Who shall write the history of the American revolution? Who can write it?
Who will ever be able to write it? - John Adams to Thomas Jefferson

Nobody. - Jefferson to Adams

What was the American Revolution? Depending on where you stand, it was a family dispute, a “regime change,” a white settler rebellion, a “Black Declaration of Independence,” a genocidal war, a struggle for national liberation, the birth of individual liberty, the end of an empire, the beginning of an empire, the transformation of an empire. It sought to bring people together in “a more perfect union”; it severed long-standing social and political relationships. It enshrined the idea of inalienable individual rights; it left many people in slavery, exile, and want. In the centuries since the Revolution took place, a staggering array of people have sought to claim its legacies: Unionists and Confederates, Simón Bolívar and Ho Chi Minh, avowed segregationists and civil rights activists, Sarah Palin and Barack Obama. How could one historical event mean so many things to so many people? What did the Revolution mean to those who experienced it? And why should we care?

In this course, we’ll try to answer these questions. True to Jefferson’s word, we probably won’t succeed to everyone’s (or anyone’s) entire satisfaction. But I do hope that from this course you will come to your own provisional conclusions about the meanings, causes, and consequences of an event (or series of events) that, for all its complexity and ambiguity, was unquestionably one of the major transformations of the modern world. Broadly, the aim of this course is to develop your understanding of North American history in the period 1763 to 1815. More specifically, I hope that by the end of the semester you will be able to:

**Analyze the relationship between ideas and experience in the history of the American Revolution:** we will read a number of foundational texts produced by well-known Revolutionary leaders. But we will also consider how people on the margins of British colonial society (including slaves, Indians, workers, and women) shaped and were shaped by the transformations of the late eighteenth century. This diversity of perspectives will give us ample opportunity to contemplate how the history of social experience intersects with the history of big ideas.

**Develop historical arguments based on analysis of primary sources:** we will examine numerous primary sources produced by eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Americans, including political tracts, autobiographies, newspaper advertisements, and a
novel; we will also analyze other historians’ interpretations of primary source material. All of your papers for this course will center around primary source analysis. Accordingly, by the end of the semester, you will have developed considerable facility with this crucial historical skill.

Compare historical interpretations of the Revolution with mythic narratives of the same events: from the earliest accounts of the Boston Massacre in 1770 through the Tea Party Movement today, propagandists have turned the events of the American Revolution to their own political ends. Through this course, I hope you will gain tools and insights that will enable you to differentiate a historical approach to the American Revolution from a mythic or propagandistic one—and also to see how one approach can shade into the other.

Expectations and assignments

Honor principle
Reed’s honor principle governs our conduct in this course in two ways:

- **Respect for others.** If you don’t agree with what someone else has to say, you are welcome (and encouraged) to express your point of view, but you must do so respectfully, and you must support your claims with textual evidence.
- **Intellectual honesty.** I expect all work you do for this course to be your own and to be produced specifically for this course. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it, don’t hesitate to ask. In your written work, please follow the Chicago Manual of Style for footnotes, not in-text citations. There is an abbreviated guide to Chicago style here: [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)

Attendance and participation
Because much of what you learn in this course will come out of the discussions you have with each other in conference, I pay careful attention to attendance. Missing more than three conferences or repeatedly coming late will put you at risk of failing the course. I expect you to come to conference on time and prepared to participate in discussion of the assigned readings. Participation includes both expressing your own thoughts and questions and listening carefully to those of others. If you have concerns about speaking in conference, please come see me so that we can discuss ways to make participating in the discussion easier and more enjoyable for you.

Written assignments
You will receive detailed descriptions of all written assignments ahead of their due dates. Late work will be penalized and will receive minimal comments. Failure to complete all written assignments will put you at risk of failing the course.

- **Response memos.** On three assigned dates over the course of the semester, you will post response memos to the course Moodle. Two of these memos will be “preliminary” responses that you prepare prior to conference; one will be a
“summative” response that you write after conference. The length of each memo should be approximately 300-400 words.

- **First paper.** This paper (3-4 pages) will require you to analyze a single primary source in light of our readings and discussions in class; due at my office by 5 p.m. on Friday, February 18.

- **Second paper.** This paper (5-6 pages) will require you to identify patterns within a set of primary sources and draw on our readings and discussions in class to analyze them; due at my office by 5 p.m. on Friday, March 18.

- **Preparatory assignments for final paper.** You should email me a brief proposal for your final paper by 8 p.m. on Friday, April 8. In addition, a preliminary draft of your final paper (5-6 pages) is due by 5 p.m. on Saturday, April 23 (submit electronically).

- **Final paper.** This paper (10-12 pages) will require you to make a historical argument about a primary source (or set of primary sources) of your own choosing; due by 5 p.m. on Monday, May 16.

**Policy on late work**

Because I have sequenced reading and writing assignments carefully, failure to complete them on time will be detrimental to your progress in the course. However, I understand that there are points in the semester when you may have more work than you can reasonably complete in the time allotted. To that end, I will grant all students one 24-hour extension, without penalty, for one of the three paper assignments (first paper, second paper, or final paper). To claim this extension, you should email me prior to the original deadline and tell me that you plan to take the 24-hour extension. You should then email me your paper by within 24 hours of the original due date and provide me with a hard copy of the paper as soon as possible. Note that you can only take this extension once in the semester, so be sure to look ahead at your schedule before you claim it for one of the early papers. I will grant no extensions on reading responses or drafts of the final paper, as these assignments will be circulated to others prior to discussion in class.

**Reading**

The required books are on order at the bookstore and on reserve at the library:


We will read a significant amount of the following book, which you may wish to purchase. It is also available on library reserve:


Most of the additional readings are available electronically, either through online journals, public websites, or the course e-reserves; the appropriate site or link is marked below. I strongly advise making photocopies or printouts of reserve and online readings so that you can bring hard copies of the readings to conference. A digital version of the syllabus, with links to the online readings, is available via Moodle (log on to moodle.reed.edu and go to History 362). The Moodle site also provides access to additional information about the course and the topics covered.

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

**Week 1: Introduction**

**M 1/31 The Revolution in our time**

a) Barack Obama, remarks for inaugural whistle stop tour, Philadelphia, January 17, 2009:

b) Barack Obama, inaugural address, January 20, 2009:
   http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/


**W 2/2 Setting the scene**


Week 2: The transformation of empire

M 2/7 Mapping a new world order

W 2/9 The stuff of revolution

Week 3: The Revolutionary man (and woman)

M 2/14 Virtue and freedom
b) Elopement advertisements and related newspaper items. [on Moodle]

W 2/16 Ben Franklin: representations and representativeness

F 2/18 FIRST PAPER DUE by 5 p.m. to Vollum 124.

Week 4: Common people and common sense

M 2/21 Cities in revolt

W 2/23 What is (was) common sense?

Week 5: Declaring independence

M 2/28 From myth to history
a) Ellis, *What Did the Declaration Declare?*, 1-106.
W 3/2 Breaking away
b) Felix’s petition (1773): [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h22t.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h22t.html)
c) Petition of January 1777: [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h32t.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h32t.html)
d) Explore the following websites, and bring to class a page of notes recounting your discoveries (further instructions in class):
   [http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/index.html](http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/index.html) and

Week 6: The Patriots’ war

M 3/7 Honor and violence
a) Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, 3-23, 58-80, 96-120, 190-197, 213-238. [library reserve]

W 3/9 War at home

Week 7: The war from the other side(s)

M 3/14 Civil wars
W 3/16 Uncivil war
a) Peter Silver, “Barbarism and the American Revolution” and “The Postwar that Wasn’t,” in Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America (New York: Norton, 2008), 227-292. [e-reserves]

F 3/18 SECOND PAPER DUE by 5 p.m. to Vollum 124

M 3/21-F 3/25 SPRING BREAK

Week 8: Making states

M 3/28 The politics of “the people”
 a) John Adams, “Thoughts on Government” (1776):
b) [For reference] Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (1780):
http://www.jstor.org/stable/30043335

W 3/30 The long road to union

Week 9: Party politics

M 4/4 The transformation of political culture
http://www.jstor.org/stable/3123352
of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic, ed. James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 121-152. [e-reserves]

W 4/6 Dueling and dining
a) Catherine Allgor, introduction and “President Thomas Jefferson in Washington City,” in Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 1-47. [e-reserves]
c) Use America’s Historical Newspapers to identify newspaper coverage of the Burr-Hamilton duel. Bring notes to class.

F 4/8 FINAL PAPER PROPOSAL due by 8 p.m. via email

Week 10: Ironies of freedom

M 4/11 Dangerous liberty
a) Foster, The Coquette.

W 4/13 Killing slavery and conceiving race
b) Petition of Primus Grant and others (1798). [on Moodle]

Week 11: The expanding stage of revolution

M 4/18 Searching the globe for freedom
a) Pybus, Epic Journeys of Freedom, 75-205.

W 4/20 Enlightenment and empire
a) Rothman, Slave Country, ix-xi, 1-35.
b) Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (c. 1781), Query 6 (read from the section on “Animals” to the end, starting with p. 165), 11, 14, and 18. http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefVirg.html

S 4/23 SHORT DRAFT OF FINAL PAPER due by 5 p.m. via email
Week 12: New (?) directions

M 4/25 Writing workshop

W 4/27 Another war for empire
c) Tecumseh, “Address to the Osages” (1811):

Week 13: Legacies

M 5/2 Remembering the Revolution

W 5/4 Do we still need the American Revolution?
   http://www.common-place.org/vol-08/no-01/talk/

F 5/13 FINAL PAPER DUE by 5 p.m. to Vollum 124