

John Brown: Abolition in Early America
Civil War Era Studies 330
Gettysburg College
Spring 2019

Wednesday – 6:30-9:00pm
Weidensall 411

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Course Objectives

“I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood.”

As John Brown went to the gallows on December 2nd, 1859, those words echoed across America on a slip of paper. As days passed into weeks, then months, the nation plunged further on the road to war. But who was John Brown? What were his plans? What did he do? Why did America go to war and shed thousands of gallons of blood, proving his prophetic pronouncement true?

History allows us to see the past. Through it we can begin to understand not only an event, but the world in which it happened and the world which we inhabit today. This course sets out to help understand the antebellum American landscape. Using John Brown as a lens, we will investigate the era which preceded the war which the radical Abolitionist helped spark.

The course is intended not only as an investigation of Brown and his times, but also as an opportunity to develop students’ ability to think and read critically, to write persuasively, and to formulate their own interpretations of the past through primary source research.

As a department, the Civil War Era Studies faculty strives to meet these four standards in all our coursework:

- Students will develop expertise in the study of the history of warfare and the American Civil War era.
- Students will learn to use primary sources and develop a sophisticated understanding of secondary literature within the field appropriate to their level of study.
- Students will gain global training in the study of war to better understand the American Civil War’s historical context.
- Students will develop an interdisciplinary understanding of war taking into account, amongst other things, the study of society, culture, and historical memory.

Readings

The following books are required reading for the course:

Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, (New York: International Publishers, 1983).

Louis DeCaro Jr., *Freedom's Dawn: The Last Days of John Brown in Virginia*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015).

W.E.B. DuBois, *John Brown*, (Philadelphia: Geo. W. Jacobs and Co., 1909) via Archive.org (<https://archive.org/details/johnbrown00dubo>).

Paul Finkelman ed., *Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003).

Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War* (Holt and Company [Picador], 2011).

Louis P. Masur, *1831: Year of Eclipse* (Hill and Wang, 2002).

Benjamin Quarles, *Allies for Freedom & Blacks on John Brown*, (Da Capo Press, 2001; 1974, 1972).

David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

Milton C. Sernett, *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom* (Syracuse University Press, 2002).

Additional short reading assignments may be distributed to the class via e-mail.

Requirements:

- **Attendance/Participation:** The course will be conducted in a free-form seminar format. It is therefore imperative that you attend all class meetings and are fully prepared to discuss the day's reading assignment. I will keep track of your contributions to class discussion. Participation constitutes a significant portion of the final course grade. Quizzes may be given in order to encourage preparation. As a courtesy to your instructor and fellow classmates make sure your cell phone is set to silent when you attend class.
- **Field Trips:** Given our proximity to Harpers Ferry, I hope to schedule some opportunity for the class to visit this historic site.

- **Honor Code:** It should go without saying that the college's honor code is in effect both for all written assignments and all in-class activity during the semester. Please do your best to keep the classroom a fair and level playing field for both yourself and your peers. In the end, cheating hurts the cheater.
- **Personal Effort:** You get out of any educational experiences precisely the amount of effort you put in. This semester should offer an exciting opportunity to test your boundaries, try new ideas and build new skills. Remember, learning can be an enjoyable experience and not simply a slog through rusty dates and names. History is about who we are as a people, how we got here and where we're going. If you try hard, then you can come out at the end of the semester knowing that the work you did mattered.

Assignments:

In addition to preparing for each class meeting, students in CWES 330 have three major responsibilities:

- **Leading a Class Discussion:** Each student will be responsible for leading two book discussions over the course of the semester. Students may opt to distribute potential discussion questions to the class via e-mail prior to that week's meeting in preparation for the seminar, though this is not required.
- **Scavenger Hunt:** Twice during the semester, each student will prepare a one-page briefing paper analyzing an assigned collection of primary sources pertaining to the history of Abolitionism. This page should be geared toward highlighting for a researcher the types of resources in this collection, and why they might want to use it. During class, students will deliver short presentations explaining the scope and utility of the source they explored, how it could be used by students in future research projects, and what light it sheds on our understanding of the period. Each scavenger hunt collection is located online, in the stacks of Musselman Library, or in Special Collections – plan ahead. At the end of the presentation, students will distribute their briefing to each member of the class for reference.
- **Research Paper:** In lieu of a final examination and to fulfill the Gettysburg College Fourth Hour Requirement, each student will prepare a research paper, rooted in primary sources, that investigates the time in which John Brown lived and the Abolition activities which helped lead to the Civil War. The paper should be a minimum of fifteen double spaced pages in length, not including footnotes and bibliography (12-point, Times New Roman, 1-inch margins).

The paper should investigate a small aspect of the Abolition movement and John Brown's sphere. Anything is on the table, with instructor approval, from deep investigations of a particular personality in the Abolition movement to the

depiction of Abolition and/or John Brown in the media to the memory of Abolition in subsequent generations. You might also like to look into Abolition activities in your hometown or region. The paper must be based largely on primary sources (letters, diaries, official reports, newspapers, etc.) and not simply a report on readings of secondary material. The paper should require you to spend some time within an archive or with archival material obtained through ILL from a partner institution. Typically students utilize resources from archives including the College's own Special Collections, USAHEC in Carlisle, Adams County Historical Society in Gettysburg, the National Archives or Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. or other local institutions. The grade will be determined by the clarity of prose, depth of research, documentation of sources, and the originality and persuasiveness of the essay. Everyone must discuss potential topics with the instructor and receive approval of topic. **A brief and rough prospectus / proposal (about 1-2 paragraphs) and a list of potential sources should be submitted by February 6th.**

February 27th will be a discussion of research progress with the entire class. All students are expected to bring one *primary* source along to class to present in a "show-and-tell" style environment. This should be an opportunity to puzzle along with your classmates on where a document might fit within the Abolition narrative. Please bring enough printed copies of your source for the entire class.

Also, please prepare a one-page analysis of the document answering the following questions: Who wrote the document? Why did they write it? What were their motives? What are the document's biases? Is the document lying? Where might it fit in my paper?

A portion of the class on April 17th will be a research progress check-in discussion where we as a class can brainstorm ways around research walls or thing through new angles for you to take in your writing. Please bring along some element of your research which is still an impediment – a source you cannot seem to decipher, an idea you want to integrate, a hole in your research you can't seem to fill. The class will think through ways you can keep pushing forward.

The final paper is due May 3rd. Please plan accordingly. The paper *cannot* be adequately completed in the final days before it is due.

Students will present their research findings during the final examination period, May 5th. This session will be open to the public.

Grade Distribution

Participation:	20%	Midterm Exam:	10%
Discussion Leadership:	10%	Final Research Paper:	40%
Source Analysis:	10%	Research Presentation:	10%

Semester Schedule

Date	Topic	Scavenger Hunt	Reading	Assignment
January 23	What Is Knowable in History?	--	Potter	--
January 30	The Roots of Unrest	University of Detroit <i>Black Abolitionist Archive</i>	Aptheker	
February 6	A Linchpin Year of Abolition	<i>John Brown/Boyd B. Stutler Collection</i>	Masur	Research Paper Topic Statement and Preliminary Biblio.
February 13	The Burned Over District Rising	<i>Fred. Douglass' Paper (Rochester) & Works of William H. Seward, Ed. George E. Baker</i>	Sernett	
February 20	Fighting Back Against the Tide	<i>Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection & The Liberty Bell, by friends of freedom annual</i>	Finkelman	
February 27	Resistance to Slavery Grows Legs	<i>William Still: An African-American Abolitionist collection</i>	Foner	Primary Source Discussion
March 6	Brown's Plans	<i>Lincoln and his Circle database</i>	Horwitz	
March 13	Spring Break			
March 20	Midterm Examination			
March 27	Brown's Souls	<i>African-Americans in Antebellum Boston Project</i>	Reynolds	
April 3	Brown's Armies	The writings of James Redpath	Quarles	
April 10	Brown's Deaths	<i>W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, 1803-1999</i>	DeCaro	
April 17	Brown's Meanings		TBD	Research Progress Check-in / Discussion
April 24	History's Brown		DuBois	
May 1	No Class – Final Writing & Revision			
May 3	Research Papers Due			
May 5	Final Research Presentations			