History 455: Colonial America

University of Oregon
Fall 2007 Syllabus

CRN 15414
214 McKenzie Hall, Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2-3:20

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Introduction
“In the beginning,” John Locke wrote in 1690, “all the world was America.” Yet as Locke wrote, much of North America was no longer “America,” if what he meant by that was a pure, pristine, untransformed state of nature. Permanent English settlement was nearly a century old, other Europeans had colonized the Americas even earlier, and Native people had lived on—and transformed—the continent for thousands of years. If America was a “New World” it was because colonization transformed it into something as novel to Indians and to Africans as it was to Europeans.

This course examines the colonial period in American history (to the eve of the American Revolution) in order to understand that strange New World on its own terms as well as to assess the colonial origins of American culture and society. At the core of our inquiries will be the question, “What was colonial about colonial America?” We will investigate how and why colonialism matters in early American history and contemplate American colonialism’s long-term implications. History is comprised of both specific (sometimes quite dramatic) events and more prosaic processes, which can unfold gradually but with glacial force. We will study both in the course of five units outlined below in order to comprehend not only the headlines of early American history (e.g., the “discovery” of America, or the Salem witch trials) but the complex stories behind them (Native American cultural development and European expansion, or social and religious trends and gender arrangements in Puritan New England). These stories are strange and complicated—particularly because they are best told from multiple perspectives—but they bear careful scrutiny for anyone interested in American history.

Course Format and Requirements
This course will combine lecture with discussion, often weaving the two together to make class sessions interactive. Lectures will generally build upon, not simply recapitulate, readings. Students are responsible for completing reading and written assignments by the time indicated on the syllabus. These assignments will often provide the basis for class activity; students are expected to attend all class meetings and participate actively. Frequent absences will produce a failing
grade in the course. Except in extraordinary circumstances, no work will be accepted late. Students must complete all assignments in order to pass the course. Grades will be assigned according to students’ performance on the following:

- Quality of class participation (20%).
- 8 short essays (approximately 500 words each) (each 10%).

There are no written exams. In a sense, each class meeting is an oral exam.

Required Reading

The following required books are available (in paper) at the UO Bookstore:


Class and Assignment Schedule

Unit 1: The “Discovery” of America.

“In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue . . . .” So what? How and why are Columbus’s voyages important? What did the mariner actually discover, and in what sense? When and how did Europeans first meet Native North Americans, what did they think of each other, and what were the short- and long-term implications of these encounters? What is “colonialism”? And how did the advent of colonialism in North America affect the subsequent history of European settlement and Native accommodation and resistance?

Week 1

September 25, 27: Introduction; the nature of colonialism. America before 1492. American discovery: In what sense was America “discovered”? Was “discovery” an event or a process? American myth and American history compared.


Unit 2: Colonial Genesis

Every Thanksgiving, Americans honor their Pilgrim Fathers in their recapitulation of a founding myth of America. But who were these “pilgrims”? Why did they venture to North America? And what did they find and ultimately found? Though often given the status of founders in myth, they were not the first Europeans to colonize the continent successfully; they were not even the first successful English colonists. In fact, the colonial foundations of North
America are complicated and diverse, a pastiche of various adventurers and settlers, representing different countries and religions, with divergent motivations and plans, and set in different environments. What did these Europeans create, how did their societies evolve, and how were they affected by the human and natural environments around them?

Week 2
October 2, 4: Natives and Newcomers: the Colonial Contest in a “New World.”
Tuesday, October 4: Film: Cabeza de Vaca.
Reading: Kupperman, 26-56, 152-179.

Paper 1: According to the legend recounted by John Heckewelder about the first encounter between Dutch explorers and the Native people of Manhattan Island (pp. 30-32), the Natives believed the newcomers to be “Mannittos,” or gods. In other encounters, European sources report a similar Native awe. Why the illusion? How long did it last? How and did Europeans react to this Native perception, and what were the implications? How did Native people assimilate the unprecedented experience of first contact into their world view? Write a short paper (approximately 500 words, or about 2 typed pages) that assesses this phenomenon and its implications for understanding the advent of European colonialism in North America. Make sure to provide a clear thesis statement and develop that thesis specifically and systematically, drawing on the assigned primary sources (not merely assigned essays) to illustrate and support your arguments. Due in class October 4.

Week 3
October 9, 11: Colonial Projects—the Chesapeake and New England.
Tuesday, October 9: Film: Roanoak.
Reading: Kupperman, 57-117.

Paper 2: Write a short paper (approximately 500 words) that compares and contrasts the letters written by Richard Frethorne (65-66) and John Pond (92-94). Due in class October 11.

Week 4
October 16, 18: Colonial Projects—the Middle Atlantic Colonies, the Caribbean, the Lower South.
Reading: Kupperman, 180-287.

Paper 3: Based on the excerpts from the early 18th-century accounts of Sarah Kemble Knight and Per Kalm, write a short essay (approximately 500 words) that analyzes New York City and its environs. What do these observers find interesting, surprising, or distinctive about New York? How did colonial New York compare or contrast with other North American colonies? Due in class October 18.
Unit 3: Servitude and Slavery

On the occasion of the three hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s 1492 voyage, the French philosophe and encyclopédiste, the Abbé Raynal, conducted an essay contest, which asked writers to assess the impact of the discovery of America on the world. Americans today might be surprised to learn that most essayists declared the discovery and colonization of the Americas a setback for humanity. Why? Because it introduced an unprecedented international slave trade and inaugurated a regime of slave production in the New World that brutalized millions in one of the greatest violation of human rights in the history of the world. This unit addresses the origins of slavery in colonial America—perhaps the nation’s greatest paradox and challenge. How and why did slavery emerge as a fundamental social, economic, and political institution in colonial Anglo North America? And how did the institution affect those who experienced it? Students will examine the relationship between slavery and anti-black racism, as well as study more generally the nature of “race” in early America. We will also assess the creation of a new African American culture in North America, born of necessity as a means to endure, resist, or transcend the horrors of slavery.

Week 5
October 23, 25: Labor and Servitude in colonial America; Origins of Slavery.
Reading: Countryman, v, vii-viii, 3-63; Kupperman, 286-301, 315-29.

Paper 4: Write a short essay (approximately 500 words) using the Board of Trade documents (287-92) to assess the role of slavery in the English Atlantic World. What was the significance of slavery and the slave trade to the economies of North American colonies and to the first British Empire? Was the institution critical economically? Was it viable, profitable, prudent, or rational? Were there any perceived disadvantages? Paper due in class October 25.

Week 6
October 30, November 1: Slave Accommodation, Resistance, Rebellion; American Slavery, Freedom, & Racism—Legacies.

Paper 5: Write a short paper (approximately 500 words) that addresses the following question: Was African slavery an unfortunate exception to early American freedom? Or were freedom and slavery fundamentally linked—did one nurture or enable the other? Papers due in class November 1.

Unit 4: Colonial Crises: Witchcraft, Rebellion, War

Few episodes from the history of colonial America have been as fascinating, puzzling, and enduring as the notorious trials in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, in which over a hundred people were accused of witchcraft and some twenty
executed for the crime. This unit examines this crisis as a way to probe the nature of early American religious belief and practice, to study the colonial New England’s “world of wonder,” and to analyze the shifting intellectual and cultural atmosphere of colonial America. The witch-hunting of 1692 quickly became an embarrassment for some, especially those embracing a new “rationalism” associated with the Enlightenment. But did faith in revelation, providence, and worlds of wonder disappear in the 18th century or later? Students might also contemplate the question: Why did witch-hunting so consistently target women? Finally, we might consider the persistent use of Salem witch-hunting—and the social psychology of fear, recrimination, and persecution it seemed to display—as a metaphor for later crises in American life (as in the 20th-century Cold War fear of Communism).

The panic in Salem in 1692 was not the only crisis that rocked colonial America in the late 17th and the 18th centuries. The growth of settlements, social and economic development, and geographic expansion signaled the success of Britain’s North American colonies but also caused new strains—not only for Indians forced to deal with threatening encroachment, but also within the colonial settlements themselves. How and why did conflict emerge within the colonies and between newcomers and Natives in this period? What role did imperial rivalries—particularly the contest between Britain and France for North America—have in these clashes?

Week 7
November 6, 8: Colonial Development and Geographic Expansion: Progress or Declension? Witchcraft and Witch-hunting in New England.
Reading: Kupperman, 118-24, 127-51; Witch-trial documents available on Blackboard course website; Salisbury, vii-viii, 1-60.
Paper 6: In a short essay (approximately 500 words) compare and contrast the testimonies of two women accused of witchcraft in Salem: Rebecca Nurse and Abigail Hobbs. Was witch-hunting a gender-neutral phenomenon in New England, or did it demonize women in particular? How are these women’s testimonies gendered? Can you explain why one denied the charges, while the other confessed? Due in class November 8.

Week 8
November 13, 15: Indian Conflict and Captivity.
Reading: Salisbury, 63-168.
Paper 7: The historian Neal Salisbury argues that King Philip’s War was a conflict fought, not between strangers, but between neighbors. Write a short essay (approximately 500 words), based on your reading of Mary Rowlandson’s narrative, that assesses this claim and its implications. What evidence of this familiarity appears in Rowlandson’s account? How and why did it matter? Why did war occur in 1675, and what were its
results? What were the implications for New England in terms of Indian-white relations? Due in class November 15.

Unit 5: Colonial America at Mid-Century
American history—particularly of the colonial era—is often written backwards. In a sense this is unavoidable—history is a means to explain the past to ourselves in the present. But historians writing about the colonial period have frequently explained the centuries preceding 1776 simply as prelude, as the “prehistory” of the United States, not on its own terms. Does such treatment of the colonial era make sense? Did American colonists and imperial officials see the American Revolution coming, even as late as the 1750s? Had colonists developed a distinctive identity as “Americans” by then, or did they continue to think of themselves primarily as British subjects? The American Revolution would certainly prove to be a watershed in American history, but can you imagine any reasons why historians might emphasize continuity (rather than rupture) in interpretations of American history through the 18th and into the 19th century?

Week 9
November 20: Awakening and Enlightenment in America. **Thanksgiving Holiday, November 22. No Class.**

Week 10
November 27, 29: Colonial Transformations—a Rising American Nation?
Paper 8: Benjamin Franklin has been called “the First American.” What is the basis of such a claim? Certainly he was not a typical American, but was he an exemplar of a new sort of American? Write a short essay (approximately 500 words) using Franklin’s *Autobiography* (and allied documents) to assess this claim about Franklin and American identity. Due in class November 29.

There is no final examination.