The Founders and Their World: histories (and historians) of the new republic

History 441
Spring 2014

Thursdays 1:30-4:20
Shelby Cullum Davis Center Seminar Room (G-14, Dickinson Hall)

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Office hours: Mondays, 1:30-3:30 (use WASS to schedule)
Overview:
This seminar allows students to dig deeply into American history during the early national period, with a particular focus on the period between 1789 and 1808. This is a vibrant and crucial timespan, one in which the ideals of the recent Revolution met the realities of statecraft, when the social institutions of British America were strained through a new national American idiom, and when many of the issues that would prove vital to subsequent American history first cropped up. To explore it, we will read and talk about a diverse array of issues, ranging from the formation of the rules governing debate in the first Congress and George Washington’s social schedule to flaps over Alexander Hamilton’s Whiskey tax and the John Jay’s Anglo-American treaty. As we go, we will assess developments such as the American reaction to the French and Haitian Revolutions and the machinations of foreign diplomats and the outbreak of a little-known naval war in the Caribbean. Through it all, we will witness the birth of partisan politics and the so-called “first party system,” figuring out the divisions and developments and marking its workings in Presidential and Congressional elections. In sum, we will steep ourselves in the political culture of the new nation.

These investigations will stream from reading and discussions about “the founders,” that collection of men (and sometimes a few women too) who most easily come to mind when thinking about early national politics. Besides using the records left by and about people such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to get at the dynamism of the period, we will also use them as jumping off places to get at the lives and ideas of people who are less prominent. Similarly, while we will look closely at this moment in American politics, we will also think a lot about cultural and intellectual developments. By making these moves, and, crucially, by thinking about how we make them, the course will teeter constantly between its express content and meta-lessons about methodology and history as a discipline. As such, the seminar is designed to be helpful for students thinking about independent work in History.
Requirements & Evaluations:
This is a seminar. Weekly preparation and in-class participation are vital components of the learning that will be taking place. In addition to the assigned reading, students will perform short, focused research assignments for each of the first nine weeks of the course. These assignments build on the topic at hand, and are designed to give students practice with the different tools, methods, and sources that historians use. The written portion of these assignments (typically 1-2 pages in length) will be due the morning before the seminar meets each week. As they do the work, students are expected to share their experiences, questions, and problems on Blackboard’s Piazza, making that a forum for further discussion.

Over the term, students will develop a particular theme or interest for further research in consultation with the instructor. (Note: as that theme develops, many of the weekly research assignments can be tailored to follow and explore it.) The final project for the course will be a presentation of the fruits of this research: an exhibit, complete with textual explanations for its various components that the students have collected, analyzed, and interpreted, as well as a short general overview. This project will be due on Deans’ Date.

There will be a take-home final exam in which students are presented with a series of documents and are asked to make sense of them in the context of the course.

The course components are weighted as follows:

- in-class/forum participation: 20%
- weekly research assignments (top 8 grades of 9): 30%
- research exhibit: 25%
- final exam: 25%

Course Materials:
NB Those of the assigned readings marked “*” below are accessible on the course Blackboard site, either through e-reserves or through links to websites and PDFs there.

The following books are available for purchase:


Weekly Schedule & Assignments

**Week One – Asking Questions**

[No assigned reading.]

For next time: Use the writings of another prominent figure to pursue one of our queries from class. (Be ready to present your findings. Bring in one document that you used.)

**Week Two – Gathering Evidence**

*Field trip to the Jefferson Papers offices, C-floor, Firestone Library*

Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 3-47.


For next time: Select a letter written to one of our subjects between 1789 and 1792 by a correspondent you do not know much, if anything, about. Perform a close read of the document. [c500-750 words]

**Week Three – Unfolding Events, circa 1789-1792**

Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 48-80.


For next time: Locate a debate among our subjects (the issue need not be ‘huge’ or influential). Use our sources to define an area of agreement or disagreement. Use proper citations. [c750 words]

**Week Four – Tracing Debates, circa 1793-1795**

Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 81-119.


For next time: Pick an individual serving in one of the first three Congresses and trace his legislative career, either over a period of time across those Congresses or over a particular issue or issues. [c750 words]

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Week Five – Following News, circa 1791-1795

Field trip to microfilm room, Firestone Library.

Ulrich, Midwife’s Tale, 36-71.

* Seth Cotlar, Tom Paine’s America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic (Charlottesville, 2011) 13-49.


For next time: Identify an event that resonated in American politics between 1792 and 1794. Track its treatment in a single locale or newspaper. [c750-1000 words]

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Week Six – Unpacking Discourse, circa 1792-1796

Field trip to Rare Books/Special Collections, Firestone Library.

Ellis, Founding Brothers, 120-161.


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Thomas Paine’s house, Bordentown, NJ

*For next time:* Identify, define, and contextualize an epithet used in popular political discourse in this period. [c500 words]

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**SPRING BREAK**

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**Week Seven – Parsing Passions, circa 1796-1799**

Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, 162-205.


*For next time:* Find evidence of a celebration in which a group of people took part. What took place? Who were they? What brought them together? What does it mean? How might we use it? [c500 words]

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**Week Eight – Finding Lives**

* Field trip to Rare Books/Special Collections, Firestone Library.


*For next time:* Identify and define a condition, motive, or goal that prompted slaves or servants to run away from their masters. [c750-1000 words]

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**Week Nine – Hearing Voices**


**Week Ten – Evaluating Change (part one), circa 1800-1804**

*Field trip to the Jefferson Papers offices, C-floor, Firestone Library.*


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**Week Eleven – Evaluating Change (part two)**


* Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, 2000) 4-47.

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**Week Twelve – Looking Backwards**

*Field trip to Rare Books/Special Collections, Firestone Library.*


Department of History Grading Practices: Thesis, Papers, and Exams

An A or A- thesis, paper, or exam is one that is good enough to be read aloud in a class. It is clearly written and well-organized. It demonstrates that the writer has conducted a close and critical reading of texts, grappled with the issues raised in the course, synthesized the readings, discussions, and lectures, and formulated a perceptive, compelling, independent argument. The argument shows intellectual originality and creativity, is sensitive to historical context, is supported by a well-chosen variety of specific examples, and, in the case of a research paper, is built on a critical reading of primary material.

A B+ or B thesis, paper, or exam demonstrates many aspects of A-level work but falls short of it in either the organization and clarity of its writing, the formulation and presentation of its argument, or the quality of research. Some papers or exams in this category are solid works containing flashes of insight into many of the issues raised in the course. Others give evidence of independent thought, but the argument is not presented clearly or convincingly.

A B- thesis, paper, or exam demonstrates a command of course or research material and understanding of historical context but provides a less than thorough defense of the writer's independent argument because of weaknesses in writing, argument, organization, or use of evidence.

A C+, C, or C- thesis, paper, or exam offers little more than a mere a summary of ideas and information covered in the course, is insensitive to historical context, does not respond to the assignment adequately, suffers from frequent factual errors, unclear writing, poor organization, or inadequate primary research, or presents some combination of these problems.

Whereas the grading standards for written work between A and C- are concerned with the presentation of argument and evidence, a paper or exam that belongs to the D or F categories demonstrates inadequate command of course material.

A D thesis, paper, or exam demonstrates serious deficiencies or severe flaws in the student's command of course or research material.

An F thesis, paper, or exam demonstrates no competence in the course or research materials. It indicates a student's neglect or lack of effort in the course.

Precepts and Seminar

A student who receives an A for participation in discussion in precepts or seminars typically comes to every class with questions about the readings in mind. An 'A' discussant engages others about ideas, respects the opinions of others, and consistently elevates the level of discussion.

A student who receives a B for participation in discussion in precepts or seminars typically does not always come to class with questions about the readings in mind. A 'B' discussant waits passively for others to raise interesting issues. Some discussants in this category, while courteous and articulate, do not adequately listen to other participants or relate their comments to the direction of the conversation.

A student who receives a C for discussion in precepts or seminars attends regularly but typically is an infrequent or unwilling participant in discussion.

A student who fails to attend precepts or seminars regularly and adequately prepared for discussion risks the grade of D or F.
THE PROVIDENTIAL DETECTION