

GLOBAL HISTORY FROM THE LOCAL PERSPECTIVE: AN INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUE¹

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As we all know, students learn best when they are connected to the subject matter, whether through a real interest or one inspired by future earnings in the job market. But when a student faces a required course, especially one perceived as irrelevant, often the primary motivation to learn is the grade, and whatever might have been learned in the course disappears once the grade is recorded. Introductory global history courses often fall into this "dreaded but required" category. The typical arguments for the study of global history usually do not convince students of their value. Discussions of our increasingly interconnected and interdependent world are met with a "But how does that affect me" shrug. Explanations of the global economy and its effect upon even the most seemingly insulated areas do little to change this attitude. Attempts to show how massive migration movements have transformed our world are ineffective.

One of the major obstacles in interesting students in global history is their self-absorption and the lack of interest in anything not directly related to them. In an effort to break through student resistance to a global view, I have developed a genealogy/migration assignment in which a student traces the migration of his or her ancestors from the Eastern Hemisphere to the Western one and, within the Western Hemisphere, to the Appalachian region. Rather than fighting against the typical self-orientation of the student, this assignment uses it to advantage. It encourages the student to explore family history and ethnicity within the global picture.

THE ASSIGNMENT

I introduced this assignment (see Appendix) during my first semester at Appalachian State University. Appalachian State, a member institution of the University of North Carolina system, is a comprehensive university (primarily a four-year institution with a limited number of masters programs and one doctoral program) located in Boone, North Carolina, in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The student population of 12000+ comes from both urban and rural areas. Although most are of European descent, there is a growing minority population.

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Southeast World History Association in Asheville, NC, November 1996. I would like to express appreciation to my students who participated in this assignment and to the outstanding resources and personnel of the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection.

Appalachian State requires two semesters of global history. The first begins with prehistory and goes to 1650; the second one follows from 1650 to the present. Class sizes range from 25 to 40 students, most of whom are freshmen or sophomores, with a scattering of juniors and seniors. I use this genealogy/migration assignment in the second world history course.

In the second half of the world survey, I emphasize the ways in which the world has become increasingly interdependent and interconnected. I also examine the major trends and events of the past. Since migration has had a significant impact in transforming the world, this assignment fits well with the course objectives. Furthermore students find greater relevance in the major global events we study since often they discover that their ancestors migrated in response to these occurrences.

Since the fall of 1994, I have used this assignment for seven semesters in fifteen classes with over 500 students. Through the semesters, I have modified it as I became aware of some difficulties but the basic assignment is the same. Although some students initially were reluctant to begin the project, almost immediately all became interested in their own family's history and migration pattern. By tracing their own ancestors, they saw the individuals in the greater historical movements come alive. Although each experience was unique, the students became aware of general patterns, the motivation for migration, and the circumstances in the home country. Rather than studying an abstract historical movement, distant in time and space, students looked at an individual's accomplishments, hardships, and struggles. Since the individuals were their own ancestors, students were more readily able to connect the past to the present and became more interested in the past.

Some students, of course, were unable to trace their own family history due to lack of information on their family, inadequate resources pertaining to another geographic region (New York or Florida or other areas not covered by the Appalachian Collection at ASU), or emotional difficulty in dealing with their family background. These students had the option of tracing a general migration history for their ethnic group or nationality. In this way they could participate in the project and obtain historical information that pertained to their background. This alternative also proved useful in "personalizing" history for students. Surprisingly, however, very few students (less than 5%) have taken this option. The overwhelming majority have been interested in and able to locate family information. Students who were able to find only sketchy information about their family also had the option of supplementing their family history with a general migration history of their ethnic group.

At the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection, students started with overviews such as *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy* by Val D. Greenwood (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1978) and *North Carolina Research: Genealogy and Local History*, edited by Helen F.M. Leary (Raleigh: North Carolina Genealogical Society, second edition, 1996), and then moved to more specialized introductions such as *Tracing Your Scottish Ancestry* by Kathleen B. Cory (Baltimore: Genealogical

Publishing Co., 1993) or *African American Genealogical Sourcebook*, edited by Paula K. Byers (New York: Gale Research, 1995). Such works helped students formulate a research strategy and introduced them to potential research tools such as the manuscript census on microfilm, printed and CD-ROM census indices and abstracts, western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee county court house records on microfilm, printed records of deeds, marriages, deaths, cemeteries, military rosters, passenger lists (from ships bringing immigrants to this country), a large collection of published and unpublished family histories (including copies of previous students' genealogy assignments), county, local, and church histories, local newspapers on microfilm, the Church of the Latter Day Saints' compilation, *International Genealogical Index* on microfiche, serial publications of local, state, and national genealogical and historical societies, and increasingly Internet sites (e.g. Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet at <http://www.oz.net/~cyndihow/sites.htm>). Students were also introduced to recent historical research in Appalachia which relied heavily on genealogy such as Altina Waller's well-received *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

STUDENT FINDINGS

The student papers varied in quality, but as a whole they offered interesting insights into the Appalachian region's patterns of migration and ethnicity, as well as its connection to the greater world. Traditionally, the Appalachian region has been thought to be more isolated, less affected by national and international forces, than the rest of the country. This myth of the insular "mountaineer" of pure Anglo-Saxon heritage is accepted widely not only in the United States as a whole but also within the region. More recent scholarly research has disproved this myth and demonstrated that there was considerably more ethnic variation, as well as interracial mixing, in the southern Appalachian region than previously believed.¹ The findings in these student papers correspond well with the latest research.

Not unexpectedly, many students traced their families back to the British Borderlands, supporting the generally held view of Anglo-Saxon predominance in the region. Other students were surprised to find evidence of relatives who were not

¹For example: Virginia E. DeMarce, "Looking at Legends--Lumbee and Melungeon: Applied Genealogy and the Origins of Tri-Racial Isolate Settlements," *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, 81, no. 1 (1993), 24-45; and Darlene Wilson, "The Felicitous Convergence of Mythmaking and Capital Accumulation: John Fox Jr. and the Formation of an (Other) almost-White American Underclass," *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 1 (1995), 5-44, and Michael H. Logan, "'My Great Grandmother Was a Cherokee Indian Princess': Ethnic Forgery or Darwinian Reality?," *Tennessee Anthropologist*, 15, no. 1 (1990), 34-43.

Anglo-Saxon. As expected, many of these were of German descent. But there were also students of French (especially French Huguenot), Dutch, Italian, Russian, Polish, Chinese, and even Thai ancestry. Although Anglo-Saxons and, to a lesser extent, Germans were the dominant groups, people from other parts of Eurasia also migrated to this region, intermarried, and were absorbed into the culture.

A number of students, both black and white, had family traditions of American Indian ancestry, and many were able to verify these claims. Only students of obvious African descent, however, claimed to have African ancestors. Recent historical scholarship on Appalachia has documented a continuing trend of the "whitening" of the historical and legal record.²

Students also discovered a number of interesting global connections. One student traced her ancestry back to the original Siamese twins, Eng and Chang, who toured the United States in the nineteenth century. After visiting the Appalachians, they stopped touring, married sisters, and lived out their lives in the Appalachian region. Another student was descended from the Siamese twins' manager who also settled in the region. The regionally significant Bolick family--including the brothers Bill and Earl Bolick, influential musicians, who recorded as the Blue Sky Boys in the 1930s--migrated from Poland via Germany to the United States and settled in the Appalachian region. Another student traced her family to German settlers brought into Russia by Catherine the Great. After several generations, this family moved from Russia, through Europe, and into the United States, settling in Kansas with the German Mennonite community. They later moved to the Appalachians. An interesting parallel to this movement is that of the German-Russian Mennonites who moved from Kansas to the mountains of western North Carolina where they converted African Americans to the Mennonite Church.³ Yet another student attributed his grandmother's move from Italy to the United States to Mussolini's infatuation with her.

Many students connected the events that we had studied in class to their families' histories. In many cases their ancestors had migrated as a consequence of these circumstances: forced or recruited labor (African slavery, Chinese "coolie" labor, or European indentured servants); persecution of dissenting religious minorities (Puritans, Quakers, Moravians, Huguenots, or Jews); economic disruptions (the Irish potato famine, the economic chaos following World War I, or the Great Depression); wars throughout history including recent conflicts (Korea, Vietnam, and Bosnia); political

²For example: Martin Crawford, "Re-rooting Appalachia: Preindustrial Ethnicity Reconsidered," paper presented at the Nineteenth Annual Appalachian Studies Conference, Unicoi State Park, GA, March 30, 1996.

³See Conrad Ostwal and Phoebe Pollitt, "The Salem School and Orphanage: White Missionaries, Black School," *Appalachian Journal*, 20, no. 3 (Spring 1993), 265-275.

upheavals (the Russian, Chinese, or Cuban Revolutions); as well as other events of global significance.

Students also discovered famous ancestors or ones who had participated in major global events, as well as "peculiar" figures or circumstances in their families' history. A number of students placed their forbearers at the decisive Revolutionary War battle of King's Mountain. These students took pride in being descendants of Revolutionary War heroes and believed their family stories validated by discovering them in the historical record. One student uncovered an interesting coincidence in that the same land that his ancestors had homesteaded was the land that his parents had just purchased without having known its history.

Perhaps the most poignant story came from a student who told me "my family is nothing special--they're just farmers and have been farmers forever. There's nothing interesting about them." This student, after having completed her project, thanked me for the assignment and told me that she had gained new understanding and respect for her family. She continued that, although there were no famous people or major accomplishments in her family, she now understood her family's struggle to survive was in itself heroic.

Overall, students liked the assignment. Many expressed gratitude for the opportunity to learn more about their families. They also told me that the assignment sparked their curiosity about various world events that we studied in class. Confirming this, I noticed students talking to each other, before and after class, not only about their families' experiences but also about global occurrences.

After turning in their papers, the class had a discussion about their findings. Although not required to participate in the discussion, the vast majority of the students eagerly shared their new-found knowledge about their families and their connection to the world. During this discussion period, my class was under observation by two peer reviewers (as mandated by the North Carolina State legislature): Their comments regarding this class discussion included the following observation; "Students seemed very enthusiastic about the project and responded with exceptional and unique information. Dr. Maiewskij-Hay did a good job of pushing students to tie the family experiences to world events."

Students' comments on the end-of-semester teacher evaluations reflected the students' positive view of this assignment:

"The genealogy assignment put aspects of global history that are associated with my family history closer to my mind and propelled me to learn more about the historical events that shaped their lives."

"The geology [sic] project allowed me to know more about my family background, as well as, more info of history covered in the classroom lectures."

"I think the genealogy report was the most relevant because it deals with your family, yet you come to realize your family goes way back to other places. It helps you see how the world changed."

"Even though it was on a very individual level, the genealogy assignment was most directly related to the progressions of global history."

"The genealogy project ... showed me how much the whole world is linked together and that all of everybody's histories affect each other."

"It helped to see what my family has endured and done up to me. Gave me a true picture of how the world had changed."

CONCLUSION

I think that this genealogy assignment is not only a valuable pedagogical tool for teaching world history, but it is also an example of the way in which local and global history are related. Increasingly, academic historians have come to realize the usefulness of genealogical materials for scholarly research. For example, the British Americanist Martin Crawford (Chair of American Studies program at the University of Keele) said in his presentation to the 1996 Appalachian Studies Conference that to understand the Appalachian region one must study the genealogical records.⁴ I believe these local records are also important for the study of global history.

One evening in 1996 I heard the historian Stephen Ambrose say on the NBC network news that Americans need to know who they are and where they came from. They need to gain a better understanding of themselves both as individuals and as a nation. They need to know their family's past as well as their nation's past. And they need to understand their connection with the rest of the world. I agree with Ambrose. Too often, the individual--especially the so called "common person"--has been removed from history, leaving an abstracted past rather than a personal one. This assignment in large measure is my attempt to encourage students to recognize how their individual histories fit into the greater world.

Appendix Genealogy Assignment

By the twentieth century, no region of the world remained untouched by the social, demographic, economic, and political impact of the globalization of the human community. This is, of course, as true for Southern Appalachia as for the rest of the world. In this assignment, you will examine your own family or ethnic group's movement into our local region to better understand the interconnectedness of all our lives to the rest of humanity past and present.

⁴See note 2.

WARNING: YOU MUST START THIS ASSIGNMENT EARLY. IF YOU WAIT TOO LONG, THE STAFF OF THE W.L. EURY APPALACHIAN COLLECTION WILL NOT BE ABLE TO GIVE YOU INDIVIDUALIZED ASSISTANCE.

1. Your research will be conducted in the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection.
2. The Eury Appalachian Collection has extensive holdings of genealogical research material. Using the on-line catalog and other appropriate indices, locate material on your family (father's family or mother's family or other ancestor surname). Trace your family's history to Appalachia from the Eastern Hemisphere. Why did your ancestors make the moves that they did? (In some cases, you will be the first of your family to come to the Appalachian region, so also include your own motivations for coming here). You must cite all your sources whether written or oral interviews. For interviews, cite the name of the person interviewed, name of interviewer, location and date of interview, and relationship of interviewee to interviewer/writer, if any. If the Eury Collection does not have specific information on your family, you may use other sources, but you must include some sources from the Eury Collection even though they might be of a more general nature.
3. If you fail to locate information on your family or if you find the information sketchy, trace a more general migration history for the ethnic group or nationality from which your family came to the Western Hemisphere (be as specific as your knowledge allows, e.g. French Huguenot rather than just French, Yoruban rather than African, etc.). In some cases, specific derivation cannot be determined, but be as precise as available data allows. Why did these people move when and where they moved?
4. In either case, the information for some time periods and some population movements isn't going to be as good as for others. In your paper document those times and areas for which there exists fuller or lesser information.
5. Your paper should be typed, double-spaced and at least three full pages in length. Turn in two copies of your paper. One copy will be graded and returned to you. The other copy will be added to the W.L. Eury Appalachian Collection so that, in the future, other scholars might benefit from your research efforts.