

History 410: Oregon Environmental History  
Spring 2010, University of Oregon



John Mix Stanley, *Oregon City* (1848).

M/W, 2-3:20, 130 Heustis Hall

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### Introduction

This course explores the dynamic field of environmental history close to home, focusing on Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. It will present and develop essential historical concepts, concerns, and methods in the context of a deep, cross-disciplinary, and hands-on examination of Oregon's physical, natural, and cultural landscape.

Environmental history studies the relationship between humans and their physical environments, understanding such relationships as “dialogues” between societies and the material (including the “natural”) circumstances of their existence. Some environmental historians emphasize culture and intellectual themes, exploring the ways that people have understood and represented the natural world and shaped it (or disturbed it) in culturally specific ways. Others stress the essential economic foundations of environmental relationships, focusing on the need to procure subsistence, comfort, and wealth and the affects that such production has on physical and natural environments. Still others cast attention on the politics, policy, and legal arrangement of humans' relationships with their environments, and how social and political life—situated in landscapes—is often the object of negotiation and conflict. Finally, others have seen environmental history as the study of

ecology, with people considered as essential (if disturbing) elements within nature. Students will become acquainted with these various approaches and the implications of different sorts of environmental history, while situating their learning in the study of Oregon and our larger region.

### Course Format and Requirements

This course will combine lecture with discussion, often weaving the two together to make class sessions interactive. Lectures will generally build upon—not simply recapitulate—readings. Students are responsible for completing reading and writing assignments by the time indicated on the syllabus. These written assignments will often provide the basis for class activity; students are expected to attend all class meetings and participate actively. Students must complete all assignments in order to pass the course.

### Field Trips & Projects

Note also that this course is linked intricately with the others in the Oregon Abroad block (Field Biology 399; Geology 410; and Environmental Studies 399), and that work in these courses and HIST 410 will overlap—particularly the required student projects associated with ENVS 399. All students will tackle and complete a term project, which may be multidisciplinary, geological, biological, or historical. See Projects Handout.

History majors may undertake a major historical research and writing project based on primary source material. This is an option, *not* a requirement. Students interested in such a project—which will allow them to fulfill the History major seminar requirement (i.e., History 407)—should consult with the instructor and enroll in an additional 1 credit of History 401: Research.

Note also that the course incorporates considerable field study. Participation in weekly field trips and the weeklong field trip to the Malheur Field Station is mandatory.

### Assignments & Evaluation

Students in the course will write 5 short essays, based on the assigned readings, and keep a journal. Grades will be assigned according to the quality of these essays, the journal, and participation in class discussion.

Essays (5 @ 10% each) = 50%

Journals = 20%

Participation = 30%

Academic integrity is important and academic misconduct will not be tolerated. I will hold all students to the University of Oregon Student Conduct Code:

<http://studentlife.uoregon.edu/StudentConductandCommunityStandards/StudentConductCode/tabid/69/Default.aspx>

### Essays

Essays are due in class as described in the weekly schedule below. They must directly engage the question posed and be clear, systematically organized, supported by evidence, and competently written according to the conventions of English usage and grammar. These essays are a means of thinking through and learning about weekly course material, and they

will often form the basis for class discussion. Therefore, late essays cannot be accepted. Students must complete at least five essays to fulfill the requirements of the course.

### Field Notebook & Journals

For Geology 410 and Biology 399, you will be keeping detailed field notebooks. You should add historical observations or questions to them, either mixing them in with other notations or placing them in a separate section as appropriate. Although you will be largely recording biological and geological data, consider and note the ways that the physical and natural landscapes you're encountering have been affected and transformed by human presence. The landscape itself is the product of a complicated human dialogue with nature.

Your journal is the place to translate field notes into a digested, somewhat more refined and thoughtful form. Our model might be Henry David Thoreau, who began keeping a journal in 1837 and continued the practice through 1861, filling some twenty-one journal volumes and forty-six hundred manuscript pages. For Thoreau, the journal was a sourcebook for future writings, including *Walden* (1854), a record of daily walks and reflections on natural and local history, and “a distinct work with an aesthetic integrity and unconventional life of its own,” according to William Rossi, Thoreau’s most distinguished modern editor. Thoreau called his journal, simply, “the record of . . . my affection for any aspect of the world.” It provided the “proper frame” for his “disconnected thoughts.” Thoreau understood his journal to be a unique and indispensable venue for some of his best writing. In a late January 1852 journal entry, for example, he doubted that his “thoughts written down thus in a journal might be *printed* in the same form with greater advantage.” A published work might be inferior in some ways to the journal, where his observations are “allied to life—& and are seen by the reader not to be far fetched.” If his published writing were a bouquet of picked flowers, his journal was the field where they flourished. It was debatable “whether the flower looks better in the nosegay,” he wrote, “than in the meadow where it grew--& we had to wet our feet to get it! Is the scholastic air any advantage?”

For your journals, use the same basic format as described in the Biology 399 syllabus. Use a loose-leaf notebook (to allow the addition of pages) and write with a technical drawing pen, or compile your journal in a decidedly post-Thoreauvian manner: on a computer. Using either approach will allow you to create a lasting and reliable archival format with illustrations. If you create and maintain your journal via computer, be sure to print out periodically and store an archival copy. Write in full sentences, recording relevant information, insights, and further questions. Be thorough but brief, providing concrete detail in a concise and precise manner. Try to include at least one historical insight or question about what you saw each day.

I will not collect your field notebooks, but I will closely examine your journals, which you will turn in twice during the term.

### Required Reading

Nancy Langston, *Where Land & Water Meet: A Western Landscape Transformed* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2003).