

# HISTORY NEWS

HISTORY DEPARTMENT NEWSLETTER

Fall 2020

## History Rises to the Challenge

By David A. Messenger, History Department Chair

Like everyone, we were shocked at the quick arrival of COVID-19 in Spring, 2020. Our faculty, however, maintained their commitment to our students, shifted to online teaching, and successfully completed the spring semester. We followed that up by having one of our highest enrolled summer semesters in recent years, and moved into fall with a majority of our classes online and limited face-to-face teaching. We will do the same in Spring, 2021. The commitment of our faculty to be flexible, work with students, and still maintain our standards and expectations within the classroom has been truly remarkable. I feel lucky to work alongside such fine people.

As you can imagine, the killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed here in Mobile and across the United States engaged us as historians, especially given USA's diverse student body with a 20% African American student population. In July, our Department issued a statement reaffirming our desire to expand our offerings in African American history, which Dr. Martha Jane Brazy has done this year; to encourage other departments to contend with issues of diversity, equity and inclusion; and to broaden scholarship opportunities in the Department for underrepresented students, among others.

Part of our commitment to offer more diverse classes and opportunities to our students is to expand our work in local history. Working with the Honors College, the Office of Community Engagement, and others on campus, we have created a class on local history and community engagement and secured internships for students

to work with groups such as the Mobile County Remembrance Commission, affiliated with the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery. This project marks sites in Mobile County where African Americans were lynched. We have been permitted by the City of Mobile to perform deeper investigations into the naming of streets, sites and statues for Confederate soldiers and generals in the city. These opportunities offer students practical experience in "doing history" in response to a current crisis and a very real public need.

Our second avenue of expansion is to develop more resources for students to conduct Digital History, the use of software to enhance and present historical research to wider audiences. The Department will offer its first Digital History class in Spring 2021, taught by Dr. Mara Kozelsky and focused on Russian history. We want to expand Digital History to projects such as those connected to local history and racial injustice, as described above, in the semesters going forward.

Despite the challenges of our time, globally and within the United States, we in the Department of History at the University of South Alabama are determined to continue to build on our reputation as a community of scholars by welcoming students into our classrooms (virtual or physical), where they engage with relevant sources and tools, continuing to pursue our own research, and serving the University and the community, especially in fields like African American history. I hope we can trust in your continued support of our work.



UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTH ALABAMA

# When History Becomes Real Life

In Fall 2019, Dr. Kelly Urban taught an upper-level course on the history of global health projects and disease control campaigns. “From Smallpox to Ebola: Global Health Challenges in the Modern World” enrolled over thirty students from across the disciplines at South, from English to Biomedical Sciences. The class was designed to serve South’s History majors and to help develop a Global Health concentration in the International Studies Major. In April 2020, approximately ten of those students joined Dr. Urban on a Zoom meeting to discuss the COVID-19 crisis. Dr. Urban reminded students that everything has a history and that historical knowledge and historical tools can help anyone better understand a problem in the present. Students reviewed the course syllabus and identified parallels between the coronavirus pandemic and past disease outbreaks and control campaigns. Several students pointed out a recurring problem: funds and political will for preparing for pandemics were often very limited, which made controlling disease outbreaks less effective and more costly.

Kenneth Sims, a History major and Biology minor, pointed out that past U.S. presidents have funded pandemic preparedness efforts, but the Trump administration dissolved such an office in 2018. Another topic of discussion concerned technology. Travis Cummins, now a master’s student in the department, pointed out that past efforts to control diseases were marred by an overconfidence in technological solutions. For example, despite the many advanced technologies that health experts and workers applied, malaria has proven impossible to eradicate. Many people

believed in late spring that a COVID-19 vaccine would quickly be developed and distributed throughout the world. While the students hoped that both goals would soon be achieved, past global health projects have suggested that even with an effective vaccine, its delivery will undoubtedly be complicated by material obstacles and unequal access to medical technology across the world. Dr. Urban also summarized her top four relevant lessons from the course: the danger of assigning blame for pandemics via racist and nationalist frameworks; how humans alter and disrupt the environment, unleashing new diseases or worsening the spread of preexisting ones; the struggle to balance individual rights with the good of the collective in public health; and (echoing students’ earlier contributions) the need for more public health funding (at the national and international levels), even in the absence of a pandemic, especially in this age of global connectedness.

Dr. Urban concluded the engaging Zoom discussion by reminding her students that throughout history, crises have been transformative. If we learn from history and apply it in our present, we can transform our future for the better. COVID-19 has revealed intense ruptures and inequities in American society (and throughout the world). This will not be the last pandemic, and we all have the responsibility of answering the question of how we can be better prepared for the next “big one.” Dr. Urban will be offering an updated version of this course, “From Cholera to COVID-19: Global Health Challenges in the Modern World,” in Spring 2021.

Please think about supporting the Department of History through a donation, and become a Friend of USA History! Online Giving: <https://giving.southalabama.edu/> Under “Can’t Find Your Fund,” click and search for “History Gifts.”

The USA History Department offers a wide variety of exciting courses, covering the histories of Eastern and Western Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, as well as the history of the United States and the South. Faculty are committed to teaching research and writing skills and the critical thinking that is becoming even more necessary for survival in the information age. Now, more than ever, a history education is a prerequisite for an informed global citizenry.

**Please visit us online or in person and see what History has to offer!**



5991 USA Drive N., Room 344

Mobile, Alabama 36688-0002

Phone: (251) 460-6210 | Fax: (251) 460-6750

E-mail: [history@southalabama.edu](mailto:history@southalabama.edu)

<http://www.southalabama.edu/colleges/artsandsci/history/>