HTS 4081, Fall 2011 Prof. S. W. Usselman

W, 9:05-11:55 Office Hours: W, 2-4, and by appt.

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**Seminar: Technology and the American South**

This class explores how technology shapes and reflects regional distinctiveness. For much of its history, the South has existed as a region apart, sharing some universal attributes with the rest of the nation yet somehow also exhibiting its own distinctive character. Many of those differences involve technologies and the built environment. As part of the most technologically dynamic nation the world has ever known, the South has hardly escaped the churning social pressures wrought by changing technology. Yet for various reasons, the region has seldom been perceived as being at the center of the technical juggernaut. Instead, it has occupied positions that strike many observers as peripheral, influenced by larger trends but not quite central to them. Responding to change, but not forging it.

Early in its history, while Northerners celebrated the patent system and cultivated an identity based on mechanical ingenuity, the South committed itself to an economy focused on agricultural exports utilizing slave labor and few machines. The raced-based system imparted enduring legacies to the South, readily evident in the structure of its postwar industries, its social and economic geography, its occupations and workforce, and its attitudes. As technologies such as automobiles, radio, and electric power made their way into the region, Southerners reached their own accommodations with them. Southerners raced stock cars, not specialized high-tech racing machines. Even the massive technological programs of the Cold War and the Civil Rights Era – the military bases, interstate highways, breeder reactors, rocket sites, suburban tracts, appliance factories, and Wal-Marts – have not entirely washed the region of its distinctiveness. In some ways, they may have made the South *more* southern.

The distinctive position of the South vis-à-vis technology has long bred cultural stereotypes. From the nation’s earliest days, Northern visitors have puzzled over what they saw as the waste and wantonness of the South. They have routinely labeled the region “backward” and frequently identified it as a problem in need of remedy, often through application of Northern techniques. Southerners have turned these criticisms on their head. Embracing their differences as expressions of deeper virtues, they have prided themselves as noble resistors to the homogenizing juggernaut of change. A celebrated school of Southern literature is built around such notions.

This class takes a hard look at these ideas and the material realities that underlie them. It embraces Southern history as a fascinating opportunity to think seriously about the ways technology interacts with culture across time. Together, technology and culture bequeath to us an array of structures and capabilities, obligations and attitudes that inexorably shape our own time and influence the potential for change in our region and our world. We turn to the past not merely to learn from it and keep from repeating its mistakes, but also to grasp something of this inheritance, so that we might know ourselves better and work more effectively toward addressing the challenges of our own time. For none of us can escape history and ignore the burdens it imposes.

While we study history for our own purposes and our own times, in order to learn from the past we must be willing to comprehend it on its own terms. We cannot expect the people of the past to behave as we would if transported to that past. We would of course bring a different set of tools, but we would also bring a quite different set of assumptions about what mattered and what we desired, given the realm of possibilities we could envision. Studying history requires that we immerse ourselves in the worlds of the people whose lives we examine. We seek to understand why they acted as they did, not to marvel over why they did not act as we might under similar circumstances. When we understand and appreciate what was different about them, we gain some understanding about ourselves.

A small seminar class provides a unique chance to engage the past in this way. Rather than an instructor telling you about the past, seminars provide opportunities to explore the past on your own terms. You do this collectively through class discussions, where many minds engage a common set of material and come together to share their individual reactions to it. Discussions become learning opportunities, forums through which you gain a deeper understanding by exchanging your perceptions with those of fellow students. Seminars also provide you with an opportunity to engage the past intensively through original independent research into primary sources – documents and other materials generated by the people of the time you are studying. With archives pertaining to technology and the South readily available in our area, you can immerse yourself into the past and produce a paper of real originality.

**Requirements and Routines**

This class meets just once a week, which means students carry a lot of responsibility for monitoring their own workload and staying on top of things. You cannot participate meaningfully in a discussion on Wednesday morning by waiting until Tuesday night to crack open a three-hundred-page book. The same holds for your term paper. You cannot conduct research for a twenty-five page paper in a week, and you cannot figure out how to organize what you find into a coherent paper with a day or two of writing. I can help by varying the schedule a bit and setting some intermediate deadlines, but you need to pace the work appropriately.

Each week you should come to class prepared. In many weeks, this will entail completing the assigned reading and preparing a thoughtful, intelligent question about it, which I will ask you to share with the class. In others, it will involve completing a short assignment of some sort connected to your research project. I will present you with a detailed schedule of assignments by August 31, our first full class meeting.

These weekly tasks, including your active participation in class discussion, constitute roughly half of your grade for the course. I will assess both the quality and frequency of your participation and provide you with individual feedback regarding your performance, so you know where you stand. In cases where participation seems inadequate or leaves me wondering if you have fully engaged the material, I may ask you to prepare a written take-home assignment on the readings. If I extend such an opportunity to one or more students, any student is free to complete the assignment. Whether you complete such an assignment of not, however, this part of the course requirements will still count roughly half of your final grade.

The other half of your grade will be based on your term-long research paper. These papers are intended to be a crowning achievement of your work toward an HTS degree. Many of the courses you have taken along the way, especially the methods course, were designed with the intent of preparing you to conduct independent research and write an original paper in which you can take pride. Like anything worth doing, preparing this paper takes real commitment. You need to plan, to work, and to show some courage – for it takes some courage to believe in a project and persevere when the going gets rough. You need to enjoy the hunt, to take pleasure in the sense of discovery, and to have faith that such searches always yield something of benefit. You are always better off for conducting them, no matter how frustrated you might be along the way. I will have more to say about this project, and the steps necessary to complete it, when we meet as a group. For now, just keep in mind that it matters a lot -- half your grade, and maybe more than that in the larger scheme of your education as an HTS major. Here’s your chance to do something special and take real ownership in your education.

In addition to the written paper, you will need to prepare an oral summary for presentation to the class. You may wish to use Power Point for this, though that is not required. The important thing is to convey what you have learned to your fellow students, not by reading your paper, but by summarizing its highlights. This is a useful exercise, and it helps turn your individual research into a collective endeavor. Together, we have a chance to learn about an important and underexplored topic. To help foster this sense of common purpose, I will also form working subgroups of students whose papers focus on complementary topics. Social science research can be lonely; it helps to know that we are all in it together.

**Rules**

You are of course required to observe the Georgia Tech Honor Code. You are also expected to show respect for me and your fellow students. Arrive on time. Be attentive. Listen to your fellow students and try to build upon what they have said. Raise your hand when you wish to contribute; do not interrupt or blurt out responses. Recognize that some students contribute more readily than others and that I might choose to let some more reticent folks have a say, rather than letting the same people dominate all the time. Laptops do not have much place in a discussion class. There’s no real reason to take notes, and there is absolutely no reason to surf the net. Better to stay attentive to the flow of conversation and work to keep things moving. Phones and texting undermine that and are strictly prohibited. Pack them away, out of site and touch. We will take a break, when you can connect to the outside world if you choose. But when we settle in at the seminar table, you need to be in the room and in the moment.

**Readings**

Most of the group readings come from a list of books available at Engineer’s Bookstore or from other vendors. From time to time I will post short supplemental readings on Tsquare, or ask you to look at a document or some statistics. Here’s the booklist:

Merritt Roe Smith, *Harpers Ferry Armory and the New Technology* [paperback] **ISBN-13:** 978-0801491818

Gene Dattell, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America* [paperback] **ISBN-13:** 978-1566639682

Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight* [paperback] **ISBN-13:** 978-0641611087

Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation* [paperback] **ISBN-13:** 978-0521617963

Louise Cassells, *The Unexpected Exodus* [paperback] **ISBN-13:** 978-1570037092

Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business* (Picador, 2010) [Paperback] **ISBN-10:** 9780312429683

Many of these books are not just about the South or primarily about technology. I have tried to find readings that help situate the South in a larger context and help us see technology in its larger cultural frame. Books on cotton and Wal-Mart are good examples; they explore global phenomena in which the South has played an especially large role. *This Land, This Nation* is about national ideas and policies in which the South figured prominently. I have also tried to put us on the ground once in a while here in the South and hear from folks who lived the history, whether they be future Presidents or little-known residents of forgotten (and obliterated) small towns. Here, too, these books will have a lot to say about topics other than technology, though their authors are unusually attentive to how technologies fit in the larger fabric of life. In this course, we look to read these books with a particular eye for the technology. But don’t approach them as you would a treasure hunt, looking to locate the technological gems amidst the “irrelevant” rubble. Be alert to the technology, but let it come to you in the course of the full story, so that you appreciate where it fits in the larger scheme of things.

Our readings cover a long span of time – from the drafting of the Constitution to the latest protests against Wal-Mart – but do not give equal attention to all periods or all subjects. We will spend a couple of weeks on the period before the Civil War, one on the war itself and one or two on the period from Reconstruction to the Great Depression, three or even four on the mid-twentieth century, and one or two on the age of Wal-Mart. That will leave us with room for presentations on your research and some other activities along the way. Here’s the tentative schedule, subject to some revision to accommodate visits to archives and such:

**Schedule**

W 8/24 No Class

W 8/31 Orientation and Archives Visit; discuss patent data

W 9/7 Discuss Smith, *Harper’s Ferry Armory*, all

W 9/14 Discuss Dattel, *Cotton and Race,* Ch. 1-3 and Thompson excerpts

W 9/21 Discuss Dattel, Ch. 4 and Wright excerpts; preliminary proposals due

W 9/28 Discuss Dattell, Ch. 5-6 and Wright excerpts

W 10/5 Discuss Carter, *Hour Before Daylight*, all

W 10/12 Discuss Phillips, *This Land, This Nation*, all

W 10/19 View *Wild River* and discuss; full proposals due

W 10/26 Individual Meetings to Discuss Papers

W 11/2 Discuss Schulman excerpts; Cassels, *The Unexpected Exodus*; and O’Connor, *The Displaced Person*

W 11/9 Discuss Lichtenstein, *The Retail Revolution*, all

W 11/16 Individual Meetings to Discuss Papers

W 11/23 Drafts Due

W 11/30 Student Presentations

W 12/7 Student Presentations

W 12/14 Student Presentations (if necessary); final papers due