

HIST 246: The American Civil War Era

Rice University, Fall 2011

NOTE: This is a PDF version of an online syllabus. Please visit the course website for updates and working links: <http://civilwar.blogs.rice.edu>

Contact Dr. Caleb McDaniel

Assistant Professor, Department of History

Office: Humanities Building 330; Office Hours: MW 10–11, and by appt

Phone: x2556 | Email: caleb.mcdaniel@rice.edu

Course Description

One-hundred-and-fifty years after the beginning of the American Civil War, the conflict remains the subject of vital debate among historians and occupies a central place in the stories that we tell ourselves about what it means to be American. For example, at his inauguration in 2008, Barack Obama swore the presidential oath by placing his hand on President Abraham Lincoln's Bible, an action rich with symbolism given Lincoln's role in the wartime emancipation of African American slaves. In 2009, the bicentennial anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, over 60 books were published about Lincoln alone! And since 2011 marks the bicentennial of the beginning of the War, historians will be busy again this year, trying to make sense of the conflict, its causes, and its consequences for newly interested audiences. Major newspapers like the New York Times and the Washington Post have created blogs devoted to the subject. Some Confederate heritage groups, meanwhile, are working this year to promote their own version of the war's history and meaning.

The timing of this course and the bicentennial of the War thus provides us with a unique opportunity to consider the differences between "memory" and "history," to talk about the way the Civil War is and has been remembered—even in our own backyard at Rice. We will delve into historical debates that are still of interest to professional historians and non-historians alike, on questions that include, but are not limited to: What caused the war? What were its participants fighting for? Why did the Confederacy lose, and what exactly did the Union win? We will also think about the best way to present Civil War subjects to general audiences today by working on an online exhibit about a locally famous Civil War figure. Throughout the course, students will be challenged to take and defend positions of their own, using evidence and critical thinking skills gathered through lectures, readings, and discussions.

Learning Objectives

Students in this course will learn: - To evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different historical arguments related to questions related to the Civil War Era. - To take their own positions on these questions and support these positions with sound reasoning and evidence. - To identify and think critically about the social,

cultural, and political factors that influence the way the past is remembered at different moments in time. - To work collaboratively to make historically informed, reflective judgments about how to commemorate and interpret the Civil War Era for public audiences today.

Because students in this course will also work on a digital archive project related to the commemoration of a Civil War battle fought here in Texas, another objective will be to learn how to use various digital tools like [Omeka](#) to present historical documents and interpretations in online environments.

What to Expect

Expect to attend class. Attentive attendance in every class will be crucial to your success in the course. *Do not expect* this course to be a “blow by blow” history of battles, events, and major figures in the Civil War. (If you would like a detailed but accessible history of the War that amply covers the military narrative, I suggest you consult James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom*, which is widely available at bookstores.) We will have occasion to talk and read some about military history, but we will also range far beyond the battlefield and the Civil War itself.

Expect to do a lot of reading for this course. Five required books are listed below, and we will read and discuss all of them in class. I will supplement these books throughout the semester by assigning short articles and historical documents as additional readings. Additional readings may not always be discussed in class as fully as the books, but completing them is still essential to meeting the course’s learning objectives.

Expect to succeed. My only reason for covering topics in class or assigning reading outside of class will be to assist you in meeting the learning objectives for the course. That means that if you apply yourself to doing the work in this class, you can expect to learn. On the other hand, if you decide you can’t commit to doing all the work or to attending class, then don’t expect to learn what the course is designed to teach.

Required Books

Please purchase the following books at the beginning of the semester so that you will have them when it is time to read them. The Rice bookstore does not keep the books in stock all semester long, and you will need to acquire one of the books from another store. - Thomas J. Brown, *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004). ISBN: 978–0312397913, [Amazon](#) - Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (Vintage, paperback, 2008). ISBN: 978–0307277329, [Amazon](#) - Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Louisiana State University Press, paperback, new edition, 2007). ISBN: 978–0807132890, [Amazon](#) - Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (Oxford, paperback, 2007). ISBN: 978–0195315868, [Amazon](#) - Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the*

Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War (Vintage, paperback, 1999). ISBN: 978-0679758334, [Amazon](#). **Please note that this book is NOT available at the Rice University bookstore.**

Note on Disability Support Services

If you have a documented disability that will impact your work in this class, please contact me outside of class to discuss accommodations confidentially. You will also need to contact and register with the [Disability Support Services Office](#), located in Allen Center.

*** Assignments***

Graded assignments have two purposes: to help you learn, and to assess—both for your information and mine—how much you are learning. These assignments will include:

1. **Four Position Papers.** In these papers, you will have the opportunity to defend, in writing, your position on four debatable historical questions about the Civil War era. I will distribute the prompt for each paper, along with specific guidelines and criteria for grading, at least one week before each is due. Two of the prompts (the first and the third) will ask you to take positions on issues we have discussed in class. The other two prompts (the second and the fourth) will ask you to apply reasoning skills honed in class to a previously unconsidered issue or debate that I will present to you. Each position paper will receive a numeric grade on the “zero to 4.3” gradepoint scale. Papers must be turned in by email, preferably as PDF files.
2. **Blog Comments on Assigned Reading.** Over the course of the semester, six of our classes will be devoted to discussing the five required books and an additional small group of articles distributed in advance. You should complete these readings before coming to class to discuss them. You will also be responsible for writing a brief comment on this blog in response to some questions I will pose before the discussion. For three of the discussions, you will be asked to comment *before* class, and for the other three you will comment *after* the discussion. Your commenting schedule will be set during the first or second week of class. You will be assigned a numeric grade on the “zero to 4.3” gradepoint scale for each assigned comment, but you can also make more comments.
3. **Text for an Omeka Exhibit Page.** As mentioned in the [course description and learning objectives](#), this semester you will have the opportunity to work on an online exhibit about a locally famous Civil War figure. As part of this project, you will be responsible for writing a brief essay that will be featured on one of the exhibit’s pages. We will work collaboratively as a class to determine the scope of the exhibit and to discuss the major purposes we want the exhibit to serve. More information about this project will be distributed in class, and a model exhibit will be provided for you. The ultimate assignment

will be a piece of writing (of around 1,000 words) that will be like a position paper, but with two differences: you will be addressing a broader public audience, and you will need to incorporate references to items in our online collection in your essay to help the viewer interpret historical objects related to your essay. As part of this assignment, you will also be responsible for commenting on, critiquing, and helping to revise other students' essays. Work on this project will not begin until after the four position papers are completed, in order to give you ample time to work.

Grades

As deadlines for each of the above assignments near, the criteria for grading will be discussed and explicitly communicated to you in class. Be aware that these criteria will only be concerned with assessing how well you are meeting the general learning objectives for the course; that is, I won't be grading you on a "curve" in relation to other students' performance. The point of grades is to let each student know where he or she stands in relation to the specific objectives of the assignment and the objectives of the course as a whole. Here's how I'll weigh assignments when calculating your final grade:

- Position Paper #1 = 10%
- Position Paper #2 = 20%
- Position Paper #3 = 20%
- Position Paper #4 = 25%
- Blog Comments Average = 10%
- Exhibit Text = 15%

I reserve the right, but am under no obligation, to bump your comments average higher if your grades on these comments trended steadily upward over the course of the semester, or if you made additional comments that showed improvement over the assigned ones. If you are unsatisfied with your performance on one of the position papers, you'll also have the opportunity to write an optional fifth position paper, due by the end of the final examination period. You must inform me by the last day of class which position paper you want to replace. If your grade on the optional final paper is higher, it will replace the grade on the paper you specified. If the grade on the optional paper is lower, then the earlier grade will stand.

A Note on Late Assignments and Missed Discussions You can turn only *two* of your position papers in late, so long as I receive them no later than one week after the posted deadline. The other two position papers must be turned in by the posted deadline. In addition, due to time constraints, be aware that I will not be able to provide much feedback on late assignments, so it's in your interest to turn in all your papers on time so you can get more feedback from me on how you are doing in the course and how to do better. All papers will get a fair read and an honest assessment, but papers turned in on time will receive the most extensive comments from me about the paper's specific strengths and weaknesses. If you miss a discussion, you should still complete your assigned blog comments on

time. The final text for your exhibit assignment will not be accepted late. Up-to-date information about the schedule for this class will always be provided here and on [the main course blog](#). Please put these important deadlines on your personal calendar to guide your planning for reading and writing. Deadlines for other, smaller assignments may be announced during the semester, particularly ones related to the drafting and reviewing of your exhibit essays in the last month of the semester.

August 31 Blog comment due. Before coming to class, complete the articles by [Ayers and Thomas](#) and [Gary Kornblith](#) and be prepared to discuss them.

September 7 Blog comment due. Before coming to class, complete all pages of the Manning book.

September 14 Position Paper #1 due by email by the end of day. Please submit by [email attachment](#), preferably as a PDF file with your last name as the file name.

September 28 Position Paper #2 due by email by the end of day. Please submit by [email attachment](#), preferably as a PDF file with your last name as the file name.

October 5 Blog comment due. Before coming to class, complete all pages of the Foner book.

October 10 NO CLASS. Mid-term recess.

October 12 Position Paper #3 due by email by the end of day. Please submit by [email attachment](#), preferably as a PDF file with your last name as the file name.

October 17 NO CLASS. Dr. McDaniel has jury duty.

October 21 Blog comment due. Before coming to class, complete assigned pages of the Brown book (pp. 1–55, 79–108).

October 26 Position Paper #4 due by email by the end of day. Please submit by [email attachment](#), preferably as a PDF file with your last name as the file name.

November 4 Blog comment due. Before coming to class, complete all pages of the Horwitz book.

November 7 Make plans to attend a free evening lecture by [Tony Horwitz](#), who will also be attending our class to talk about his book and Civil War memory.

November 14 Blog comment due. Before coming to class, complete all pages of the Levine book.

November 25 NO CLASS. Thanksgiving Recess.

December 14 Final text for your exhibit essays due to Dr. McDaniel by 5 p.m.