

[Reinterpreting the American State: Digital History's Intervention](#)

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Chair: Susan Schulten, University of Denver

Commentators: Susan Schulten, University of Denver; Gregory Downs, University of California, Davis

Panelists:

- Cameron Blevins, Northeastern University
- Jamie Pietruska, Rutgers University-New Brunswick
- Benjamin Hoy, University of Saskatchewan
- Nicole Phelps, University of Vermont

“The state” has attracted growing attention from U.S. historians as a category of analysis. Recent work by historians of law, politics, gender, slavery, race, and capitalism have not only “brought the state back in” to American history, but recast our understanding of the state’s history and its role in society. What, then, does the burgeoning field of digital history contribute to this new body of literature? Some historians complain that digital history is too infatuated with flashy bells and whistles and has failed to make substantive scholarly interventions. This panel aims to change that by bringing together four historians who are using digital mapping to reinterpret American state power in the long nineteenth century.

Each of the panelists will present very brief (5-10 minute) introductions of their projects. Rather than showcasing the digital tools themselves, they will concentrate on the major research findings and scholarly arguments that those new methods have allowed them to make. Their overviews will serve as a concrete starting point for the heart of the session: a conversation amongst the panelists, co-chairs, and audience members on broader topics such as the rapidly changing historiography of the American state, theories about space and geography, and the role of analysis and interpretation in the practice of digital history.

Nicole Phelps begins by tracing the history of the US Consular Service between 1789 and 1924. Historians have traditionally seen the work of the consular service through its role in expanding trade. While important, consuls did much more. Charting the rapid spatial growth of the US Consular Service reveals the country’s shifting global interests, the expanding mandate of the service, and the way its growth forced US citizens and foreigners to confront US sovereignty abroad. Next, Benjamin Hoy charts the growth of federal infrastructure in both Canada and the United States between 1860 and 1930. He uses GIS software to show where people were hired and fired, where posts were built or fell into disrepair, and what incidences received federal attention and which did not. This analysis shows a highly uneven process, encompassing a vast range of capacities and approaches to deploying state power on both sides of the border.

Jamie Pietruska uses digital mapping to recover a large-scale network of weather-reporting stations in the United States in the nineteenth century. This network has traditionally been seen as the

product of government efforts that appeared in the wake of the U.S. Civil War. Instead, Pietruska uses datasets compiled by historical climatologists to reveal a longer and much more dynamic spatio-historical trajectory, one in which overlapping information networks both competed and collaborated with state initiatives. Finally, Cameron Blevins focuses on the single largest arm of the federal government: the U.S. Post. Mapping this massive network debunks any lingering notions of a weak or limited nineteenth-century state. Charting how it spread and functioned across such a large territory leads to a fundamentally new model of state power that was much more ephemeral and spatially expansive than historians have previously understood.

Recorded in April 2018 at the OAH Annual Meeting held in Sacramento, California as part of the Mellon-funded Amplified Initiative.

Full Session

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