In 1776, American Patriots seceded from an empire that they believed had grown corrupt, tyrannical, and threatening to the liberties they treasured as Britons. In response, they created a republic premised on the idea of limited government, waging a war for independence that embroiled neighboring Native powers and distant European ones. Thomas Jefferson dubbed the new nation an “empire of liberty” as early as 1780. But for decades, this fragile seaboard confederation struggled even to project power over the Appalachian crest. It seemed doomed to replicate the problems of early modern European empires, which had fought and largely failed for 150 years to dominate the North American continent and its Indigenous inhabitants.

Yet by 1850—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 and why did the revolutionary republic become an empire? What was the relationship between the origins of U.S. imperialism 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? Our readings will bring a wide array of historical methods and approaches to bear on these questions, including borderlands studies, Native American history, and military history, as well as the histories of politics, capitalism, gender, and law.

Over the course of the semester you will craft a 25-30 page junior paper that addresses a question of your own devising, on some topic related to the contested emergence of an imperial American republic between (roughly) 1776 and 1848. Your paper will be based on original primary-source research and grounded in 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.

Sample readings:
Colin Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*
Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution*
Honor Sachs, *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the 18th-c. Kentucky Frontier*
Tiya Miles, *Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Bondage and Freedom in the City of the Straits*
Adam Jortner, *The Gods of Prophetstown: The Battle of Tippecanoe and the Holy War for the American Frontier*