171-01 US Environmental History to 1865

John Fairfield
Fairfield@xavier.edu

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“It is hard to imagine, but it is a matter of record that a mid-eighteenth-century mariner approaching the American strand could detect the fragrance of the pine trees about 60 leagues, or 180 nautical miles, from land. Before landfall he might thus be reminded, even after more than a century of white settlement, of the essential newness of the New World.”


“Look at it – and think it is the most beautiful history in the world,” F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of American history near the end of his life. Fitzgerald, the author of *The Great Gatsby*, surely cannot be accused of ignoring the sordid aspects of American life.

But even Gatsby, Fitzgerald’s great exemplar of American excess, had “something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life,” an “extraordinary gift for hope.” That hope stemmed from the great beauty and abundance of this continent, a hope not effaced even by three hundred years of environmental and social degradation. “Most of the big shore places were closed now,” Fitzgerald wrote of Gatsby’s gaudy corner of Long Island near the end of the novel, “and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent,
compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.” That sense of hope and wonder both inspired and haunted Americans and provided an often distressing measure of their failures, a sense of possibilities squandered or soiled. By the 1830s, Americans had already begun to imagine the imminent collapse of the civilization they had yet to build.

This course seeks to capture something of that sense of wonder, hope, and possibility even as it applies the same distressing measure to the rise of American civilization. The course pays particular attention to the ways Americans interacted with the beauty and abundance – as well as the challenges – of the North American continent. Environmental issues (and their economic, social, political, and cultural ramifications) will come first in the course. Such events as the founding of colonies, the revolutionary process, the emergence of democracy, and the road to civil war will not be as prominent in this course as in the traditional U.S. survey. But we will encounter each of these issues through an environmental lens.

Like all history courses, this course is also designed to promote habits of critical reading, thinking, writing, and speaking. The method used to promote these habits is the reading of a series of historical texts, followed by thinking and writing about the issues they raise. The assigned texts are central to the course. It will be difficult to get much out of this course without careful and timely reading. The course is also designed to develop students' understanding of history as a field of inquiry. History is centrally concerned with change over time. Historians describe and, as fully as possible, explain how things change over time. A major concern of historians, therefore, is cause and effect. Historians prefer multi-causational, rather than mono-causational explanations because we believe things are generally more complex than they might superficially appear. Consequently, a major benefit of historical study is a greater appreciation of complexity and ambiguity. This particular historian (Fairfield) prefers historical descriptions and explanations that emphasize active agents rather than impersonal historical forces because I believe women and men play a significant role in making their own history, within the limits imposed by other historical and natural factors.

Historical inquiry is dependent upon good questions about change over time and logical arguments about cause and effect. History is something very different than "the past" (a chaotic jumble of everything that has ever happened). History is an interpretation of selected aspects of the past. To guide our way through the maze of details and events in the past, we need good questions that clarify what it is we want to know and that help us select what is important to our inquiry (that is, evidence that addresses our question, especially when that evidence does not support our presuppositions). To answer our questions (that generally do not have single, simple,
or obvious answers), historians construct arguments that marshal as much evidence and logic as possible to develop convincing explanations of change over time. Everything in this course, what I do and what you do, will concern questions and arguments concerning change over time.

**Student Learning Outcomes**: Students who read the assignments, participate in the discussions, and complete the assignments in this course will be able to:

1. Identify and describe the distinctive environmental qualities of the various regions of the United States to 1865
2. Explain the role of environmental factors in the economic, social, political, and cultural history of the United States to 1865.
3. Compare and assess wonder and humility, rationality and ambition, management and stewardship as competing approaches to the challenges and opportunities of North American continent to 1865.
4. Construct and evaluate arguments for and against treating environmental factors as crucial in the development of the United States to 1865.
5. Examine and analyze the role of public agencies, private agencies, social groups, and individuals in exploiting natural resources in the United States to 1865.
6. Articulate a historically-informed view of the current direction and possible futures of the United States in its relations with the natural world.
7. Organize and present their ideas in a clear and effective manner.
8. Work effectively in groups where they act as both teachers and learners.

**Course Texts:**

Carolyn Merchant, editor, *Major Problems in American Environmental History* - This is an introduction to the field edited by one of its founders. It contains a selection of primary documents sources along with interpretative essays from prominent scholars (****in other words, a collection of primary and secondary sources; see below). The book will also be used in HIST 172 in the spring.

Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* - This is a beautiful and useful book about the tension between technology and the pastoral ideal in American culture. Our ideas of nature are a potent factor in environmental history and Marx masterfully explores these ideas. Indeed a case might be made for *The Machine in the Garden* as a founding classic of American environmental history.

Supplemental readings will be available on the Canvas site for this course.

****Primary sources: sources from the time period under examination and which reveal the assumptions, motivations, interests, and actions of historical actors (diaries and correspondence, polemics, political platforms, philosophical treatises, etc.) or provide insight into the character of an historical period or the impact of historical forces (novels, films, material culture from architecture and urban design to consumer goods, photographs, popular music)
Secondary sources: second-hand accounts and analyses of historical events; useful for background material to aid the primary researcher; also the stuff of historiographic papers where they are treated as primary sources.

Course Requirements: Grading is on a 1,000 point scale. The paragraphs on the readings (see below) are due before each day’s class and should be posted on the appropriate discussion board on Canvas. All other assignments should be loaded to turnitin.com (links are provided on Canvas) by 11:59PM on the due date. Grading rubrics for all assignments can be found on the Canvas site.

A. Class attendance and participation. This includes keeping up with the reading and participating on a regular basis in class discussion. This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-8 (50 points for attendance; 100 points for participation – 150 points total).

B. Reading Responses: A written response of at least 100 words to the seven primary document reading assignments in Merchant and any other five reading assignments (beginning with the September 2 assignment; twelve total responses out of twenty-four reading assignments). This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-5, 7. (100 points)

C. Take-Home Midterm Examination: An approximately 1,500 word essay (about six double-spaced typed pages) on one of two questions based on the first half of the course. You will have an opportunity to submit an optional draft for comments and suggestions. Due October 19th (optional draft due October 10th). This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-5, 7. (250 points)

D. Short Essay on Cincinnati and Its Environment: An approximately 1,250 word essay (about five double-spaced typed pages) on some aspect of Cincinnati’s relationship to its environment. This paper could be about an event (a flood, epidemic, building project, etc.), an organization (the waterworks, sewer district, Findlay market, etc.), the experience of an individual or social group (immigrant experience in inner city; women’s role in municipal sanitation, etc), or a location (a local park, stream or creek, neighborhood, etc.). This paper must make use of at least three outside sources and be properly footnoted (there is a guide to proper footnoting, along with a video explanation, on the Canvas site; look under modules). The paper does not need to focus on the period before 1865 but it must use some portion of the assigned reading to illuminate its subject. You will have an opportunity to submit an optional draft for comments and suggestions. Due December 3 (optional draft due November 23). This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 2-6, 7. (200 points)

E. Take-Home Final Examination: An approximately 1,500 word essay (about six double-spaced typed pages) on one of two questions based largely on the second half of the
course but with an element connected to the course as a whole. Due December 16th. This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 1-7. (250 points)

F. Final Oral Presentation of Essay on Cincinnati and Its Environment: Three- to five-minute oral presentation on your essay on Cincinnati and its environment. Tuesday, December 16th, 8:30-10:20AM. This assignment develops and provides an assessment of student learning outcomes 4, 6-7. (50 points).

****Late assignments will be penalized at the discretion of the instructor, generally five percent per 24 hours.

Please note the following policy from page 52 of the Xavier University Catalog (the History Department and your instructors take this seriously):

“The pursuit of truth demands high standards of personal honesty. Academic and professional life requires a trust based upon integrity of the written and spoken word. Accordingly, violations of certain standards of ethical behavior will not be tolerated at Xavier University. These include theft, cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized assistance in assignments and tests, unauthorized copying of computer software, the falsification of results and material submitted in reports or admission and registration documents, and the falsification of any academic record including letters of recommendation.”

“All work submitted for academic evaluation must be the student’s own. Certainly, the activities of other scholars will influence all students. However, the direct and unattributed use of another’s efforts is prohibited as is the use of any work untruthfully submitted as one’s own.”

“Penalties for violations of this policy may include one or more of the following: a zero for that assignment or test, an ‘F’ in the course, and expulsion from the University.”


Course Outline

Introduction to Environmental History and Its Methods

August 26: Doing Environmental History (part 1):

Merchant, 1-14; Marx, 3-11

August 28: Doing Environmental History (part 2):

Merchant, 14-31; Marx, 11-33; Burrows and Wallace, “First Impressions” from Gotham (11
pages); Flannery, “What is a tree?” (2 pages)

*Exploration, Colonization, and the Origins of American Ecological Thought*

Sept. 2: **Native American Ecology and European Contact (part 1)**

Merchant, 33-47 (the part ones of these Merchant assignments consist of the chapter introductions and the primary documents).

Sept. 4: **Native American Ecology and European Contact (part 2)**

Merchant, 48-69 (the part twos of these Merchant assignments consist of the interpretive essays, including the introductions to those, and the short section of “Further Reading.”

Sept 9: **European Conceptions of the New World**

Marx, 34-72

September 11: **The New England Forest in the Seventeenth Century (part 1)**

Merchant, 71-86

September 16: **The New England Forest in the Seventeenth Century (part 2)**

Merchant, 86-101

September 18: **American Ecological Ideas: the Garden (part 1)**

Marx, 73-116

September 23: **Tobacco and Rice in the Colonial South (part 1)**

Merchant, 103-121

September 25: **Tobacco and Rice in the Colonial South (part 2)**

Merchant, 122-135

September 30: **American Ecological Ideas: the Garden (part II)**

Marx, 116-144

October 2: **The Frontier and the Wilderness in American History**
Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”; Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness” (on Canvas site)

**The Expanding Republic: Commerce, Technology, and Environment**

October 7: **American Ecological Ideas: the Machine (part 1)**  
Marx, 145-190

October 9: **Fall Holiday**

October 14: **Farms and Cities in the Early Republic (part 1)**  
Merchant, 137-154

October 16: **Farms and Cities in the Early Republic (part 2)**  
Merchant, 154-173

October 21: **Nature and the Market in the Nineteenth Century (part 1)**  
Merchant, 175-195

October 23: **Nature and the Market in the Nineteenth Century (part 2)**  
Merchant, 195-213

Marx, 190-226

October 30: **The Machine in American History**

Leo Marx, “Ecological Ideas and American Institutions”; Perry Miller, “The Responsibility of Mind in a Civilization of Machines”

**American Ideals and American Tragedy in Civil War and Continental Expansion**

November 4: **The Cotton South Before and After the Civil War (part 1)**  
Merchant, 214-235

November 6: **The Cotton South Before and After the Civil War (part 2)**
Merchant 235-249

November 11: The Transcendental Pastoral
Marx, 227-265

November 13: Extracting the Far West in the Nineteenth Century (part 1)
Merchant, 251-266

November 18: Extracting the Far West in the Nineteenth Century (part 2)
Merchant, 266-283

November 20: Into the Deep Part 1

November 25: No class

November 27: Thanksgiving

December 2: Into the Deep Part 2

December 4: The Tragic Pastoral
Marx, 265-319

December 9: The Vernacular Pastoral
Marx, 319-365

December 11: Recap and Review