

George Mason University  
Department of History  
Fall 2023

**History 617 001:  
READING SEMINAR IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION**

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East 134  
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[BlackBoard site](#)

The American experiment in self-government was scarcely eighty years old when the Civil War threatened to tear the country permanently in two. The massive cataclysm lasted four years, cost 750,000 lives, freed some four million enslaved Blacks, and touched virtually every American in some manner. It redefined the very political, social, and economic fabric of the country in ways that still reverberate today. The Civil War also sparked a remarkable deluge of historical scholarship that shows no signs of ebbing more than a century and a half later. The resulting literature has generated some of the most intense and persistent debates in all of American historiography.

This seminar offers two things. First, it provides an introduction to the vast historiography of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction that followed. Using some of the most important recent scholarship, the course will help familiarize students with the literature surrounding the war. The class will analyze the history of the sectional conflict from a variety of angles: its roots in the eighteenth century; the role of race-based chattel slavery; political attempts to resolve the tension in the first half of the nineteenth century; and the military, social, and cultural results of southern secession. Other books offer insights into the ways that the war and its fallout affected the postwar Reconstruction and the ways in which the Civil War and American understandings of it continue to shape the political, historical, and cultural discourse today.

Second, the seminar affords an opportunity to practice some of the most important skills of the working historian. Over the course of the semester, each participant will participate in a group discussions designed to explore the way historians craft arguments and conduct research; write book reviews that distill historical monographs to their essentials; and become expert in one subfield of the literature and its historiography.

**Reading List**

[Allen Guelzo, \*Fateful Lightning\*](#) or [James McPherson, \*Battle Cry of Freedom\*](#) (student's choice)

[Edward Baptist, \*The Half Has Never Been Told\*](#)

Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*

[George Rable, \*Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!\*](#)

Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over*

David Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*

Edward Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* or *The Thin Light of Freedom* (student's choice)

[Thavolia Glymph, \*The Women's Fight\*](#)

[Stephanie McCurry, \*Confederate Reckoning\*](#)

[Sarah Purcell, \*Spectacle of Grief\*](#)

Eric Foner, *Short History of Reconstruction* or Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Stony the Road* (student's choice)

## Assignments and Grading

Performance in the course will be determined by a long historiographic essay, two short book reviews, and participation in individual discussion sessions.

**Historiographic Essay (due via BlackBoard December 4):** The course's long assignment will be a historiographic essay of about twenty pages (that is, approximately 5,000 words, excluding footnotes) that explores and analyzes some subfield within Civil War or Reconstruction-era history.

"Historiography" is a term that appears frequently in this business, and it can be a confusing one. For the purposes of this course, think of historiography as the history of scholars' inquiry into a given field or question. A thorough historiography seeks to describe and analyze the record of historical writing on a specific topic: the origins of the field, the debates that have shaped the literature, various scholars' answers to those questions, and the overall effects of the shifting lines of inquiry. The long essay should identify, summarize, and discuss approximately ten of the most important books and articles in a given subfield. A satisfying historiography will analyze how the method, argument, evidence, and conclusions of that subfield have changed over time.

For newcomers, one useful way to conceptualize historiography is to think about what it is *not*. Historiography is not research into a particular episode in the past; it is not a narrative of a specific historical event; it is not a critique of the decisions made by various historical actors. Such topics are historical, rather than historiographic, in nature.

Rather, historiography is the analysis of the ways that scholars have approached a particular field over time, and the manner in which those approaches have evolved. Historiography is argument-driven; it is focused upon scholars' treatment of some topic; it is cognizant that different scholars have produced very different interpretations of the same topic at different moments. Historiography aims to describe and to explain those changes.

For the long essay, each student will choose as an organizing subject some theme related to the Civil War or Reconstruction eras and explore how the literature on that topic has evolved over time. The choice of the subject is up to each individual student. One way to select a topic is to choose one of the books on the reading list and locate it within a broader literature. Most of these works lie at the intersection of a number of different subfields; Edward Ayers' *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, for example, can be classified broadly as a social history of the Civil War. It also belongs to the literatures of community history, local politics during the war, the cultural dimensions of the conflict, and to comparative histories of the period.

After selecting a topic, students will undertake a survey of the most significant work in that field. That work will consist largely of scholarly monographs—works that would, in most other research contexts, appear as *secondary sources* but which are, in the context of historiography, the *primary sources* which support an analysis of the way a subfield has changed over time.

The best historiographies address several different threads as they survey the evolution of ideas across a series of books. What questions does each individual work attempt to answer? How do those questions build upon the work of prior historians? How have other works attempted to answer similar questions? What is the author's thesis? How does that thesis differ from answers other authors have offered? What is each author's method? How does the method relate to the author's argument? How persuasive do you find these arguments? Why? What is the weakest part of each book? Why? What assumptions does each author make? How do those assumptions affect the overall argument? What material is missing? How does the absence of certain evidence or arguments affect the book? And perhaps most importantly, how and why has the field evolved over time?

Surveying a subfield and weaving the answers to these questions into a single, cohesive essay is one of the most challenging tasks that historians face. It is also one of the most important: every meaningful piece of original historical scholarship is built on a solid historiographic foundation. To keep you on track to complete a thorough and well-written essay by the end of the course, there are a series of four modest check-in assignments due over the course of the semester:

- a short, one-paragraph description of your proposed topic, due **September 18**
- an annotated bibliography of the monographs your essay will survey, due **October 2**
- a draft of your essay's two- to three-page introduction, due **October 30**
- a revised version of your essay's introduction, due **November 13**

Each of these check-in assignments should be submitted through the Bb portal. These are ungraded assignments; their chief function is to keep you on schedule and to guarantee that you have a chance to discuss, refine, and revise your ideas with the instructor before the final draft is due on **December 4**.

To begin the conversation about your historiography, bring an idea or two to our first full seminar meeting on **August 28**, and be ready to briefly describe your interest in it to the group.

**Book Reviews:** In addition to the historiographic essay, each student will prepare two short, 750-word book reviews on two of the course's reading assignments. Each review should follow the standard format for academic book reviews published in the *Journal of Military History*, the *Journal of American History*, or the *American Historical Review*. The review should briefly introduce the work (its topic, its author, the details of its publication) before analyzing the substance of the author's discussion. What questions does the book seek to address? What is the author's argument? What kind of evidence does the author employ to support that argument? How effective is the argument? Why? What are the book's chief strengths and weaknesses? Fitting that information into a brief essay is enormously challenging; writing reviews offers class participants practice in synthesis, criticism, and brevity—essential skills for the professional historian. The choice of which two books to review is up to the student; reviews are due through the Bb portal the night the book is discussed.

**Participation:** Participation in every class discussion is a vital part of an effective seminar. The ability to think critically in the moment, and to present one's ideas within a discussion, is a vital trait in the historical profession. Effective participation in a graduate seminar comprises several skills: *preparing* for discussion, *contributing* to the give-and-take of an academic conversation, and *following* effectively the contributions of others in order to advance the analysis collaboratively. The book discussions offer class members an opportunity to develop those skills in an encouraging environment. Participation is weighted heavily in the course grade precisely because being prepared to discuss each week's material in a thoughtful manner is so important to professional development.

*Every* student should expect to participate actively in *every* discussion this semester. Note that "active participation" is not the same as "attending." For the purposes of the course requirements, plan to pose or answer one question, and offer one original insight, in every session. (This is a bare minimum; students should aim to participate much more frequently than that, but these benchmarks reflect an acceptable baseline level of participation in our discussions.) Students who do not come to class prepared to participate thoughtfully in *every* discussion should not expect to pass the course.

**That bears repeating:**

**No passing grades will be awarded to students who do not participate in *every* discussion.**

To aid in preparation for seminar, students will frequently be asked to bring a short thought, question, or response to the week's reading (specifics will be circulated the week before each discussion) to share at the beginning of the class. In aggregate, these responses will initiate the longer discussion that week and help ensure that every student contributes at least one idea to each discussion. Reading questions

circulated in advance of each week's discussion will provide indicators about where the conversation in seminar is likely to go in order to aid your preparations for seminar.

**Class absences:** Because in-class participation is such a significant part of the course, students should plan to be at every discussion session. Life intervenes on occasion, however. If you know that you will miss a class, notify the instructor beforehand. You can make up one absence by submitting a book review for the monograph covered in the missed session. A review submitted to substitute for a missed class **will not** count toward the two required book reviews for the semester.

**This is a one-time substitution; do not think of class attendance or a book review as an either/or option.** Every student should plan to be in class and participating actively unless there is an extenuating circumstance.

**Final grade breakdown:**

Long essay, 50%

Book reviews, 15% each (students may submit more than two book reviews; the two highest scores will count towards the final grade)

Participation, 20%

## Class Schedule

### **August 21: Introductions and Expectations**

Edward Ayers, "Worrying about the Civil War." In *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, edited by Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, 145–66. Cornell University Press, 1998. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv5rf34z.11>

### **August 28: Historiography and the Civil War**

Isaac R. Pennypacker. "Civil War Historians and History." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (1927), pp.330-350.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20086649>

J. W. Randall. "The Civil War Restudied." *The Journal of Southern History* 6, no. 4 (1940): 439-57. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2192164>

Stephen Berry, Michael T. Bernath, Seth Rockman, Barton A. Myers, Anne Marshall, Lisa M. Brady, Judith Giesberg, and Jim Downs. "The Future of Civil War Era Studies." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 1 (2012): 3-10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26070189>

#### **SAMPLE HISTORIOGRAPHIES:**

Frank Towers, "Partisans, New History, and Modernization: The Historiography of the Civil War's Causes, 1861–2011." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 2 (2011): 237–64.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26070115>

Michael E. Woods, "What Twenty-First-Century Historians Have Said about the Causes of Disunion: A Civil War Sesquicentennial Review of the Recent Literature." *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 2 (2012): 415–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44306803>

Chandra Manning, "Faith and Works: A Historiographical Review of Religion in the Civil War Era." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 10, no. 3 (2020): 373–96.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26977379>

**ASSIGNMENT:** Come to class with one or two possible ideas for your historiography essay, and be ready to discuss your interest in them informally with the group.

### **September 4: NO CLASS—LABOR DAY BREAK**

### **September 11: Master Narrative and the Civil War era**

Allen Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning* or  
James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (student's choice)

David S. Reynolds, "Reading the Sesquicentennial: New Directions in the Popular History of the Civil War." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 3 (2012): 421-35.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26070251>.

### **September 18: Slavery and American economic history**

Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*

Gaines M. Foster, "Guilt Over Slavery: A Historiographical Analysis." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 56, No. 4 (Nov., 1990), pp. 665-694. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2210932>

**ASSIGNMENT:** Submit a short, 150-word description of the topic you will explore in your historiography essay through the portal on Bb.

### **September 25: Political history and the crisis of the 1850s**

Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*

J. G. Randall, "The Blundering Generation." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27, no. 1 (1940): 3-28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1896569>

Gary Kornblith, "Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise." *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 1 (2003): 76-105. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3659792>

### **October 2: Battle history**

George Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!*

Joseph T. Glatthaar, "The 'New' Civil War History: An Overview." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 115, no. 3 (1991): 339-69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20092630>

Gary Gallagher and Kathryn Shively Meier, "Coming to Terms with Civil War Military History." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4, no. 4 (2014): 487-508. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2606220>

**ASSIGNMENT:** Submit an annotated bibliography of 10-12 books and articles you will survey in your historiography essay. Each entry should include the work's full citation and two or three sentences outlining what the book covers and why it is relevant to the literature.

### **October 9: NO CLASS—FALL BREAK—CLASS SHIFTS TO TUESDAY**

### **October 10: Civil War soldiers and the "new" military history**

Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over*

### **October 16: Biography**

David Blight, *Apostle of Freedom*

### **October 23: Gender history**

Thavolia Glymph, *The Women's Fight*

William F. Pinar. "The Gendered Civil War in the South." *Counterpoints* 163 (2001): 237-70.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42977754>

Thavolia Glymph, "Rose's War and the Gendered Politics of a Slave Insurgency in the Civil War." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3, no. 4 (2013): 501–32.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26062098>.

### **October 30: Social history**

Edward Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* or  
*Thin Light of Freedom* (student's choice)

**ASSIGNMENT:** Submit a draft of the introduction to your historiography—the first three or four paragraphs, 500 to 750 words—through the Bb portal. The introduction to a historiography serves as the foundation for the entire essay; it is hard to build a compelling argument when the foundation is cracked or uneven. This check-in gives you a chance to begin pulling your argument together while there is still an opportunity to make adjustments as you begin to flesh out the treatment of individual works.

### **November 6: Reexamining the Confederacy**

Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*

Yael A. Sternhell. "Revisionism Reinvented? The Antiwar Turn in Civil War Scholarship." *Journal of the Civil War Era*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (June 2013), pp. 239-256.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26062047>

### **November 13: War and memory**

Sarah Purcell, *Spectacle of Grief*

David W. Blight. "'What Will Peace among the Whites Bring?': Reunion and Race in the Struggle over the Memory of the Civil War in American Culture." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1993, pp. 393–410. [www.jstor.org/stable/25090451](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25090451)

Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying." *The Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 1 (2001): 3–38. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3070083>

**ASSIGNMENT:** Submit a revised draft of the introduction to your historiography through the Bb portal.

## **November 20: Reconstruction**

Eric Foner, *Short History of Reconstruction* or  
Henry Louis Gates, *Stony the Road* (student's choice)

Brent Tarter, "Three Lost Causes" in *Virginians and Their Histories*, 293–314. University of Virginia Press, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvxkn6m7.18>

## **November 27: Conclusions**

## **DECEMBER 4: FINAL HISTORIOGRAPHY ESSAY DUE**

**Original work:** All of the written work submitted for this seminar (and, indeed, *every* seminar at George Mason) should be your original work. Presenting others' ideas or words as your own is one of the most serious violations one can commit as a scholar.

Presenting other ideas and words as your own extends to artificial intelligence software such as ChatGPT. It can be tempting to enter the prompts into an AI generator. Do not succumb to this temptation. First, doing so constitutes an academic integrity violation. Second (and more importantly), the kinds of written assignments in a graduate seminar are the kind that generative large-language modelers still (in their current state, at least) struggle with—such that the text they generate may contain serious and obvious errors. There is simply no substitute for doing the work yourself: That is the point of a graduate seminar in history.

*If you have a documented learning disability or other condition that may affect academic performance, you should:*

*1) make sure this documentation is on file with Disability Services (SUB I, Rm. 4205; 993-2474; <https://ds.gmu.edu/>) to determine the accommodations you need;*

*and*

*2) talk with me to discuss your accommodation needs.*