



HISTORY HAPPENINGS

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Cover photo: Dr. Scott Marler at his first undergrad conference at the University of Houston–Clear Lake in 1996.

Réflexions: From Algiers to Useful Paranoias



Dr. Scott Marler

A distinguished scholar, colleague, and professor, Dr. Scott Marler will retire at the end of the spring semester this year. The Department of History, countless students, and fellow historians have all benefited from Dr. Marler's sharp mind and inspired teaching. In this feature, Dr. Suzanne Ostine interviewed Dr. Marler, and characteristically, he offers astute reflections upon a career fully realized.

Dr. Suzanne Ostine: You're retiring this spring after eighteen years of teaching in the History Department. That's a long stretch of time, but on the other hand, you're still fairly young by the standards of academia. So what gives?

It's not been an easy decision, since I'm very fond of my department, my colleagues, and my students. But a lot has changed for me in the last five years—most of all, getting married to lovely Lynn Jensen, buying a historic house together, and moving to the charming hamlet of Water Valley in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, which is about ninety miles southeast of Memphis and twenty south of Oxford. That's too far away to commute comfortably for very long. But everything just fell into place summer before last, so I had to push up my retirement date considerably.

You mentioned your students and colleagues. Are there any you'd care to single out for praise?

Whew, that's difficult, since I've had so many memorable, talented, hard-working students over the years! I would like to name two: Brendan Stark and Steven Buckingham, an undergraduate and a graduate student, respectively. Their energy and enthusiasm were infectious, and their abilities were justly award-winning. Tragically, however, they both passed away too soon. I still miss them. As for my many excellent colleagues, I'd just like to mention one: Walter R. "Bob" Brown, who, sadly, is also no longer with us. I owe Bob a great deal—not least of all, for any success I've enjoyed in the classroom. One of the nicest things a student ever said to me was that I was "the new Bob Brown."

What led you to become a historian?

Well, history and politics were intertwined for me from a tender age. At seven years old I wrote angry letters to the Nixon Administration against the war and against strip mining. (The answers were priceless: "I assure you, Scott, we do not throw old farmers off their land.") At the same time, I devoured all the American biographies for kids (and some from "the adult section") at the Algiers branch of the New Orleans Public Library. I also memorized and delivered the Gettysburg Address to my third-grade class, wearing a yarn beard and a stovepipe hat. That was circa 1970. I had a faint idea that Abraham Lincoln wasn't exactly a local hero, but he was one to me.

What about later influences? You served in the U.S. Army, right?

Yes, I joined at seventeen, mainly to secure money for college. Many remarkable experiences ensued after I was trained as an interrogator and Spanish linguist, but my interests were decidedly more political than historical during those Reagan-era years of service. Soon after my discharge, I enrolled as a history major at the University of Houston. Under the tutelage of New Left activist/historians like Robert Fisher and Bruce Palmer, I studied widely and intensively, but before long, I gravitated to post-Civil War southern history.

You received your Ph.D. from Rice University, where the *Journal of Southern History* has long been housed.

I had the great fortune of working there for several years under my effortlessly brilliant dissertation advisor, John B. Boles—first as an intern, then as an editor. It was an incredible job, like being perched atop my subdiscipline's world. I also studied American and European intellectual history under Thomas L. Haskell and Richard Wolin, respectively. Haskell was frighteningly smart, and he applied very high standards to his students' work.

Any published influences you'd like to mention?

The Past & Present crowd of British Marxist historians—Hill, Hobsbawm, Hilton, Thompson et al—especially their protracted debates over the transition from feudalism to capitalism. C. B. MacPherson. Perry Anderson. C. Vann Woodward. Early works by Eugene D. Genovese. Steve Hahn. Eric Foner. Richard Hofstadter.

Your book on merchant capitalism in nineteenth-century New Orleans and the South was published by Cambridge University Press in 2013. Have you continued to mine that scholarly vein?



Dr. Daniel Unowsky and Dr. Marler team-teaching in the spring semester of 2025.

Not really. I refashioned myself as an American historian more broadly, which was reflected in post-tenure courses I offered on conspiracy theories, and on U.S. populism and conservatism. Those soon became my research agenda too: a book that synthesizes those subjects. Meanwhile, I contributed my curmudgeonly voice to a roundtable on the “new” history of American capitalism in the *Journal of American History*; I covered the historic Lee Monument removal for *The Nation* in 2017; and I published a cover feature on steampunk in *AHA Perspectives*. Call me a dilettante if you must, but I prefer to think of it more as revenge of the autodidact.



Scott Marler, c. 1998, during his time as a student at Rice University.

You also taught U.S. constitutional history for many years.

Yes. Maybe surprisingly, that was my favorite class to teach. Always a lot of motivated students. The course had been orphaned for a long time, to the oft-stated chagrin of then-undergraduate director Bob Brown, so I volunteered. I'd had a seminar on the subject in grad school (under the legendary Harold Hyman), so given a year to prepare, I figured, how much harm can I do? The chance to expose so many would-be attorneys to American con-law's historical contexts, as well as to introduce them to the overly mythologized Founding era, was just too tempting to pass up.

What are your intentions in retirement?

To finish up my book, *Useful Paranoias*, for one. To learn German, and maybe Italian. Rest assured, I'll remain fully engaged with *la vie intellectuelle*. There's always so much more to learn—and even more to be done! At other times, you might find me lounging on our wraparound front porch, reading Flannery O'Connor or Anthony Trollope with a pitcher of sweet tea on the side table. Come on up and shoot the breeze awhile!



On May 1, the Department held a reception to celebrate Dr. Marler's retirement. Thanks to all who attended the reception. Photos courtesy of Dr. Yaowen Dong. From top left: Dr. Marler reflecting upon his time at U of M; Dr. Marler and his partner, Lynn Jensen; Dr. Aram Goudsouzian praising Dr. Marler as a model colleague, and Dr. Unowsky doing the same.

Alumni Spotlight: Dr. Troy Hallsell

Dr. Troy Hallsell graduated from the University of Memphis in 2005 (BA), and returned to complete a PhD in history in 2018. Among Dr. Hallsell's accomplishments, he is a veteran (U.S. Army), and is currently a historian with the Air Force History and Museum Program at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. In March 2024, Dr. Hallsell discussed his career path and work as an Air Force historian with Dr. Caroline Peyton.

The interview has been condensed for clarity and concision.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your background? Why did you want to become a historian? What sparked your interest in history?

I did my undergrad at Memphis as well, and so my freshman year, I was thinking, you know, something business, just generically business. Nothing was really set in stone, and you had some time to decide. The one class, or the type of class, that I always looked forward to were my history classes. I was like, you know what? I'm going to get a degree in this. I enjoy it.

And that's essentially what I did. When I was there, actually, it was mostly studying with Dennis Laumann, because I took his World Civ. classes, and I was fascinated by just Africa in general. And so basically, I took everything he offered, which I think might have been like four or five classes, and then actually ended up enlisting in the U.S. Army after I graduated, which is a path people don't typically go down. I was an intelligence analyst, but the whole time I was there in the Army, I kept reading tons of history books and stuff on Africa broadly.



Above: Dr. Troy Hallsell

How did you become a historian for the Air Force?

When I got to the ABD phase, I had this epiphany, and I was like, do I want to be a professor, or do I want to be a historian? And as soon as I said, I want to be a historian, you know, this kind of the aperture opened up, and I could conceive of other possibilities. And what that really meant for me is I want to work in the history profession broadly, no matter what it really is.

Alumni Spotlight: Dr. Troy Hallsell

(cont'd)

I knew that the federal government employees a lot of historians. Ultimately, I got the job at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. I wasn't done with my dissertation, so I wrote the last two chapters when I was up here, and then defended that October, so I started July, defended in October, and graduated in December, and I've been up here ever since.

Tell me a little bit about the nature of your job currently. What historical research do you do? What are the expectations?

It's usually easiest to do this by talking about the main product I create every year: the command history report. It's an annual report. It covers from January 1 to December 31. My job is to try to chronicle everything, quote, unquote, of "note" during that year.

It exists in four chapters. Chapter one is your executive summary, which is exactly what it sounds like. Colonels and generals prefer bullet points to long, discursive paragraphs. So, I try to distill the important stuff down, and then there's chronology, which is what it sounds like.

For example, in the ICBM world, there's a big concern about PCB contamination in the launch control center. I've been tracking that since it happened.

Last year we had a vehicle rollover that killed one person and seriously injured two others, right? And so, I tracked that as much as I can, really trying to figure out, what do we learn from that? And what ended up happening is the 20th Air Force commander said, you know, we're not using Humvees anymore.



ICBM Training Silo at Malmstrom

There's also a new ICBM in development -the Sentinel. And so while most of that design is happening elsewhere, there's still stuff that's happening here. We'll hold conferences for design stuff. Buildings are going to be built on base in support of that development.

Chapter two is what we call special studies. These are the things I love doing. Imagine writing a research seminar paper, you know, a few times a year.



A sneak peak into the new MH-139 helicopter.

For last year, I wrote two. One was, actually, it was my second COVID special study. So basically, how the COVID pandemic affected how our operations group would deploy personnel. It forced our operations group to go. How can we do this in a way that basically keeps our personnel as safe as possible? Chapter three is what we call case files, and this is where I gather documentation in real time, and I will use that for a special study in the future. The last chapter contains appendices, data, statistics, personnel, rosters, things like that. I write this history annually. I do tons of other stuff too, like heritage displays.

For graduate students who might be interested in this kind of work, what advice do you have for them? Your background set you up really well to get this position. Do you need a military background, or is that not necessary? What do you need to bring to the table to get this kind of job?

I'm in the Air Force history program, so having military experience is a benefit, but not necessary. I mean, I work with tons of other historians who have never been in military. There is an internship program, and there are usually one or two positions across the entire program per year. So that's a good way to kind of get in, and that's actually something I would tell master students to look into, because you come in as a GS nine. But they really want someone who is a self starter, who can do this on their own, who can read federal policy manuals that dictate your job. And then kind of figure it out. What I love about this job is it made me a more effective conveyor of historical information.

For more on Dr. Hallsell's research, please see his recent publications: "Malmstrom Air Force Base and Civil Rights Activism in Great Falls Montana, 1947-1984," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (2024) "Building Malmstrom's Minuteman Missile Fields in Central Montana, 1960-1963," *Air Power History* (2021) ; "Great Falls, Malmstrom Air Force Base, and the end of the Cold War," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (2022).

Phi Alpha Theta Conference Report

By Dr. Beverly Tsacoyianis

On Saturday April 26, 2025, the University of Memphis Phi Alpha Theta chapter Epsilon Nu co-hosted the annual regional Phi Alpha Theta conference as a virtual conference in conjunction with three Phi Alpha Theta chapters from Arkansas: Harding University (Eta Phi Chapter), Arkansas Tech University (Alpha Theta Gamma), and Ouachita Baptist University (Chi Theta). There were 17 papers from nine different universities accepted to the conference: Arkansas State University, Arkansas Tech University, Austin Peay State University, Middle Tennessee State University, Midwestern State University (in Texas), Ouachita Baptist University, University of Arkansas, the University of Memphis, and the University of Tennessee Knoxville. As with all regional PAT conferences, students from beyond the region are welcome to participate.

There were five panels, and panel judges were professors from Midwestern State University in Texas, Arkansas Tech University, Middle Tennessee State University, and Ouachita Baptist University. Our very own Dr. Bradley Dixon presented the keynote about part of his recently published book *Republic of Indians*.

Our chapter has continued its winning streak for the fifth year in a row, with a regional PAT conference's Best Paper in Panel prize winner. Graduate student Madison P. Givens won Best Paper in Panel for her paper "Distortions: Frances Beal and the Intersections of Anti-Imperialism, Feminism and the Black Body."



Dr. Beverly Tsacoyianis, faculty advisor for the Epsilon Nu chapter

Next year's regional Phi Alpha Theta conference is expected to be hosted sometime in March or April 2026 by Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, just an hour away from Memphis. Be on the lookout for details! We hope to send a large contingent of our students to that conference. Please reach out to Dr. Beverly Tsacoyianis, faculty advisor for the Epsilon Nu chapter, with any questions.

Phi Alpha Theta Conference Report



Madison Givens, PhD candidate, and winner of regional PAT conference's Best Paper in Panel prize winner.

In this time of exceptionally uncertain budgetary allocations, our chapter is especially interested in fundraising to support our undergraduate and graduate students with travel grants to regional conferences. We welcome donations to our chapter via PayPal (epsilonupat@gmail.com), cash (dropped off at the History Department main office, Mitchell 219) or check made payable to "the University of Memphis Phi Alpha Theta."

Students eligible to join Phi Alpha Theta are contacted by email every late February by the History Department's PAT faculty advisor. Joining costs \$65 for a lifetime membership and brings perks such as eligibility to win paper prizes at Phi Alpha Theta conferences. Basic requirements for undergraduates to join Phi Alpha Theta are at least 12 credit hours in History with a 3.1 or higher GPA in History, and a 3.0 or higher overall GPA. Students need not be a History major to join. Basic requirements for graduate students are completing a minimum of 12 semester hours towards their Master's Degree in History with a GPA of better than 3.5, and completing approximately 30% of the residence requirements for the Master's Degree.

Department of History Awards Banquet - Spring 2025

In April 2025, the Department of History held their annual banquet, where both undergraduate and graduate awards are presented, and qualifying students are inducted into Phi Alpha Theta. The following students were inducted into Phi Alpha Theta: Mary Elizabeth Acree, Lilly Bradley, Blake A. Dexter, Lee Gifford, Madison P. Givens, William Blake Leonard, Cate VanNostrand, Aspen-Marie Viola, Molly Yates, Erik Young. Bo Porter won the Major L. Wilson Undergraduate Paper Prize and presented his research as the student speaker. Congratulations to the new inductees and our award winners!



Some of the award winners (top left to bottom right): Mabel Yaa Fosua Dunyo, Dr. Erika Feleg; Lilly Catherine Bradley, Bo Porter, James D. French. Photos courtesy of Dr. Eron Ackerman.

Undergraduate Awards

Bo W. Porter, Undergraduate Wilson Prize winner

Kassandra Karrigan-Fink, Bob Baker Scholarship

**Natalie Martinez Bartell, 2025-26 Belle McWilliams
Scholarship (African-American history)**

**Lee (Wesley Thomas) Gifford, 2025-26 Belle McWilliams
Scholarship (General history)**

James D. French, Kell F. Mitchell Memorial Award

Lilly Catherine Bradley, Walter R. Brown Award

**Cate VanNostrand, Janann M. Sherman Undergraduate
Award for the Study of Women's History**

Nathaniel Blake Magnin, Paul R. Coppock Scholarship

Internship Award, Elizabeth Raspa

Graduate Awards

Shelby Moore, Major L. Wilson Graduate Paper Prize

Mabel Yaa Fosua Dunyo, Dr. Dalvan M. Coger and Dr. Greta M. Coger Fellowship in History Award

Savannah Jackson-Cornell, Dr. William R. and Helen Lucile Gillaspie Scholarship

Ali Mahboob, Ruth and Harry Woodbury Graduate Fellowship in Southern History

Meridian McDaniel, Dr. Peggy Jemison Bodine Fellowship and Dissertation Award

Brooke Gray Hughes, Best Dissertation Prospectus

Savannah Jackson-Cornell, 2024-2025 Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award

Brianna Harrison, 2024-2025 Outstanding Adjunct Teaching Award

Faculty Awards and Honors

2025 National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholars Grant: Dr. Aram Goudsouzian

College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Research Grant: Dr. Dennis Laumann

AY 2024-2025 Field Work & Archival Research Grant from the Division of Research & Innovation: Dr. Dennis Laumann

2025-2026 Division of Research & Innovation Fine Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences Support Program Professional Indexing Grant: Dr. Selina Makana

Spring 2026 MOCH Freeburg Fellowship: Dr. Selina Makana

2025-2026 New York Public Library Schomburg Scholar in Residence Fellowship: Dr. Selina Makana

Dunavant Associate Professorship: Dr. Catherine Phipps

Catherine and Charles Freeburg Professorship: Dr. Sarah Potter

Professional Development Awards: Dr. Daniel Unowsky (Fall 2024) and Dr. Selina Makana (Fall 2025)

2024 Brown Book Prize Honorable Mention: Dr. Cookie Woolner

Rose Erika Feleg, PhD, 2024-2025 Outstanding Adjunct Teaching Award