

Origins of the Civil War

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Course Description

What was the Civil War all about? The answer lies mainly in its origins. This course examines various aspects of what historians call “The Crisis of the 1850s,” the crucial decade that ended in the secession of eleven slave states from the Union. Why did they secede? And why didn’t President Lincoln let them go?

This course spans the colonial era through the eve of the Civil War. After reviewing conflicting interpretations of the origins of the Civil War, the course focuses on specific aspects of the crisis of the 1850s, in particular the cascading series of events that led to war: the war with Mexico, the “Compromise” of 1850, the fugitive slave crisis, the struggle over Kansas, the *Dred Scott* decision, the collapse of the Whig Party, the rise of the Republican Party, the catastrophic fissure of the Democratic Party, and finally the election of Abraham Lincoln and the secession crisis. No one methodology can adequately account for the origins of the Civil War—it requires an understanding of economic, social, political, and cultural history.

Lecture Videos

This course consists of approximately 12 hours of instruction presented by Professor Oakes, split into 24 lecture videos ranging from 20 minutes to 30 minutes in duration. Below are the lecture titles and major themes as identified by Professor Oakes. The videos provide the content needed to answer the quiz questions.

1. “Historians versus the Civil War” (2 Videos)
2. “The New Nation: Half Slave, Half Free” (2 Videos)
3. “Slavery in the Early Republic” (2 Videos)
4. “The Missouri Crises: 1819–1821” (2 Videos)

5. “The Slave Power” (2 Videos)
6. “Dueling Economies” (2 Videos)
7. “The Antislavery Project” (2 Videos)
8. “The 1840s” (2 Videos)
9. “The Crisis of the 1850s: Part 1” (2 Videos)
10. “The Crisis of the 1850s: Part 2” (2 Videos)
11. “*Dred Scott* and the Irreconcilable Conflict” (2 Videos)
12. “And the War Came” (2 Videos)

Note: Course lectures were originally recorded for the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s online graduate program. You can disregard references to assignments, other coursework, and the use of content in classrooms discussed in the videos. They are not part of the History U program.

Resources

Although not required as a part of the course, you can select the Resources link for information about the primary and secondary resources, videos, and websites referred to in the course if you want to learn more. All quiz questions are drawn from the lectures.

Quizzes

The purpose of the short quizzes is to review your knowledge of the material covered in the lectures. No outside reading is required to answer the questions successfully. After watching the video, select and complete the corresponding quiz to test your knowledge and qualify for the Certificate of Completion.

Certificate of Completion

After finishing your course by watching all of the lectures, scoring 80% or higher on each quiz, and completing the History U Course Feedback Survey, you will be able to download your certificate.

Please email historyschool@gilderlehrman.org with any questions.