View from the East: The Federal Government & the American West

During the past thirty years, the writing and teaching of western American history has undergone a fundamental shift of perspective and understanding. For nearly a century the field had been dominated by the “frontier thesis” of Frederick Jackson Turner. Turners asserted that the challenges of making a life in the American West forged a new people characterized by distinctive national virtues—individualism, democracy, pragmatism, and perseverance. The western historians who emerged in the 1980s challenged that approach on several fronts. Their story was one less of settlement than of a conquest accompanied by considerable human and environmental costs. They stressed the role of powerful corporations and a government that made the West more a colony than a land of individual economic opportunity.

Historians have pursued and expanded all these themes over the past twenty years. One key insight of the post-Turnerian history is the vital role of the federal government. In the older narrative, government’s role in western history was secondary to that of settlers; pioneers led and Washington followed, often tentatively and ineffectively. In contemporary western history, an aggressive federal government more often directed and shaped western expansion, seizing and exploring the new country, dispossessing its native peoples, devising new institutions to cope with its challenges, creating an infrastructure to bind it to the nation, and partnering with corporations to develop and exploit its resources. All this effort, in turn, played a key part in the emergence of a vastly more powerful central government between the Civil War and the early-twentieth century. In the memorable phrase of Richard White, the West was “the kindergarten of the state.” The
emergence of the West and the transformation of the federal government cannot be understood apart from one another.

The institute will pursue the insights of the new history through four themes in which the federal government played a major role: 1) exploration and mapping of the West, 2) the settlement of diverse groups in the West, 3) the evolution of western identities, and 4) the visual presentation of the West. Each theme will include materials on both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and explore important elements of the human experience in the American West.

During their time at the institute, each participant will develop a project that addresses a specific research topic relating to one of these themes or, alternatively, describes how work in these areas can enhance his or her teaching. The projects may be a draft of a scholarly article, a proposal for book length research, a new course syllabus, a revision of an existing syllabus, plans for a new museum or archival exhibit, or a digital project (website, blog, or other digital project). The participants will be asked to consider topics before the institute begins and will present summaries of their projects during the last week of the institute.

The institute will run for five weeks. The first four weeks will focus on the major themes of the institute. The fifth and final week will be reserved for participants to finish working their projects and to present those projects to their colleagues at the institute.

**Week 1—Orientation, Computers, Archives, and Images**

The first morning of the Institute will be devoted to introducing the participants to one another, the George Mason campus, and the Washington, D.C. area. Each participant will be given Metro (subway) cards, a password to the university wireless network, a pass
for Fairfax County’s “Cue” bus system as well as a general orientation to the institute program. The principle faculty and Patricia Limerick of the University of Colorado will be introduced, present the opening lecture, and lead the opening discussion devoted to the scholarship of the western history. During the afternoon, Professor Limerick and the principal faculty will be available to discuss participants’ topics and help guide participants plan their projects.

Later in the week, institute participants will receive an orientation to George Mason’s Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (CHNM) and two of the research tools developed there: Zotero, a bibliographic tool for humanities research, and Omeka, software for the presentation of exhibits and collections. Participants will travel to the National Archives and the Library of Congress (LOC) in downtown Washington, D.C. and to the National Archives facility in College Park, Maryland. At these facilities, participants will receive an orientation to the collections, obtain readers cards, and have the opportunity to speak with staff about their individual projects. The week will also include a panel discussion about the prospects and problems for using digital tools and resources for western history, and orientation to several Federal digital resources, and a discussion of graph theory and the emerging field of social network analysis.

Although future Fridays will be reserved for research, the Friday of the first week will introduce participants to the opportunities for historians afforded by the West’s visual culture. In the morning, the group will journey to the Smithsonian American Art Museum where William Truettner, Senior Curator of Western Art, will lead a tour emphasizing the paintings of George Catlin, Thomas Moran, Albert Bierstadt and Carl Moon in the museum’s collections. In the afternoon, participants will visit to the Prints and
Photographs Reading Room at the LOC where they will explore New Deal photographs with Beverly Brannan, the LOC’s curator of twentieth-century documentary photography.

**Week 2—Finding the Way: Exploration, Mapping, and Transportation**

In the second week, Richard Stillson, institute director, will introduce the topic of exploration and mapping. He will review federal government-sponsored surveying and mapping expeditions, including the role of western Indians and European mapmakers in guiding U.S. explorers. He will also discuss the topographical engineers (TOPOGS) unit within the Army Corps of Engineers that conducted numerous scientific studies of western natural history and resources and also performed major surveys for possible transcontinental railroad routes. The TOPOGS assisted in building thousands of miles of wagon roads in the West which were crucial to early settlement and the construction of the transcontinental telegraph. Stillson’s discussion of the TOPOGS will be supplemented by a presentation from John Lonnquest, chief of the Office of History of the Army Corps of Engineers, based in Fort Belvoir in Northern Virginia.

Participants will travel by bus to the headquarters of the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in Reston, Virginia. The USGS was created in 1879 as an agency in the Department of the Interior (DOI) to scientifically survey and classify potential mineral resources and examine the geological structure of the country. Clifford Nelson, a historian of the USGS, will lecture on the founding of the USGS and the lives and contributions of John Wesley Powell and Clarence King, the agency’s first two directors. USGS staff will provide a tour of the library and will lecture on the expanded role of the agency in the twentieth century with its emphasis on water and mineral resources. Participants will tour the mapping facility and learn about modern computer mapping.
Later in the week, Richard Stillson and Stanford University’s Richard White will discuss transportation in the nineteenth century American West. Dr. Stillson will discuss how the federal government helped to create a network of wagon roads, postal routes, and other communication networks to facilitate settlement and commerce. Richard White will lecture and lead a discussion on the railroads in the nineteenth century. He will emphasize the complex and usually corrupt relationship between the federal government and the highly subsidized private railroads in the West. Tom Patterson, Chief Cartographer at the National Park Service will discuss the mapping of the West—paying special attention to mapping national parks—and explore what the process of mapping the West can offer humanities scholars. Paula Petrik, institute principle faculty, and Mr. Patterson will conduct a hands-on cartography workshop in which participants will recreate a portion of a Sanborn map using Ortelius, a cartographic software program, and make a three-dimensional map of the Little Big Horn National Battle Field using the specialized Natural Scenery Designer software.

**Week 3—Making a Home in the West**

The third week emphasizes the functions and resources of the Department of the Interior (DOI), which was and still is the most important single government agency for implementing federal policy in the West. George Franchois, Director of the DOI Library, will discuss the Department’s role in western U.S. history and provide an overview of its library’s holdings—which surpass the collections of most college and university libraries for Indian affairs and many western topics. Participants will also tour the nearby Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) headquarters where Eric Grunset, director of
the DAR Library, will provide an orientation to the materials in the library and lead a
discussion of the use of local and family history in understanding western history

Katherine Benton-Cohen of Georgetown University will deliver a presentation
entitled “Women, the Homestead Act, and the Settlement of the West.” The 1862
Homestead Act, although greatly abused by speculators, provided a mechanism for large
numbers of families to migrate to the West, changing substantially the male-dominated
culture. David Edmunds of the University of Texas at Dallas will lecture on “Oklahoma
Indians: Making a New Home in the American West.” Most Oklahoma Indians were forcibly
removed from their homelands in the East to “Indian Territory,” present day Oklahoma.
Professor Edmunds will contrast the Oklahoma Indian experience to the experiences of
other Western tribes, such as the Lakota Sioux and the Navajo, which managed to hold on
to a portion of their homelands but who remained largely isolated and segregated from
other peoples. Participants will travel to the Cultural Institute of the Embassy of Mexico
where Andrés Reséndez of the University of California at Davis will survey significant
issues in Anglo-Latino relations in the American Southwest over the last two centuries.

Also during this week, Francis Flavin, institute principal faculty, will demonstrate how
social network analysis can be used to model and analyze a community from the American
West in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The model will show family
relationships, broader social relationships, and political relationships, and he will show
how those relationships changed over time. Toby Jurovics of the Joslyn Museum will
discuss the survey photographs of Timothy H. O’Sullivan and photographs from other
western surveys. Professor Petrik will talk about including images, particularly
photographs, in scholarship and teaching and assist participants as they experiment with various image-editing software tools.

This week features a trip to Capitol Hill where participants will meet with staff of the House and Senate committees that deal with issues of primary concern to the West. The purpose of these meetings will be strictly educational, designed to show participants how the legislative branch addresses western concerns and the processes by which proposed legislation evolves into law.

**Week 4—Assuming New Identities in the American West**

The fourth week will explore how the federal government in the West played a vital role in evolving American identities—a role that involved helping to create some and working to destroy others.

Elliott West, institute principal faculty, will discuss how the creation of national parks help to shape the American identity. He will focus on the nation’s first national park, Yellowstone Park, established in 1872. Professor West will lead a discussion on the origins of the park and what they reveal. The park illustrates another common theme, the partnership of Washington with corporate power, especially railroads. At the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Mr. Truettner will lead participants in an analysis and discussion of the huge canvases by Thomas Moran of Yellowstone which are credited with creating public awareness of the value of establishing the first U.S. national park.

Later in the week, David Wallace Adams of Cleveland State University will examine the federal government’s Indian reservation system. The reservation system used three principal methods to try to assimilate Indians into mainstream American culture: Christianization, entry into the economy through agriculture, and education of the young.
This week will include a guided tour of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

Scott Wong of Williams College will look at a group of immigrants to the West, the Chinese. Dr. Wong will work with participants to question how this nineteenth-century history helped to shape race relations not only in the West but also in the nation at large, and how the issues and conflicts involved echoed into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This week includes a visit to the National Portrait Gallery where Frank Goodyear, curator of photographs, will lecture on approaches to the study of western portraits and photographs, particularly of American Indians. This week will include additional time for participants to work on their projects.

**Week 5—Project Completion and Presentation**

On Monday and Tuesday participants will be free to work on their project in preparation for their presentations on Wednesday and Thursday and, if necessary, Friday morning. Each presentation should be about twenty minutes long and explain the motivation and the results of the participant’s work during the institute. An additional ten minutes after each presentation will be reserved for group discussion. Presentations should explain how the federal government influenced their projects and the use of federal resources in doing their research or course preparation. Finally participants should indicate how their work might be extended and result in a publication, a new course or an enhancement of a current course, or a new museum or archival exhibition. On Friday afternoon, participants will evaluate the program and, in the evening, attend a farewell dinner.