This course is designed to introduce you to the rudiments of early American history, from the European invasion of North America to the Civil War. But then you’ve already endured that introduction in grade school and high school—why repeat the experiment here? More information? No, you got enough back then, and now you’ve got more than you need via Wikipedia and Google, certainly more than I can supply. Less information? Probably, my role as a lecturer is to let you in on the arguments historians still have about moments we already take for granted as real events. Better information? Maybe, but only if you assume that objectivity is overrated, and that interpretations produce the facts.

In any event, in addition to our duties to the core curriculum, the goal of the course is to convince you that the difference between the past as such and the past we know through available narratives is unimportant—in other words, there’s no difference between what has happened in the past and what we say has happened. To put it more formally: history and historiography are the same thing because all we’ll ever know about the past is what we’ve claimed to know about it.

The four required books are classics in the making of American history (understood as historiography)—they’re not textbooks, so you can read them with pleasure. The recommended reading (marked with asterisks) is available online or as handouts in class.

The books, in the order we’ll use them, are:


Your grade will be derived from your performance on a midterm (35%), a final (35%)—both take-home exams—and two short writing assignments due along with the exams (15% each), which will ask you to address a question raised by the readings or the lectures. When we take up the readings in class, we’ll frame the discussion with these questions in mind.

Attendance in class is mandatory. You’ll sign a sheet attesting to your presence on every day the class meets; more than two unexcused absences will lower your grade by a full step. Do not come late because your tardiness will translate as absence on the attendance sheet and as rude offense in my old-fashioned view of things.
COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1 (9/2): Introduction to the Course

Week 2 (9/6-9): What is History?
READ: *Monumenta Historica Germanica

Week 3 (9/13-16) Meanings of Modernity
READ: Hofstader, Introduction
*William Shakespeare, “Romeo & Juliet,” and/or “King Lear,” and/or “Hamlet,”
and/or “Othello”
Questions: Are Romeo and Juliet the villains of the piece? What’s the difference
between Othello and Hamlet? What’s the matter with Cordelia?

Week 4 (9/20-23): A Country Created by Corporations, 1600-1700
READ: Hofstader, ch 2
Questions: Has America always been corporate? Why slavery?

Week 5 (9/27-30): Growth, Development, Crisis, 1660-1750
READ: Hofstader chs 1, 3
Questions: How do growth and crisis go together? Or do they? Was North America
already exceptional in the 17th and 18th centuries?

Week 6 (10/4-7): The Great Awakening 1735-55
READ: Hofstader, chs 6-7
Questions: What is the relation between religious revelation and political innovation?
Why is it rational to believe in God?

Week 7 (10/11-14): American Revolutions: Meanings and Movements
READ: Hofstader, ch 5; Fischer, all
Questions: Was the American Revolution a real revolution? What does revolution mean,
anyway? What is the nature of Washington’s crossing in 1776? Are the Declaration and
the Constitution moments on a continuum, or does the latter signify Thermidor?

MIDTERM and WRITING ASSIGNMENT due in class Tuesday, October 18

Week 8 (10/18-21): The New Nation, 1790-1821
Questions: Was Alexander Hamilton interested in manufacturing? Thomas Jefferson?
Who won the War of 1812?

Week 9 (10/25-28): The Transportation Revolution, 1820-1860
READ: Genovese, chs 1-4
Questions: Why do the railroads matter, not to mention canals? How did regional
development determine the nation’s destiny?
Week 10 (11/1-4): The Question of Slavery, 1830-1850
READ: Hofstadter, ch 4; Genovese, chs 5-9
Questions: How was North American slavery different? How did anti-slavery movements address it?

Week 11 (11/8-11): The Crisis of the 1850s
READ: Oakes, chs 1-2; Genovese, ch 10
Questions: Why did the party system break down? What were the stakes of the ideological debate between North and South?

Week 12 (11/15-18): Lincoln and his Party, 1854-1865
READ: Oakes, chs 3-5
Questions: Was Lincoln a racist or a revolutionary, or both? Did the Republican blueprint for modern America work as planned?

Week 13 (11/22 [Thanksgiving Week]) The American Iliad, 1861-1865
Question: Can this conflict be understood as military history?

Week 14 (11/29-12/2): Emancipation and its Legacies
READ: Oakes, chs 6-7
Questions: When did slavery end? What did the Freedom Amendments accomplish?

Week 15 (12/6-9): The Future of Reconstruction
Questions: When did Reconstruction end? Or did it? Was Jim Crow always waiting?

Week 16 (12/13): Retrospect and Prospect
Question: What is the relation between the past and the future?

FINAL and WRITING ASSIGNMENT DUE 12/16 @ Van Dyck 307 by 12:00 noon.

History Department
Rutgers SAS Core
“SAS is committed to the employment of authentic assessments tools that are minimally invasive, efficient for you, and provide valid formative information that will allow you to improve student learning in your courses.”
-- Anon., SAS Dean’s Office, Rutgers University
Social and Historical Analysis (6 credits)
Students must meet at least one (H, I, J) plus one Historical Analysis (K or L) and one Social Analysis (M or N) goal

H. Understand the bases & development of human and societal endeavors across time and place.
I. Explain and be able to assess the relationship among assumptions, method, evidence, arguments, and theory in social and historical analysis.

J. Identify and critically assess ethical issues in social science and history.

K. Explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time, including the history of ideas or history of science.

L. Employ historical reasoning to study human endeavors.

M. Understand different theories about human culture, social identity, economic entities, political systems, and other forms of social organization.

N. Apply concepts about human and social behavior to particular questions or situations.