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FRONTIERS & BORDERLANDS IN THE ERA OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

S06

W 1:30–4:20

Eighteenth-century North America was a world of frontiers and borderlands: places of encounter, exchange, and conflict between Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans. Colonial empires and Indigenous powers competed for survival and supremacy, while borderland peoples created and contested new ideas about race, nation, land, and liberty. This borderlands world was remade beginning in 1776, when American Patriots seceded from an empire that they believed had grown corrupt, tyrannical, and threatening to the liberties they treasured. Waging a war for independence that embroiled neighboring Native powers and distant European ones, they created a republic premised on the idea of limited government. Although Thomas Jefferson dubbed this fragile seaboard confederation an “empire of liberty” as early as 1780, it struggled for decades even to project power over the Appalachian crest. And yet by 1848—within the span of a single lifetime—the new nation had transformed itself, astoundingly, into an imperial juggernaut. The U.S. had refined its tools for dispossessing Native peoples and expanding political economies of white landownership and black slavery. It had conquered vast borderlands, claimed the Pacific as its western boundary, and was setting its imperial sights upon regions and peoples much further afield.

This course investigates that story. What did the American Revolution mean for the many peoples of North America? How did the emergence of an imperial republic affect borderlands people, politics, and cultures? What was the relationship between frontier conflict, national expansion, and the idea of American liberty? And how did Natives, the enslaved, and competing colonial powers confront and resist the new nation’s imperial ambitions?

But like all sections of History 400, this course is not a traditional seminar. While it will explore major themes in the history of early North American borderlands, its primary purpose is to help you develop the skills and methods necessary for “doing” history yourself. Over the course of the semester, you will craft a 30-35 page Junior Paper on a question of your own devising — grounded in original primary-source research, and in conversation with the scholarly literature. The course is structured around a series of building-block assignments designed to guide you through the stages of that process, including choosing a topic, asking a good historical question, finding and analyzing primary sources, building an overarching historical argument, connecting your interpretation to previous work

by other historians, and writing persuasively and elegantly.

Students are encouraged to write a Junior Paper on any aspect of the history of frontiers, borderlands, imperialism, or national expansion in North America, from roughly 1750 to 1850. During the first half of the semester, weekly readings will introduce you to a wide array of historical approaches and methodologies, including borderlands studies and Native American history, as well as the histories of politics, gender, capitalism, war, material culture, and law. During the second half of the course, you'll gain experience presenting and revising your research, as well as giving constructive feedback to your peers.