

FALL 2018 – ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Prof. James Oakes
Tuesday, 2-4 p.m.

Course Description: What was the Civil War all about? The answer lies largely in its origins. This course examines various aspects of what historians call “The Crisis of the 1850s,” the crucial decade that ended in the secession of eleven slave states from the Union? Why did they secede? And why didn’t Lincoln let them? The readings focus on two aspects off the crisis. We will first review conflicting interpretations of the origins of the Civil War, after which we will focus on specific aspects of the crisis of the 1850, in particular the cascading series of events that led to war: the War with Mexico, the “Compromise” of 1850, the fugitive slave crisis, the struggle over Kansas, the Dred Scot decision, the collapse of the Whig Party, the rise of the Republican Party, the catastrophic fissure of the Democratic party, and finally the election of Lincoln and the secession crisis. No one methodology can adequately account for the origins of the Civil War—it requires economic, social, political, and cultural history.

Course Requirements: Students will be required to produce a final paper, 15-20 pages, on the Crisis of the 1850s. The paper should be written as a lecture for undergraduates explaining the origins of the Civil War. It should not be “academic” or purely historiographical, though it can introduce students to conflicting interpretations. Footnotes are unnecessary but you should demonstrate, however implicitly, your familiarity with the course readings.

The final course grade will be based on the final paper, but the paper grade will be raised or lowered based on your participation in weekly discussions.

READINGS

August 28 David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*

September 4 **Civil War “Revisionism” vs. “Fundamentalism”**

- Avery Craven, *The Repressible Conflict*
- Dwight Dumond, *The Antislavery Origins of the Civil War*

September 11 **no class scheduled**

September 18 **no class scheduled**

September 25 **Neo-Revisionism vs. Fundamentalism**

- Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*
- Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders*, pp. 1-230.

October 2 **Economic Origins**

- Gavin Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development*
- David Meyer, *The Roots of American Industrialization*

October 9 **Cultural Origins**

- David Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America*

October 16 **Antislavery**

- Patrick Rael, *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States*

October 23 **The Slave Power**

- Leonard Richards, *The Slave Power*
- Corey Brooks, *Liberty Power*

October 30 **The Fugitive Slave Crisis**

- Richard Blackett, *The Captive's Quest for Freedom: Fugitive Slaves, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, and the Politics of Slavery.*

November 6 **Popular Sovereignty**

- Christopher Childers, *The Failure of Popular Sovereignty*

November 13 **Proslavery Expansionism**

- Robert May, *Slavery, Race and Conquest in the Tropics*

November 20 The Crisis, part 1

- Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink*

November 27 The Crisis, part 2

- Joanne Freeman, *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War*

December 4 Lincoln

- William W. Freehling, *Becoming Lincoln*

December 11 Secession

- William Link, *The Roots of Secession*