

Journey Through the American Past
Lecture 1

What is History?
By Professor Maria A. Brown

Welcome to the audio lectures in Journey Through the American Past, the Pre Columbian period to the Era of Reconstruction. This lecture, What is History?, is the first in a series of audio lectures to be presented, via the web, throughout the course of the semester. The text for this and subsequent lectures can be downloaded from the audio text found in the Lecture Archives in the Journey Site.

This lecture will be divided into two sessions. The first session will focus on a general concept of History. In this discussion, consideration must be given to the validity of American History so that we might establish the perimeters of the context in which our study of the pre Civil War American Experience will take place. The second session will deal with the method of history. It is the intent of that lecture to help you develop an understanding of the historical method and process and to provided you with the

tools to develop your own interpretation of the American experience.

Let me share with you how some students responded. When asked the question "What is History?" One student answered: "History is the study of past recorded events." Another student suggested that "History is a chronological record of significant events often with an explanation of their causes."

A student writes: " It is very easy to say that history is simply a combination of organized facts relating to past events. But such a stoic definition seems to miss much of the charm and importance of history. History serves both as a reminder of the past and a predictor of the future. It is a very natural expression of human inquisitiveness. Humans by nature are history keeping. As intellectual creatures, humans pass on information through generations with the hope that their descendants will be more knowledgeable than they are. This information can be as mundane as how people in the past dressed or wore their hair or as exciting and important as something like the Declaration of

Independence. Humans will always wonder about their history. They often look through their past to see their future. It sometimes seems much easier to predict what is to come when one can examine the events of the past. This is not to say that within the pages of history lies some secret fortune telling secret or some other such nonsense. It simply means that when history is studied carefully, sequentially, and comparatively, our future may be a little easier to envision."

A second student responded to the question by writing that: " History is the study of the people and places that have given our country meaning and importance. Through history we learn of our ancestry. We read about their cultures, values, government, and traditions. History helps us find ourselves and how our ideas, morals, values and societies came about. We discover when these historical events occurred, why they occurred and the outcome. On the whole, history gives us the answer to many questions about wars, people's rights, the government and why people thought the way they did. Mainly, history is the analysis of

worldly events and important people. History gives us answers to how it all started. Therefore, we find out where our rules came from. We also learn of the many changes and the effects that certain events have had on the lower, middle and upper classes."

Another student wrote: "Each aspect of life has its own history, whether it is music, art, geography, or geology. These examples of history did not just come to be, they each evolved, they each have a past, which makes up their history. To know history, is to know what and why something has happened---it is the sum of details, facts, people, dates, and events. History not only focuses on the good, but also recognizes the bad, the suffering and failures."

To another student "History is a difficult term to define, but in my opinion, history is any fact that took place from the beginning of time to five seconds ago. Now the way history is portrayed, the student writes, is another subject. People who publish anything about history are basing their facts on what research they have done, who they may have interviewed, or

what they may have found. Therefore, history is made up of many facts with many different points-of-view to tell the story."

To these students history is the study of what men have done and said and thought in the past. History is biography, a work of the creative imagination in which the author attempts to recreate the life and thoughts of particular men who actually lived at a certain time. History is the study of man in his social environment, both past and present.

And finally a student writes:

History is the study of the experience of humankind.

As one can see, there are many interpretations of History. The interpretations that emphasize the recording of significant events, although limited in scope, are correct. What I mean by limited in scope is that history is exclusive and some would argue chauvinistic, in every sense of the word, in terms of class, race, sex, and ethnicity. The definition suggests that history is only that which is recorded. That the event must be documented before it can be called history. This brings to mind the old

conundrum about the tree that falls with no one to see or hear it. Did it really fall? How does one know, and how can one report on it? Without a record, can there be a history? For example, from 18th century letters, diaries, legal documents and autobiographies we know what plantation holders thought about those confined to the institution of slavery. But what about those confined to the institution of slavery? How did they feel about their situation? How did they feel about their "masters?" How did they feel about each other? Because we have few real records or documents to support possible answers to these questions does that mean that the slave had no feelings and no desire to be free, or that he made no significant contributions to the development of American civilization? The existence, thoughts and values of the Founding Fathers have been thoroughly documented. But what about the Founding Mothers?

As we moved to other interpretations of history, the concept becomes inclusive in that it encompasses the idea that everything that happens is history . You had breakfast this morning. You

are listening and desperately trying to take down every word I say. A recent discussion you had with a friend happened in the past. But much of what happened went unobserved—like the falling tree— Without the "traditional" forms of evidence for historians to work with, it is as if nothing happened.

And yet as we closely examine these interpretations of history and synthesize the material, it is very easy for us to conclude that history is more than the study of people, places and events. History is the memory of the total group experience. If it is forgotten or ignored, we cease in that knowledge to be human. Without history we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be. We can conclude that history matters because it is the source that binds people together, creates nations, social groupings and that recognizes the commonalities among people.

History serves as a source of inspiration as it brings to life the clashing passions of victories and sometimes defeats of the past. History is that which gives people meaning, something to live or die for. Gerda Lerner in her book, Why History Matters,

points out that "History, a mental construct which extends human life beyond its span, can give meaning to each life and serve as a necessary anchor for us. It gives us a sense of perspective about our own lives and encourages us to transcend the finite span of our life-time by identifying with the generations that will follow. By perceiving ourselves to be part of history, we can begin to think on a scale larger than the here and now. We can expand our reach and with it our aspirations. It is having a history which allows human beings to grow out of magical and mythical thought into the realm of rational abstraction and to make projections into the future that are responsible and realistic."

". . .We [build] symbolic communities, based on ethnicity, religion, race or any other kind of distinguishing mark, setting ourselves apart from those different from us, in order to find and enhance our own identity. We look to a past community, our "folk" of whatever definition, and our stories weave a collective myth into our own narrative. These widespread collective myths can serve a creative, harmonizing function, in stressing shared

values, ideas and experience. They offer us heroes in the past, role models for emulation, and provide us with a coherent narrative which gives shape and order to our experience. The story of Christianity, the Protestant Ethic, universal freedom, automatic progress, the American Dream--these are some of the collective myths which have sustained generations." And yet those collective myths, narratives and heroes have created clubs of exclusivity reflecting a nationalistic history predicated on the belief in white male supremacy that not only distorts the record but negates the realities of the American past and present. Those myths have been used to lock out, marginalize, isolate, alienate and even black out whole human groupings in the American society. It was as if those living on the fringes of society had ". . .no words, thoughts or acts historians needed to take into account. . ."—that "those" people did not exist, certainly did not exist in the world that mattered. (Nathan Huggins, p. 125-30) In, a sense like the falling tree. . .

It is then understandable why some have argued that this

misuse of history has contributed much to the social, economic and even political fragmentation of contemporary American society. In the telling of the American story, by not acknowledging the total group experience, not only has the telling of that story been unbalanced and incomplete, but it has stripped many Americans of a sense of historical presence, identity and a sense of self worth.

In response, women, people of color and the poor, as well as various ethnic groups who have been out locked out of the cultural mainstream of American life have taken matters into their own hands. These groups for the sake of their identity and sense of self worth have been compelled to set the record straight. They have been compelled to write their own history, explain their connection to the American past, create their own narratives, heroes and myths that stress their thoughts, values and experience within the context of the American experience as a whole and in an effort to balance the telling of the American story. The sources of these histories are not confined to

"traditional" documentation. These folk find their stories in oral tradition, folktales, folklore, customs, rituals, artifacts, music and in the reality of their experiences. These forms of information dissemination to a large extent have become recognized as legitimate historical sources.

What does all this suggest about history? It tells us that history is a road map to self-knowledge and a means of understanding how the attitudes and actions of people of diverse backgrounds were intertwined and woven into the creation of American civilization. This diversity has created a cultural richness and strength in American civilization.

If we accept the notion that we are all products of the past, then, there is connection between the past, present and the future. This implies that history is living. It is that which gives us continuity. We are the products of a constant process, like time and space. As products and students of history we must recognize that and heed the words of Dr. Lerner when she writes "A meaningful connection to the past demands, above

all, active engagement. It demands imagination and empathy, so that we can fathom worlds unlike our own, contexts far from those we know, ways of thinking and feeling that are alien to us."

This also implies that we must not make value judgements about the past using the values of today's society. We must base judgement about a given event within the historical context of the time the event took place.

Again from Dr. Lerner," We must enter past worlds with curiosity and with respect. When we do this, the rewards are considerable." History has the capability to teach lessons. There are many lessons to be learned from history. If we learn those lessons we will not be destined to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Because the historian chooses among his data, and because his craft requires that he ask questions and convert his data into meaningful form, the written product of his labor necessarily reflects his biases. This cannot be helped. After all the historian is human. Therefore, historian's views, most often, reflects his

prejudices or biases based on his class, social and political orientation. This fact, it has been argued, has made American history chauvinistic. It has lead some to believe that American History did not begin until the arrival of the Europeans to the New World, that women made no significant contributions to the development of American civilization, that New World Indians were "noble savages" and that the slave accepted their status readily and happily.

The task of the historian is great. The study of history demands details and close impartial observation of those details. The study of history demands critical and analytical perception. Therefore, the historian, as she or he wades through mountains of data, must do so with objectivity. Judgement must be reserved until all the data has been examined. How is that objectivity preserved? The historian must attempt to transcend his environment, his social, political and economic orientation. The historian must try to become an impartial observer so that he can see the whole picture as opposed to only part of the picture.

In doing so the historian creates balance and wholeness in the telling the American story.

As student historians, remember that you are the impartial observers and your responsibility is the same as that of the professional historian. As you collect information reserve judgement until you have had the opportunity to carefully weight all the facts.

In the next session we will discuss the method of history.