Revolutionary America and the Early Republic

Paul Revere’s engraving of the Boston Massacre (1770)

[Note: The official, up-to-date version of the course syllabus is posted on Blackboard.]

This course explores the creation of the United States and the complex dynamics that shaped American society and culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We will begin by examining the British colonies in mainland North America at approximately 1750, and we will proceed to explore in depth the causes and consequences of the American Revolution. Historians have long debated the Revolution's purpose and significance, and we will look at different sides of this enduring controversy. In the process, we will consider what the War for Independence meant to Native Americans and African Americans as well as to Euro-American men and women. We will also analyze the patriots’ efforts to establish a republican form of government on a firm foundation. In particular, we will weigh the question of whether the ratification of the federal Constitution represented the fulfillment, repudiation, or modification of the original Spirit of ’76. We will also consider whether the new federal
system worked the way its framers intended, paying special attention to why political controversies in the early Republic proved so vicious. Our focus during the closing weeks of the course will be on the inter-related processes of democratization, capitalist development, and the expansion of slavery during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. We will conclude with a consideration of how much the American social order and American cultural norms had changed between 1750 and 1820, the nation's formative era.

Over the course of the semester, students will undertake individual projects involving intensive research in primary source materials. Students will make oral presentations of their findings to the class. Research papers will be due near the semester's end. The goal of this project is to empower students to do history, not just to read it.

**Format:** The class will meet three times each week—-for one hour on Monday, for one hour on Wednesday, and for up to two hours on Friday. As indicated below, some class sessions will be devoted to lectures, others to discussions, and yet others to viewing videos. The discussions will focus on the reading assignments, and in preparation for these sessions, students will be expected to post preliminary comments on Blackboard.

**Requirements:** In addition to doing the assigned reading and regularly posting comments on Blackboard, students will write two position papers (3-4 pages each); submit a prospectus for the research project (1-2 pages); make an oral presentation of research findings; and compose a research paper (9-10 pages). The due dates are given in the schedule of assignments below. Participation in class discussions is expected, and students should notify the instructor of the reasons for absences from discussion sessions.

**Grades:** Final grades will be based on the following formula: position papers, 15% each; research paper, 40%; and class participation (including Blackboard postings, in-class discussions, and oral presentation), 30%. The professor reserves the right to exercise some discretion in determining final grades.

**Honor Code:** All course work is governed by Oberlin's Honor Code. If you have a question about how the Honor Code applies to a particular assignment, you should ask the professor in advance of the due date.

**Writing Certification:** Students who wish to be considered for certification of writing proficiency should notify the instructor at the beginning of the semester.

**Purchases:** The following books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore and should be purchased.

Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins* of the American Revolution
Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion*
Jack P. Greene, ed., *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789*
James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army, 2d ed.*
Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*
Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*
Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*
Schedule of Classes:

Mon., Feb. 5  
**Introduction**

Wed., Feb. 7  
**Lecture: The Making of the British Empire**

Fri., Feb. 9  
**Discussion: The Social Order of Colonial America**
* Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, ix-x, 3-168
* Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, xv-xxix, 1-43

Mon., Feb. 12  
**Lecture: Origins of the Imperial Crisis**

Wed., Feb. 14  
**Discussion: The Anglo-American Debate over the Stamp Act**
* Greene, *Colonies to Nation*, 45-93

Fri., Feb. 16  
**Discussion: The Role of the Crowd**
* Nash, *Unknown American Revolution*, 44-59

Mon., Feb. 19  
**Lecture: Escalation of the Imperial Crisis**

**First position paper due**

Wed., Feb. 21  
**Lecture: Resources for Research Project**

Fri., Feb. 23  
**Discussion: Ideological Interpretation of the American Revolution**
* Greene, *Colonies to Nation*, 122-33, 213-220

Mon., Feb. 26  
**Lecture: Divisions within the Colonies**

Wed., Feb. 28  
**Lecture: Continental Mobilization and War**

Fri., Mar. 2  
**Discussion: Social Interpretations of the American Revolution**
* Nash, *Unknown American Revolution*, 59-189
Mon., Mar. 5  Lecture: Secession from the British Empire

Prospectus due

Wed., Mar. 7  Discussion: The Case for Independence
   * Greene, Colonies to Nation, 270-301
   * Nash, Unknown American Revolution, 189-216
   * David Armitage, "The Declaration of Independence and
     International Law," William and Mary Quarterly 3rd ser., 59 (Jan.
     2002): 39-64 [in History Cooperative]

Fri., Mar. 9  Discussion: The Military Struggle (I)
   * Martin and Lender, A Respectable Army, 1-99
   * Thomas Paine, The American Crisis, No. I (1776) [online]

Mon., Mar. 12 Lecture: The Home Front

   * Martin and Lender, A Respectable Army, 100-180

Fri., Mar. 16 Discussion: How Radical Was the American Revolution?
   * Wood, Radicalism of the American Revolution, 169-243
   * Nash, Unknown American Revolution, 306-365

Mon., Mar. 19 Lecture: Constituting State Governments

Wed., Mar. 21 Lecture: The Crisis of the 1780s

Fri., Mar. 23 No class
   Second position paper due

Spring Break

Mon., Apr. 2 Lecture: The Challenge of Nation-Building

Wed., Apr. 4 Discussion: Drafting the Federal Constitution
   * Greene, Colonies to Nation, 514-556

Fri., Apr. 6 Discussion: Debating the Federal Constitution
   * Greene, Colonies to Nation, 557-581

Mon., Apr. 9 Lecture: The Federalist Establishment and Its Enemies

Wed., Apr. 11 Lecture: The Revolution of 1800

Fri., Apr. 13 Discussion: Making Sense of Thomas Jefferson
* Thomas Jefferson, "Draft of a Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 1779"
* Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*
  o Query 14 ("Laws")
  o Query 17 ("Religion")
  o Query 18 ("Manners")
  o Query 19 ("Manufactures")
* Letter of Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Sept. 6, 1789
* Letter of Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, Sept. 9, 1792
* "Draft of the Kentucky Resolutions," Oct. 1798
* Thomas Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1801

Mon., Apr. 16  
No class

Wed., Apr. 18  
Lecture: Transformation of the North, 1790-1820

Fri., Apr. 20  
Discussion: Gender and Family in Post-Revolutionary New England
  * Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale*, 3-161, 204-85

Mon., Apr. 23  
Lecture: Transformation of the South, 1790-1820

Wed., Apr. 25  
Discussion: Slavery and Slave Resistance in Jeffersonian Virginia
  * Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion*, ix-xiii, 3-178

Fri., Apr. 27  
Video: *Jefferson’s Blood*

Mon., Apr. 30  
Student Presentations

Wed., May 2  
Student Presentations

Fri., May 4  
Student Presentations

Mon., May 7  
Student Presentations
  Research paper due

Wed., May 9  
Lecture: Nationalism, Sectionalism, and American Identity

Fri., May 11  
Discussion: Historical Significance of the American Revolution