

“Talking History” Online Forums for Virginia Teachers, 2002-2003
Center for History and New Media
George Mason University

Interim Report, December 2002
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Description of Project

The Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University received a grant of \$6,000 from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy to continue our “Talking History” online discussions. In these discussions, U.S. History teachers at all levels interact with each other and with the prominent humanities scholars who moderate each month-long forum. Forums cover topics taught in U.S. History survey courses and foster unique discussion between university-based scholars and high school, college, and community college teachers across the country. The process allows teachers to keep up with advances in history scholarship and exchange perspectives, resources, and methods for teaching in a variety of classrooms. These forums directly support the major goals of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities (VFH): making scholarship accessible, promoting thoughtful discussion, and broadening educational opportunities. With support from the VFH, we are successfully continuing this valuable program and focusing our energy on increasing its use among teachers and pre-service teachers in Virginia.

The discussions follow the well-established structure of previous forums. Each month, the distinguished humanities scholar begins with an opening statement outlining the major interpretive issues associated with the month’s topic and posing a series of questions. Forum participants respond to these questions, and raise many of their own, to which the scholar/moderator regularly replies. Participants also engage in conversations with each other about issues of historical interpretation and classroom practice. Moderators focus the conversation by supplying historical interpretations, information, and guiding questions and respond to teachers’ inquiries. A staff member reviews each message before it is posted to the entire group to insure that its content, language, and tone are conducive to professional discussion. There are no requirements for participation in “Talking History”—teachers participate by reading the messages and posting responses and questions. At the end of each forum, the entire discussion is archived and easily available, at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/talkhist/>, providing all *History Matters* users with a permanent library of thought-provoking discussions about teaching and history.

This fall, we ran the first three forums:

History of Feminist Movements in the U.S. (September 2002)

Estelle Freedman, Professor of History at Stanford University, moderated the forum on feminist movements. Professor Freedman specializes in the history of women, gender, and sexuality. She is the author most recently of *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (2002), which draws on interdisciplinary feminist scholarship to explore the influence of feminism in the West and its relationship to broader movements for

women's rights and social change throughout the world. Other books include *Maternal Justice: Miriam Van Waters and the Female Reform Tradition* (1996), *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (co-authored with John D'Emilio, 1997), and *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830–1930* (1981). Professor Freedman has taught at Stanford since 1976. Among others, she has received the Dinkelspiel Award and the Rhodes Prize for Teaching and Service to Undergraduate Education.

Using Material Culture to Teach U.S. History (October 2002)

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, James Duncan Phillips Professor of Early American History and Director of the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University, moderated the forum on material culture. Her most recent book *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of An American Myth* (2001) explores the production and consumption, as well as the social meanings, of textiles in pre-industrial New England. She is also the author of the Pulitzer Prize winning *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (1991), *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (1982), and numerous articles and essays on early American history. Recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, she assisted in the production of a documentary film based on *A Midwife's Tale* and as well as the related website *Do History* <<http://www.dohistory.org>>.

History of Early Settlement in the U.S. (November 2002).

Alan Taylor, Professor of History at University of California at Davis moderated the forum on early settlement. Professor Taylor specializes in early American history, history of the American West, and history of pre-Confederation Canada. He is the author of *American Colonies* (2001); *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (1995), winner of the 1996 Bancroft, Beveridge, and Pulitzer prizes for American history; and *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: the Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier 1760–1820* (1990). He is currently working on a borderlands history of Canada and the United States in the aftermath of the American Revolution.

During the spring semester, we will host three additional forums. In February 2003, **Linda Shopes** will moderate the forum on **Teaching with Oral History**. She is a historian at the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. She has worked on, consulted for, and written about oral history projects for more than twenty-five years. She is co-editor of *The Baltimore Book: New Views of Local History* and is past president of the Oral History Association. In March, **David Blight** will moderate the forum on **Teaching the Civil War**. He is Class of 1959 Professor of History and Black Studies at Amherst College and the author of *Frederick Douglass's Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (1989) and *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory, 1863–1915* (2000), as well as editor of numerous collections of Civil War era writing. In April, we will have a forum on **Teaching the Civil Rights Era**. Earl Lewis is no longer able to moderate this forum, but we are securing a replacement.

Audience and Promotion Plan

We promoted the first three forums broadly to reach as many interested teachers and members of the general public as possible. This has included postings to listservs and websites; email announcements; conference presentations; postcard mailings; and word-of-mouth. For example,

we posted announcements each month (*see Attachment A*) on all relevant H-Net lists as well as the general announcement through H-Net. *History Matters* maintains a guestbook with more than 1,500 registered users. We emailed fall forum announcements to all of these users, many of whom signed up for the forum. In addition, CHNM maintains email lists of interested teachers, historians, and the general public who also receive forum announcements. We sent email announcements to an additional 300 interested middle school and high school teachers, many of whom teach in Fairfax County Public Schools.

CHNM also worked extensively this fall to expand the “Talking History” audience among Virginia teachers and pre-service teachers, bringing them into dialogue with their peers nationwide. CHNM built on our strong ties with school divisions around the state—from urban to suburban to rural—through professional development and teacher education programs. We began the year with a booth at the Fairfax County Public Schools Social Studies in-service. More than 750 teachers attended this in-service and we distributed information on the Talking History forums and spoke with many of these teachers. Later in the day, project staff presented to a group of Fairfax middle school teachers. We have been invited to present at a meeting of school social studies coordinators in January 2003 and to hold additional workshops at the next division-wide in-service. All of these presentations highlight the Talking History discussion forums and encourage teachers to register and to participate.

CHNM also publicized the forums with a mass mailing. We developed a list of social studies and curriculum coordinators in each school division in Virginia. We then contacted these division level coordinators to identify the number of U.S. history teachers per division and the best methods for reaching them. We designed and printed 5,000 postcards and mailed them to coordinators or directly to schools, as they preferred, for distribution to teachers across the state. In addition, many social studies coordinators emailed information on the forums to all of their teachers. The success of this effort in reaching teachers became apparent during the Virginia Council for Social Studies Educators (VCSSE) conference in Richmond in November 2002. A teacher brought her postcard to the presentation by project staff, sharing her excitement for the forums and the publicity.

In addition to presenting at the 38th Annual VCSSE Conference, project staff attended the meeting of the Virginia Consortium of Social Studies Specialist. Staff were invited to present on *History Matters* and the online forums at their spring meeting and will participate in the planning of the VCSSE conference next fall in Northern Virginia. All of these activities are helping us reach teachers across Virginia as well as nationally. Publicity for the spring 2003 *Talking History* forums will continue to draw on all of these resources to reach the broadest possible audience.

All publicity related to the *Talking History* online discussion forums has both a direct impact—people sign up and participate in the current forum—and an indirect impact. The latter is even more rewarding in the long run because it exposes teachers, even those who do not join the listserve, to the feature as a whole and to the archived forums. Many teachers who do not have time in a given month or who are faced with teaching new courses or topics use the site to read through past postings, look for teaching materials or suggestions, or puzzle over teaching challenges others have discussed. These provide a permanent resource for teachers on a range of topics relevant for teaching U.S. History. For example, the number of visitors to the *History*

Matters site has increased significantly in the past years, including visitors to Talking History. In fall of 2001, the average number of visitors (not hits) was more than 50,000 per month, almost double the number for the previous fall (27,000). In fall of 2002, the average number of visitors was more than 70,000 per month, and increase of 40%, and the average number of hits was 1,500,000. Among the reasons for the increase were the expansion of the site, including new features, hundreds of new documents and annotations, and increased publicity efforts. Visitors come primarily from the U.S., but the logs record visits from at least fifty different nations.

Outcomes and Evaluation

By their very nature, the “Talking History” forums provide rich data for evaluation. Through email addresses, signatures, and our guestbook we have information for most participants on their location and professional affiliation. We also have the complete record of exchanges throughout the forum, through which we assess the relative success of the various topics from participation numbers, quantity and quality of postings and responses, and general feedback. With this feedback, we plan future topics and help guide moderators in their opening statements and postings to both shape the discussion and allow room for participants to communicate with each other.

Overall, all three forums have been very successful. We had record numbers of participants register for the listservs and receive all of the postings:

223 registered for the forum on Feminist Movements
231 registered for the forum on Material Culture
212 registered for the forum on Early Settlement

The introductions were strong and the moderators participated actively throughout the discussions. Estelle Freedman’s forum on Feminist Movements included extensive discussion on teaching women’s history at various levels, student response to feminism and women’s history as a topic, and the complicated nature of the word “feminism.” Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s forum on Material Culture covered a range of topics, including strategies for using material culture into the classroom, tools for analyzing material culture, and the various kinds of artifacts teachers encounter. Alan Taylor’s forum on Early Settlement included a lively discussion on what films work best in colonial history classes, how to effectively use films for teaching this period, ways to structure early American survey courses, and teaching resources, such as books, maps, and slides.

To read the discussion for the History of Feminist Movements in the U.S. (September 2002), visit <<http://ashp.listserv.cuny.edu/archives/feminismforum.html>>. For the forum on Using Material Culture to Teach U.S. History (October 2002), visit <<http://ashp.listserv.cuny.edu/archives/materialcultureforum.html>>. And for the forum on History of Early Settlement in the U.S. (November 2002), visit <<http://ashp.listserv.cuny.edu/archives/earlysettlementforum.html>>.

Attachment A

ANNOUNCEMENT—ESTELLE FREEDMAN MODERATES A WEB FORUM ON FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN U.S. HISTORY AT HISTORYMATTERS.GMU.EDU

Starting September 1, 2002, Estelle Freedman will moderate a month-long open discussion on FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN U.S. HISTORY on the HISTORY MATTERS website (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu>). To subscribe go to (<http://ashp.listserv.cuny.edu/archives/feminismforum.html>) and choose “Join or leave the list.”

Professor Freedman will answer questions and lead a discussion on teaching about feminist movements in U.S. History. The discussion will focus particularly on approaches to teaching this subject in U.S. history survey courses at the high school and college levels and include suggestions for resources as well as strategies.

Estelle Freedman, Professor of History at Stanford University, specializes in the history of women, gender, and sexuality. She is the author most recently of *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (2002), which draws on interdisciplinary feminist scholarship to explore the influence of feminism in the West and its relationship to broader movements for women's rights and social change throughout the world. Other books include *Maternal Justice: Miriam Van Waters and the Female Reform Tradition* (1996), *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (co-authored with John D'Emilio, 1997), and *Their Sisters' Keepers: Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930* (1981). Professor Freedman has taught at Stanford since 1976. She has received the Dinkelspiel Award and the Rhodes Prize for Teaching and Service to Undergraduate Education, among others.

HISTORY MATTERS is a gateway to the Web for teachers of the U.S. History Survey course. It provides high school and college teachers (and their students) a starting point for exploring American history on the Web with 800 first-person historical documents for use in the classroom, an annotated guide to 700 quality, history websites, and a range of teaching resources (including sample syllabi, teaching assignments, and forums). HISTORY MATTERS is a project of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University and the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning of the City University of New York. The HISTORY MATTERS website was created with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The 2002-2003 forums are funded by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy.

ANNOUNCEMENT—LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH MODERATES A WEB FORUM ON USING MATERIAL CULTURE TO TEACH U.S. HISTORY AT HISTORYMATTERS.GMU.EDU

Starting October 1, 2002, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich will moderate a month-long open discussion on USING MATERIAL CULTURE TO TEACH U.S. HISTORY on the HISTORY MATTERS website (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu>). To subscribe go to (<http://ashp.listserv.cuny.edu/archives/materialcultureforum.html>) and choose “Join or leave the list.” Professor Ulrich will lead a discussion and answer questions on approaches to teaching with material culture in U.S. history survey courses at the high school and college levels and will include suggestions for resources as well as strategies.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is James Duncan Phillips Professor of Early American History and Director of the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University. Her most recent book, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of An American Myth* (2001), explores the production and consumption as well as the social meanings of textiles in pre-industrial New England. She is also the author of the Pulitzer Prize winning *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (1991), *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (1982), and numerous articles and essays on early American history. Recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, she assisted in the production of a documentary film based on *A Midwife's Tale* and her work is also featured on the website DO HISTORY <dohistory.org>

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ANNOUNCEMENT—ALAN TAYLOR MODERATES A WEB FORUM ON
TEACHING THE HISTORY OF EARLY SETTLEMENT IN THE U.S. AT
HISTORYMATTERS.GMU.EDU

Starting November 1, 2002, Alan Taylor will moderate a month-long open discussion on TEACHING THE HISTORY OF EARLY SETTLEMENT IN THE U.S. on the HISTORY MATTERS website (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu>). To subscribe go to (<http://ashp.listserv.cuny.edu/archives/earlysettlementforum.html>) and choose “Join or leave the list.” Professor Taylor will lead a discussion and answer questions on approaches to teaching on early settlement in U.S. history survey courses at the high school and college levels and will include suggestions for resources as well as strategies.

Alan Taylor is Professor of History at University of California at Davis. Professor Taylor specializes in early American history, history of the American West, and history of pre-Confederation Canada. He is the author of *American Colonies* (2001); *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (1995), winner of the 1996 Bancroft, Beveridge, and Pulitzer prizes for American history; and *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: the Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier 1760-1820* (1990). He is currently working on a borderlands history of Canada and the United States in the aftermath of the American Revolution.

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