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Featured Piece

Abou B. Bamba
Gettysburg College

Bill D. Bowman
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David P. Hadley
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Featured Piece

Abstract

This year the General Editors continued the tradition started last year by creating a feature piece to show our appreciation for the History Department. We selected four professors from the faculty to answer a question about history: what figure/event/idea inspires your interest in history? Reading their responses helped give us insight into the thoughts of these brilliant minds and further help us understand their passion for the subject we all share a common love and interest in. We hope that you enjoy reading their responses as much as we did.

The four members of the faculty we spoke with are Dr. Abou Bamba, Dr. William Bowman, Dr. David Hadley, and Magdalena Sánchez.

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Professor Abou B. Bamba

Professor Bamba is an associate professor of history and chair of the Africana Studies department at Gettysburg College.

My interest in history came through my earlier academic focus in college on languages and American Studies. While at the university of Cocody (Abidjan, Ivory Coast), I took several courses in U.S. history. Even though my Master's degree was ultimately on African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, I never lost interest in the historical dimensions of studying the United States. Then in 1996, the American president Bill Clinton visited several countries in West Africa, including Senegal, Ghana and others. I was intrigued by the visit, especially the fact that Ivory Coast was not part of Clinton's itinerary. For someone who grew up in the context of the revival of multiparty politics in Ivory Coast and was in tune with leftist intellectual activism, I longed for explanations, all the more so because I thought Ivory Coast was a major regional partner of the United States. In contrast, many opposition newspapers in the country were arguing that the Clinton

administration was demonstrating that Ivory Coast meant nothing for Washington. What was more, by skipping Abidjan, political commentators also suggested, Clinton was demonstrating his dissatisfaction with the pace and directions of Ivorian democratic reforms in the 1990s. It was in this context that I thus decided to embark on a post-Master's research project whose aim was to understand the historical basis of U.S. foreign relations with Africa. More crucially, I was interested in mapping the historical role and place of Ivory Coast in the American policy with regard to Africa.

So I did not start my academic career as a “history buff.” Rather, contemporary social/political issues led me to embrace the study of the past in the hope that it would allow me to better understand the present. With hindsight, I must say that I am glad about the choices I made in college and in graduate school. Studying foreign languages (English and Spanish) in college gave me the critical skills and tools that have allowed me to engage primary sources in their original language(s). The numerous archives and repositories that I use for my historical research today would have been impossible to exploit had it not been my initial training in languages. As for the study of literature, it provided me with a deeper understanding of the significance of narratives and storytelling in the production of meaning.

Professor William Bowman

Professor Bowman is the Johnson Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Humanities and is a professor of history at Gettysburg College.

A series of events during my junior year abroad in Innsbruck, Austria inspired me to study history in graduate school and beyond. While there, I had the opportunity to take a wide

range of classes in European history, philosophy, and religion. As almost all of the courses were in German, it was a huge academic challenge. I enjoyed it immensely and knew that I wanted to further my studies. At the time, I gave little thought to future careers in history; I just knew that I wanted to keep on learning more about Europe's past.

While in Innsbruck, I was also able to travel extensively in Central and Western Europe. A group of friends and I traveled to Rome to attend midnight mass celebrated by the then Pope John Paul II. While in Italy, we also visited Venice, Florence, and Verona. Later, a close friend, my brother, and I set out on a month-long trip crisscrossing as many countries as we could take in, including France, Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany. It was a typical American college student abroad adventure; we slept on trains, in parks, and, occasionally, in cheap hostels and hotels. We learned about short-term strikes in the Spanish rail system, slurped coffee from bowls in Paris, and rendezvoused with friends studying at Oxford. That trip also opened my eyes to a wide range of European cultures, languages, cuisines, and customs. By the time I returned to Innsbruck, I was exhausted, but also hooked on the idea of studying Europe and its history as deeply as I could. Those experiences influenced me greatly and continue to inspire me to this day as a professor of European history. They are also why I am such a strong advocate of study abroad, anywhere in the world, for Gettysburg College students.

Professor David Hadley

Professor Hadley is a visiting assistant professor of history at Gettysburg College.

Recently, I had the opportunity to host a discussion forum on the Confederate Flag and its legacy at an event in town. The passion and interest evident in that discussion, over a flag that first appeared in Gettysburg with an invading army more than 150 years ago, is a reminder of how important understanding history is; a whole universe of meaning surrounds people, events, symbols, and more that would be lost without a grasp of history.

I first began to grasp that on my first trip to Gettysburg as a boy. While a third-grader, I was told we were taking a family trip here. I was initially suspicious because, when I was younger, my father was in the habit of telling long stories about the Civil War and also retelling stories from *The Lord of the Rings*; having found out Middle Earth did not exist, I was skeptical about the existence of Gettysburg. Seeing the battlefield first hand was a transformative experience, though. It was the Peace Light, especially, that captured me, that symbol of peace overlooking a field that witnessed intense slaughter. Even as I developed a more complicated understanding of the costs and injustices involved in post-Civil War reconciliation, that monument remains my favorite place to go on the battlefield.

It is somewhat ironic that it was as a student here at Gettysburg that I began to expand my historical understanding beyond the Civil War. I took a senior thesis seminar with Professor Birkner, focused on President Eisenhower. We studied the CIA-sponsored overthrow of Iran's government in 1953, a topic that aroused fierce debate within the classroom about U.S. activities in the world. This experience helped drive my main areas of interest – the Cold War and intelligence history. As I studied, I saw more and

more resonances between the topics I was studying in the past and the present day. Questions about privacy, foreign intervention, fears of foreign influence – none of these are new questions. Whether the Civil War or the Cold War, the blue and gray at Gettysburg or the shades of grey of espionage – the weight of history lies upon us all. It is inescapable. Rather than cause despair, this fact has always entranced me, as I hope it does my students, because it means history is not just a dry catalog of events; it is understanding the shaping of the world.

Professor Magdalena S. Sánchez

Professor Sánchez is a professor of history at Gettysburg College.

I've had some excellent history teachers since I was in high school, and I'm an historian because of them. In my first semester at college, a western civilization course taught by a dynamic professor with a dry sense of humor spurred my intellectual curiosity. His courses and his example led me to a history major. In college I also studied art history, and thinking about graduate school, I deliberated between history and art history. My adviser pointed out that because history was more encompassing, it would give me greater flexibility. I took his advice, and have never looked back.

I chose to study Spanish history without ever having taken a Spanish history course. Though I was born in Cuba, my mother's family came from Spain, my father taught Spanish literature at Seton Hall University, and as a family we had visited Spain. It helped, too, that I was fluent in Spanish. I was lucky to choose the Johns Hopkins University for graduate studies; unknown to me, it had one of the best programs in the country for early modern European history. My mentor there was Richard Kagan, the leading American historian in early modern Spanish history. At the

time he was one of few historians teaching early modern Spain in the United States, but he would go on to train a whole generation of scholars now teaching throughout the country and beyond.

I discovered that I love archival research – the challenge of locating sources and the excitement of finding primary documents overlooked by others. My research allows me to travel frequently to Europe, and I've worked in archives in Spain, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, England, and Belgium. Entering graduate school in history, I had no idea how fulfilling my career choice would be, but it certainly has been, and my research continues to motivate and excite me every day. I hope that my love of research will infect at least a few of my students, and inspire them as my own teachers inspired me.