

# Occult America

**RELG 210-01/02**

**Fall Semester 2021**

**Instructor:** Douglas Winiarski

**Course Meeting Times:** MW 3:00–4:15 (SECTION 01); 4:30–5:45 (SECTION 02)

**Location:**

**Email:** [dwiniars@richmond.edu](mailto:dwiniars@richmond.edu)

**Cell Phone:** (804) 683-3152 (emergencies only please!)

**Group Me:** [https://groupme.com/join\\_group/70059308/PdnTVKVj](https://groupme.com/join_group/70059308/PdnTVKVj)

**Office Hours:** by appointment



How do historians study the unseen, mysterious, or “occult” forces that animated the worlds of European settlers, Native Americans, and enslaved people in early America? This course introduces students to historical methods through an investigation of selected eighteenth-century supernatural and preternatural phenomena ranging from witchcraft, hauntings, ventriloquism, and spirit possession to occult healing, poisoning, and charming practices. Students will learn to formulate interpretive questions and develop historical arguments based on a broad array of challenging primary texts (including rare archival manuscripts) and related secondary scholarship.

## Historical Studies (FHST) Objectives

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I have designed “Occult America” to meet the Historical Studies requirement in the University's General Education Curriculum.

To learn more about the FSHT requirement, click [here](#).

In addition to the specific topics described above, this course will serve as a laboratory for practicing various methodological approaches used by scholars of early American history; formulating historical questions and arguments; and developing advanced research skills. Specifically, the FSHT component of RELG 210 may be divided into four learning objectives:

- Analyzing different types of primary texts, including court records, theological tracts, diaries and letters, novels and other literary works;
- Developing advanced research skills using early American history resources available through Boatwright Library's print and electronic collections;
- Identifying the methodological and historiographical frameworks employed by scholars who study early modern Anglo-American occult phenomena;
- Applying these different methodological and historiographical frames to unfamiliar, but well documented incidents we have not discussed as a class.

## The Big Picture

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What else can you expect to take away from this course, beyond a letter grade and a General Education requirement checked off on Grad Tracker? That's a tough question to answer. It will depend of a few things, including our commitment to building a supportive and collegial intellectual community. It will also depend on your willingness to set aside the pervasive belief among Generation Z students that coursework primarily involves studying content related to potential careers rather than training generally in classic liberal arts methods: critical thinking and reading, persuasive speech and writing, and ethical reasoning. This is not a zero-sum game, to be sure, but, in the end, the content of “Occult America”—while perhaps (hopefully?) interesting—is far less important than the humanities training you'll receive in this course.

So, what does that entail? What does it mean to train in the humanities? Here are the six principles that guide my courses:

1. I am committed to **teaching you how to engage the cultures of information around you responsibly**. We'll be approaching this issue as historians working on unusual topics located in the distant past. Yet I firmly believe the Historical Studies competencies you'll be pursuing in this class will contribute to your development as global citizens capable of confidently navigating a volatile world of disinformation, fake news, artificial intelligence, social media, and the overall diminution of facts, science, expertise, and scholarship. Throughout the semester, we'll discuss the foundations of historical expertise: the qualifications of professional historians, the process of publishing scholarship, their research techniques, the strengths and limitations of their arguments, their methods, the sources they use, and the like.

2. I expect that you'll expand and deepen your ability to produce compelling, thesis-driven arguments and begin to **create new knowledge, both verbally and in writing**. The study of history isn't about memorizing names, dates, and facts—that is, of consuming “textbook” historical knowledge—although these basic skills are important. Instead, college-level history involves discovering historical sources, placing them in appropriate contextual frameworks (both methodological and historiographical), formulating new arguments about what they mean, and persuading others about the significance of those meanings. In the abstract, then, humanistic inquiry is closely related to other forms of knowledge-production in other disciplines. As such, the research and argumentation skills you'll be honing in this lower-division Religious Studies course are directly applicable to your broader training at UR and beyond.
3. I want you to **become more comfortable tolerating ambiguity and taking risks**. You'll be writing three “essays” this semester, not papers. Derived from the French *essayer*, written essays are experiments, trials, or attempts to prove or persuade. The written assignments for this class have no “right” answers, only more and less persuasive interpretations. This is the heart of humanistic inquiry: it takes a certain degree of ingenuity and courage to form your own interpretations of various aspects of human experience and put them out into the world.
4. For this reason, then, I earnestly hope that you'll **begin to envision your essays as an extension of the self**. This claim may seem overly philosophical, but writing is a way of engaging the world. I hope you'll pour yourself into the essays for our class, and, by so doing, learn how to claim your own voice in ways that will enrich your cover letters, lab and business reports, op-ed essays, position papers, stories, articles, poetry, and books as yet unwritten.
5. In terms of the content of our seminar, we'll be working to **develop an appreciation for the small scale, the odd or offbeat, the idiosyncratic, and, most importantly, the different**. We'll be pursuing this goal in the realm of early American religious history where the stakes seem unusually low (that's by design). We'll spend time talking about how to study historical phenomena often deemed (derided? dismissed?) as “supernatural.” To do so, we'll be working to develop interpretive strategies that allow us to take seriously beliefs, worldviews, and even worlds we may (or may not) share. Learning to value difference is an essential building block in the creation of a more just and equitable society, and early American historians have much to teach the world about the importance of taking differences seriously.
6. In the end, I hope that you will **come to enjoy—or at least respect and value—the art of learning itself**. After all, learning is an art or skill, something that can be mastered with patience and diligence.

## Course Procedures & Requirements

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“Occult America” has no prerequisites and assumes no prior knowledge of the topic. Our bi-weekly meetings will consist of short presentations and seminar-style discussions. Keeping up with the scheduled reading assignments is crucial.

Attendance is mandatory. I will evaluate the quality of your participation in each of our class discussions using the following scale: 5 (excellent: multiple informed/insightful comments), 3 (good: moderate contributions), 1 (poor: minimal participation), and 0 (incomplete/absent). *Please*

*do not contact me to explain class absences other than in situations of major illnesses or University of Richmond events/activities.*

I have designed our course to meet the University's standard 10–14 hours time-on-task requirement. Plan to spend *an average of two to four hours preparing for each class* and roughly *two hours per page when writing essays for class*.

During the semester, course participants will write three argument-driven, interpretive essays based on our course readings, discussions, and research activities. Our Blackboard website describes these graded assignments in greater detail.

I expect all students to annotate our readings and take Cornell-style notes during our class discussions. I will occasionally collect, review, and evaluate your reading annotations and class notes during the semester using the same 0, 1, 3, 5 scale described above. The combined score of these unannounced critical reading/note-taking check-ins and other occasional homework assignments will count 10 percent toward your final grade.

Final grades for the semester will be calculated as follows:

Class Attendance & Participation	25%
Class Preparation, Homework, & Reading Annotations	10%
Ghosts of Long Marsh Run Essay (5 pages)	10%
Joshua Gordon Witch Book Essay (7 pages)	25%
<i>Holy Ghost People</i> Final Essay (6 pages)	20%

## Required Texts

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There are no required textbooks for this class. Instead, we will be reading a series of primary texts and scholarly articles available in one of three formats: (1) online; (2) through one of Boatwright Library's subscription databases; or (3) PDF files stored on our Blackboard website. *You will need to print copies of these texts and bring them with you to class.*

## Getting Help

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In addition to reaching out to me for extra help with our course, consider making an appointment with a peer consultant at UR's [Academic Skills Center](#) or [Writing Center](#).

## Disability Accommodations

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Students with disabilities for whom accommodations have been formally granted by a University of Richmond Disability Advisor must present a copy of their "Disability Accommodation Notice" to each professor within the first week of the academic term. Accommodations must be negotiated in advance for each scheduled course assignment. Students should plan to consult with me at least one week prior to any scheduled deadline.

## Grade Scale

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Final grades will be assigned based on the following grade scale: A+ (98–100); A (93–97); A- (91–92); B+ (88–90); B (83–87); B- (81–82); C+ (78–80); C (73–77); C- (71–72); D+ (68–70); D (63–67); D- (61–62); F (60 and below).

## Cell Phones & Other Devices

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While in class, please disable all cell phones and other communication devices. In addition, I ask that all students refrain from using laptop computers, tablets, and other electronic devices, which create distractions that disrupt the flow of our seminar discussions.

## Pass/Fail Options

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RELG 210 may not be audited or taken on a pass/fail basis.

## Class Schedule

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### How to Read a Ghost Story

<b>Monday, August 23</b>	<b>Introduction to the Course</b>
<b>Wednesday, August 25</b>	<b>Literary History of Ghosts</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Irving, “Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” pp. 272–297 (Blackboard).</li> <li>▪ Browse the Cornell Note Taking System website (available <a href="#">online</a>).</li> </ul>
<b>Monday, August 30</b>	<b>Intellectual History of Ghosts I</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ [Chamberlain], <i>Litbobolia</i>, pp. 58–77 (Blackboard).</li> </ul>
<b>Wednesday, September 1</b>	<b>Defining Terms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mather, <i>Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences</i>, selections T.B.A. (Blackboard).</li> </ul> <p>HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE IN CLASS.</p>
<b>Monday, September 6</b>	<b>Intellectual History of Ghosts II</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Winiarski, ed., “Haunted Plymouth,” pp. 1–16 (Blackboard).</li> <li>▪ Examine the original manuscript of Josiah Cotton’s “Some Observations” (available <a href="#">online</a>).</li> </ul>

- Wednesday, September 8**     **Social History of Ghosts**
- Winiarski, ed., “Haunted Plymouth,” pp. 16–32 (Blackboard).
- HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE IN CLASS.
- Monday, September 13**     **Ghosts of Long Marsh Run**
- Wust, ed., “Ghosts of Long Marsh Run,” pp. 82–101 (Blackboard).
  - Hark, trans., *Chronicon Ephratense*, pp. 263–268 (Blackboard).
- Wednesday, September 15**     **No Class, Religious Studies Conference**
- Monday, September 20**     **The Ephrata Cloister & the Beeler Family**
- Bradley, “History of the Ephrata Cloister,” pp. 1–35 (Blackboard).
  - Pappas, “Christopher Beeler,” pp. 243–247, and “Christopher Beeler’s Second Wife,” pp. 256–257 (Blackboard).
- HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #3 DUE IN CLASS.
- Wednesday, September 22**     **Writing Workshop (Thesis Statements)**
- SUBMIT GHOSTS OF LONG MARSH RUN ESSAY BY EMAIL ([DWINIARS@RICHMOND.EDU](mailto:DWINIARS@RICHMOND.EDU)) BEFORE 12:00 MIDNIGHT ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 25 (DEADLINE 1) OR 5:00 P.M. ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 26 (DEADLINE 2).

### Occult Worlds of the Old South

- Monday, September 27**     **Witchcraft & the Legal Process**
- Hall, “Magic and Witchcraft,” pp. 653–664 (Blackboard).
  - Dalton, “Conjuration and Witches,” pp. 365–368 (Blackboard).
- HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #4 DUE IN CLASS.
- Wednesday, September 29**     **Virginia Witchcraft Cases I**
- Winiarski, ed., “Witchcraft in Virginia,” pp. 1–15 (Blackboard).
- Monday, October 4**     **Virginia Witchcraft Cases II**
- Winiarski, ed., “Witchcraft in Virginia,” pp. 15–22 (Blackboard).
- Wednesday, October 6**     **African American Conjure Practices**
- Chireau, “Conjure and Christianity,” pp. 225–246 (Blackboard).

- Chireau, “Uses of the Supernatural,” pp. 171–188 (Blackboard).
- Leone and Frye, “Conjuring in the Big House Kitchen,” pp. 372–403 (Blackboard).
- Thornton, “Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders,” pp. 273–294 (Blackboard).
- Wells-Oghoghomeh, “She Come Like a Nightmare,” pp. 239–274 (Blackboard).

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #5 DUE IN CLASS.

**Monday, October 11**

**No Class, Fall Break**

**Wednesday, October 13**

**Joshua Gordon’s Witch Book**

- Atkinson, ed., “Witch Book of Joshua Gordon” (Blackboard).

**Monday, October 18**

**Scots-Irish Witchcraft in the Southern Backcountry**

- Wilson, *Tinkling Spring*, pp. 132–134 (Blackboard).
- *South Carolina Gazette*, November 10, 1792 (Blackboard).
- Jefferson to Coles, January 9, 1825 (Blackboard).
- Doddridge, *Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars*, pp. 161–166 (Blackboard).
- Cooper, *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, pp. 742–743 (Blackboard).
- *Autobiography of Brantley York*, pp. 7–10 (Blackboard).
- Rector, “Autobiographical Sketch,” pp. 323–328 (Blackboard).
- Winiarski, et al., eds., “Edward Pearson’s Account,” pp. 1–8 (Blackboard).

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #6 DUE IN CLASS.

**Wednesday, October 20**

**Research Workshop (Joshua Gordon)**

- Milspaw, “Witchcraft in Appalachia,” pp. 71–86 (Blackboard).
- *Signs, Cures & Witchery* (click [here](#) to watch documentary, 57 minutes running time).

**Monday, October 25**

**Joshua Gordon in Context**

- Readings T.B.A.

**Wednesday, October 27**

**Writing Workshop (Argument Structure)**

SUBMIT JOSHUA GORDON ESSAY BY EMAIL ([DWINIARS@RICHMOND.EDU](mailto:DWINIARS@RICHMOND.EDU)) BEFORE 12:00 MIDNIGHT ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 31 (DEADLINE 1) OR 5:00 P.M., MONDAY, NOVEMBER 1 (DEADLINE 2).



## Varieties of Spirit Possession

**Monday, November 1**      **Special Evening Event: RELG 210 Halloween Film Festival!**

DETAILS T.B.A.

**Wednesday, November 3**      **Possession of Elizabeth Knapp**  
 ▪ Hall, ed., “Servant ‘Possessed,’” pp. 197–212 (Blackboard).

**Monday, November 8**      **A Brief History of Ventriloquism**  
 ▪ Schmidt, “From Demonic Possession to Magic Show,” pp. 274–304 (Blackboard).  
 ▪ Download 5 different articles on ventriloquism in America before 1810 from the Early American Newspapers database (see Homework Assignment #7 for additional instructions).

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #7 DUE IN CLASS.

**Wednesday, November 10**      **Origins of Vodou I**  
 ▪ Roberts, “Influential Yoruba Past,” pp. 177–182 (Blackboard).  
 ▪ Olmos and Pravisini-Gebert, “Haitian Vodou,” pp. 116–154 (Blackboard).

**Monday, November 18**      **Origins of Vodou II**  
 ▪ Long, “Marie Laveau,” pp. 262–292 (Blackboard).  
 ▪ Use the Early American Newspapers database and the Chronicling America website at the Library of Congress to locate, download, and read at least 4 of the newspaper articles cited in the “Voudou” section of Long’s article.

**Wednesday, November 20**      **Bodily Exercises of the Great Revival I**  
 ▪ Browse the [History of the Jerks](#) website. Review the site’s introductory [StoryMap](#) and sample at least 10 entries in the [Archive](#) of historical documents.

**Monday, November 25**      **Bodily Exercises of the Great Revival II**  
 ▪ Examine at least 10 additional documents from the [History of the Jerks](#) website.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #8 DUE BEFORE 12:00 MIDNIGHT, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 25.

**Wednesday, November 27**      **No Class, Thanksgiving Break**

**Monday, November 29**      **Holy Ghost People**  
 ▪ Gray-Hildenbrand, “Appalachian ‘Other,’” pp. 47–57 (Blackboard).



**Wednesday, December 1 Pentecostal Serpent Handlers/Wrapping Up**

SUBMIT HOLY GHOST PEOPLE ESSAY BEFORE 5:00 P.M., FRIDAY,  
DECEMBER 10 (RELIGIOUS STUDIES OFFICE, WEINSTEIN HALL 102).

**Blackboard Bibliography**

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- [Chamberlain, Richard]. *Lithobolia: Or, the Stone-Throwing Devil*. In George Lincoln Burr, ed., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648–1706*, Original Narratives of Early American History, pp. 58–77. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914.
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- Chireau, Yvonne. "Conjure and Christianity in the Nineteenth Century: Religious Elements in African American Magic." *Religion & American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 7 (1997): 225–246.
- Chireau, Yvonne. "The Uses of the Supernatural: Toward a History of Black Women's Magical Practices." In *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism*, ed. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane, pp. 171–188. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
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- Gray-Hildenbrand, Jenna. "The Appalachian 'Other': Academic Approaches to the Study of Serpent-handling Sects." *Religion Compass* 10 (2016): 47–54.
- Hall, David D. "Magic and Witchcraft." In *Encyclopedia of the North American Colonies*, ed. Jacob Ernest Cooke, 3 vols, pp. 653–664. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993.
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- Irving, Washington. "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." In *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, pp. 272–297. New York: Penguin Books, 1978.
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- Leone Mark P., and Gladys-Marie Frye. "Conjuring in the Big House Kitchen: An Interpretation of African American Belief Systems Based on the Uses of Archaeology and Folklore Sources." *Journal of American Folklore* 112 (1999): 372–403.
- Long, Carolyn Morrow. "Marie Laveau: A Nineteenth-Century Voudou Priestess." *Louisiana History* 46 (2005): 262–292.
- Mather, Increase. Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences.
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- Milspaw, Yvonne J. "Witchcraft in Appalachia: Protection for the Poor." *Indiana Folklore* 11 (1978): 71–86.
- Olmos, Margarite Fernández, and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. "Haitian Vodou," pp. 116–154. In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.
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- Winiarski, Douglas L. ed. "Witchcraft in Virginia: Selected Documents." Unpublished ms., 2019.
- Winiarski, Douglas L., and students in RELG 210, eds. "Edward Pearson's Account of the 1792 Witch Hunt in Fairfield, South Carolina." Unpublished ms., 2019.
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