

**NJS Presents*****Teaching NJ History*****In This Issue:*****Teaching Local History Using Digital Humanities*****By Steven Elliott****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v7i1.231>**

*This article shares lessons learned from teaching two related undergraduate courses, History of New Jersey and History of Newark, both at Rutgers University-Newark. Students in these courses have completed several assignments that asked them to find and analyze primary sources using online databases and repositories. I share an overview of the assignments, highlight students' best finds in the course of their research, and assess what aspects of the assignments worked well and what needed improvement. Overall, this article finds that online primary sources are ample and easily accessible, though their abundance means that students may need assistance in determining what will best fit their projects.*

State and local histories have long been overshadowed in the academy for both research and teaching. National, regional, and global history survey courses abound, with textbooks, essay collections, and primary source readers readily available to support instruction. For those teaching geographically narrower topics, there are unfortunately fewer resources, particularly for primary sources. Thankfully, the proliferation of online repositories and databases allows instructors to access a range of original documents and images, facilitating a deeper engagement with the past for their students.

Rutgers-University Newark has long offered a popular 200-level undergraduate survey course, *History of Newark*. Class sections generally consist of about forty students; the vast

majority are not history majors. The course fulfills several general education requirements, making it popular with students from all disciplines seeking to meet their requirements before graduation. More recently the University has also added a *History of New Jersey* course that likewise fulfills general education requirements and has enjoyed similar popularity.

The available secondary sources for both courses are adequate for instruction. The relatively new *How Newark Became Newark* (Rivergate, 2008) by Brad Tuttle and *History of the Garden State* (Rutgers, 2012) edited by Maxine Lurie and Richard Veit serve as the main texts for the respective courses. Both are available to students as e-books through the University library, greatly reducing the financial burden of the courses. Each are supplemented by various academic articles, almost all of them readily available online as well.

Primary sources, however, present accessibility problems. Howard L. Green's *Words that Make New Jersey History* (Rutgers, 2006) provides a fine collection of documents for the state's history; unfortunately there is no recently published option for *History of Newark*. Yet, for the latter course in particular, primary source readings often provide the best window onto the past for students.

Given the lack of published material, online resources provide a useful alternative. Throughout the semester, students in both *History of Newark* and *History of New Jersey* are exposed to online primary source repositories and gain experience in the methods scholars use to find and evaluate sources. For nineteenth century history, students are instructed in the use of "America's Historical Newspapers: Early American Newspapers, Series 2-7, 1741-1922," a database available through the University's library website. An in-class assignment asks students to look at different portrayals of the September 1854 Nativist riots in Newark by examining news coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Newark Centinel of Freedom*. Students quickly learn

that objectivity and reporting did not go hand-in-hand, a lesson with present-day relevance in this era of “fake news.” In terms of practical skills, many undergraduates, having grown up in the digital age, quickly grasp the basics of entering search terms and setting date ranges. The limitations of the database itself unfortunately preclude more in-depth explorations. *The Centinel of Freedom* is the only Newark periodical of the more than 900 available through “America’s Historical Newspapers.” For the state at large there are twenty-five papers. Trenton and southern New Jersey are well covered (five Egg Harbor City publications!) but the absence of Paterson or Jersey City papers limits research opportunities for the northern part of the state. Indeed, one of the major takeaways from these lessons has been the glaring need for additional newspaper digitization projects.

For the early twentieth century, students in both classes learn to find historical documents using HathiTrust.org. HathiTrust is a digital library that features digitized books held in the collections of various research libraries. It offers particularly rich holdings in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century government documents, magazines, and antiquarian works. Items once sequestered in reference rooms in a handful of libraries are now accessible to anyone with an internet connection. HathiTrust has proven particularly useful for research into Newark’s history. Annual mayor’s messages, reports to the Newark Board of Trade, and various studies on urban problems commissioned by the city government are all available in full. Students have used digitized copies of *The Newarker*, a magazine published by the Newark Public Library during the early twentieth century, to explore how the city’s civic leaders boosted Newark’s image to outsiders during the Progressive Era. Students have also used health and housing reports to assess the difficulties of administering a growing city. Beyond Newark, HathiTrust provided numerous state government documents covering topics ranging from industrial development to immigration.

A more locally-focused project, the New Jersey Digital Highway, offers a similarly eclectic assortment of documents and images related to the state's past. On the local level, no cities approach Newark in the level of documents produced and digitized. Paterson, Jersey City, and others lacked the active cultural or governmental institutions in the early twentieth century that have left such a vibrant and easily-accessed written record in Newark's case.

For the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries, students face the challenge of sifting throughout an abundance of sources. They have access to a greater number of digitized newspapers; hundreds of government documents can be found on state and local websites, and photographs and video provide alternatives to the written word. Several websites offering carefully curated content help streamline the research process. A useful tool used for both *History of Newark* and *History of New Jersey* was "Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America," a project hosted by the University of Richmond. This interactive website overlays 1930s Home-Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) securities maps (commonly known as redlining maps) over modern digital maps of the United States. Clicking on the various color-coded sections of the redlining maps brings up the original HOLC reports. With the click of a mouse students discover the racially-charged language that real-estate assessors used to describe various New Jersey towns and neighborhoods. So far, Mapping Inequality has uploaded maps for Atlantic, Bergen, Camden, Essex, Hudson, Mercer, and Union Counties. This affords students of New Jersey history with an opportunity to compare the criteria used for assessing different counties, the disparate impact of redlining on suburban and urban areas, and in many cases, learn about how these issues affected their home towns. For *History of Newark*, the project contributes further source material to the study of racial disparities that expanded in the city during the twentieth century.

For Newark's twentieth-century history, two other digital resources stand out. The Newark Public Library's digital collections page provides a wealth of photographs, local newspapers, and official documents in a well-organized and easy to use format. The bulk of the materials deal with the city's history after 1900 and offer broad coverage of the Black and Latino experiences. The second, [riseupnewark.com](http://riseupnewark.com), features a range of documents, photographs, and archival video footage curated by Newark activist and scholar Junius Williams. The website features useful learning modules on several periods of the city's history, as well as an extensive archive of documents related to the local struggle for civil rights.

For a final project, students in each course were asked to write a five-to-seven-page paper that drew on primary sources to respond to a prompt. *History of Newark* students were asked to use primary sources to identify a theme contributing to the city's nineteenth century rise, twentieth century fall, or twenty-first century rebirth (these three categories correspond with the sections of Brad Tuttle's *How Newark Became Newark*, used as the main course text). *History of New Jersey* students were asked to use primary sources to identify and explore a theme in the state's history. Students in both courses were provided with an extensive selection of pre-selected primary sources uploaded to the course management system. But, they were also given the task of finding at least one primary source on their own, using one of the digital repositories covered during the semester. These projects shared the goal of encouraging students to hone practical skills of conducting online research while also exposing them to the methods historians increasingly use to find primary sources for their projects.

Ultimately, many students succeed in finding excellent original documents. HathiTrust proved the most popular choice, likely due to its ease of access and broad coverage. *History of New Jersey* students found information on the status of the state's women through a 1912

publication from *The New Jersey Law Journal*. Women's sources also turned up in the form of a National Archives publication on women in World War II. Additionally, students traced the state's industrial history using handbooks published by railroad companies during the 1850s, reports on manufacturing from turn-of-the-century Paterson, and newspaper reports on industrial decline from the 1970s.

*History of Newark* undergraduates enjoyed even greater success in their research. For the city's recent past, they uncovered Congressional inquiries into organized crime from 1950, copies of urban renewal planning papers from 1959, and a Civil Rights Commission hearing on Newark from 1962. Students also used historical newspapers including *The New York Times* and *The Star Ledger*, as well as documents and images found on [riseupnewark.com](http://riseupnewark.com) and through the Newark Public Library's digital collections. One particularly talented pupil used a series of reports to the State Board of Public Health, found on HathiTrust, to develop a tightly focused paper on the role of disease in Newark's history.

Ultimately, most students demonstrated competency in using digital sources to find primary documents relevant to their projects. Nevertheless, there remains room for improvement. First, students in both courses focused on twentieth and twenty-first century sources. This makes sense given these sources' greater availability and familiarity. An assignment with narrower parameters, such as a mandated focus on the nineteenth century, would likely have challenged classes to use historical newspaper databases or delve more deeply into materials available on HathiTrust. Second, *History of Newark* students had an easier time finding and using sources than their peers taking *History of New Jersey*. Although the latter class covered a broader topic, sources dealing with Newark itself proved more accessible than those from other parts of the state. The existence of the Newark Public Library's digital collections, [riseupnewark.com](http://riseupnewark.com), and the

widespread of digitization of Newark documents on Hathitrust accounts for this disparity. Third, as more digital venues are added, new assignments will be needed to foster student engagement. For example, beyond written documents students could learn much from working with the oral histories contained in The Krueger-Scott Oral History Collection or the Queer Newark Oral History Project.

Overall, the digital humanities offer extensive collections of primary sources for New Jersey history. For courses lacking a published primary source reader, online documents and images can be obtained with relative ease. Digital formats are particularly useful for engaging contemporary students accustomed to using laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Finally, working with digital sources teaches students valuable research skills that carry over to other majors and future employment. Those of us teaching state and local history are fortunate to be working at a time when such resources are available.

*Steven Elliott holds a PhD in American Military History from Temple University. His research has been recognized by awards and fellowships from the David Library of the American Revolution, The Fred W. Smith Library at Mount Vernon, the Society of the Cincinnati, the North Jersey Heritage Trail, and the New Jersey Historical Commission. His book, Surviving the Winters: Housing Washington's Army during the Revolution will be published by the University of Oklahoma Press in March 2021. He has also published articles and reviews in *New Jersey Studies*. Steven currently works as a historian of the Army National Guard for the United States Army Center of Military History, and teaches courses on the history of Newark, history of New Jersey, and American military history at Rutgers University-Newark.*