

**History 600:**  
**Selma and America**  
Prof. Steve Kantrowitz  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Tuesdays, 7 – 9 pm - Fall 2004

**Selma in Context**

This is a course about Selma, Alabama, a town that became world-famous during the African American freedom struggle, so much so that the word “Selma” became shorthand for the victory won by Martin Luther King Jr. and his nonviolent armies in the spring of 1965. But Selma is a place, not an event. For the next fifteen weeks, we will explore the history of this place and its people. Learning about this small town, we will come to ask big questions. What happened in Selma before 1965? How did the history of this place fit into the larger currents of Southern and American life? How did that history shape what was possible and impossible, thinkable and unthinkable, during the freedom movement? Selma will become the prism through which we understand the last two centuries of U.S. and world history.

To understand Selma, we must understand the Alabama cotton belt of which it was part.

For historical maps of Alabama in various eras, go to:  
<http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/index.html>

**Some Alabama History (Satellite View)**

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, much of Alabama was the home of Creek and other native peoples. U.S. settlers, troops, and treaties took their land and pushed them across the Mississippi River, clearing the way for a plantation society based on slavery and cotton. Two more migrations—one voluntary, one forced—created that society. Whites from longer-settled parts of the South moved into the fertile lands of middle Alabama. They brought with them enslaved men and women, and they subsequently imported many more, peopling the southwestern cotton plantations with slaves torn from their communities on the eastern seaboard.

The wealthy planters who dominated the cotton belt also shaped the state's politics, but not completely. The descendants of Africans whom they brought with them as a labor force never ceased resisting their sway. And the descendants of Europeans themselves were not of one mind. Alabama planters overcame their internal political divisions sufficiently to join other slave states in seceding from the Union in 1861, but they never fully subjugated either the larger number of non-slaveholding whites or the black people who made up half the state's population (and two-thirds or more of the population in the wealthiest plantation regions).

The defeat of the Confederacy in 1865 brought slavery to an end and allowed black Alabamans—and others—to put old dreams and new ideas into practice. During Reconstruction, Alabama for the first time had black voters, black officeholders, and an interracial political coalition. The overthrow of that coalition set the stage for several decades of heated, often violent political contest, culminating in a radical farmers' movement—the Populists—which raised anew the possibility of interracial cooperation for mutual benefit. The failure of Populism and the new constitution imposed by the victorious Democrats left many voters disillusioned and disfranchised. Like the rest of the region, Alabama developed a Jim Crow society of separate and unequal institutions, laws, and customs, and an agricultural system that trapped most blacks and many whites in permanent poverty.

Two movements reshaped twentieth-century Alabama: the “Great Migration” northward, pushed by the terrors and poverty of the Jim Crow South and pulled by the industrial jobs available in the North; and the continuing resistance to Jim Crow among black Southerners. The Great Migration left the cotton-belt states with clear white majorities for the first time since the 1820s. African American protest movements, which occasionally recruited smatterings of white support, challenged the system from within. During the Depression of the 1930s, Alabama became a theater in the national debate over poverty and race. Sharecroppers formed unions and undertook less formal collective actions (as we will see in *All God's Dangers*); black people prosecuted for imagined offenses (the Scottsboro “Boys”) or locked up for challenging the system directly (Angelo Herndon). Both blacks and poor whites challenged the legitimacy of Alabama's social structure. These protests, drawing on a century of careful (and often clandestine) organization, bore fruit in the freedom movement that accelerated after World War II. By the 1950s, they began to take the forms that have made Alabama so nationally and internationally familiar: the Montgomery Bus Boycott; George Wallace's resistance to integration; and, of course, the Selma to Montgomery March and “Bloody Sunday” in 1965.

### **People Make History**

The brief, general history on the previous page can help us understand the broad patterns that shaped life in the cotton belt, but it cannot give us the texture of real people's lives, thoughts, and struggles. For that, we need to look more closely at the traces that these people have left behind: the letters and diaries of the area's planters, and the narratives written or dictated by those who had been slaves; the records of Civil War era institutions such as the Union Army and the Freedman's Bureau; the investigations of Klan violence and contested elections undertaken by the federal government; the newspapers and journals published in and around Dallas County; memoirs and personal accounts of twentieth-century struggles; oral histories; and many other kinds of records. These are the primary sources which historians study and through which we attempt to recover the past. We will be collecting, examining, discussing and writing about these sources together.

### **Selma is a Place**

We are focusing on Selma because many of us have spent time there and are committed to telling the story of the place and its people; one reason that story seems so important to us is that it has not, for the most part, been told. This means we can uncover a lot of history; it also means that we will have to look outside Selma and Dallas county for ways of approaching much of that history.

We will look elsewhere in the state (and region) for illumination and context. The books we will read together do not deal with Selma directly, except in passing, but they will give us the tools to make sense of the sources we explore.

The following books should be available for purchase at Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative, 46 West Gilman (down the street from Amy's Café):

Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*  
Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*  
Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*  
Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage*

Steven Hahn's brilliant work is a synthesis of black Southern political history (and much else) from slavery to the Great Migration; Theodore Rosengarten's narrative of the sharecropper "Nate Shaw" (Ned Cobb) opens up the world of black farmers in the generations after Reconstruction. It takes place in a slightly different part of the state than our other primary sources. So does Norrell's study of black activism in Tuskegee from Reconstruction to Black Power. Carter's biography of George Wallace focuses on white Alabama and the politics of segregation in the era of integration. All of these stories are necessary context: they help us understand the history in which Selma was and is embedded. They help us see how historians use sources to tell stories. They help us make sense of the fragmentary stories we find by showing us how they link up to similar fragments elsewhere.

### **The Seminar**

Context—like the maps on page 1, the capsule history on page 2, the books listed on page 3--on will help us enter Selma's past through the broader stories of Southern and Alabama history. But the research and writing portion of this seminar will be devoted collecting and interpreting primary sources about Selma itself.

Some of those sources are obvious.

- **Newspapers on Microfilm:** This summer, I arranged to have the State Historical Society purchase a large collection of newspapers from Selma and other cotton-belt communities in Alabama. These run from the early nineteenth century through the mid twentieth century (though, for economic reasons, they do not include key years in the 1950s and 1960s—something we'll have to discuss).
- **Congressional Serial Set:** testimony, reports, and documents collected by committees of the U.S. House and Senate, and the records of debate in those chambers, published regularly since the early days of the republic. These include the hearing about the Ku Klux Klan, contested elections, and much else. The State Historical Society, like all great research libraries, has a complete set (thousands upon thousands of volumes).
- **Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations:** microfilmed collections of papers produced by planters, including a large set of Alabama plantations.
- **Memoirs, Narratives, and Autobiographies:** from ex-slave narratives produced before the Civil War to Civil Rights-era memoirs, some available on line and some in the stacks.

There are many more sources that will lead us to Selma. Our job this semester is to find them and interpret them.

We are a community of scholars. We have different degrees of experience and different kinds of expertise, but we are all in this together for the next 15 weeks as we:

- learn how historians analyze, interpret, and write about primary sources
- prepare for and participate in discussions of the common readings
- turn in several short writing assignments, including revisions
- research and write a substantial, original work of historical interpretation

We will read our four books for the first half of the semester, while simultaneously exploring the various primary sources available to us. There will be several short writing assignments and several one-week research assignments. **All weekly assignments are due at the beginning of seminar and may not be turned in late.** You Are Warned.

### **Research Projects**

About midway through the semester, our paths will diverge in two ways.

First, we will be spending less time reading together and more time developing individual research projects.

Second, we will be doing **two different kinds** of research projects. You are free to choose either one.

1) Some students may elect to do a traditional research paper. This means identifying a question that you'd like to answer, confirming that it has not been asked and answered by a previous historian, finding sources that may help answer it, reading the appropriate secondary literature, and writing several drafts of a research paper. The final product should be about 25 pages plus notes, approximately the length of an academic journal article.

2) Other students may wish to follow up on our early assignments by producing a thematic collection of annotated documents. We'll discuss this further in a few weeks.

In both cases, polished drafts of these research projects will be due **before** the end of the semester. You will comment on each other's drafts (and receive comments from me) before producing a final draft.

Your grade for the semester will be calculated as follows:

- Preparation for and participation in seminar meetings – 50%  
(includes discussion and weekly research and writing exercises)
- Seminar paper – 50%  
(includes work refining your topic and writing drafts, as well as the paper itself)

You are not in competition with each other: it is possible for everyone in the seminar to earn an A. Help each other succeed.

### **Schedule of Readings and Assignments**

Week 1: Sept. 7 - Introductions

Week 2: Sept. 14

READ: Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 1-159

WRITE: a one-page essay answering the following question:

What were the most important elements of rural Southern slaves' political lives?

Week 3: Sept. 21

READ: Hahn, 163-363

FIND: Hahn's sources. Choose one full page of his endnotes, and use MADCAT and other resources to determine which of his sources are and are not available for use at UW-Madison. Bring in a photocopy of that page along with a typed list of three categories of sources:

- sources available at UW-Madison (and where they are)
- sources not available here
- sources you couldn't figure out how to locate

Week 4: Sept. 28

READ: Hahn, 364-476

WRITE: Using Hahn's work as a guide, write a one-page explanation of the meaning of a primary document (to be provided).

**\*\*\* Note special day for Week 5 meeting\*\*\***Week 5: WEDNESDAY Oct. 6

READ: Begin reading Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*

ASSIGNMENT: Using Madcat and your wits, find the main "Alabama" section of the State Historical Society library stacks.

1) Make some notes on the following for discussion: Where is the section? What kinds of books are there? Where else are books on Alabama history located, and why are they in a different place?

2) Find a book containing (or consisting of) primary sources. Bring it in, and be prepared to make a brief (one-minute) presentation on what kind of sources it contains.

MEET: in State Historical Society for discussion and to explore microfilm and primary-source collections.

- Congressional Serial Set
- Slavery Microfiche
- Newspapers in microform
- published document collections

Week 6: Oct. 12

READ: finish reading Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*

WRITE: a two-page (600-word maximum) essay that analyzes some element of Nate Shaw's narrative from the perspective of Hahn's interpretation. Choose some way in which Shaw's narrative either appears to closely match Hahn's interpretation or appears to diverge from it (or even some way in which it both matches and diverges). Remember that you can't summarize the book in 600 words; you can only pick one telling moment from Rosengarten and discuss it in light of what Hahn has to say.

READ: Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind*

WRITE: a one-page analysis of a primary document (to be provided) that uses information and analysis from Norrell, Hahn, and Rosengarten.

Week 7: Oct. 19

READ: Dan Carter, *Politics of Rage*

FIND: An Alabama newspaper article dating before 1960 (from the microfilm collection) that discusses George Wallace. Make a copy of the article and bring it to class with you. Make sure to put a full citation (location and title of paper; date; page[s] and column[s]) on the photocopy.

Hint: use the footnotes in Carter to identify spans of dates during which Wallace's activities were matters of public debate.

Week 8: Oct. 26

ASSIGNMENT: Pick a period (a decade or less) that you'd like to study for the rest of the semester. Identify the most important primary sources available at UW for research on that area. Spend four hours before the class meeting reading in those primary sources.

BEGIN TO DECIDE: Do you want to produce a collection of annotated documents, or a full-blown research paper? Ask yourself if you have enough sources on one discrete topic to write a paper.

Bring in a written description of 3 potential topics, including a list of the sources that caused you to be interested and any other sources you can think of.

Week 9: Nov. 2

ASSIGNMENT:

1) Pick one of your three potential topics and spend AT LEAST four more hours reading through the sources. Make a note of everything you find interesting or surprising. Revise your list of primary sources; bring it to class.

2) Write a one-paragraph summary of your research topic; bring it to class.

3) Thinking about the period, the subject, and your experience so far in the library, identify three or four books that you think are directly relevant to this topic. Bring a list of these books with you, attached to your list of primary sources and one-paragraph summary.

Week 10: Nov. 9 – No class meeting this week

READ: primary sources and secondary literature on your topic

Week 11: Nov. 16

WRITE: a revised topic statement that reflects what you have learned so far

DECIDE: whether this is a collection of annotated documents or a research paper

BRING: three copies of your latest topic statement, including either:

- a full list of the documents you will be analyzing (for a collecting of documents)
- a tentative outline of the research paper

Week 12: Nov. 23

WRITE: a partial draft of the paper or annotated collection

BRING: 3 copies of that draft with you to seminar

Week 13: Nov. 30 – No class meeting this week

TURN IN: copies of a draft to you writing partners. Use the worksheets provided to comment on those draft, and bring the drafts and comments with you to seminar on Dec. 7.

Week 14: Dec. 7

BRING: your most vexing writing problem.

Week 15: Dec. 14

PAPERS AND DOCUMENT COLLECTIONS DUE IN CLASS

### A Few Secondary Works on Selma and Alabama History

note: this is **not** an exhaustive list of works; rather, these books (and their call numbers) should point you to significant areas of scholarship in the State Historical Society library stacks. It does not include periodicals such as the *Alabama Review* (though it does include an anthology from that journal), microfilmed dissertations, or primary sources.

J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* E185.93.A3 T48 2002

David Garrow, *Protest at Selma* JK1929 A2 G37

J. L. Chestnut, Jr., and Julia Cass, *Black in Selma* KF373 C389 A3 1990

Charles E. Fager, *Selma 1965* F334 S4 F34

Loren Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*  
E185.97 R3 S38

Richard Bailey, *Neither Carpetbaggers nor Scalawags: Black Officeholders During the Reconstruction of Alabama, 1867-1878* F326 B27 1991

Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, comp., *From Civil War To Civil Rights--Alabama, 1860-1960 : An Anthology From The Alabama Review* F326.5 F76 1987

Carl Grafton and Anne Permaloff, *Big Mules and Branchheads: James E. Folsom and Political Power in Alabama* F326 F755 G73 1985

William Warren Rogers, *One-Gallused Rebellion: Agrarianism in Alabama, 1865-1896*  
F326 R85

Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama*  
available as e-book; link in Madcat

J. Mills Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society*  
available as e-book; use Madcat link

William L. Barney, *Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860*  
E440.5 B28