TENTATIVE SYLLABUS

History 203-302                                                               Fall Semester, 2007
Professor Richard R. Beeman                                          Wednesdays, 2-5 P.M.
Email: rbeeman@sas.upenn.edu

The Creation of the United States Constitution

The primary focus of this course will be on the events immediately surrounding
the creation and ratification of the United States Constitutions, events which all occurred
during the period from May, 1787 through the summer of 1788, when the requisite nine
states added their assent to the proposed Constitution. Although most of our work in the
course will deal with aspects of that rather brief period, we will also need to be familiar
with some of the broader historical context in which the Constitution was written and
adopted, so we will spend the first few weeks of the course reading and discussing the
most important trends and events of the American revolutionary era more generally. I am
mindful that some members of the seminar have more background in the period of the
Revolution and Constitution than others (I note that there are a few veterans of History
442, my undergraduate lecture course on the Revolutionary era, enrolled in the class), so
the reading assignments for those first few weeks may vary from student to student.

One purpose of the course is of course to help you become familiar with the
principal historical works on the subject of the creation of the Constitution, but an equally
important purpose is to give each student an opportunity to engage in intensive primary
source research on that subject. Each student will be expected to complete a substantial
research paper on some aspect of the making of the Constitution, and that paper will
constitute 75% of your grade in the course (the other 25% will be based upon the quality
of your participation in the weekly business of the seminar). I will work individually
with each student in the seminar both to help you select a topic and to help guide your
research once you have settled on a topic. While we will meet as a group during most
weeks of the semester, there will be a few weeks, in the final half of the semester, in
which we will not hold formal class meetings and I will instead schedule individual
conferences with each of you.

What follows is a TENTATIVE schedule of readings and topics for discussion.
I may very well wish to make alterations, subtractions, and additions to the reading
assignments depending on your needs and interests. In addition to the books and essays
listed below, I would suggest that each member of the class obtain—either by purchase or
through the library—one of several narrative accounts of the Constitutional Convention.
Among those that I recommend are:
Carol Berkin, A Brilliant Solution
Catherine Drinker Bowen, Miracle at Philadelphia
Christopher Collier, Decision in Philadelphia
Clinton Rossiter, 1787: The Grand Convention
Carl Van Doren, The Great Rehearsal
Another indispensable source for understanding the origins of the Constitution is a documentary collection compiled by Max Farrand, Records of the Federal Convention of 1787. There are multiple copies of this collection in the library, some of which are in Rosengarten Reserve.

September 7—Introduction—The Historiography of the American Revolution and Constitution.

If at all possible, I would suggest that those who have very little familiarity with the literature of the American Revolution and Constitution read either of the following brief surveys of the subject in preparation for this week’s introductory class: Gordon Wood, The American Revolution (Modern Library paperback) or Edward Countryman, The American Revolution (Hill and Wang paperback).

September 14—The Anglo-American Heritage of Liberty, 1215-1776
Edmund S. Morgan, Inventing the People, pp. 1-235.
Bernard Bailyn, Ideological Origins of the American Revolution
Tom Paine, Common Sense
Thomson Jefferson, The Declaration of Independence

September 21—“To Begin the World Anew:” The World’s First Written Constitutions
Gordon Wood, Creation of the American Republic, Chapters 2-8
Individual Assignments: Each student in the seminar will read and report on one of the original state constitutions.

Students will read and report on one of the state constitutions drafted in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution.

September 28—America’s First Federal Government—The Articles of Confederation: Its Strengths and Weaknesses
Wood, Creation of the American Republic, Chaps. 9-11.
E. James Ferguson, “The Nationslists of 1781-83 and the Economic Interpretation of the Constitution.”
Merrill Jensen, “The Achievements of the Confederation.”
Primary Source Documents on Shays’s Rebellion

October 5—The Constitutional Convention: Conflicting Interpretations
Charles Beard, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States
Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, “Youth and Energy Carry the Day.”
Martin Diamond, “A Democratic Cure for the Diseases and Defects of Democracy.”
Wood, Creation of The American Republic, Chapter 12.

October 12---The Business of the Convention---Planning and Launching a Revolution in Government
James Madison, Notes on the Federal Convention, excerpts.
Rakove, Original Meanings, Chapter 4.
NOTE: In this, and subsequent weeks it would be good for you to have handy a copy of any of the narrative accounts of the Constitutional Convention mentioned above.

October 19—“A Government “Part-Federal” and “Part National”

Madison, Notes on the Federal Convention, excerpts.
Lance Banning, “The Practicable Sphere of a Republic,” in Beeman, Beyond Confederation
Jack Rakove, Original Meanings Chapters 6,7.

October 26—The Constitution, Democracy, and Presidential Power
Madison, Notes on the Federal Convention, excerpts
Rakove, Original Meanings, Chapter 8,9.

November 2---The Constitution, Slavery, and Individual Rights
Rakove, Original Meanings, Chapter 10.
Paul Finkelman, “Slavery and the Constitutional Convention,” in Beeman, Beyond Confederation.

November 9---Individual Conferences

November 16—The Contest to Ratify the Constitution

“Shays’s Rebellion and the Contest Over Ratification in Massachusetts,”
In Beeman, Beyond Confederation.
Saul Cornell, “Ratification and the Politics of the Public Sphere,” (course web site).
Selections from Debates in the State Ratifying Conventions (each student will be
assigned a different state and will report on the debate in that state).
Selections from the Federalist Papers. (see the course web site).
Selections from Antifederalist Writings. (see the course web site).

November 21-23—Individual Conferences

November 30---Contemporary Issues in American Constitutonalism
   Rakove, Original Meanings, Chapter 11
   “Originalism.” Click on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/originalism
   Cass Sunstein, “Originalism for Liberals.” Click on
   http://home.uchicago.edu/~csunstei/originalism.html
   “Affirmative Action.” Click on http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/affirmative-
   action/
   Other readings to be announced.

December 7---Individual Student Progress Reports