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HSTAA 315

### **Challenges Presented by my Research on Port Madison Reservation**

Most of my experience in history has been in ancient and medieval studies. In those eras, there are so few sources that research consists of extremely close reading of the very limited sources, and of secondary source criticism and historiography. It is impossible, or at least extremely unlikely, to come across something in your research that hasn't been done before. Probably dozens or hundreds of times before, in fact. The range of types of sources is also extremely limited - there are no photos taken of ancient Rome, and the lines between government documents, literature, and history texts were pretty thin.

Needless to say, this class has been very different – a new experience. My first challenge in researching this type of history was the sheer quantity and variety of the material available. I was presented with many more challenges to my interpretation of historical data than I normally encounter, and I understood how much more difficult it is to feel like I understand an event or a setting when I have that much more information. I know this is counterintuitive, but the advantage of having less data is that less data makes for less contradiction, and this makes for much easier interpretation. Confronted with the mass of data on Washington Territory in the second half of the nineteenth century, the complexity of understanding even a small aspect of it was pretty overwhelming. My first hurdle was to remember that I wasn't trying to understand it all, and to limit my scope to a particular subject.

This, of course, is all from the perspective of an ancient historian. From another perspective, one that I quickly found myself adopting, it is still very difficult to find data that does relate

to a specific topic within this mass of information. Once I found myself choosing a topic and narrowing in on something that I had an interest in, I realized that the massive quantity of data available did not necessarily guarantee that there was anything at all specifically related to the topic I was studying in the geographical area that I had chosen. Even if there was such information, my abilities to actually find out where it was and put my hands on it were equally undeveloped. As I did my research, I kept seeing other topics present themselves – people, places, events, and issues that came up in the sources again and again. These temptations to change topic were initially something I felt had to be resisted and ignored, but eventually I realized that a research topic should not be adhered to so blindly that I became oblivious to what the sources I was locating had to offer.

My eventual choice of topic owes something to the types of sources that I found most interesting – and this is another guide that I had to learn to trust. It seems as if I was considerably more likely to find relevant information in sources that I found fascinating than in sources that failed to hold my interest. Even though it could be time consuming, I had to just believe that I was going to find something worthwhile in whatever I was reading through – that I could find something in there that could be turned to my purposes. For the most part, this was successful. My topic did change, but not completely. It evolved as my research progressed, and data surfaced or failed to do so. Part of my learning experience so far has been letting this process happen – trying not to be so involved in my topic that I am only looking in the sources for data that specifically supports a view that I have already decided on. This is more difficult than I imagined in these types of sources – in ancient history, finding a new line of interpretation through the same old texts almost requires a preset opinion in order to rearrange the text in your mind as

you go. As I wrote in one of my assignments earlier in the quarter, this class has made it clear to me that the past did not intend any particular interpretation. Or any interpretation at all.

That was another difference I found between my studies in ancient history and my research in this class. Almost all of the texts that I've read for ancient history were written as consciously historical documents. They were recorded laws, proclamations, or even explicit histories. There were almost no incidental sources that survived. In this class, most of the information we have looked through has not been intentional history – it is numbers in ledgers, government reports written to be read once and then filed forever, newspaper articles intended to be read primarily on a single day, letters written between single individuals who probably wouldn't have imagined us reading their words 150 years later. These documents and records are so refreshingly different from the stuffy historical texts – so much more personal and real. Of course, this presents many challenges to interpretation, but it brings the subject so much closer, and makes it more real. This difference in the sources is directly analogous to the locations that these sources may be found – the library versus the archive. In the library, information is pre-packed and processed for our interpretation. In the archives, a sea of raw data awaits, real history unretouched. For me, this quarter has been a truly wonderful introduction to the frame of mind and discipline necessary to finding and understanding information in these circumstances.

The greatest challenge for me in this type of research is knowing when to stop. In ancient research, the question was how deep to go. In this research, the question seems to be how broad. Realizing the essential incompleteness of any understanding of the past is always a good reality check. Setting limits for myself when I know that there is always more out there to find is a real challenge, which is why I have decided to be arbitrary with myself. Today was my research cut-

off, and from here on out, I'm stuck working with what I've already got. Hopefully, I've got enough to make a convincing argument in my paper. Questions?