

HIST 159: Legendary Americans

Fall 2011, Rice University
Wednesdays, 2-5 p.m., SEW 562

Welcome to HIST/FSEM 159: Legendary Americans! In this course we will be exploring the lives of a few of the most famous figures in American history, as well as the legends and stories that surround their lives.

For a complete online version of this syllabus with working links, please visit <http://hist159.blogs.rice.edu>.

Professor

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Course Description

Our aim this semester is to learn more about the kind of work that historians do, as well as to consider and subject to critical examination the ways that Americans in general remember and represent their own past. By consulting scholarly articles and book as well as historical documents, we will attempt to separate what we can establish about these historical figures from the myths that have often become associated with them. (For example, can we determine how Davy Crockett died? Is it possible to know how many slaves Harriet Tubman helped escape to freedom?) At the same time, however, we will be as interested in thinking about what the myths themselves can tell us about different periods in American history. (For example, why does the way that Crockett died matter to Americans? What explains why different writers have offered different accounts of Tubman's rescue missions?) Through both scholarly readings and analysis of cultural artifacts like songs and films, we will consider why and how "legendary Americans" have become iconic and explore the relations between history, biography, and collective memory.

Learning Objectives

In this course students will learn ...

- The basic procedures by which historians learn about the past.
- How to read and evaluate scholarly works of history.
- To formulate, defend, and communicate their own positions on contested historical questions.
- To develop critical and informed perspectives on representations of American history in popular culture.
- To treat visual and verbal representations of famous Americans as historical documents that can themselves teach historians about different periods of American history.

Required Books

The following books are required reading and are recommended for purchase. They are available at the Ley Student Center.

- Francois Furstenberg, *In The Name Of The Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, And The Making Of A Nation* (paperback, Penguin, 2007). ISBN: 0143111930
- James E. Crisp, *Sleuthing The Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand And Other Mysteries Of The Texas Revolution* (paperback, Oxford, 2005). ISBN: 0195163508
- Milton Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, And History* (Paperback, Duke UP, 2007). ISBN: 0822340739
- Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, The Untold Story Of An American Legend* (paperback, Oxford, 2008), ISBN: 0195341198

What to Expect

This course is designed as a seminar, rather than as a lecture course. That means that students will complete a large amount of reading (from 150-200 pages per week, on average), and that class time will be focused on discussion and dialogue about those readings. To succeed in this course, you will need to prepare for each class by making notes to yourself about the readings. Come to the seminar ready to share your thoughts. You will also be completing regular, short writing assignments throughout the semester. In other types of courses, your primary responsibility is often to listen to lectures, read a textbook, take notes, study those notes, and recall information for an exam or a major essay. In this seminar, though, you should have different expectations. Your primary responsibilities will be to contribute to class discussions, ask questions as well as answer them, write regularly in short bursts, and read a variety of books and articles with an eye towards discussing their major points and arguments, rather than with an eye towards recalling specific facts, information, or procedures for an exam.

Policies

Attendance in class is mandatory. You should not miss class unless you have a medical emergency that is documented to my satisfaction. It is your responsibility to contact me as soon as possible if you will not be in class.

Plagiarism and intellectual dishonesty are violations of the Rice Honor Code and will be reported to the Honor Council. Plagiarism is defined by the Honor Council as "quoting, paraphrasing, or otherwise using another's words or ideas as one's own without properly crediting the source. ... The Honor Council assumes that, unless otherwise credited, all work submitted by the student is intended to be considered as his or her own work. Any time a student draws particularly or generally from another's work, the source should be properly credited." Specific information about how to credit the ideas and words of other writers will be provided to you in class, but I, like the Honor Council, assume that all the work you submit is your own original work and that doing otherwise is a form of intellectual dishonesty. Because this is a seminar, some of the work you do in this course will require you to collaborate with other students, but since I will make clear when it is okay to work with other students, you should assume that in all other cases you must complete your work independently. If any of the course requirements are unclear, students are responsible for coming to me directly for clarification. For more information on these policies, you can also consult the Rice Honor Council webpage.

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 in the Allen Center.

Assignments

In this course, you have four major assignments. More information about each of these assignments will be provided throughout the semester. If you have questions about my expectations for any of these assignments, or would like to ask about how you are doing on them, don't hesitate to ask!

A semester-long small group project

At the beginning of the semester you will be placed in a small group with three to four students. Working collaboratively, your group must first select a "legendary American" from a list that I will give you. (It is possible for you to propose a figure who is not on the list, but you must obtain approval from me.) Your group should settle on a figure by **September 14**.

Over the course of the semester, you and your fellow group members will then work individually and independently to learn as much as you can about this figure and the legends surrounding him or her, reporting your findings back to the group on a "group blog" (more on that below). You will need to do research and reading on your figure, both on the Internet and in traditional sources at the library or in the library's online databases. You should also think throughout the semester about how what you are learning relates to the assigned readings that we are doing in class.

Finally, at the end of the semester, you will work collectively as a group to select some materials about your figure to share with the entire class for discussion (examples of relevant materials might include scholarly articles, historical documents, artifacts about the historical figure from popular culture, film clips, etc. Use our schedule of readings as a model for the kinds of things you might select for discussion). You must provide these materials (which should amount to no more than about 50-80 pages of text) to the entire class by **November 16** so that everyone in the seminar can look them over, and you should also provide a few questions for discussion about your materials. Then, on November 23 and November 30, we will devote about an hour of class time to discussing the materials prepared by your small group. In these discussions, you and your fellow group members are responsible for serving as facilitators of discussion and "resident experts" on the "legendary American" that you have been learning about over the course of the semester.

After these end-of-semester discussions, each student will publish a final post to the blog (around 1,000 to 1,200 words in length) that makes and defends an argument about your figure or the historical debates surrounding him/her. More guidelines for these final posts will be provided later, but they are due by 5 p.m. on Wednesday, **December 14**.

Two blog posts per week

You and the other members of your small group will be given a group blog on the Rice network. *Every week* (from the end of class Wednesday to the beginning of class on the next Wednesday), each student should publish *at least two posts* to this blog.

One post must be a “reading-response post” based on readings assigned for our upcoming class. (Each week on the main course blog, I will post a list of questions about these readings, and you should select one of the reading questions and respond to it directly in your reading-response blog post. This post is due before you come to class each week.)

The other required weekly post should be some update about your small group project (described above). Examples of this type of post might include (in the early weeks of the semester) ideas you have about potential historical figures for your group to focus on and (in the later weeks) reports about some reading you have done, interesting things you have learned about your historical figure, connections or comparisons that you see between some figure we are discussing in class and your own figure, or potential materials that your group might want to circulate to the class for our end-of-semester discussions.

As a group, you may decide that each member will focus on finding sources and learning about a particular aspect of your figure’s life, or will focus on particular kinds of sources. However, each individual member is responsible for publishing a post per week about the project: think of it as a weekly “progress report” on what you’re learning, questions you’re asking, or things about your “legendary American” that puzzle or interest you. There is no firm word limit on these posts, but your target range for your two weekly blog posts should be, at a minimum, 400 words each. When deciding on a writing style, think about your posts as “miniature essays” or brief letters to the editor of a newspaper; that is, these posts don’t have to be as formal as a research paper, but should not be as informal as a posting to a Facebook wall. The main point(s) of your post should be clear.

A short “mock editorial”

This assignment will be due on **November 22** by 4 p.m. Imagine that you are writing an editorial for a local newspaper or for the *Rice Thresher* on the topic of high school history education in the United States. In your editorial, you should address the following question: Should high school history courses focus on some famous historical figures more than on others? Why or why not? (In defending your answer, you are encouraged to draw on readings and specific examples of famous historical figures from the semester. The editorial should be about 3-4 double-spaced, typed pages in length).

Participate in the seminar every week

One of your most important assignments is more general than the other three. Namely, for this seminar to be successful, it is essential that you contribute to our intellectual community in the course. Community is the key word here: by joining this course, you are entering a collective intellectual enterprise with your fellow classmates as well as your professor. All of us will learn more if all of us take responsibility for nurturing that community.

One of the best ways you can do that is by *contributing to in-class discussions during the seminar*, both by making comments or asking questions about the readings, but also by listening attentively and responding to the comments of others. You can also *comment on blog posts* by your fellow group members or classmates on other group blogs; all writers benefit from knowing that someone else read a piece of writing and responded to it in some way, whether the response was agreement, disagreement, or a question that the writer’s post raised.

Consider it your responsibility to regularly monitor, at the very least, the main course blog and your small group’s blog. Sometimes you might contribute to our intellectual community by

sharing with us something you learned or found outside the class that related to course themes; in addition to your required weekly blog posts, for example, *you might post a link or a brief note to your blog* about something you saw that reminded you of class. These are only three examples of the ways you can contribute to intellectual community in the course; your assignment is not to do *all* of these things on a weekly basis, but in every week you should give some evidence of participation in the seminar, perhaps by doing one of the above things.

Finally, it is vital to the success of the course that you *keep up with the weekly readings* and *complete your other assignments on time*; much of our discussion in class will revolve around the assignments and readings that you are doing during the week, so when you don't read or don't complete your assigned weekly posts to the blog on time or don't submit materials by their due dates, you are harming the education of your fellow classmates as well as your own.

Grading Guidelines

Your grade for this course will assess your performance on the above assignments. Over the course of the semester you will receive five numeric grades (measured on the 4.0 grade point scale), which will then be weighted by the following percentages to calculate your overall course grade.

1. Mid-Term Grade on Reading-Response Blog Posts published by October 6 (25%)
2. End-of-Term Grade on Reading-Response Blog Posts published between October 6 and November 17 (25%)
3. Participation in the Seminar (10%)
4. "Mock Editorial" (10%)
5. Individual Grade on Small Group Project (30%)

This last item—the group project grade—will be based equally on your weekly blog posts on your small group project, your presentation to the seminar, and your end-of-term reflection paper; I will give you a provisional grade on October 6 based on your performance on the small group project up to that point, but the only grade that will count towards your final grade is the one given at the end of the semester. Your grade will be based on your work alone, as documented through your weekly posts and reflection paper, and not on the work of your fellow group members.

More detailed rubrics about how these grades will be determined will be distributed in class, and I will provide informal feedback throughout the semester about how you are doing (for example, by posting occasional comments to your posts or by highlighting model work on the main course blog). If you have additional questions about how you are doing or would like some more extensive feedback prior to or after receiving grades on your assignments, you can always make an appointment with me to discuss your work.

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Schedule

This page contains a schedule of readings and major assignments for our class. Other short readings may be recommended or assigned during the course of the semester, but these are the readings that you must complete for this course. Please be sure to complete the readings listed *before* coming to class on the days for which they are assigned. Links to readings that will only be available on the Rice network are followed by "Rice only" in parentheses.

WEEK 1: AUGUST 24 No assigned readings**WEEK 2: AUGUST 31** Sacagawea

- “Sacagawea” entry in American National Biography (Rice only)
- Thomas P. Slaughter, “Porivo’s Story,” in *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness* (New York, 2003), pp. 86-113 (available on OWL-Space)
- Donna Barbie, “Sacajawea: The Making of a Myth,” in *Sifters: Native American Women’s Lives*, ed. Theda Perdue (New York, 2001), pp. 60–76 (available on OWL-Space)
- Scott E. Casper, “Revising the National Pantheon: The American National Biography and Early American History,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (April 2001), pp. 449-463 (Rice only)

WEEK 3: SEPTEMBER 7 George Washington

- Francois Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington’s Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2006), pp. 1-145, 233-239 (required book)
- Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of George Washington; with Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself, and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen* (1840 edition on Google Books), Chapter 2 (pp. 9-20), Chapter 13 (pp. 188-204) and Chapter 16 (pp. 232-242)
- William M. Thayer, *The Farmer Boy, and How He Became Commander-in-Chief* (1863 edition on Google Books), pp. 41-45

NOTE: Please plan to attend a free lunch with Francois Furstenberg on **Monday, September 12** at **noon** at the Cohen House.

WEEK 4: SEPTEMBER 14 Davy Crockett

- “Davy Crockett” entry in American National Biography (Rice only)
- Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, “King of the Wild Frontier,” in *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory* (New York, 2001), pp. 230-253 (available on OWL-Space)
- Margaret J. King, “The Recycled Hero: Walt Disney’s Davy Crockett,” in *Davy Crockett: The Man, the Legend, the Legacy, 1786-1986*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville, 1985), pp. 137-158 (available on OWL-Space)

NOTE: By September 14, your group should settle on the historical figure that you will be studying for your small group project.

WEEK 5: SEPTEMBER 21 Davy Crockett

- James E. Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett’s Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution* (New York, 2005), entire (required book)

WEEK 6: SEPTEMBER 28 John Brown

- “John Brown of Osawatomie,” by John Greenleaf Whittier (PDF)
- “The Hero’s Heart,” by Lydia Maria Child (PDF)
- Wendell Phillips, “The Burial of John Brown,” in *Speeches, Lectures and Letters*, pp. 289-293
- Unsigned woodcut illustrating Whittier’s poem (1866)
- Lithograph published by Currier & Ives (b&w | color), after a painting by Louis Ransom (1863).

- Thomas Noble, “[John Brown’s Blessing](#)”, print of an oil painting (1867)
- Another [lithograph](#) published by Currier & Ives (1870)
- [Etching](#) by Thomas Hovenden (1885)
- “A Triumphant March,” in James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (1860), pp. 396-404
- Thomas Drew, *The John Brown Invasion: An Authentic History of the Harpers Ferry Tragedy ...* (1860), [p. 67](#)
- Richard D. Webb, *The Life and Letters of Captain John Brown* (1861), [pp. 317-318](#)
- Cecil D. Eby, Jr., “[Whittier’s ‘Brown of Osawatomie.’”](#) *New England Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (December 1960), pp. 452-461.
- Paul Finkelman, “Manufacturing Martyrdom: The Antislavery Response to John Brown’s Raid,” in *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid*, ed. Finkelman (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 41-66 (available on [OWL-Space](#))
- Zoe Trodd, “[Writ in Blood: John Brown’s Charter of Humanity, The Tribunal of History, and the Thick Link of American Political Protest](#),” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 1 (2007), 1-29.

WEEK 7: OCTOBER 5 Harriet Tubman

- Milton C. Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (Durham, 2007), pp. 1-130 (required book)
- Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman (1869 edition on Google Books)*, pp. 1-53

WEEK 8: OCTOBER 12:

- Sernett, *Harriet Tubman*, pp. 131-319 (required book)
- Find and read a short children’s book on Harriet Tubman

WEEK 9: OCTOBER 19 John Henry

- Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of an American Legend* (New York, 2006), entire (required book)

WEEK 10: OCTOBER 26 Bandits!

- Richard White, “[Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border: American Social Bandits](#),” *Western Historical Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (October 1981), pp. 387-408 (Rice only)
- Claire Bond Potter, “‘It’s Death for Bonnie and Clyde’: Romance, Bandit Identity and the Rise of Celebrity Bandits,” in *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, 1998), Chapter 4, pp. 75-105 (Rice only) **NOTE: If for some reason you can’t access this chapter online, the book is also on desk reserve at Fondren Library. Ask for it at the circulation desk.**
- Elliott J. Gorn, “Re-memembering John Dillinger,” in *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History: Past, Present and Future*, ed. James W. Cook, Lawrence B. Glickman and Michael O’Malley (Chicago, 2008), pp. 153-184 (available on [OWL-Space](#))
- Nancy F. Cott, “Bonnie and Clyde,” in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. Ted Mico, John Miller-Monzon, and David Rubel (New York, 1995), pp. 220-223 (available on [OWL-Space](#))

WEEK 11: NOVEMBER 2 Elvis!

- Ron Rosenbaum, “Among the Believers,” *New York Times*, 24 September 1995 (available on [OWL-Space](#))
- Alice Walker, “Nineteen Fifty-Five,” from *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories* (1981), pp. 3-20 (available on [OWL-Space](#))
- Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith and Image* (Kansas, 1999), pp. 1-31, 163-211 (available on [OWL-Space](#))
- Michael T. Bertrand, “Elvis Presley and the Politics of Popular Memory,” in *Southern Cultures* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2007), pp. 62-86 (available on [OWL-Space](#))

NOTE: Please make plans to attend a free evening lecture by author [Tony Horwitz](#) about John Brown.

WEEK 12: NOVEMBER 9 William Marsh Rice – Readings TBA**WEEK 13: NOVEMBER 16** Perspectives on Legendary Americans

- James W. Loewen, “Handicapped by History: The Process of Hero-Making,” from *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York, 1995), pp. 9-27 (available on [OWL-Space](#))
- Sam Wineburg, “Goodbye, Columbus,” [Smithsonian.com](#)
- Michael Frisch, “American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in Empirical Iconography,” in *Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989), pp. 1130-1155 (Rice only)
- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “How Betsy Ross Became Famous,” *Common-Place* 8, no. 1 (October 2007)
- Stephanie Simon, “The Culture Wars’ New Front: U.S. History Classes in Texas,” *Wall Street Journal*, 14 July 2009

NOTE: Your small group must distribute materials for discussion to the entire seminar by **November 16**. Also, your “mock editorial” assignment is due on **Tuesday, November 22, by 4 p.m.**

WEEK 14: NOVEMBER 23 Discussion of Materials Prepared by Student Groups**WEEK 15: NOVEMBER 30** Discussion of Materials Prepared by Student Groups

NOTE: Your final reflection post on your small group project is due by 5 p.m. on **December 14**.