American History to 1877
Major Problems of Interpretation

**Description:** This course provides an introduction to the study of American history from the eve of European colonization through the close of Reconstruction. Rather than try to address all the significant historical developments that took place across four centuries, we focus on key topics which hold special interest for scholars and which figure centrally in debates over the meaning of the American experience for various groups. Topics include: initial cultural encounters between natives and settlers; origins of American slavery and racism; causes and consequences of the American Revolution; the growth of capitalism and democracy in the early republic; divisions in the antebellum North and South; and causes and consequences of the Civil War.

By sacrificing "coverage" for in-depth analysis, we are able to pay particular attention to how historians do history and construct interpretations from various kinds of evidence. We also consider why historians sometimes disagree about how to read and evaluate the existing sources. Historical interpretation is "contested terrain." Yet it is not simply a matter of opinion where all points of view are equally valid. Historical interpretation involves creative investigation, careful documentation, critical thinking, and logical analysis.

**Format:** There are two kinds of readings for the class: the readings for a particular day and the "Weekly Readings." I will expect you to complete the "Weekly Readings" for a given week by Monday of that week.

Most weeks there will be a combination of lectures and discussions. The discussions will focus on the assigned readings, which should be done on time. During the days for discussion, please come to class prepared to discuss one question/topic from the reading(s). I may email you a list of questions to consider or I may ask you to generate your own.

**Attendance:** Note that your attendance at all sessions is required and that your participation is expected.

**Evaluation:** Students will be evaluated on the basis of two exams (20% each), one 10-12 page analytical project (45%), and class participation (15%). Late papers will be penalized 5 percent per day. **You must complete all assignments for the class.** The instructor reserves the right to exercise some discretion in assigning final grades.

**Honor Code:** All student work is governed by the [Oberlin College Honor Code](#). If you have a question about how the Code applies to a particular assignment, you should raise that question with the professor in advance of the due date.
**Purchases:** The following six books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore. They are also available on Reserve at the library.


**Readings available in JSTOR and ERES:** To find articles in JSTOR, go to the library website, click Find Articles & Journals, click JSTOR, and search by article title or name. To find articles on ERES, go to Blackboard, search under HIST103. Use HIST103 as the password.

**Schedule of Classes and Assignments**

**WEEK 1**

Wed., Sept. 5
Introduction to the Course
Choosing Regions

Fri., Sept. 7
Presentation on library resources

**WEEK 2**

Mon., Sept. 10
Natives

Wed., Sept. 12
Discussion
The Indians’ Economy


Friday, Sept. 14
Discussion
The Spanish Conquest

**JSTOR:** Inga Clendinnen, Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty: Cortes and the Conquest of Mexico, Representations 33 (Winter, 1991), 65-100.

Weekly Readings

AP, Chapter 1, “Ancient America and Africa,” 3-23.
AP, Chapter 2, “Europeans and Africans Reach the Americas,” 24-49.

**WEEK 3**
Mon., Sept. 17
Colonial experiments

Wed, Sept., 19
Discussion
Origins of the Slave Labor System in early VA

Fri, Sept. 21
New England comparisons

Weekly Readings
AP, Chapter 3, "Colonizing a Continent in the Seventeenth Century," 50-89.

WEEK 4

Mon, Sept. 24
Discussion
Using historical evidence
Book 1: Start Robert Cole’s World, 1-76.

Wed, Sept. 26
Discussion
Social dynamics in early Maryland
Book 1 (cont’d): Finish Robert Cole’s World, 77-166.

Fri, Sept. 28
***Group presentations***

Week 5

Mon, Oct. 1
***Group presentations continued (if needed)***
Slave Systems

Wed, Oct. 3
Discussion
Explaining the Colonial Economy

ERES: John J. McCusker & Russell R. Menard, “The Economy of British America, 1607-1789, pp. 5-34.

Fri, Oct 5
Awakenings

Weekly Readings

WEEK 6
I recognize this is a tremendous amount of reading. I will specify the most critical chapters to read for each day.

Mon, Oct. 8
Discussion
Adaptations
**Book 2: Into the American Woods, 1-127.**

Wed, Oct. 10
Discussion
Adaptations
**Book 2 (cont’d): Into the American Woods, 128-224.**

Fri, Oct. 12
**Book 2 (cont’d ) Finish Into the American Woods, 225-315**

**WEEK 7**

Mon, Oct. 15
**************************In-Class Exam**************************

Wed, Oct. 17
Imperial Crisis

Fri, Oct. 19
Discussion
Rebels and Loyalists
**ERES:** Thomas Paine, Chapter 1 of Common Sense

Weekly Readings
**AP:** Chapter 5, “The Strains of Empire,” 126-151. (Recommended)
**AP:** Chapter 6, “A People in Revolution,” 152-187.

**************************Fall Recess**************************

**WEEK 8**

Mon, Oct. 29
Discussion
Patriot motivations
**Book 3: The Minutemen and Their World, 1-108.**

** Annotated Bibliography Due **

Wed, Oct. 31
Discussion
**Book 3 (cont’d): Finish The Minutemen and Their World, 109-191.**

Fri, Nov. 2
Discussion
The Elusive Republic
**ERES:** Intro to Inheriting the Revolution by Joyce Applebee
Weekly Readings:
AP, Chapter 7, “Consolidating the Republic,” 188-217. (Recommended)
AP, Chapter 8, “Creating a Nation,” 218-245. (Recommended)
AP, Chapter 9, “Society and Politics in the Early Republic,” 246-279. (Recommended)

WEEK 9

Mon, Nov. 5
Discussion
Launching the American Industrial Revolution
**Book 4: The Artificial River, 1-78.**

Wed, Nov. 7
Discussion
**Book 4 (cont’d):** Finish The Artificial River, 79-171.

Fri, Nov. 9
Discussion
Reform Movements
Documents from Early Oberlin

*Covenant of the Oberlin Colony* [on WWW]

*Prospectus for the Oberlin Collegiate Institute* [on WWW]

*Constitution of the Oberlin Anti-Slavery Society* [on WWW]

Weekly Readings:
AP, Chapter 10, “Currents of Change in the Northeast and the Old Northwest” 280-308.

Week 10

I recognize this is a tremendous amount of reading. I will specify the most critical chapters to read for each day.

Mon, Nov. 12
Discussion
The Black Experience
**Book 5: Black Masters, 1-106**

Wed, Nov. 14
Discussion
**Book 5 (cont’d):** Continue Black Masters, 107-194

Fri, Nov. 16
Discussion
**Book 5 (cont’d):** Finish Black Masters, 195-338
** Abstract of Paper Due **

Weekly Readings
AP, Chapter 11, “Slavery and the Old South” 309-338. (Recommended)
AP, Chapter 12, “Shaping America in the Antebellum Age,” 339-373. (Recommended)

**Week 11**

Mon, Nov. 19
Discussion
Manifest Destiny & Manifest Domestcity


Wed, Nov. 21
Discussion
Irrepressible Conflict?

Weekly Readings
AP, Chapter 13, “Moving West,” 374-404.

**WEEK 12**

Mon, Nov. 26
Discussion
Divisions between North and South


Wed, Nov. 28
Discussion
Divisions between North and South


***Take-home exam handed out***
Spend no more than two hours on the exam.

Fri, Nov. 30
Reconstruction & Retreat

***Turn in take-home exam at the beginning of class***

Weekly Readings
AP, Chapter 14, “The Union in Peril,” 405-434.
AP, Chapter 15, “The Union Severed,” 435-465. (Recommended)
AP, Chapter 16, “The Union Reconstructed,” 466-494.

**WEEK 13**

Mon, Dec. 3
Presentations
Wed, Dec. 5
Presentations

Fri, Dec. 7
Presentations

**WEEK 14**
Mon, Dec. 10
Presentations

Wed, Dec 12
Presentations

**Project (& dates) for History 103**
During the semester, you will work on a topic in American history. You may choose any subject of your choice. Options include but are not restricted to crops such as cotton, rice, or tobacco; social institutions such as the school, church, or marriage; categories of people such as immigrants, plantation owners, abolitionists, slaves, Quakers, Puritans, loyalists, indentured servants, or physicians.

You must use at least six sources. You may use any of the assigned readings for the class.

**Question:** How has my topic affected/transformed/influenced the region I am studying? How has it shaped the evolution of American society?

**First Day of Class**

You will choose from one of the following five regions:

1. Chesapeake (VA, MD, northern NC, and perhaps southern Delaware)
2. New England (MA, and its offshoot colonies CT, RI, NH, and Nova Scotia)
3. Caribbean (Barbados, Leeward Island colonies of Antigua, Montserrat, Nevis, and St. Christopher, and Jamaica)
4. Middle Colonies (NY, NJ, PA, and northern Delaware)
5. Lower South (SC, southern NC, and GA)

**Between September 5 and September 27**

You will choose a topic and a time period within your region.

**Note:** You may not work on a single person.

You may not have time to meet your region members in class. You are responsible for arranging other meetings outside of class to decide how your region can best present itself as a whole. You may choose to organize yourself chronologically, thematically, or in any other manner.

I will be happy to set up each regional group in Blackboard so you can communicate readily.

**Friday, September 28**
You will choose a title that unites your group, and prepare a 5-minute presentation of what you hope to accomplish as a group. You may want to create an outline to distribute to the class as you speak.

**Monday, October 15**

In-Class Exam  
(20% of the grade)

**Friday, October 29**

Turn in an annotated bibliography of the sources you intend to use for your paper. They may be a mix of articles and books. In a short paragraph, you should explain what each text is about and how it will help you develop your topic.  
(5% of the grade)

**Friday, November 16**

Turn in a 1-2 page abstract of your paper. You will state your argument, explain your use of the relevant texts, and describe how your work fits into the larger argument being made by your regional group.  
(5% of the grade)

**Wednesday, November 28**

Take-home exam handed out. Allocate no more than two hours to the exam.

**Friday, November 30**

Turn in your take-home exam at the beginning of class.  
(20% of your grade)

**Beginning on Monday, December 3**

You will collaboratively present your findings about the region. Each group will be assigned to respond critically to the presentation of another group.  
(5% of your grade)

**Friday, December 14**

Turn in a one to two-page response of another region’s presentation. You will assign a grade to the presentation.  
(5% of your grade)

**Monday, 11 a.m., December 17**

Turn in your final paper. Please staple your bibliography and abstract with the paper. (25%)