

Personal Statement for a History Program

A railroad car changed my life. I was a senior in high school, visiting the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. with my social studies class. We were walking through the museum in this slow, somber line. None of us were really speaking. I saw the railroad car and broke off from my group, wandering into the car's interior. I paused in the middle, looking to my left and to my right. I could almost hear the voices of the victims who had ridden to their deaths.

I remember shaking my head and stepping through to the other side of the car. My skin was crawling with goosebumps and my hands were shaking. I looked down and saw this pile of suitcases, stacked next to the exit. That luggage had belonged to someone's son. Someone's daughter. Someone who had possessed enough hope to pack an extra set of clothes for his or her trip east. For the first time in my short life, I realized that the things that had happened before I came into existence mattered. The people who had lived before me mattered. And they mattered profoundly.

Before that trip, history was simply one of many subjects I had to study in school, facts and dates to memorize for tests. But passing through the railroad car changed the way I thought about history. It changed the way I thought about the world. History became that stack of suitcases—the hopes and dreams and actions of people who may or may not have had a chance to tell their stories.

Several years and three majors in college would pass before I decided to dedicate my life to studying the subject. Even though I knew history mattered, making it my career choice seemed so impractical. But after two years as an undergraduate, floating from major to major, I signed up for a history class to fill out my schedule: "Germany since 1871". Something clicked for me during that class. All the uncertainty I had about my possible career paths melted away. I knew I wanted to be a historian. I wanted to be a teacher. History wasn't impractical—it was vital.

A few things have changed since I made that decision. I'm no longer specializing in European history. Now my research focuses on American history, specifically the modern South. The Holocaust and World War II Germany are still passions of mine, but I have found other stories which need to be told. I know that I want to spend the rest of my life telling those stories, and I've chosen to focus on the modern South because that is the world in which I grew up—I have a connection to this region and its past. I want to get my doctorate in history so I can deepen not only my understanding of the lives and events gone by, but deepen the understanding of others as well.

Perhaps what fascinates me the most is why the South seems at times to be a separate entity, set apart from the rest of the country. Why is this? Racism? Regionalism? Religion? And does this mythology reflect reality, or is the South more American than it likes to think? What does it mean to be southern? What does it mean to be American? How are the two connected? And how have the answers to these questions changed over time, especially since Reconstruction?

A more specific topic I'd like to pursue is reform movements and activism in the South. I think reactions to accepted norms can provide crucial insight into a broader social framework. My thesis touches on this topic: I am researching the development of offshore oil drilling in Alabama in the 1970s and the resulting environmental protests. Not exactly known for having an aggressive record of environmental protection, the state has historically prioritized jobs over conserving its natural resources—yet the process of approving offshore oil drilling took almost a decade. When Alabama finally authorized permits to drill in its waters, the state's legislature had enacted what were considered the strictest regulations in the world at that time. How did that happen in Alabama?

The writing sample I have submitted is the genesis of my thesis, which is currently under revision. I wrote the paper for a Southern history seminar in 2006. The university's archives house a tremendous collection of documents, dedicated largely to local history. The director of the archives pointed me to the Mobile Bay Audubon Society's collection, and I spent a week going through nearly thirty boxes of material before I decided to focus on just one cause that the organization advocated.

Since that initial paper, I have worked to expand the scope and content of my research. I've traveled to Alabama's state archives and tried to get a sense of the government's reactions to the development of offshore oil drilling. I am also trying to place this opposition in the broader framework of Alabama history. Reform, when it has come in Alabama, has often been conservative. Was this environmental reaction similar to previous reform efforts? Or was it a departure? I have yet to come to a conclusive answer to these questions, but I hope that by continuing my research I can come closer to finding out.