

# **HIST152: Slavery, Law, & Power in Early America and the British Empire**

Summer 2026

Dr. Michael Becker

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Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday, 1-2pm

Taliaferro Hall 2140

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Mr. Zachary Taylor (College Park Academy)

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## **Course Description**

At the core of this course is the establishment, codification, and growth of slavery and the structures supporting it in the British empire and early United States. We will ask how slavery's development and entrenchment relates to other power structures, including absolute monarchy, empire, capitalism, and patriarchy. In part, we'll consider the tensions between these power structures and emerging concepts of human rights, democracy, and the Enlightenment. And we will examine at length efforts to challenge and contest slavery and its underlying principles of racial inferiority, hierarchy, and dominion.

This course emerges in conversation with the innovative digital humanities project based at UMD, Slavery, Law & Power in the British Empire and the Early United States. The project aims to create a digital critical edition of key primary source documents, many of which are otherwise scattered in archives around the world. It prioritizes an open access framework, facilitating direct engagement with evidence, pairing transcriptions with original images. We will use this project, its methods, tools, and features, as an entry point into the world of digital humanities. You will experiment with a variety of different skills, including hands-on archival research, paleography, coding, and web design, in this context. We will also look a bit at other digital humanities projects dealing with these issues in different ways. As a final project for this class, you will create your own critical edition of a key primary source or set of sources (depending on length) related to the class themes, including a critical introduction, transcription, and annotations. Excellent final projects will be considered for publication on the site with full credit to their creators.

## **Learning Objectives**

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- **Locate, read, and analyze key primary source documents, with attention to their author, audience, context, and purpose.**
- **Read early modern handwriting (paleography) on at least a basic level**

- **Develop a working familiarity with relevant digital humanities databases, concepts and tools**
- **Describe how slavery became established, codified, and entrenched in the British empire - and how it was eventually abolished.**
- **Analyze the relationships between slavery, monarchy, capitalism, and empire.**
- **Critically engage ideas around human rights, democracy, and the Enlightenment and the context of their emergence.**

**Note: This syllabus is a living document, and I reserve the right to make alterations as the semester goes on. All alterations will be clearly announced in class and via e-mail.**

### **Assignments:**

Small Research and Digital Humanities Assignments (30%): Students will do a number of small assignments aimed at familiarizing themselves with research methods and digital humanities tools. Many of these assignments will take place in class, but will also include some homework. Examples will include practicing early modern English paleography, experimenting with metadata, basic website construction in Wordpress, etc.

Discussion Board Posts (30%): Each week, students will write a short reading response post (about 150-200 words) responding to one or more of the week's readings. Posts will be due each week by Friday night at midnight. Each student will also be responsible for responding to at least two classmates' posts.

Document Edition or Website Feature (40%): For the final assignment, students will work in small groups to create a digital critical edition of a document or package of documents related to class themes. Each assignment will include: 1) transcription of document, 2) annotations providing key contextual information for the document, 3) a 750 word critical introduction, 4) at least 4 guiding questions suitable for classroom discussion. Alternatively, students may work on designing a new interactive feature for the website, such as a map or timeline. In this case, they will also be asked to write an introduction and guiding questions.

### **Grading:**

I use the following grading system when converting numerical grades into letter grades.

100.00 - 97.00 A+  
 93.00 - 96.99 A  
 90.00 - 92.99 A-

87.00 -89.99 B+  
83.00 - 86.99 B  
80.00 - 82.99 B-  
77.00 - 79.99 C+  
73.00 -76.99 C  
70.00 -72.99 C-  
67.00 -69.99 D+  
63.00 -66.99 D  
60.00 -62.99 D-  
59.99 and lower: F (failing)

### **Course Materials**

Students do not need to purchase any books or other course materials. All course readings will be either available online at [slaverylawpower.org](http://slaverylawpower.org) or posted to the course ELMS page.

### **University Policies**

Policies relevant to Undergraduate Courses are found here:

<http://ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>. Topics that are addressed in these various policies include academic integrity, student and instructor conduct, accessibility and accommodations, attendance and excused absences, grades and appeals, copyright and intellectual property. I assume you are familiar with these policies, and this syllabus provides additional clarification on these issues as they apply directly to this class.

### **Academic Integrity**

It is expected that every assignment you turn in for this course reflects your own original work, and that you properly attribute any ideas, content, or phrasing from other works or other people. You may receive outside assistance from the writing center on any written work for this class. Any assignment which reflects cheating, plagiarism, or other violations of the honor code will receive an automatic zero.

### **Accessibility and Accommodations**

Any student who feels they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a learning, psychiatric, physical, or chronic health diagnosis should contact Accessibility and Disability Service at (301) 314 7682, or [adsfrontdesk@umd.edu](mailto:adsfrontdesk@umd.edu). Once you have a letter from ADS, please meet with me to discuss specific accommodations for this class; I am happy to work with you to make this class accessible for you. I will consider short term adjustments if the ADS process is taking too long.

### **Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy**

The use or incorporation of any AI-generated content (from ChatGPT, Dall-e, etc.) is not permitted unless the assignment specifically calls for it. In those cases, both the AI search engine and the exact query used must be cited.

## **Attendance Policy**

Regular class attendance is crucial to learning key skills and content. Nonetheless, I recognize that life happens and things from illness to family emergencies to sports engagements may require an occasional absence. Towards that end, I will excuse up to two absences without documentation. Any absences beyond the second require written documentation (submitted by the second class session after the student returns from their absence) to be excused.

## **Non-Discrimination Policy**

The University Non-Discrimination Policy prohibits discrimination and harassment on the basis of “protected classes.” Protected classes include: race, color, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, age, national origin, political affiliation, physical or mental disability, religion, protected veteran status, genetic information, and any other legally protected class. The Non-Discrimination Policy also prohibits retaliation against any individual who files a complaint or participates in an investigation under the Policy.

[The Office of Civil Rights & Sexual Misconduct \(OCRSM\)](#) responds to all complaints of discrimination, harassment, and retaliation based on a protected class. To file a report, go to the [OCRSM website](#), click “File a Report,” and then complete the online discrimination report form. For more information, call [301-405-1142](tel:301-405-1142), or email [civilrights@umd.edu](mailto:civilrights@umd.edu). Walk-ins are also welcome, the OCRSM is located at 4200 Lehigh Rd, Susquehanna Hall 3101.

## **Sexual Harassment and Misconduct**

The University of Maryland Policy on Sexual Harassment & Other Sexual Misconduct prohibits a broad range of behaviors including, but not limited to, sexual harassment, sexual assault, stalking, and dating and domestic violence. The Sexual Misconduct Policy also prohibits retaliation against any individual who files a report or formal complaint or participates in an investigation under the Policy.

The Office of Civil Rights & Sexual Misconduct (OCRSM) responds to all complaints of sexual misconduct. To file a report, go to the [OCRSM website](#) and click “File a Report,” then complete the online sexual misconduct report form. For more information or assistance, please contact OCRSM by phone at [301-405-1142](tel:301-405-1142), or email [titleixcoordinator@umd.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@umd.edu). Walk-ins are also welcome, the OCRSM is located at 4200 Lehigh Rd, Susquehanna Hall 3101.

## **Reaching the Professor**

I look forward to getting to know each of you over the course of the semester and hope to tailor the course to address your interests and concerns. If you have questions you think are relevant to the class as a whole, feel free to pose your question in class. For questions relevant to your individual performance or that you don’t feel comfortable sharing with the class as a whole, I encourage you to see me before or after class, during office hours, or contact me via e-mail. I strive to answer all e-mails within 24 hours of their receipt.

## **Lateness Policy**

Assignments must be submitted by midnight on their due dates. Unless you have been granted explicit permission for an extension, 20% will be deducted from your final assignment grade for each day it is late.

### **Technology**

Computers are permitted in class, with the expectation that they will be used for class purposes, such as taking notes or consulting electronic copies of course readings. I encourage you to close out any distractions and mute notifications before our class sessions. I reserve the right to limit technology use for students who are routinely off-task or are using technology in ways that substantially distract other students' learning (i.e. engaging in online shopping, watching a movie or sports event in class, etc.).

### **Office Hours**

I will hold regular office hours on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 1-2pm. If you ever feel confused by the readings, are concerned about your score on an assignment, or are just curious to discuss the course content in further depth, please feel encouraged to attend office hours. Holding office hours is part of my job, and I would be happy to meet with you. If you are unavailable during my regularly scheduled office hours, please send an e-mail to request an appointment. I usually need at least 24 hours advance notice to schedule an appointment outside of my usual office hours.

### **Creating an Open and Inclusive Learning Community**

My goal as your professor is to create a safe learning environment that fosters open and honest dialogue. Everyone plays a part in creating a respectful, welcoming, and inclusive environment. To that end, we should all strive to treat each other with honor, dignity, and respect. Disagreement and debate have an important place in the educational process, but please pursue disagreement without aggression and personal attack. Please trust the good intent of others but also recognize that some words and ideas land differently based on people's different personal experiences, backgrounds, and histories.

### **Tips for Critical Reading and Writing**

It is not enough in this course to simply read the text on the page. Understanding the always shifting terrain of historical debates requires critical reading and critical thinking. Below is a set of eight questions which, when posed of each reading assignment, will guide you to the key features that shape each author's argument. If asked systematically, these questions will also allow you to put the different authors into conversation with one another and open up new understandings about how the field has developed.

These questions also make great starting points in preparing for written assignments, and will make it much easier to put each week's selections into dialogue with previous readings.

1. What is the author's purpose?
2. What key questions does the author raise?

3. What information, data, and evidence does the author present?
4. What is the author's conceptual framework? (In other words, how does the author conceive of the world working?)
5. What are the author's key conclusions?
6. What are the author's primary assumptions? (Assumptions are those ideas or understandings we accept without question.)
7. What is the author's viewpoint or perspective?
8. What are the (unstated) implications of the author's reasoning?

### **Monday, July 13: Introduction to course and syllabus; Defining Slavery and Freedom**

Introduction to Paleography

Introduction to Databases

- Richard Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1972] 2000). Preface & Chapter 1

### **Tuesday, July 14: 17<sup>th</sup> Century Britain and the Emergence of Britain's American Empire**

- Brewer, Holly. "Not "Beyond the line": Reconsidering Law and Power and the Origins of Slavery in England's Empire in the Americas." *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20, no. 4 (2022): 619-639. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/eam.2022.0022>.
- [James I - True Law of Free Monarchies](#)
- Barbados 1636 Hawley's Decree (soon to be posted on [slaverylawpower.org](http://slaverylawpower.org))
- [1632 Charter of Maryland](#)

Paleography Session

Database Introduction: Colonial State Papers

### **Wednesday, July 15: The English Revolution**

Hornbake Library - Special Collections Visit

- Excerpts from Eikon Basilike (soon to be posted on [slaverylawpower.org](http://slaverylawpower.org))
- [Excerpts from Eikonoklastes](#)

Paleography Practice with Hornbake Materials

### **Thursday, July 16: The Interregnum**

- Carla Pestana. "A West Indian Colonial Governor's Advice: Henry Ashton's 1646 Letter to the Earl of Carlisle." *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2003): 382-421
- [Act Abolishing the Kingly Office](#)
- Excerpts from accounts of Prince Rupert's Voyage (soon to be posted on [slaverylawpower.org](http://slaverylawpower.org))

Paleography Practice

Database Introduction: Early English Books Online

**Friday, July 17: Digital Humanities Practicum** (introduction to key concepts, training on basics of software & technical tools used by Slavery Law & Power project)

### **Monday, July 20: Stuart Restoration**

- [Barbados Slave Code](#)
- [Jamaica Slave Code](#)
- [Royal African Company Charter](#)

Paleography Practice

Activity with Slave Voyages Database

### **Tuesday, July 21: Reaction to the Stuarts**

- Holly Brewer. "Slavery-Entangled Philosophy." *Aeon*. <https://aeon.co/essays/does-lockes-entanglement-with-slavery-undermine-his-philosophy>
- [Butts v. Penny](#)
- [Morgan Godwyn's Trade Preferr'd Before Religion](#)

Paleography Practice

Activity with Colonial America Database

### **Wednesday, July 22: The Glorious Revolution**

- Steve Pincus, "The Revolution of 1688-1689: The First Modern Revolution." in *England's Glorious Revolution, 1688-1689: A Brief History with Documents*. (New York: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2005)
- [English Bill of Rights](#)
- [James Tyrell - Bibliotheca Politica](#)
- [Dominion of New England documents](#)

Paleography Practice

### **Thursday, July 23: Whig Moments**

- [Chamberlain v. Harvey](#)
- [Samuel Sewall's \*The Selling of Joseph\*](#)

Paleography Practice

**Friday, July 24: Field Trip** (Optional but strongly encouraged) to Library of Congress & National Museum of African American History & Culture

**Monday, July 27: Tory Reactions**

- [Queen Anne's Speech on the Assiento](#)
- Royal African Company Report (soon to be posted to [slaverylawpower.org](http://slaverylawpower.org))

Paleography Practice

**Tuesday, July 28: Consolidating Empire**

- Jack Greene. "Liberty, Slavery, and the Transformation of British Identity in the Eighteenth Century West Indies." *Slavery & Abolition* 21, no. 1 (2000): 1-31
- 1736 Antigua Slave Rebellion report (soon to be posted to [slaverylawpower.org](http://slaverylawpower.org))
- Jamaica Maroon Treaties (soon to be posted to [slaverylawpower.org](http://slaverylawpower.org))

Paleography Practice

**Wednesday, July 29: Revolutionary Atlantics**

- [Somerset v. Steuart](#)
- [Declaration of Independence \(Jefferson's draft\)](#)
- [Massachusetts Petitions](#)

Paleography Practice

**Thursday, July 30:**

**Thursday, July 30: Revolutionary Atlantics, Part II**

- Haitian Declaration of Independence
- Additional selection to be determined

**Friday, July 31: Class Presentations of Final Projects / Wrap-up Discussions**