



ISSUE #1

HISTORY TURNOUTS

DEPARTMENT
OF HISTORY

Fall 2025



From the Department Head



On behalf of the history department, let me welcome you to our first—in many a year—departmental newsletter. We're tremendously excited to share what's happening in and beyond Scott Shipp Hall, and to update you on the current state of the department. The history department has been fortunate enough to enjoy significant growth in recent years, welcoming new faculty, expanding programming, and advising an increasing number of cadet majors.

In Academic Year 2025-2026 the department employs 19 faculty members, 17 of whom are tenured or tenure-track. Almost 160 cadets currently major in history—including Regimental Commander Devin Auzenne '26—with several dozen other cadets declaring a history, Middle Eastern Studies, or military history minor. This past August the department matriculated 44 new rats and welcomed two new faculty members—Major Mattie Webb and Dr. Semih Gokotalay. All have hit the ground running, and we could not be happier to have them.

The department is also fortunate to oversee the John A. Adams 71' Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis and the emerging Constitutional History Program. As you will see, Lt. Col. Joel Christenson '99 and Lt. Col. Mark Boonshoft are deploying an exciting raft of programs, from the Adams Center's wide-ranging cadet summer internship program to the Constitution program's sponsorship of visits to witness oral arguments at the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond for cadets enrolled in HI 300: U. S. Constitutional History. Along with an extremely active Phi Alpha Theta chapter, a dynamic world history program, and faculty engaged in a host of exciting activities in and beyond the classroom, it's an exciting time for VMI history!

Thank you all for your ongoing support for the department and be on the lookout for future updates!

Col. M. Houston Johnson

Professor of History & Head, VMI Department of History

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MEET OUR NEW PROFESSORS

Dr. Semih Gokatalay joined us this fall as an assistant professor, with a focus on the history of the Middle East. He was born and raised in Turkey and says education has always been central to his life: "Both my parents are retired teachers. Watching them has been a steady source of motivation in my work as an instructor."

Although he attended a science high school and initially studied economics at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Gokatalay's passion for history persisted. He focused on the economic history of the Ottoman Empire and later earned two master's degrees, one in economics and another in Middle East studies. After beginning a Ph.D. in economics, Gokatalay shifted paths and pursued his doctorate in History at the University of California, San Diego, completing it in 2024. During his studies and after graduating, he taught courses in world history and the Middle East and published scholarly work on the region.



DR. SEMIH GOKATALAY

Now at VMI, Gokatalay teaches World History and History of the Middle East. He's excited to bring his expertise to Lexington and to "work with cadets in a more personalized, disciplined environment."

Outside the classroom, he enjoys movies, travel, long walks, and playing historical strategy games with his wife.



MAJ MATTIE WEBB

Maj. Mattie Webb also joins us as an assistant professor, specializing in the history of U.S. foreign relations.



Maj. Webb grew up in Virginia and lived in Lexington until she was 12. Her father, Reggie Webb, graduated from VMI in 1975. "I grew up around the VMI community, and it's exciting to be back in Lexington after spending so many years away," Webb reflected. "VMI means a lot to my family, and I'm so thankful to join such a dynamic and growing department."

As an undergraduate at NC State University, Webb discovered her passion for history. She went on to earn a master's in global studies from UNC-Chapel Hill, where she also competed as a track and field athlete. In 2017, she moved to California to pursue her Ph.D. at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Supported by a Fulbright Fellowship, she conducted dissertation research in South Africa. After completing her doctorate in 2023, Webb began a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at Yale University, where she continued work on her first book and taught in the history department.

Throughout her academic journey, Webb has taught a wide range of courses on U.S. and South African history and published both scholarly and public-facing work. She is also an avid distance runner, having competed in marathons and ultramarathons around the world. Her proudest achievement: completing the grueling and historic Comrades Marathon (53 miles) in South Africa in 2024. In her free time, she loves to run, hike, drink craft coffee, and cook.

At VMI, Webb is teaching courses on U.S. foreign relations, the Constitution, and South African history. She is currently training toward a sub-three-hour marathon and hopes to get involved with VMI's Marathon Club.



News from the Adams Center

For more than a decade, the Adams Center has connected cadets with meaningful, immersive, and funded summer internships as historians with partner organizations. This year we placed several history majors in exciting opportunities near and far. Gracie Harlow '27 worked for American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), conducting research at the National Archives on the lives and service of 12 U.S. military personnel buried in the Normandy American Cemetery (Colleville-sur-Mer, France). Upon completing her extensive archival digging, she flew to France and visited the cemetery to deliver 8 gigabytes of digitized archival documents and brief Dr. John Bolt '99 (assistant superintendent) on her findings.

Jeremiah Velazquez '28 served as research intern for the Marine Corps History Division (Quantico, VA), where he compiled a historical brief on the 1927 Battle of Octal, Nicaragua, and transcribed marine oral history interviews for the division's archive. Benjamin Stephani '27 helped develop a new Marshall Plan research guide for the George C. Marshall Foundation's Research Library. And Donovan Blake '27 served as research assistant to Dr. Bradford Wineman '99, who is writing a history of Union armies during the Civil War's Chancellorsville campaign. More great opportunities are in store in 2026—stay tuned! The Adams Center director is Lt. Col. Joel Christenson '99.



Constitution Program Report

Established in fall 2020, this program is dedicated to educating cadets about the U.S. Constitution and the American republic. It does so through a course, HI 300: U.S. Constitutional History, which gives cadets a framework for understanding and discussing constitutional issues from the late 18th century to the present day. Every semester, the program also organizes several guest speakers, field trips, and cadet extra-curricular events. Elsewhere in this newsletter, you can read more about this fall's Constitution Day event and the trip to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond. LTC Mark Boonshoft holds the Conrad M. Hall '65 Chair in American Constitutional History and directs the program.



Alumni Spotlight

Capt. Austin Bajc '17 recently published "Blocked and Bloodied: Lessons for the Combined Arms Breach from the 2023 Ukrainian Counter-Offensive" in *Armor Magazine*. He recently started an M.A. in history at the University of Alabama and will soon serve as a military history instructor at the United States Military Academy. "VMI prepared me to lead. The VMI history department prepared me to think critically and to ask the right questions. Our Nation needs leaders of character who understand the past to shape the future, and I look forward to continuing this legacy."

Congratulations, Capt. Bajc!



PHI ALPHA THETA UPDATES

The fall semester kicked off with the history department welcoming 44 new rats to the third floor of Scott Shipp Hall. They were given a chance to relax (sort of) at the Rat Advising Trivia Night, co-hosted with the Virginia History Society. The event included an advising session and Q&A with upper class cadets, an overview of both clubs, and a tour of the Adams Center. Cadets closed out the evening with a round of trivia! PAT members also held a pizza and movie night where they enjoyed the 1970 classic "Waterloo." Members are looking forward to the annual trip to Washington, D.C. (including a visit to the Pentagon) and hosting the PAT regional conference on April 13.

CONSTITUTION DAY 2025

With the development of the department's U.S. Constitution program, and thanks to the Jackson-Hope Board, we have enjoyed hosting a Constitution Day event each year in Marshall Hall. At this September's event, after a delicious dinner of steak au poivre (thanks, Lt. Col. Boonshoft!) in the Hall of Valor, the award-winning historian Dr. Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy (Oxford University) gave a lecture on the 250th anniversary of the outbreak of the American Revolution. O'Shaughnessy discussed themes from his new book, "Republic and Empire: Crisis, Revolution, and America's Early Independence," co-authored with the late, Dr. Trevor Burnard. Around 250 cadets, faculty, staff, and members of the VMI community attended the fascinating talk.



CADETS ESCAPE POST

October welcomed many chances for cadets to partake in "experiential learning." Who doesn't love a field trip? Those enrolled in Maj. Ramsey's History of the South since 1865 enjoyed the fall foliage on the Skyline Drive as they delved into the stories and history that surrounded the building of Shenandoah National Park during the Great Depression. They toured Big Meadows Lodge and enjoyed an al fresco lecture by Col. Johnson on the creation of the park, the workers who built it, and the effects of the Great Depression and New Deal on the region. The trip ended with a hike to Camp Rapidan where President Hoover and Mrs. Lou Hoover built a retreat in 1929, aided by a few hundred marines.



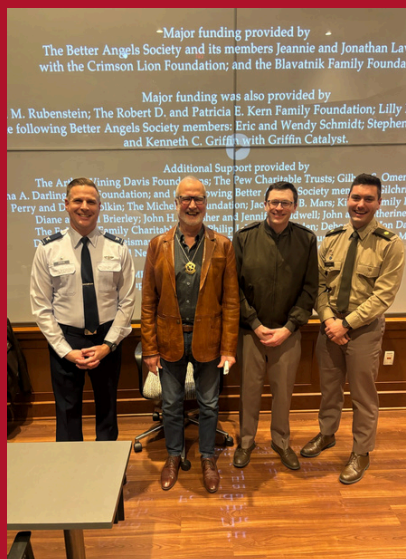
ADAMS CENTER WELCOMES CAPT. LUGTU

October ended with a visit from Capt. James F. Lugtu, Philippine Naval Attache to the United States, hosted by Adams Center and the VMI Center For Leadership and Ethics. Lt. Col. Christenson, Col. Gray, and Col. Spencer Bakich led a lively discussion on the longstanding U.S.-Philippine security partnership and shared challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. With more than 300 cadets and faculty attending, it was a wonderful opportunity to illuminate the connections between the past and contemporary national security challenges.

CADETS TAKE RICHMOND

This fall, cadets enrolled in U.S. Constitutional History, U.S. History, and the History of U.S. Foreign Relations traveled to Richmond for a full day of immersive learning. The Constitutional History group began at the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, where cadets observed oral arguments and took part in a lively Q&A with the judges. Meanwhile, the American history courses toured the Virginia State Capitol, examining the building's architecture, symbolism, and role in early U.S. politics.

After lunch, all groups reconvened at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture, where students explored the permanent galleries and a special exhibition on the American Revolution. The day concluded with a mock Supreme Court case, giving cadets the opportunity to apply their classroom knowledge in a hands-on setting.



VIRGINIA HISTORY SOCIETY CONVENES

After an exciting Ring Figure and wonderful Thanksgiving furlough, December brought long study sessions, late nights, and lots of essay writing. Cadets still managed to enjoy a few events including a showing of Ken Burns's newest documentary on the American Revolution hosted by the Virginia History Society. The evening concluded with a roundtable discussion led by Lt. Col. Boonshoft, Col. McCleskey and Col. Steele.

The VHS also enjoyed a presentation by Col. Keith Gibson at the VMI Museum. Members were treated to hot chocolate, Christmas-themed snacks, and an entertaining and informative exploration of the history of cadets experiencing the joys of Christmas at VMI. In the new year, VHS members can look forward to a range of fun on-post activities and exciting field trips to museums and historical sites.

From the Himalayas to the Appalachians: Cadets Explore Culture and Tradition at China Folk House

Cadets in Dr. Qiong Liu's HI 357: Imperial Chinese History traveled to the China Folk House in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, on November 4. Built by a Tibetan Catholic family near Cizhong, China, in 1989, the house was disassembled and shipped across the ocean after a dam project threatened its original location. It now stands along the Appalachian Trail near the Shenandoah River.

The Folk House director welcomed cadets with traditional Chinese tea and introduced the architectural philosophy behind the house's layout, materials, and ornamentation. The cadets then prepared Mongolian BBQ together and helped winterize the property with hands-on repair work.

The visit challenged assumptions. "I honestly thought Chinese culture was uniform throughout China," admitted Kyle Troutman '27. "That's completely untrue. What really surprised me was the vast coordination it took to relocate and reassemble this building. Every part of the house is special in its own way." Alisa Johnson '28 agreed: "This experience showed me there's more to Chinese civilization than the shallow portrayal we see in media."



The trip also brought classroom concepts to life. Daoism emphasizes harmony between humans and nature, a principle the Folk House embodies through its fengshui influenced design and integration with its surroundings. Observing how abstract ideas like yin-yang manifest in physical spaces helped cadets understand that philosophy isn't merely theoretical; it shapes practical life, from architecture to daily routine.



CADET SPOTLIGHT: JEREMIAH WOODS '27

In October, to a standing-room only crowd, history major Jeremiah Woods presented his SURJ project on Black labor at VMI during the antebellum era. Entitled "African Americans at VMI: 1851-1865," his work explores the contributions of the enslaved and free Black men and women who lived and worked in connection with the Institute during the years leading up to and throughout the Civil War. "It highlights their lives, labor, and legacies, while reflecting on how their presence shaped the foundation of VMI and how their stories can be more fully recognized today," he explained.

Woods spent much of the summer conducting research at the VMI Archives in Preston Library with his advisors, Maj. Madeleine Ramsey and Lt. Col. Mark Boonshoft. Drawing from those archival sources, his work highlights the lives of individuals who helped sustain the Institute but were left out of the historical record.



PROFESSORS OFF POST



Maj. Zac Deibel spent his summer at the American Philosophical Society as a David Center for the American Revolution short-term research fellow. His recent article, "William Tudor's Oration and Revolutionary Projects of Political Education," highlights some of his archival findings. He also had the opportunity to meet one of our founding fathers! [Read Maj. Deibel's blogpost here.](#)

Lt. Col. Jochen Arndt gave a three—part lecture series about South African history to the Kendal retirement community as part of their Kendal College Program in September. He also presented a paper, "A Comradeship-in-Arms? An Analysis of East German-Angolan Military Relations during the Cold War, 1975-1990," at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa, Washington DC, in November.



Maj. Mattie Webb's insights on South African history were recently published in the *South African Historical Journal*, the flagship journal in the field. Webb joined forces with four other scholars in an article titled: "30 Years of Democracy: 1994-2024." Her contribution offers an overview of post-1994 trends in transnational and labor history, while also reflecting on the state of archival research, digital and public history initiatives, and university-community collaboration. [Read Maj. Webb's article here.](#)

Lt. Col. Mark Boonshoft was recently named the co-editor of the *Journal of the Early Republic*. He will be serving alongside Dr. Lindsay Schakenbach Regele of Miami University of Ohio. The journal publishes the best scholarship on the history and culture of the United States in the years of the early republic (1776-1861).



HISTORIANS MAKE THEIR CASE

In November, Maj. Bryant Etheridge, Maj. Madeleine Ramsey, and Col. Houston Johnson, attended the American Society for Legal History Conference in Detroit. Seeking to expand their insights into Constitutional history, the group enjoyed attending panels discussing the role of law throughout U.S. history. The conference includes legal and constitutional scholars from around the world; the VMI contingent enjoyed expanding their professional network and sharing the details about the innovative HI: 300 course. While in town, they were able to sneak in a visit to the Henry Ford Museum in nearby Dearborn!

HISTORIANS “OVER THERE”

“With Good Reason” recently interviewed Lt. Col. Eric Osborne and Maj. Alex Paul about their World War I research and publications. The episode, “Into the Sun,” aired on 138 public radio stations across 36 states.

In a wide-ranging conversation, Osborne explores the 1918 Battle of Megiddo, the world’s last great cavalry charge and a decisive British victory. He recently published a book on the topic: “Battle of Megiddo: Palestine 1918.” Meanwhile Paul examines how immigrants responded to U.S. conscription practices. Look out for his forthcoming book: “Unwilling Doughboys: The U.S. Army’s Foreign-Born Conscripts in World War I.”

[This interview is available online.](#)



ANOTHER POTSDAM CONFERENCE?

During Thanksgiving furlough, Col. Geoffrey Jensen and Maj. Alex Paul attended the annual conference for the Society of the History of War, held in Potsdam, Germany, at the Bundeswehr Centre of Military History and Social Sciences and the University of Potsdam. Society members invited Jensen to share his expertise chairing two panels: “Extremely Bloody and Incredibly Close: Cultures of Imperial War and Spanish Colonialism in Morocco in the Twentieth Century” and “The Boomerang Effect of Colonial Violence.” Paul presented a paper based on his current book manuscript about World War I and the U.S. Army’s foreign-born conscripts: “Preventing Foreign-born Conscripts from Claiming Military Discharges: The U.S. Army’s World War I Naturalization Campaign.”

SNAPSHOTS THROUGH HISTORY...FALL '25



We leave you with one last history fun fact...

Who is responsible for the Corps receiving a winter furlough? Read on to find out!

When the Virginia History Society visited the VMI Museum earlier in December, Col. Gibson '77, the museum system's executive director, gave a festive presentation, titled "When Christmas Came to VMI." One story he highlighted was the origin of winter furlough. In the early 1900s, cadets tried to organize a "Christmas furlough" several times and were always thwarted by administration. When Gen. John J. Pershing, and his aide-de-camp Col. George Marshall, VMI class of 1901, visited Lexington in 1920, Superintendent Edward Nichols asked General Pershing his opinion on a furlough. Pershing, believed to be briefed by Marshall who was very much in favor, encouraged Nichols to support it. While the first few furloughs were merit based, by 1925 all cadets were included. An article in the Dec. 21 edition of The Cadet described it as "an epoch in the history of V.M.I." Cadets (and staff!) are forever grateful those two officers intervened!



Huge congratulations to our December graduates: Edward Hale, Bane London, and Cameron Revels. Congratulations! We are so proud of what you've accomplished.

**Thank you for
reading! Please
stay in touch.**

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If you find yourself in the same benevolent mood as Gen. Pershing on that fateful day in 1920, please consider making a gift to the history department. Simply scan the QR code (or [click here](#)) to help cadets with the important work they do on the third floor of Scott Shipp Hall.

Thank you for your support!



The funds linked to this code go directly to a history discretionary fund authorized by the VMI Alumni Agencies.



Chief of Staff Gen. Marshall in his office with a portrait of Gen. Pershing behind him.

From all of us in the history department (and Gen. Marshall), we wish you and yours a wonderful holiday season and a happy new year! Please stop by and visit the next time you're on post.