

The past is never dead. It's not even past

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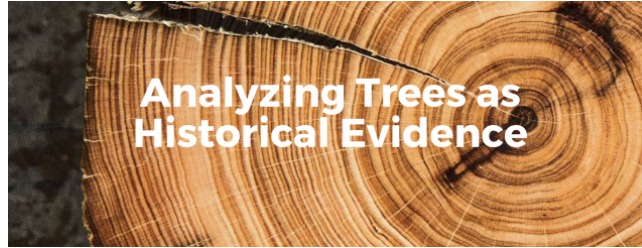
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IHS Climate in Context: Analyzing Trees as Historical Evidence

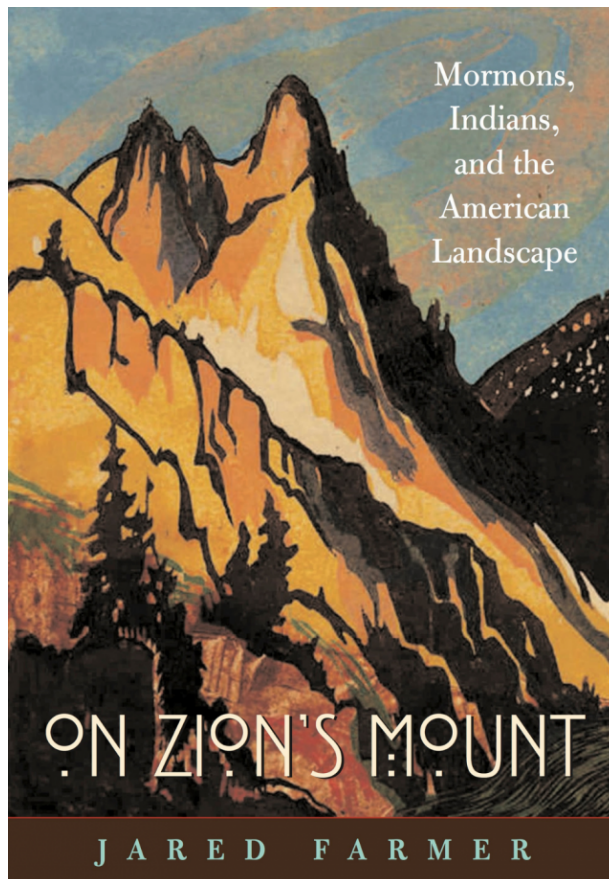
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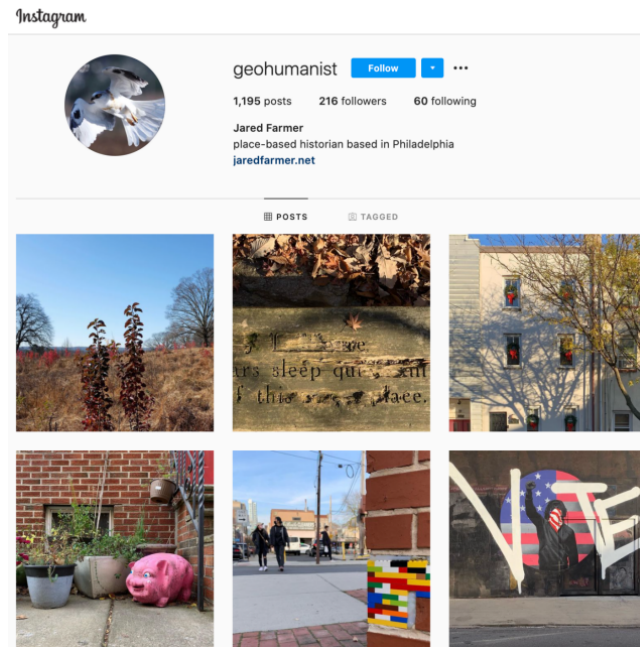
By Raymond Hyser

As the next iteration of the Institute for Historical Studies' 2020-21 theme on "[Climate in Context: Historical Precedents and the Unprecedented](#)," Dr. Jared Farmer, a Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania, will give a talk on Thursday, December 3rd at 3:30 PM central time. His talk entitled "Ancient Trees in Modern Times" will focus on the discovery of the tree-rings of Great Basin bristlecone pines and their important role as a lens into the world of past climates and climate change.



Dr. Farmer studies the overlapping historical dimensions of landscape, environment, technology, science, religion, culture, and law. His work has been recognized through a range of fellowships, grants, and awards. His 2008 book, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape*, received the Francis Parkman Prize from the Society of American Historians. His current book project, provisionally titled *Survival of the Oldest: Ancient Trees in Modern Times*, is a place-based planetary history of ancient trees and the problem of long-term thinking. He has also published a wide range of [e-books](#) and [articles](#).

Labelling himself a geohumanist, Dr. Farmer scrutinizes how people sacralize as well as desacralize landforms as they change landscapes throughout history. He uses [Instagram](#) as a platform to share his landscape observations with the public.



His most recently published article, an opinion piece published in the Los Angeles Times in November 2020, titled "[The Golden State treescape wasn't made to last](#)," explores just this in regards to California's treescape. Dr. Farmer talks about how natural, as well as unnatural, forces have shaped California's landscape over the 20th century.

He chronicles how humans, starting with Indigenous peoples, have impacted California's treescape through intentional burning, the afforestation of nonnative tree species, deforestation, and the accidental introduction of harmful insects and pathogens from abroad. He notes that natural forces also played a role. He explains that during California's period of afforestation of nonnative agricultural and ornamental trees, a climatic anomaly left California soaking wet and, along with the lack of the trees' native predators and pathogens at the time, foreign trees flourished.



Op-Ed: The Golden State treescape wasn't made to last



Californians of the future will envy our familiarity with big old trees. (Marcus Yam / Los Angeles Times)

By JARED FARMER

Dr. Farmer also touches upon some of the political factors that contributed to California's unsustainable treescape including the work of U.S. "improvers" and the affordable housing crisis forcing families farther and farther into the suburbs. He reaches the conclusion that "...[California's] current landscape of risk is unprecedented: a spread-out population (now 40 million), a stressed-out treescape, global warming and regional megadrought. No reference points exist for this situation. Knowing history helps, but there's no going back to the past."

He explains how the absence of funds, lack of agreement, current ecological landscape, and continued residential development have prevented California from implementing expert-recommended controlled burning as a fire management tool. Dr. Farmer ends his article by noting that all eyes are on California to accept that their treescape was never meant to last and to come up with a solution to adapt to their current landscape.

To join Dr. Farmer's IHS talk via Zoom on December 3rd at 3:30 PM central time, register [here](#).

For more events related to climate and environmental history at the Institute of Historical Studies, see the [calendar](#) and follow the IHS on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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