

America's First Civil Rights Movement: From the Revolution to Reconstruction

Professor Kate Masur

Spring 2023

Course Description

This course explores the little-known movement for racial equality in the free states from the nation's founding to the Civil War and Reconstruction. While the abolitionist movement is a familiar part of many history classes, we've known far less about activists' fight for racial justice in the free states themselves. The course emphasizes African Americans' leadership in this struggle; the interpenetration of race, class, and gender oppression; the complex history of citizenship; the changing political landscape of the antebellum United States; and the US Constitution.

We'll explore both small-scale histories and large structural changes. For instance, we'll look at free Black sailors from places like Boston and New York, whose work brought them to southern ports where they were incarcerated simply because they were Black. We'll also delve into the movement against racist "black laws" in Midwestern states like Ohio and Illinois, examining Black political mobilization and the work of White allies who fought for racial justice. Students will also emerge with an enhanced understanding of the US Constitution, American federalism (that is, the division of power among local, state, and national governments), and the Reconstruction amendments.

Course Readings

1. Masur, Kate. *Until Justice Be Done: America's First Civil Rights Movement, from the Revolution to Reconstruction*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2021.
2. Baumgartner, Kabria. *In Pursuit of Knowledge: Black Women and Educational Activism in Antebellum America*. New York: NYU Press, 2019. ([This reading can be accessed through the Musselman Library with your Gettysburg College credentials.](#))

Course Requirements

- Contribute to nine discussion boards
- Complete five short papers (1–2 pages)
- Participate in at least three Q&As
- Complete a 15-page paper or project of appropriate rigor

Learning Objectives

1. Develop content knowledge of the movement for racial equality in the free states from the American Revolution to Reconstruction
2. Deepen understanding of the US Constitution and federalism
3. Practice and hone skills in reading and interpreting primary sources

Class Schedule

Week 1: February 9: Gradual Emancipation & the Emergence of Free Soil

Readings

- Masur, Introduction and historiographic note.
- Sarah L. H. Gronningsater, "Born Free in the Master's House: Children and Gradual Emancipation in the Early American North," in *Child Slavery before and after Emancipation: An Argument for Child-centered Slavery Studies* edited by Anna Mae Duane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 123–149.
- "U.S. Constitution," accessed on National Archives. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 1 module.)
- "Declaration of Independence," accessed on National Archives. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 1 module.)
- An Act for the Gradual Emancipation of Slavery (New York, 1799) (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 1 module.)

Assignments

- Discussion Board One
-

Week 2: February 16: The "Black Laws" of the Midwest and the Police Powers of the States

Readings

- Masur, Chapter 1.
- William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996), Introduction and Chapter 6.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two
- Short Paper One due February 22
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Week 3: February 23: Questions of U.S. Constitutional Citizenship

Readings

- Masur, Chapter 2.
- "Article Four, U.S. Constitution," accessed on the National Constitution Center. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 3 module.)
- "Case of Gilbert Horton," *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Aug. 23, 1826. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 3 module.)
- "The Case of Gilbert Horton," *New York Commercial Advertiser*, Sept. 2, 1826. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 3 module.)
- "City of Washington," *Freedom's Journal*, Nov. 16, 1827. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 3 module.)

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three
- Final Paper/Project Question due March 1
 - In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the question your final paper or project will attempt to answer. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic, a brief description of your research plan, and a justification for why your particular paper or project is worth pursuing.

Week 4: March 2: Fighting for Repeal of the Black Laws

Readings

- Masur, Chapter 3.
- Theodore Dwight Weld, letter, March 9, 1826, *Weld-Grimke Papers*, I, 273. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 4 module.)
- "Convention of Colored People (1837 Petition of Black Citizens)," *Philanthropist*, Oct. 17, 1837. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 5 module.)

Assignments

- Discussion Board Four
 - Short Paper Two due March 8
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week 5: March 9: Black Women and the Pursuit of Knowledge

Readings

- Baumgartner, Intro, Chapters 1 and 2.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five
- Revised Question and Proposed Bibliography due March 15
 1. Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor's feedback AND
 2. Create an annotated bibliography containing at least five sources. Each of these sources should be followed by a short paragraph describing the source and what it will contribute to your final paper/project.

Q&A Session One: Thursday, March 9 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 6: March 16: Interstate Struggle: Black Sailors and the Constitution

Readings

- Masur, Chapters 4 and 5.
- Affidavit of Joseph Thompson, published in David Lee Child, *The Despotism of Freedom; Or the Tyranny and Cruelty of American Republican Slave-Masters, Shown to Be the Worst in the World; In a Speech, Delivered ... of the New England Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston: Boston Young Men's Anti-Slavery Association, 1833). (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 6 module.)
- Excerpt from John G. Palfrey, "What Has the North to Do with It? —Outrages on Northern Citizens," from *Papers on the Slave Power* (Boston: Merrill, Cobb & Co., 1846). (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 6 module.)

Assignments

- Discussion Board Six
 - Short Paper Three due March 22
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week 7: March 23: Political Struggle: Elections and their Consequences

Readings

- Masur, Chapter 6.
- Corey Brooks, *Liberty Power: Antislavery Third Parties and the Transformation of American Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), Chapters 3 and 4. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 7 module.)
- "Address to the Citizens of Ohio," 1843, accessed on the Colored Conventions Project. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 7 module.)

Assignments

- Discussion Board Seven
- Short Paper Four due March 29
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.

Q&A Session Two: Thursday, March 23 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 8: March 30: The Question of Equal School Rights

Readings

- Baumgartner, Chapters 4, 5, and Conclusion.
- "Triumph of the Right," *Liberator*, Feb. 20, 1846. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 8 module.)
- Benjamin Roberts, "Equal School Rights," *Liberator*, June 14, 1850. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 8 module.)
- "*Roberts v. City of Boston*," 1849, accessed on Caselaw Access Project. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 8 module.)
- Optional: BC Law School web exhibit on Robert Morris, <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/law/sites/students/library/special-collections/robert-morris.html>.

Assignments

- Paper/Project Preview due April 5
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first five pages of your final paper
 - Project: Submissions of the project preview will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.

Q&A Session Three: Thursday, March 30 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 9: April 6: Crises of the 1850s and the Rise of the Republican Party

Readings

- Masur, Chapter 7.
- Excerpts from speeches of Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, and Hezekiah Ford Douglas. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 9 module.)
- Explore website: *Black Organizing in Pre-Civil War Illinois: Creating Community, Demanding Justice*, <https://coloredconventions.org/black-illinois-organizing/>.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Eight
 - Short Paper Five due April 12
 - Write a response paper: You can respond to the prompt created by your section professor or to one of your own design.
-

Week 10: April 13: The Civil War and the Politics of Racial Equality

Readings

- Masur, Chapter 8.
- Kate Masur, "Color Was a Bar to the Entrance: African American Activism and the Question of Social Equality in Lincoln's White House," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 2017): 1–22. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 10 module.)

Assignments

- Rough Draft due April 19
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first ten pages (at minimum) of your final paper.
 - Project: Submissions of the project rough draft will differ from project to project according to type. Determine an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in with your section professor.

Q&A Session Four: Thursday, April 13 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 11: April 20: To Restrain the Power of the States

Readings

- Masur, Chapter 9.
- "13th Amendment," December 6, 1865, accessed on the Constitution Center. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 11 module.)
- "14th Amendment," June 13, 1866, accessed on Immigration History. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 11 module.)

- "15th Amendment," February 3, 1870, accessed on the Constitution Center. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 11 module.)
- Excerpt from "Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va., to the People of the United States," 1865, accessed on the National Humanities Center. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 11 module.)
- Excerpts from speeches of Sen. Jacob Howard and Rep. Thaddeus Stevens.

Assignments

- Discussion Board Nine

Q&A Session Five: Thursday, April 20 - 8:00-9:30 p.m. ET

Week 12: April 27: Enduring Challenges

- Masur, Epilogue.
- "*Plessy v. Ferguson*," 1896, accessed on Justia US Supreme Court. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 12 module.)
- Martin Luther King, Jr., "Recognition and Opportunity," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 6, 1964. (A link to this reading can be found in the Week 12 module.)
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Press Conference," 1963, watch ~4:58-8:54 and 11:57-15:03, accessed on C-Span. (A link to this video can be found in the Week 12 module.)

Assignments

- Final Paper/Project due May 3

Assignment Descriptions

Short Papers

Throughout each term students will complete five short papers. Each of these assignments should be 1–2 pages in length, in 12 pt. font, and double-spaced. Students have the option of responding to a prompt created by their section professor or to one of their own design. Prompts should reflect the themes discussed in course readings.

Discussion Board Posts

Students will respond to nine virtual discussion board posts for each course. Discussion boards are led by the section professor, who will provide an analytical prompt related to course material and instructions for participation. These prompts will give students the opportunity to interact with fellow students and share their interpretation of course themes.

Question-and-Answer Sessions

Throughout the semester the lead scholar of each course will conduct five Q&As. Students **MUST** attend at least three of these sessions for each course they are taking. **In order to receive credit for attending each Q&A, students must complete a 1–2 paragraph evaluation within 24 hours of participation.** Note: If students cannot attend three of the five Q&A sessions, they may receive credit by viewing archived Q&As and completing a 1–2 page review of topics covered for each missed Q&A.

Final Paper/Project

For the final assignment of each term, students will choose to complete either a 15-page research paper or a research project. The research paper can be a traditional position paper that uses original research to prove a thesis statement or a historiography paper that critically examines how American historians have interpreted the same event differently and why shifts in historical debates may have occurred. Research projects are a public-education tool designed for the general population, teachers, and/or students of varying ages. Sample projects include (but are not limited to) vodcasts, documentary editing and transcription, podcasts, websites, annotated readers, walking tours, or museum exhibits. Lesson plans *will not* be accepted. A 5-page paper narrative must accompany the project. The section professor must approve research projects.

Both final assignment options require students to ask an open-ended historical question (something that does not have an easy yes or no answer) that they do not yet know the answer to. They will then use the research process (pulling from a variety of resources, mostly primary source documents) to explore that question and create a thesis-driven answer. Regardless of whether students choose to pursue a paper or project, papers and projects are broken down into smaller assignments, or scaffolded, throughout the semester. This method breaks up a large grade into smaller constituent grades and allows students time to incorporate instructor feedback into their assignment.

Scaffolded Assignments

- Final Paper/Project Proposal (2%):

In roughly 1–2 pages, you should outline the main question, topic, or purpose of your final paper or project. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information on and historical context for your topic (answer the questions who, what, where, and when), a brief description of your research plan (this does not need to be very specific, but should outline how many weeks you plan to research, if you need to schedule research trips or if your sources are published or available digitally, and when you plan to begin writing), and a justification for why your particular project or paper is worth pursuing (What is the significance of this topic? What does it add to our historical knowledge? Are you filling a gap that other historians have overlooked, such as considering race, ethnicity, or gender?)

- Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography (3.5%):

This assignment will give you the opportunity to incorporate the feedback you received on the first draft of your proposal. In addition to incorporating your section professor's comments, you will also submit a proposed bibliography listing five sources you plan to use in your research for your final product. Each of these sources should be followed by a brief summary (3–5 sentences) of the source and what it will contribute to your research process.

- Paper or Project Preview (5%):

This will give you the opportunity to show the progress you have made on your final project or paper and get some early-stage feedback from your section professor. For a final paper, this should be roughly the first five pages of what will ultimately be your final submission. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in.

- Rough Draft (10.5%):

For a final paper, this should be, at minimum, the first ten pages of what will ultimately be your final submission. For a final project, determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final submission to turn in.

- Final Product (21%):

Final Paper: Final papers should be at least fifteen pages in length. These can take the form of research papers or historiography papers.

Final Project: Much like the final paper option, a final project is meant to prove that you have mastered the content covered by this course. We encourage you to be creative in your approach to this project, though it should be equivalent in rigor and workload to a final paper.