History of American History I: To 1865  Fall 2022  Thurs. 2-4pm GC
Prof. David Waldstreicher  dwaldstreicher@gc.cuny.edu
Office hours (Rm. 5111.09): Thursday 1:00-2:00 and by appointment.

This course introduces Ph.D. students to the historiography of the U.S. through the Civil War and prepares students for the First Written Examination or an outside field in US history. We will take deep dives into classic and recent work – from monographs to syntheses, from exploratory essays to historiographical reviews -- and examine how historians absorb, reflect, and refract continuing opportunities and dilemmas in the field. This field, by now, has a fairly long history, one that, once we pay attention to it, actually helps us make sense of how current and emerging concerns – political, institutional, intellectual, broadly public -- shape research and teaching now.

Does the “early” part of U.S. history carry special burdens and opportunities? One of our concerns will be periodization. In what ways should the colonial period be considered a prologue to U.S. history, or its deep grounding? How much do origins matter, and which ones do? What is the status of the Revolution and the Civil War, and the political history that drives or used to drive the narrative of U.S. history between these events, amid transformations otherwise seen as social, cultural, economic? Is there a coherence or continuity to the “first half” of U.S. history beyond the particularities of the colonial, revolutionary, early republic, antebellum/Civil War periods? What explanations can cut across centuries and thus can organize the larger story? When, and what, does a division of history into periods or eras help or hinder?

Another important theme of the course is space, within and beyond the places that became the United States during this period and afterwards. Is U.S. history the story of provinces or regions becoming a nation-state, or of sections of regions converging or diverging as well as expanding? What weight should be given to the local in a moment when historians are reassessing the international or even global nature of early modern as well as modern history? Should atlantic or continental approaches replace or change the narrative of national development? Can empire or empires provide a more compelling and honest as well as capacious history while allowing for the different experiences of different groups in different places?

Recent U.S. historiography is deeply concerned with diversity but also with oppression. Can we do better than turning a narrative of national progress that othered early America as primitive or as prelapsarian into one of illiberal consensus and continuity? To put it differently: what, if anything, was really revolutionary? If one of the achievements of the literature of US history has been its debunking, critical, myth-breaking ventures, are there limits to those strategies and genres, and where might they be found or transcended? One of the presumptions of this course is that some of the most valuable and lasting work that historians can do is when they cross subfields and subgenres to explain relationships between events and groups. We can’t do justice to every subfield, but we can attend to the kind of work that earns the special appreciation of historians, and surprisingly often a wider public, for originality, elegance, problem-solving, and generative scholarship.

Written Assignments:
The books and articles we shall discuss include narrative histories, classics that are still in print after decades, recent monographs born as dissertations, syntheses, analytical and historiographical essays. An important part of what we will be doing is attempting to read these in light of each other. The reading is extensive, in recognition of the five credits this course carries and its status as a prerequisite for the first qualifying examination. Our goal is to prepare for the exam, of course, but also to prepare to teach this period at the college level and to lay a substantial foundation for future research and teaching in any specialty and period of U.S. history.

Instead of a seminar paper or historiographical essay, your written work for the course will consist of weekly (2-3 page) responses to the readings. I will provide prompting questions that will help us work toward the kinds of writing and analysis the faculty will expect for the examination. These informal short essays will be due Wednesdays by 10:00pm via email and may serve as jumping off points for our Thursday seminar discussions.

Schedule of readings/discussions
Books with a + are available electronically via the GC library, or (with a *) at NYPL. Students are encouraged also to use the CUNY system to borrow copies from other libraries. All articles can be downloaded from the library’s subscription databases or when necessary will be supplied via email. There will be physical library reserves for some books and a linked e-reserves site for others. The newest books have been ordered and will become available in either hardcopy on reserve, on e-reserve, or both.
1. Thurs. Aug. 25 Introduction: History, Historians, the Nation, and the Present

Jill Lepore, *This America: The Case for the Nation* (2019), ch. 1, 14, 15, 16 (pp. 15-20, 114-38).
Annette Gordon-Reed, *On Juneteenth* (2021), Preface, ch. 1, 3, Coda (pp. 11-14, 17-29, 57-73, 139-41)


Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men who Made It* (1948), intro & ch. 1-6 (v-163 in older eds.)


Benjamin L. Carp, “Edmund S. Morgan and the Urgency of Good Leadership,” *Reviews in American History*
44 (Mar. 2016), pp. 1-18
(Mar. 2018), 1-17.
War,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 74 (2017), 401-436.


+Andrew Lipman, *The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast* (2015)
Allan Greer, “Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America,” *American Historical Review* 112 (2012),
365-86

5. 9/22 Re-organizing Early America: Empires, War, and Governance

+Richter, *Before the Revolution*, ch. 10-12, pp. 241-323
Early American Studies 1 (Spring 2003), 1–27.

No class 9/29 – CUNY scheduling shift (Thursday is a Monday)
6. Oct. 6 Re-OrganiZing and Particular Places: Imperial New York Stories

→ Read two of the following:

D. Richter, Before the Revolution, ch. 13-16 and Epilogue, pp. 327-423.


→ Read either Woody Holton, Liberty is Sweet: The Hidden History of the American Revolution (2021) or Alan Taylor, American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804 (2016)


8. Oct. 20 Politics, Constitutions, and States

Max Ellen Lewis, Perfecting the Union: National and State Authority in the U. S. Constitution (2021)


9. Oct. 27 Early Republic Democracy, Nationalism, Political Culture and Periodizations


10. Nov. 3 Slavery Revisited, Capitalism Revisited, Both Refinanced, History Embodied


Stephanie Jones-Rogers, “[S]he could … spare one ample breast for the profit of her owner”: white mothers and enslaved wet nurses’ invisible labor in American slave markets,” Slavery & Abolition 38 (2017), 337–355.


11. Nov. 10 Women and Men, Sex (or Not), and Reform
Kara M. French, Against Sex: Identities of Sexual Restraint in Early America (2021)

12. **Nov. 17 Political Economies, Cultural Politics, and Paths to Civil War**

John Suval, Dangerous Ground: Squatters, Statesmen, and the Antebellum Rupture of American Democracy (2022)

⇒No class Nov. 24, Thanksgiving holiday

13. **Dec. 1 Revising What the Civil War Was About (Again)? Revolutions, Transnational Contexts, Big Pictures**

James Oakes, Crooked Path to Abolition, 134-204.
Andrew Lang, A Contest of Civilizations, Part II, 127-319.
Kevin M. Gannon, “The Civil War as a Settler-Colonial Revolution,” Age of Revolutions blog, Jan. 18, 2016

Dec. 8 **New Syntheses, Not-So-New Themes, and Old Crises: What Has Changed in U.S. Historiography?**

⇒Read and compare two or more of the following [pre-1865 sections]
Nancy Isenberg, White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America (2016)
Jill Lepore, These Truths: A History of the United States (2019)
Pekka Hamaleinen, Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America (2022)