

Course Proposal: American History pre-1877, Historiography and Debate

Instructor: Christopher Fuqua

Course objective:

To expose students to a wide variety of source materials, the current historical consensus, and the debates surrounding the interpretation of historical analysis of the period of American history up to 1877. Among the explored topics will be the cultural and social realities of colonial America, the War of 1812 and its effect on American society and culture, the turbulence and political strife of the years during and following the Andrew Jackson administration, the cultural norms and practices in the antebellum South and the slave economy, and the various theories about the causes and effects of the Civil War, and the ongoing debate over the successes and failures of Reconstruction. Current historiographical debates, including the concept of 'Republicanism', will be explored with an emphasis put upon identifying source materials and the chronological map of American historiography.

In addition to accessing and analyzing source materials from the pre-1877 period in American history, students will use their growing knowledge to apply historical events and outcomes to understand current events in American politics. Attention will be paid to the effect that decisions and events during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continue to have on the current political and social realities in a divided and bitter American

landscape today. Connecting events in American history to current events will be essential to understanding American history as an overall concept, constantly evolving and re-writing itself.

Students will access a wide variety of materials, focusing upon major works in pre-1877 American history, journal articles, and historiographical pieces, as well as learning to access and utilize the digital information available in the Library of Congress. Use of the Library of Congress' digital archive of Congressional records and *Chronicling America*, a digital newspaper repository of American history during the nineteenth century will be required for the course. Additionally, students will be exposed to a selection of popular works of history, including documentaries and feature films, in order to explore the broader view of American history experienced by the public through popular media.

Tools:

Library of Congress

Access to the Library of Congress will be essential to complete the course assignments. Students will learn how to access and use the Annals of Congress, Register of Debates, Congressional Globe, and the Congressional Record in order to understand the process and shape of debates taking place in Congress during the period between the establishment of Congress and the end of Reconstruction in 1877. Emphasis will be placed on the importance of the legislative body in shaping American policy, and ultimately in writing the history of the United States.

Chronicling America

This online source of digitized newspapers covers America from 1789-1924.

Students will use it's archive to access digitized copies of American newspapers in order to understand the cultural and political views of various segments of American society. Of particular note will be the newspaper coverage of various American conflicts, including the Mexican-American War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. Students will learn to identify political leanings by regions and by sources, and gather a deeper understanding of the political climate of the day. Students will also be able to identify journalistic bias, and the overall effect that growing media coverage had, and continues to have, on the development of the American political landscape.

Assignments:

Library of Congress Paper

Students will access the Library of Congress' congressional records from any period before 1877 focusing on a particular subject of the student's choice. Example subjects could include congressional debates on slavery, expansion, the Mexican-American War, the War of 1812, etc. Students will identify the main proponents of each side of the issue, including the effects of political and sectional identities on the positions of various politicians. This paper will be divided into two equal sections: the first will cover the facts of the debate, including all the above information, the second section will be an analysis, to be written by the student, as to the effectiveness of each side of the debate. The outcome of the debates surrounding the issue should be noted in the paper, however the larger focus should be on how each side made its arguments, who it appealed to for support, and the

dynamics of American politics during the time period. Students will be required to provide at least three quotations from the congressional records and three newspaper articles, along with correct citation in Chicago style. Assignment is to be 8-10 pages, excluding bibliography and cover page.

Documentary Analysis Paper

Students will access and watch a historical documentary from any period of American history, working in groups of 4-6 students, and work together to create a presentation. The presentation will focus on multiple factors, including the historical accuracy of the documentary, potential bias by the creators/director of the documentary, and the intended audience for the film. Students will be expected to go beyond the surface, to deeply analyze the film as a work of history. The presentation should be approximately 10 minutes, including a small clip chosen from the documentary that provides evidence for the information being provided by the students.

Units:

A note on sources: included below within each unit's subheading is a source-list of material to be used in the exploration of American history. Sources will be used in one of two ways: as an assignment for students to read (either a short source, or a selection from a larger work) or a source to be discussed/exhibited during class periods.

*Primary sources marked with *.*

The Colonial Period: The Great Experiment

This initial unit will focus on laying a solid groundwork for understanding of American history as a whole, by exploring the colonial period and the political, social, and economic issues by which it was shaped. Students will become familiar with the important foundational documents of the United States, the colonies and the unique set of circumstances each one faced, the outside powers and how the Native Americans and the French played a role in shaping early American history, and the realities of the puritanical societies of the New England colonies.

Sources:

****The Articles of Confederation.***

****The United States Constitution.***

Students will be exposed to selections from both the Articles of Confederation and the United States Constitution. The history of political debate during this period will be traced from the initial *Articles* through the writing and enactment of the United States Constitution, to allow students to gather a thorough understanding of the political forces and ideas influential during the establishment of the republic. Focus will be placed on both important guaranteed rights and ideas, such as freedom of speech and religion, as well as less notable but equally important rights, including the 4th amendment's implied right to privacy, and the 9th amendment's protection of non-enumerated rights. The importance of the Bill of Rights to personal liberty will be discussed, in relation to current events in American history. Students will become informed citizens, who fully understand the rights and privileges provided for them by the founding documents of our country, capable of

analyzing current events in relation to the fundamental structure of individual rights that is essential to American history.

***The Crucible*. Directed by Nicholas Hytner. 1996. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 1996. DVD, 123 minutes.**

This film, based on a well-received play by Arthur Miller, explores the Salem Witch Trials and the surrounding society of puritan New England, as an allegory for the Communist witch-hunts of the 1950s. Students will use the portrayal of American life during the pre-colonial period in this film to identify and analyze stereotypes about puritan America, explore the ways that American history is dramatized for a wide public audience, and discover how period pieces in American history are often used metaphorically to comment on later periods.

Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. New York: Viking, 2001.

This monograph on the American colonial period does a great job of moving out of the rote, well-trod path of American colonial history. Instead, Alan focuses on each colony as an individual society, dispelling the idea of the American colonies as a monolith; Taylor instead highlights both the differences between the colonies themselves and the issues with outside groups. Taylor's focus on the Native Americans as well as the colonial history of the other European powers in America allows for a much broader view of American colonial history than most earlier works. Students will take from this an understanding of

the different populations making up the forming United States, and a grasp of the differences that will eventually play out in later sectional conflicts and political debates.

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife's Tale: the Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Knopf, 1990.

This analysis of the diary of a midwife, Martha Ballard, provides an incredibly detailed glimpse into the life of a woman in the early American republic. Dispelling the common myths about women in early America, this fantastic work shows the changing gender roles in the colonial United States, and focuses on the women within the community, including their relationships, obstacles, and challenges, as well as the out-and-out toughness of Martha Ballard. Sources about women during this period are rarely so deeply researched and well-written, and students will be able to learn about the trials and tribulations of a woman working to succeed in a world dominated by men.

Republicanism: the Historiography of Early America

Students will learn about historiography as a concept, including its purpose, methods, usefulness, and problems. The students will be able to analyze historiographical passages and articles, assessing the sources and evidence cited by the authors, and weigh the conclusions. In the interest of obtaining these skills, students will be informed of the history of and the current status of the historiographical debate about 'Republicanism'. This discussion will include the origins of 'Republicanism', its influence, the difficulty in precisely defining the term, the issues raised by historians in applying 'Republicanism' to

American society as a whole. Also included within this section will be material describing current trends in American historiography.

Sources:

Rodgers, Daniel T. "Republicanism: the Career of a Concept." *The Journal of American History* 79, No.1 (June, 1992): 11-38.

Shalhope, Robert E. "Republicanism and Early American Historiography." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, No. 2 (April, 1982): 334-56.

This pair of articles explores the term 'republicanism' as it applies to American historiography, which Shalhope defines as "the belief that a republic succeeded or failed based on the character and spirit of the people within the republic". The two articles cover the beginnings of the term, its co-opting by historians for other purposes, its usefulness as a concept, and the current debate around the term itself as a construct through which to understand this period of American history. These historiographical articles will provide an example of the structure of arguments and debates used by historians and allow students to grasp the importance of historiography as a field. Students will also analyze 'republicanism' as an idea, along with 'republican motherhood', and decide for themselves whether this controversial historical framework has a place in the current debates over early American historiography.

The War of 1812: Politics and War Collide

This section will cover the presidency of Thomas Jefferson and his Louisiana Purchase, the beginnings of the two-party system in American politics, the beginnings of

industrialization in the United States and the corresponding social changes including the creation of the working class, the War of 1812 and the effects of victory on the still-nascent United States, and the end of the Federalist Party that began the Era of Good Feelings.

Also included in this section are explorations of the beginnings of distinct American culture, the controversy over expansion, and the conflicts between the growing territory of the United States and the Native American cultures being driven off their land through conflict and disease.

Sources:

***Hickey, Donald R., ed. *The War of 1812: Writings From America's Second War of Independence*. New York: The Library of America, 2013.**

This excellent collection of writings is put together by Donald R. Hickey, a notably prolific scholar and author of works about the War of 1812. Included within are letters by many of the notable politicians of the early nineteenth-century, along with myriad editorials, journal entries, memoirs, and newspaper articles. Of particular note to the class is the expression of the political and social realities of America during the 'Second War of Independence'.

Fuqua, Christopher. "The Causes of Collapse: The Death of the Federalists and the Legacy of America's First Political Party." *The Chico Historian*.

This short essay explores the relationship between two events in early American history: the War of 1812, and the end of the Federalist Party and the First Party System of American politics. This source traces the causes of the weakness within the Federalist

Party, including the internal splits over the future of the party that culminated at the Hartford Convention, as well as the effect of their disastrous choice to not support war against Britain during the run-up to the War of 1812. Also explored is the ultimate legacy of the Federalist Party, including the co-opting of their major platform by the Democratic-Republicans following the end of the Federalists as a national player in politics.

Antebellum South: Capitalism, Slavery, and Culture

This unit will largely consist of explorations of the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the South during the decades preceding the Civil War, with emphasis on the economic, social, and political aspects of slave-holding states. Students will be introduced to the structure and culture of the American South during this period and how the issue of slavery shaped politics both within and outside of the Cotton belt. The South, the idea of paternalism, and the realities of a racially-based, semi-feudal state will be explored and compared to other forms of slavery, including those in the Caribbean and South America.

Sources:

Genovese, Eugene. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976.

This major work of slave history set the standard by which other histories of slavery in the United States have been held ever since. Genovese plows a new path from previous slave histories, focusing not on the cruelty and injustice of slavery that is universally agreed upon by scholars. Instead Genovese relates the daily lives of slaves, their communities, and how the slave culture dealt with living under the peculiar institution. He covers ideas of

paternalism, both the inflated sense of superiority of the planter class, and the effects paternalism had on slaves. Finally Genovese moves away from the view of slaves simply as victims of an unjust system, instead exploring the forms of resistance, the fight to stave off dehumanization, and the ways in which culture and community helped to keep slaves going in the face of harsh oppression.

Kaye, Anthony E. *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Using newly gathered evidence, largely from interviews and testimonies given to the Federal Pension Board by widows of freedmen who died during the civil war, Kaye paints a fascinating and illuminating picture of slave life in Mississippi. Going beyond the idea of the individual plantation, Kaye writes about slave “neighborhoods”, which included multiple plantations and many generations of slave families that fraternized, loved, and married across plantation lines with or without the permission of the slaveholders they were beholden to. Students reading this work will receive a much broader view of what slave life was actually like, and allow them to truly understand the strange and unjust world in which slaves toiled for hundreds of years before emancipation.

Kolchin, Peter. “Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective.” *The Journal of American History* 73, Issue 3 (December, 1983): 579-601.

In this article, Kolchin argues against the idea of the slave “community”, providing a contrasting perspective to Genovese and Kaye. He downplays the power and strength of

slave communities in defining their own reality, and argues that previous historians have over-reached while writing about slave agency. Kolchin also spends time comparing the American slave population to those being held in the Caribbean, as well as serfdom in Russia, a unique idea that leads to a potential view of slavery in America as akin to serfdom in Europe.

Morgan, Edmund. "Slavery and Freedom: the American Paradox." *The Journal of American History* 59, Issue 1 (June, 1972): 5-29.

In this short article, Morgan explores the interconnectedness of American ideals about freedom and liberty with slavery in the South. He argues that it was the plantation society that allowed the rise of republicanism in America, that it was on the backs of slaves that Americans built their republic. This article will provide for students a wider view of slavery as an American, rather than only a Southern, institution.

The Age of Jackson: Jacksonian Democracy in a Modernizing Society

The focus of this unit will be on the presidential administration of Andrew Jackson, as well as the period book-ending his presidency. Students will explore the growth of presidential power during this time period, the struggle between the Democratic-Republicans and the coalescing Whig Party, the fight over the Bank of the United States (including the effects of its destruction), and the Indian Removal Policy. Students will be asked to analyze and interpret the legacy of Andrew Jackson, and whether he belongs on a list of great American Presidents.

Sources:

Watson, Harry L. *Liberty and Power: the Politics of Jacksonian America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1990.

This excellent work on Andrew Jackson provides a great overview of his presidency, including all the controversies and political battles that occurred during the period. Also included are sections on slavery and Indian removal, two important issues during this period that eventually had long-term consequences for the United States. Students will also be able to find within this work sections not directly related to Jackson, as Watson provides a thorough and easily understandable history of America from the end of the Jefferson presidency, up through the first rumblings of the controversy that would spill into civil war within just a few decades. Of particular note to students will be the section about the Second Bank of the United States, and Watson includes much of the information about a seminal debate in American history that students will be asked to provide in their Library of Congress paper.

The Civil War: Regional Divisions in American Politics

This section will cover the Civil War, with a particular focus on the causes of the War and how it relates to sectional and political divides in the United States following the Jackson administration. Students will learn about the economic realities of the North and South, the issues of expansionism and the spread of slavery, the shifting of political parties and political ideology, and the rise of the abolitionist movement in the North. Students will also examine gender issues, particularly in the South, and how the gender dynamic of Southern culture affected the outcome of the Civil War.

Sources:

***The Civil War: a Film by Ken Burns.* Directed by Ken Burns. Aired September 23, 1990. Arlington, VA: PBS Home Video, 1990.**

This multi-part series is an iconic work of popular history by the endlessly well-acclaimed director and producer Ken Burns, covering the Civil War through individual stories, photographs, correspondence, and political speeches of the period. The source is incredibly rich with detail of the everyday lives of soldiers, civilians, slaves, and anyone else affected by the brutal realities of the Civil War. Burns is able to present a thorough and even-handed account of the war, in a way that is compelling to wider audiences and those still discovering the engrossing history of the United States.

Rockman, Seth. "The Future of Civil War Era Studies: Slavery and Capitalism."

Journal of the Civil War Era.

This short article lays out the debate among historians about slavery and its relation to capitalism. Rockman goes through the historiography of the slave-holding South to explore ideas about proto-capitalism developing on the plantations, particularly in the cotton industry, as well as the connection of slavery to America as a whole. Instead of focusing on slavery as simply a Southern reality, Rockman shows that the North was just as dependent economically on slavery, in spite of the commonly held historical view that the North was economically independent because of rapidly developing industry. Students will be able to differentiate between historical viewpoints about slavery after reading this piece.

Ayers, Edward L. "Worrying about the Civil War." In *What Caused the Civil War:*

***Reflections on the South and Southern History.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.**

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***Reflections on the South and Southern History.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.**

These two articles by Edward Ayers will give students an overview of the run-up to the Civil War, including the tensions that led to its outbreak. Ayers does a deep dive into the historiography surrounding the causes of the Civil War, disregarding the simplistic idea that "slavery caused the Civil War" in favor of more complex and interconnected events and social realities referred to as "deep contingency". Much like the earlier pair of articles on 'republicanism', these two articles will expose students to current historical debates going on between scholars, in this case, on the causes of the bloodiest war in American history.

Reconstruction: A Failed Experiment?

This final unit will explore the era of Reconstruction, with a focus on whether Reconstruction was a success, a failure, or both. Students will explore the initial positive effects of Reconstruction on freed slaves, the rise of African-American political participation, and the eventual reversal of progress by the end of Reconstruction by the Johnson administration. Students will also learn about the rise of political violence and fear as a political tool, the effects of Reconstruction's failure to secure equal rights for African-Americans, and the ongoing issues in today's America that have roots in the outcome of Reconstruction in the South during the 1870s, particularly the usage of the

criminal justice system as a tool for racial oppression that took the place of the system of chattel slavery that was ended by the 13th amendment.

Sources:

Egerton, Douglas R. *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013.

This excellently researched and written source on Reconstruction focuses sharply on the Reconstruction period and names it the first Progressive period in American history. Students will analyze this source and its argument that Reconstruction was not a total failure, although the opportunity for true lasting change in America came and went quickly. Also of note for students will be the study of political violence during this period, particularly the rampaging terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan and the tacit endorsement of it by white southern politicians. Students will evaluate the presidency of Andrew Johnson, and relate how the views of the Johnson administration affected national policy, and relate this dynamic to the current situation in American politics with the Trump administration.

13th. Directed by Ava DuVernay. Released October 7, 2016. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2016.

This amazing work of documentary film-making explores the legacy of Reconstruction in the United States and relates the establishment of the 13th amendment as essential to understanding the current situation of African-Americans in the United States prison system. Also explored are the current rise in racism and bigotry surrounding the rise of the Trump administration, which DuVernay excellently parallels to anti-black

violence in the early 20th century following the end of Reconstruction. Students will be exposed to the current issues surrounding race and class in the United States, and how they are ultimately rooted in the failures of Reconstruction to create a truly equal playing field for all Americans. Also explored will be the effects of 'Black codes', Jim Crow laws, and segregation, all of which stemmed from the Republican failure (or disinterest) to put in the effort required for Reconstruction to be a success.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Articles of Confederation.

The United States Constitution.

Hickey, Donald R., ed. *The War of 1812: Writings From America's Second War of Independence.* New York: The Library of America, 2013.

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- Rockman, Seth. "The Future of Civil War Era Studies: Slavery and Capitalism."
- Rodgers, Daniel T. "Republicanism: the Career of a Concept." *The Journal of American History* 79, No.1 (June, 1992): 11-38.
- Shalhope, Robert E. "Republicanism and Early American Historiography." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, No. 2 (April, 1982): 334-56.
- Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. New York: Viking, 2001.
- Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife's Tale: the Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Watson, Harry L. *Liberty and Power: the Politics of Jacksonian America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1990.

Popular Media

- The Civil War: a Film by Ken Burns*. Directed by Ken Burns. Aired September 23, 1990. Arlington, VA: PBS Home Video, 1990.
- The Crucible*. Directed by Nicholas Hytner. 1996. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 1996. DVD, 123 minutes.
- 13th. Directed by Ava DuVernay. Released October 7, 2016. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2016.