HIST 680 - The Prelude to War: 1859 - 1861

Course Description

This course focuses on the secession crisis that led to the outbreak of the Civil War, starting with the aftermath of John Brown’s raid on the United States Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), on October 16, 1859, and continuing up to the firing of the first shots at Fort Sumter, in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, April 12, 1861. Students read and discuss early newspaper accounts of the events of the secession crisis, contemporary opinions, and historical accounts, exploring how and why interpretations of the secession crisis have changed over the decades since the Civil War. Students apply what they learn to become historians of the secession crisis that led to the Civil War.

Course Scope

From abolitionist John Brown’s execution to the outbreak of the American Civil War, national events were tumultuous and explosive. Brown’s ill-fated strike against enslavement of African Americans sparked talk of war, and secession throughout the United States. Viewed from the perspective of more than one hundred forty-five years after the end of what is still by far America’s bloodiest war, the actions of the secessionists seem almost irrational and generate a multiplicity of questions. Why did secession seem like a necessary solution for southern defenders of slavery? Was secession a spontaneous mass movement or was it engineered by political activists? Who favored secession and why? Who opposed it in the South? What were northern attitudes toward secession? Why did secession occur when it did? What do the events of the secession crisis tell us about the American people and the American political system?

This course combines scholarly readings with careful study of online primary source documents and videos to help students develop a range of tools that will enable them to understand more effectively the development of the secession crisis, from John Brown’s shocking action at Harpers Ferry to the opening gun at Fort Sumter almost eighteen months later. It also enables them to understand the significance of the coming Civil War within the larger story of American history.

Students participate in discussion groups and are responsible for collecting information from selected readings about a given area each week. Students respond to questions to be discussed online after experiencing an activity that is designed to bring forth meaning from the key evidence in the story of the coming of the Civil War.

This course seeks to help students better understand what history is, how historians conduct research, and how both the times in which historians live and theories about historical change can shape historical inquiry. It also seeks to shed light on how people remember both individually and collectively.
This course is also designed for teachers who coach and advise students as they research and ultimately create an educational project idea for use in their classroom. By participating in this study of the secession crisis, participants will explore and add to growing sources of educational information on the Internet for students by students.

In sum, the features of this course offer creative approaches to teaching, with particular emphasis on innovative ways of analyzing the historical records and integrating technology. At the conclusion of this course, students will reflect on how new approaches to our history, active learning techniques, and Web-based resources and new media will impact their teaching and students.

Texts: