

2014 Winning Essay by Lucas Phillips

The daunting task of writing a twenty-five page research paper about an ambiguous, historical topic can be a tad overwhelming. In fact, it can be terrifying. As the history senior seminar class began, I realized that I had a very limited idea of what I wanted to research for my capstone project. I vacillated between a variety of ideas but finally decided to dedicate a semester of research examining the repressive, anti-speech statute promulgated by the Adams Administration in 1798. The Sedition Act effectively made it a crime to publish or speak against the government. The Act itself and the broader political, social, and diplomatic landscape of a young and fragile America piqued my interest and inspired me to explore a critical question – why would a nation that threw off the yoke of Great Britain with intent to establish a liberal, republican government adopt such a suppressive law?

Once I discovered my topic, I set up a meeting with Professor Nora Belzowski in the Christopher Center. I knew that because my research area focused on the 1790s, the sources available might be few and far between. Professor Belzowski and I had a very productive meeting. She pointed me to a number of resources that students could access. Beyond the Christopher Center, I spent numerous hours on the Library of Congress website looking at the United States Statutes at Large and the House and Senate Journals. I was able to find the text of the Sedition Act, was able to trace the movement and debate of the bill through the Senate and House, and recorded which Congressmen voted for the legislation. In addition to effectively using the Library of Congress website, I exploited the abundant resources that the library had to offer.

I utilized numerous collections in the stacks of the library; I found a number of assembled papers and letters of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, George Washington, and John Jay. These valuable primary sources allowed me to get an idea of what America's power players were thinking, writing, and saying in the years surrounding the Sedition Act. In addition, the online history research guide quickly became a good companion while conducting research. Professor Belzowski taught me how to streamline the search process when using the databases. By simply using a "subject search" I was able to locate a variety of primary and secondary sources that pertained to my topic that the library had on its shelves or that were in accessible archives. Moreover, the history research guide had tabs with links to contemporary government documents including the Annals of Congress, the Journals, and the American State Papers. The plethora of resources was both exciting and suffocating. Trying to collect, analyze, and arrange such an array of sources was tough, especially when I was reading page after page of debate on the Sedition Act in the House of Representatives.

Additional primary sources were harder to find. Since the Sedition Act received extensive promotion and criticism in the pages of America's newspapers, I wanted to track down some of the premier newspapers of the 1790s. While reading some of my secondary research materials, I found two newspapers I wanted to locate. After searching for Porcupine's Gazette and the Philadelphia Aurora in the U.S. Newspaper Directory, I only turned up general descriptions of the papers, but no specific articles. I thought I had hit a stumbling block, but turned up a book that collected excerpts of both papers that was available through Interlibrary Loan. The book proved to be full of newspaper clips that added a unique dimension of primary source material to my project.

Without the immense quantity of material that the library has to offer and without the kind help of the professional staff, my research would not have been as enjoyable or detailed. The twenty-five page

senior seminar research project turned into a forty page examination of the Sedition Act of 1798; many of the sources I used were found through the library in one fashion or another. I am grateful to Professor Belzowski for showing me where to look for obscure sources and for helping me navigate the library's collection of diverse resources. I have used the same research methods and databases for subsequent classes with research components and will continue to use the library for future projects.