HIS 701-02 Colloquium in American History before 1865

Professor: Dr. Greg O’Brien
Office: MHRA 2110

The historian is perforce a critic; the historian of history is a critic of critics . . . .
History is always written because history is always made. Historiography is always revised because history is constantly remade.

–Bert James Loewenberg,
American History in American Thought

Interpretations of events, ideas, forces, and persons in history change all the time. Historiography is the study of those differing interpretations by professional historians and their development over time. In this class you will be exposed to various schools of thought on major themes in American history through the Civil War. You must read a large amount of material in order to begin to master the literature on our selected topics. You will read the equivalent of roughly a book and a half each week, a normal load for history graduate students. I strongly urge you to take notes on your readings and familiarize yourself with the notes. As a matter of course, you will be exposed to “facts” and “content knowledge” in this course, but we are more interested in historical interpretations and how and why historical interpretations have changed over time.

When doing history, it helps to keep in mind that there are many different ways of determining how history happens. One of the key things to remember is that historians can disagree very much over why almost any event happened. You will not agree with all interpretations that you encounter in this course. However, you must know the major differing interpretations in order to understand historians and to become one yourself.

Grading: I expect that you will attend every class meeting, complete all readings, and participate in discussions. Your grade will be reduced for non-participation or absences.

You will complete six (6) analysis papers throughout the semester. Each paper of 5 or more pages will take that week’s readings and search for a crucial fact, process, question, idea, or approach to history that has caused historians to disagree about that topic. Analyze that particular item: why is it so critical to debate on this topic? Should it be the main focus of historians, or are there other facts, processes, questions, ideas, or approaches that could open up new understandings? Perhaps one of the week’s readings makes such a case? You choose the six topics/weeks to complete your papers – they are due the day we discuss that particular topic, though at least two of them must be turned in by Oct. 13.

At one meeting you will lead the discussion of that week’s readings. Prepare a one-page, single-spaced outline of key ideas and questions you will use to guide the discussion to turn in at the end of that class. It is obviously helpful if you are also completing an analysis paper for the same week.

Finally, there will be a take-home exam that will require you to discuss some of the key trends we identify over the course of the semester.
Grading summary:
6 Analysis Papers  10% each or 60% of your overall grade
Final Exam  20%
Class Participation  10%
Discussion Leadership  10%
100%

Required books (available in the UNCG campus bookstore):
Jon Butler, Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776 (Harvard, 2000)
Thomas Benjamin, ed., The Atlantic World in the Age of Empire (Houghton Mifflin, 2001)
Donald Fixico, Rethinking American Indian History (New Mexico, 1997)
Gwenda Morgan, The Debate on the American Revolution (Palgrave, 2008)
Linda Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (UNC, 1997)
Peter Kolchin, American Slavery, 1619-1877 (Hill & Wang, 2003)
Kenneth Stampp, Causes of the Civil War (Simon & Schuster, 1992)

SCHEDULE:
Nearly all of the articles listed in the schedule are available on the J-STOR or Project MUSE databases through the UNCG Library webpages or via the general internet. Others will be handed out by me.

August 25: Introduction

September 1: No class per university calendar - Labor Day

WEEK ONE (Sept. 8)

Colonial America - generally speaking

Book:  Jon Butler, Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776 (Harvard, 2000)

Articles:
WEEK TWO (Sept. 15)

Colonial America: an Atlantic World?


Articles:

WEEK THREE (Sept. 22)

American Indians, Ethnohistory, and the “New Indian History”

Book: Donald Fixico, *Rethinking American Indian History* (New Mexico, 1997)

Articles:

WEEK FOUR (Sept. 29)

Early American Environmental History


Articles:

WEEK FIVE (Oct. 6)

Religion in early America

Articles:
Philip Goff and Alan Heimert, “Revivals and Revolution: Historiographic Turns since Alan Heimert’s ‘Religion and the American Mind,’” *Church History* vol. 67, no. 4 (Dec. 1998), pp. 695-721. *JSTOR*

WEEK SIX (Oct. 13)

The American Revolution: Part One


Articles:

October 20: No class per university calendar

WEEK SEVEN (Oct. 27)

The Impact of the American Revolution


Articles:
WEEK EIGHT (Nov. 3)

Women in Early America: Revolutionary Changes?


Articles:
Kathleen Brown, “Brave New Worlds: Women’s and Gender History,” *William and Mary Quarterly* vol. 50, (1993) pp. 311-328. JSTOR
Kathleen Brown, “Beyond the Great Debates: Gender and Race in Early America,” *Reviews in American History* - Volume 26, Number 1, March 1998, pp. 96-123. Project MUSE

WEEK NINE (Nov. 10)

Historical Memory and Myth-Making in Early America


Articles:
Carla Mulford, “Figuring Benjamin Franklin in American Cultural Memory” *New England Quarterly* 72 (1999) 415-43. JSTOR

WEEKS TEN & ELEVEN (Nov. 24 – no class on Nov. 17)

Jacksonian America & the Market Revolution


Articles:
WEEK TWELVE (Dec. 1)

Antebellum Slavery: The Institution and Slave Life


Articles:

WEEK THIRTEEN (Dec. 8)

Causes of the Civil War


Article:

Final Exam due in my office or office mailbox by (or before) 12:00 p.m., NOON, Monday, December 15.