classrooms seems fairly compelling: students who take notes by hand do better on tests and report (overwhelmingly) that they are less distracted in the classroom. Laptops used for purposes other than note-taking or course materials also have a negative effect on students near the person with a laptop. That said, I do not want to stigmatize students who need a laptop to be able to learn in this class. Any student who has an Accessible Education Office (aeo, see their website here) letter specifying that they need a laptop or other device in place of a class journal can of course use one and any other student can request permission with me in person. Students who do not have letters from the aeo must make a compelling argument in person about why they need to use a laptop for learning in this classroom. All students who ask to use laptops must sign a laptop contract.

Students who have a letter from the aeo should either email me or speak with me. I am happy to do anything I can to make my classroom more accessible, more inclusive, and less ableist.

zotero

For this class we’ll use the storage and citation software Zotero. Students who already have an equivalent or better system for storing files and citing should come speak with me. All students must attend one of the three introductory workshops (Sep 18, 19, or 24) where you will learn to use Zotero. There will be support available from librarians, the tf, and me for the whole semester.
Required Books, Supplies, & Technology

Highlighters
Please buy an orange, blue, and yellow highlighter—we’ll be using these a lot.

Books
There is only one required text, Michael Rawson's *Eden on the Charles*. You are free to purchase it at the Harvard Coop (order it [here](#)), at another bookstore, or online. You can also use one of the two copies on reserve at Lamont Library. Over the course of the semester we will read the whole book. As a starting point for research, I also recommend Anthony Penna and Conrad Wright’s *Remaking Boston* (though it’s not required). In addition to the readings below, we will begin every class by looking at and interpreting together a number of relevant primary sources. All the other course readings are available online, though I’d like you to have printed out versions to use in class (I’ll give you options with various price ranges in class).

Class Journal
I would like you to go to get a blank sketching journal with at least 50 pages. I will send a list of several that I recommend but I mostly want you to have something durable with slightly thicker pages than a normal notebook. You will use this journal extensively both in and out the classroom; please bring it to every class.

A Civil & Inclusive Classroom

In this course we will be examining interpretations of history that can appropriately be called controversial, including the role of identity, power, privilege, and agency in the past. We should endeavor to engage in these dialogues with two competing ideas in mind: that the classroom is a space where free exchange of ideas must happen, but where consideration for others and their life experiences is also paramount. I also would like all of you to join me in respecting our fellow students in their choice of pronouns, and I want to make it clear that I see bilingualism (or tri-, or more) as a huge strength for students, not an obstacle.

Practical Matters
I subscribe to the Harvard College Honor Code ([here](#)) and will enforce it. I would much rather sit down and work with you before something is due than have you feel like you have to copy someone else’s work.

I answer to the director of undergraduate education for the History Department (Dr. Lisa McGirr), but my daily work is at least in part for you. Coming to see me during office hours is never a bother for me: indeed, I love to talk one-on-one about history.

You are always welcome to drop by my office, but it’s a good idea to make an appointment, just to make sure we have time to talk.
Weekly Readings

Week 1 (Sep 4)—Introduction to the Course
At our first meeting, we’ll do an exercise about evaluating historical sources, looking at archival documents, historic maps, and a number of objects. Please bring your notebook for some brief writing exercises.

Week 2 (Sep 11)—Silences in the Archives & Landscapes as Palimpsests
For this meeting, please read the article on archives, as well as these brief introductions to ways of analyzing landscapes.


At the end of class, we will walk over to the Cambridge Common and do a few lightning exercises in evaluating historical sources in landscapes.

Week 3 (Sep 18)—Geology and Palynology


September 25—No class on Tuesday—Attend one of the Zotero workshops

[Writing assignment #1 (individual, 300 words)—due in draft in the Clio by Sep 25]

Week 4 (Sep 30—Sunday)—Boston’s Native Landscapes: Yesterday and Today

Instead of class this week, we will be taking a field trip to Georges Island in the Boston Harbor. The trip is on Saturday (we will have no class on Tuesday, September 25). We leave the Harvard T station at 8:30am and will get back by 2pm. Please do the following reading beforehand and bring your journals.


Please read "Native Americans and the Boston Harbor Islands" on the National Park Service website, as well as this brief Commonwealth article, paying attention to the controversy about calling the Harbor Islands a “recreation” area.

### Week 5 (Oct 2)—History in Landscapes


Rawson, Eden on the Charles, Ch.2 “Constructing Water” (pages 75-128).


### Week 6 (Oct 9)—Revolutionary Changes


[Writing assignment #2 (group, 500 words)—due in draft form in theclio.com by class]

### Week 7 (Oct 16)—Places at the Margins?

Rawson, Eden on the Charles, Ch.3 “Inventing The Suburbs” (pages 129-178).


### Week 8 (Oct 23)—The “Natural” and Built Environments

Please make a trip on your own to Mt. Auburn Cemetery before this class meeting. Please note any differences between gravestones for men and women.

Rawson, Eden on the Charles, Ch.4 “Making The Harbor” (pages 179-232).


[Writing assignment #3 (individual, 750 words)—due in draft form in theclio.com by class]
Week 9 (Oct 30)—Parks, Morality, & Class

Look at Colton's *Map of Boston* from 1856 (available through the Library of Congress, [here](#)).


Week 10 (Nov 6)—Final Paper Workshop

[Writing assignment #4 (group, 750 words)—due in draft form in theclio.com by class]

Week 11 (Nov 13)—“Restoring” The Past

Browse some photographs of the Back Bay Fens [here](#).


Week 12 (Nov 20)—Corporate Urbanism


November 27—No class on Tuesday

Week 13 (Dec 2—Sunday)—Race Politics, The Law, and A Place to Live

Instead of class this week, we will be going on a “toxic tour” organized by Alternatives for Community and Environment, an environmental justice organization based in Roxbury, MA. The tour is on Saturday. We leave the Harvard T station at 8:30am and will get back by 2pm. Please do the following reading beforehand and bring your journals.

Massachusetts Advisory Committee on Civil Rights and the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. “Route 128: Boston's Road to Segregation,” January 1975. [here](#)


Week 14 (Dec 4)—Boston’s Gendered Past


[Final seminar paper—due by the end of the week]