

Serendipity

This crucial dimension of education, often neglected by busy students, is especially valuable for the study of history. If you like, you can give it a serious work-out in this course and in the process live things up for yourself considerably. The word comes to us from a Persian fairy tale, as a result of the early modern interactions between Europeans and other peoples around the globe of which the origins of Brazil form a part. Here is how it is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary:

"The faculty of making fortunate and unexpected discoveries by accident."

Such discoveries always make you feel that you are "doing your own thing" by studying history. They will whet your appetite for further study, and they will often lead you to a term paper topic or a project for thesis research (or a life's work!).

The best way to get your serendipity sharpened this quarter is to spend at least half an hour a week in McHenry and the Science Libraries, simply browsing freely in the materials available there for the study of colonial & 19th-c. Brazilian history. Pick a few titles that seem promising to you, go find the books and others near them, and simply handle these books for a while. Check them out by looking at tables of contents, introductions, conclusions, illustrations and so forth, or simply leafing through them attentively.

Another approach is to head for the G section of the stacks (now located in the Science Library), where the early European travel accounts are kept -- especially the fabulous blue-bound Hakluyt Society collection and look for the accounts of travellers who visited Brazil. Another is to poke around in the atlases kept just outside the Map Room in Science Library, and the maps kept and catalogued in the Map Room itself.

Yet another is to explore the bound volumes, shelved in the stacks, of such scholarly journals as the Luso-Brazilian Review, The Americas, Hispanic American Historical Review, Colonial Latin American Review, Colonial Latin American Historical Review, Journal of African History, Plantation Societies in the Americas and the recent issues of these and the dozens of other wide-ranging historical journals that may be found on the shelves near the Reserves Desk in McHenry and on the main floor of Science Library.

When you find an article, or a chapter, or a map that grabs your attention during this kind of a browsing search, stop what you're doing and take fifteen minutes or half an hour to study it closely and let whatever it offers you sink in. Write a note to yourself for future reference. Make sure you have enough bibliographical information to be able to find the interesting item when you want to go back to it later on, so that the process of your serendipitous discoveries can get to be cumulative, and not just a matter of catch as catch can.

When you do make a "fortunate and unexpected discovery" in this way, and especially one that you think may be of interest to other students of colonial and 19th-c. Brazilian history, be sure to report on it in discussion section, so as to encourage the rest of us to make room for serendipity in our own researches.