SUMMER 2014 AMS RESEARCH WINNERS:

**Sean Beienburg, Department of Politics.** My project seeks to provide an account of American states’ rights and federalist discourse by understanding the presence and causes of constitutional backlash from state legislators, governors, and electorates to national policies involving individual rights and liberties. My dissertation provides a political history of such resistance to the national government after Reconstruction, rooted primarily in state legislative journals and local newspaper accounts. I argue that constitutional opposition to the national government is continuous and deeply embedded in the American polity, but that the intensity of state constitutional resistance more closely tracks the evolution of the American party systems than it does regional or other causes. With the national parties only weakly differentiated from each other in their constitutional visions from 1880 until the New Deal, state level Republicans and Democrats alike, from both conservative and progressive wings, produced vociferous but weak constitutional resistance across a wide set of issues such as prohibition or state cooperation in national welfare policies. Previous accounts of state level constitutional politics tend to miss this ongoing resistance because they typically conclude their studies with the coming of the Civil War or focus on Washington, D.C. This tends to confine our understanding of state constitutional resistance as based in southern racial conservatism while downplaying other expressions, such as the nation’s strong progressive decentralist tradition. I conclude that with the singular, though crucial, exception of race, the North and more recently the West have actually been more likely to invoke states’ rights claims throughout American history.

**Alice Cotter, Department of Music.** Since the mid-1980s when American composer John Adams, director Peter Sellars, and librettist Alice Goodman set out to make opera relevant to contemporary American experience with Nixon in China (1987), their efforts have continued to be provocative. Each of their collaborations explores among the most contentious geopolitical challenges of our times: ideological conflict in Nixon, radical Islamophobia in The Death of Klinghoffer (1991), and the threat of nuclear annihilation in Doctor Atomic (2005). My dissertation charts the genesis, compositional development, and post-premiere revision histories of Nixon, Klinghoffer, and Atomic. Relying on hitherto unknown sources from Adams's private archive, I explore the processes and the problems that shaped each work. Among the challenges faced by the creators involved finding a means to reflect upon subjects of devastating magnitude, subjects to which, in the words of Sellars, “the bathetic failure of representational artifice is an unacceptable risk.” As a result of this ethical dilemma, the creators' strategies shifted dramatically over the span of each opera’s creation. Moreover, Adams continues to revise the operas in relation to pressures ranging from the logistical to the political. By viewing his revisions in their historical contexts, I argue that these works are part of a larger communal dialogue. Important undercurrents of meaning lie in what can be reconstructed of the dynamic processes leading up to the operas as we know them, offering insight into not only Adams’s compositional practice, but also into how art can—and cannot—respond to tragedy.
**Justene Hill, Department of History.** Over the past three decades, historians have investigated the history of enslaved peoples’ experiences not simply as slaves, but also as consumers and producers in their local communities. We now understand that African-American slaves dedicated their free time to cultivating gardens and tending livestock to sell to one another, slaveholders, neighboring merchants, and poor white consumers. As early as the 1690s, African slaves in Charleston made themselves visible in the local marketplace as sellers, a tradition that they maintained well into the 1850s. However, there remains much to be learned about the independent economic lives of enslaved people between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Thus far, historians’ have not fully interrogated how the slaves’ economy changed over this period of time. Studies of slaves’ profit-making enterprises remain separate from the literature on economic and legal transformation in the early national and antebellum slaveholding South. My dissertation, “Felonious Transactions: Legal Culture and Business Practices of Slave Economies in South Carolina, 1787-1860,” connects slave economies to broader economic and legal transformations that occurred in South Carolina between the post-Revolutionary period and the Civil War. It argues that slaves’ moneymaking pursuits were an integral aspect of the southern plantation economy. I also show that enslaved people took advantage of inconsistencies embedded in state statutes to participate legally in their local market economies.

**Ashley Lazevnick, Department of Art and Archaeology.** My dissertation considers the paintings, photographs, and poems created by a group of early twentieth century artists affiliated with American Precisionism. Painters such as Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, and Georgia O’Keeffe were among those who cultivated a “machine aesthetic” style, defined by photorealist techniques and industrial landscapes. The term Precisionism was applied to their work retroactively: to create in hindsight a group that was never coherent during the 1920s and 1930s, when these artists were most active. Because the term Precisionism seems to support the myth of America’s mimetic modernism—its mere copying of European styles and modern subject-matter—it has been largely jettisoned by revisionist art historians. In contrast, my project seeks a nuanced understanding of the term “precision” in period discourse. At the time precision was colloquially associated with science, but often in a generalized manner. What are the stakes of using precision to categorize artistic production? To answer such a question, I look beyond art criticism to philosophical writing, in the essays of American Pragmatists William James and C.S. Peirce, and poetry, in the work of Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams. An odd mix of logic, romanticism, curiosity, and imagination constellate these figures around the term “precise.” From this mix, I develop a richer notion of aesthetic precision that is better suited to investigate the enigmatic, multivalent canvases of Precisionist painters.
**Heath Pearson, Department of Anthropology.** “The whole problem in these small towns is the families that move in to be close to the inmates,” a Corrections Officer said to me in the prison’s parking lot. According to the muscly officer, the prison itself was not “the problem.” Instead, what followed the prison into town was “the problem.” Contrary to popular opinion, prisons are not stagnant structures, concrete and barbwire fences, that simply house transplanted offenders and employ local residents. Instead, prisons are things that leak from all sides—Corrections Officers that go back to their neighborhoods and families after work, “illicit economies” that attach to the prisons and create new pathways in these towns, and families that move from urban environments to these rural environments, to name only a few. My ethnographic fieldwork is an exploration of these things that leak. My project is an attempt to expand on the research revolving around the Prison Industrial Complex. Much of the current conversation explores the topic as if it is self-contained and stable, a phenomenon to be studied on its own. And though this research has been and continues to be invaluable for understanding the larger, historical picture, it leaves many lingering questions. What happens in the actual (often rural) towns where federal prisons are built? When a family with an imprisoned loved one moves to the “prison town,” how do they negotiate their new landscape? These are only two (of my many and always-expanding) questions, but they help to localize the conversation that can sometimes appear detached and immaterial. My work is an effort to continue exploring the “whole problem” at the local level.

**Emily Prifogle, Department of History.** I am currently working on a dissertation prospectus examining New Deal resettlement communities, asking what does it mean—legally, physically, culturally, socially—to make a new community? The proposed project examines planned communities created by three New Deal agencies in the 1930s. These planned communities provide an opportunity to evaluate New Deal policies at multiple scales of analysis. I expect to use micro-histories of families who lived in the New Deal communities to analyze larger questions about the federal government’s land use policies and local government law in rural areas. My analysis will include close attention to the ways in which federal land use policy involved intimate interference in the domestic sphere of community residents. I plan to use a braided-narrative method of historical writing to weave together families’ experiences, legal battles, mid-level bureaucracies, and national law and policy. In so doing, I hope to answer questions about race, gender, and class in New Deal policies and examine ways in which federal policy and legislation was created, implemented, and experienced.