

TENTATIVE SYLLABUS

History 203-302
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Fall Semester, 2007
Wednesdays, 2-5 P.M.

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 Constitution, 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

Richard R. Beeman, "The Traditional Order of Politics in England in America," in The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth Century America, Chapter One, Ten.

Edmund S. Morgan, Inventing the People, pp. 1-235.

Bernard Bailyn, Ideological Origins of the American Revolution

Tom Paine, Common Sense

Thomas 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 Nationalists 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 McKittrick, “Youth and Energy Carry the Day.”

Martin Diamond, “A Democratic Cure for the Diseases and Defects of Democracy.”

John Roche, “The Founding Fathers: A Reform Caucus in Action.”

Lance Banning, “What Happened at the Constitutional Convention.”

Wood, Creation of The American Republic, Chapter 12.

Wood, “Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution,” in Richard R. Beeman, et. al., Beyond Confederation.

October 12---The Business of the Convention---Planning and Launching a Revolution in Government

James Madison, Notes on the Federal Convention, excerpts.

William Pearce, “Character Sketches of Delegates to the Federal Convention.”

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

Madison, Notes on the Federal Convention excerpts.

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.

Cecilia Kenyon, “Men of Little Faith: The Antifederalists on the Nature of Representative Government.” (on course web site).

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 Constitutionalism

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