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## Tracking Privateers or Impressed Sailors in the Early American Republic

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## **Tracking Privateers or Impressed Sailors in the Early American Republic Proposal for UAH RCEU Summer 2017**

**Faculty Mentor:** Dr. Christine E. Sears, Associate Professor of History  
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2016 RCEU award with Jacob Nelson

### **Project Summary:**

Over the past two years, I have collected thousands of photographs of archival resources, all related to sailors and the maritime world from 1780-1820. These sources range from shipping manifests, diplomatic papers, sailors' letters and journals, merchants' letter books, and other primary sources. The student will choose whether he/she would like to focus on privateering or impressed sailors. Then, the student will work with me to populate a searchable database cataloguing information from these archival documents and will complete a secondary literature review related to the either privateering or impressment.

The student will learn key historical skills used by professional historians, whether in an academic or public history setting. For example, the student will learn the crucial skill of reading and transcribing archival documents. Under my guidance, the student will become conversant reading these 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century sources. After mastering the skill of deciphering the sources, the student and I will work closely to modify or expand the database I am currently using. This will include identifying search categories and increasing the search capabilities of the database.

The student's work will be central to this project as they transcribe and catalogue research from primary sources and create a review of related secondary literature. These steps—surveying secondary literature and reading primary sources—are the basic building blocks for professional historical research.

**Student Prerequisites:** The ideal student partner will have completed American history courses at UAH, like HY221, HY290, or closely related courses. B or higher academic standing preferred.

### **Student Duties:**

The student will be responsible for reading and understanding archival resources, which are the basic building blocks for all work historians do. To do this, the student will work with me to learn the skill of paleography; that is, how to read and transcribe 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century documents. The student will need to understand the historical context for this material in order to best organize the research and choose the relevant search criteria. The student will thus be responsible for writing a 3-4 page literature review of work on the early American republic maritime world, which will include at least 10 significant and related secondary sources.

Working closely with me, the student will assist in modifying the database currently used. We will work to make the database more expansive but easier to search. As the student reads and transcribes primary source, he/she will enter data into the database. Thus, the student will learn how to catalogue primary sources, a crucial component of many historical research projects, and gain experience in both creating a database and working with primary source materials. These skills will aid students doing their own research projects as an undergraduate or as a professional working in public history projects that require cataloguing graves, memorials, or material objects. These skills will give a leg up to students applying for master's or Ph.D. historical, archival, or information services programs, where they will be expected to use paleography, catalogue objects and documents, and use primary sources in their own work. For example, if hired by a house museum, this student will be conversant with database options and best practices for cataloguing information about the museum's collection. If applying for a history master's or Ph.D., student could show the database as an example of his or her ability to work with and catalogue primary sources.

### **Mentor Supervision and Interaction:**

During the first week, the student and I will meet daily in my UAH office. Together, we will go over the primary source materials, how to transcribe them, and what systems we can create to track search terms. I will do more instructing at the start as the student masters paleography. Once the student feels comfortable reading primary documents, I will turn over my flash drive of sources and ask her or him to spend some time getting to know those sources, with the intention of creating search terms and thinking about database possibilities. After that, the student and I

will meet of twice a week for the next three of four weeks in my UAH office. During those meetings, we will investigate how to modify the database and plan operational search terms that cover the documents represented.

During this phase, we will meet as needed, but will communicate via email regularly. I also expect the student to enter some data, which will give her or him an opportunity to read the primary sources, thus practicing his or her paleographic skills. The student will also work on contextualizing the primary sources, by completing a secondary literature review. The secondary literature review allows the student to hone their ability to choose the most significant secondary works and to showcase his/her understanding of the significant and relevant ideas contained in those works.