



US History: Course Syllabus

Below you'll find a sampling of some of the most significant topics covered in this course. (It's not even close to comprehensive.) I've provided fuller details for Year 1, and kept Year 2 shorter for now, but do reach out if you have questions about it—I'm happy to discuss!

A note on pacing: instead of setting a strict schedule of topics, I adjust as needed to each group of students. If they need more time on something, we will take the time, and if they are all already familiar with a particular topic, we can speed up. As a result, even the divide between the years is an approximation. I expect to end Year 1 somewhere around the Civil War, but please read what's below as something closer to an intention than a commitment.

Year One

Intro and Background

To 1600

The course opens well before the first British settlers reached the shores of America. We begin by surveying key topics from the history of Europe generally, and Britain specifically, so that by the time we make our way to the stories of Jamestown and Massachusetts, students have the context needed to understand not only what happened but *why*.

Topics include:

- Voyages to America
- Early European settlement
- British political history
- Protestant Reformation and European religious wars
- Divine right of kings vs. limited monarchy

Example primary source: excerpts from the Magna Carta

The Colonies

1607~1750

Jamestown and Massachusetts were founded for different reasons by different kinds of people: one mainly motivated by profit, the other by religion. We see how each of these colonies took root, and we explore the distinct economies and cultures that emerged as



two colonies became thirteen. We also see the beginnings of several long-running historical threads established: the origin and nature of slavery in America, the economic and political relationship between the colonies and Britain, and the Enlightenment ideas that would one day inspire the American Revolution and the United States government.

Topics include:

- Jamestown and Massachusetts Bay Colonies
- Development of the thirteen colonies
- Cultural and economic differences between the colonial regions
- Indentured servitude and slavery
- Mercantilism and the Navigation Acts
- The Dominion of New England and the Glorious Revolution
- The Salem Witch Trials
- The Enlightenment and John Locke

Example primary source: excerpts from John Smith's *The Generall Historie of Virginia*

Conflicts in the Colonies

~1735-1774

The decision to declare independence was not a hasty one; it followed many decades of increasing tension between the colonies and Britain. We explore this tension through a series of increasingly high-stakes conflicts, seeking to understand from both sides: why Britain saw their actions as perfectly reasonable and why the colonists came to see them as tyrannical. Underneath this, we see the evolution of revolutionary ideas: how and why the colonists moved from demanding their "rights as Englishmen" to demanding their John Locke-inspired "natural rights," and why that shift mattered. The goal: students will understand phrases like "no taxation without representation" not as slogans, but as philosophical arguments.

Topics include:

- The John Peter Zenger trial
- The French and Indian War
- The Stamp Act
- The Boston Massacre
- The Boston Tea Party
- The Coercive/Intolerable Acts
- The First Continental Congress

Example primary source: Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech



Rebellion and Revolution

1775-1787

The American Revolution wasn't won through military victories alone. Two critical wars of persuasion had to be won, too: one to convince the American people themselves to endure the hardships of war, and another to persuade foreign nations to provide much-needed support. Having declared themselves independent, each colony—now a state—faced a choice: what sort of government would they have? And what relationship would the colonies have to one another? We end with an in-depth exploration of the Articles of Confederation, the challenges that arose under it, and the heated debate about whether the benefits of a stronger national government would outweigh the risks.

Topics include:

- Battles and strategies of the Revolutionary War
- Debates at the Second Continental Congress
- Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*: John Locke for the farmers
- The Declaration of Independence
- State constitutions and
- The Articles of Confederation
- Shays' Rebellion
- The Northwest Ordinance
- Debt and Devaluation

Example primary sources: Excerpts from *Common Sense*; the Declaration of Independence; the Articles of Confederation

A Republic...

1787-1809

We spend roughly the first half of this section of the course on the Constitution itself: not just the document, which we do read and analyze, but also the debates at the Constitutional Convention, what compromises were made and why, and some of the most interesting proposals that were rejected. As always, historical debates are approached from the perspective of people who lived them—seeing not only the arguments that won, but also the most interesting and significant arguments that lost. (For example: why did many intelligent, thoughtful delegates to the Constitutional Convention consider the Bill of Rights to be not only unnecessary, but also dangerous?) After seeing the Constitution through the ratification process, we follow the first few presidencies as they sort out what it means in practice.

Topics include:



- The Constitutional Convention and the debate about ratification
- The Constitution and Bill of Rights
- George Washington's precedent-setting presidency
- The emergence of political parties
- The French Revolution and American neutrality
- The Alien and Sedition Acts
- The Louisiana Purchase
- The Embargo Act

Example primary sources: The Constitution and Bill of Rights; excerpts from Federalist and Anti-Federalist Papers; George Washington's Farewell Address

...If You Can Keep It

1809-1829

Having built a republic, the job was now to ensure that it could survive and flourish. We see America's second fight against Britain in the War of 1812, demanding full recognition of its independent standing in the world. Meanwhile, the impact of the Industrial Revolution ramped up; exciting new technologies like steam power were developed, and advancements in agriculture brought cash crops to new lands.

Topics include:

- Madison and the War of 1812
- The Industrial Revolution
- The evolution of slavery
- The "Era of Good Feelings" and the end of the Federalist Party
- Relations with Native Americans: treaties and Tecumseh

Example primary source: Thomas Jefferson letter to John Holmes about slavery

Westward Expansion and Jacksonian Democracy

1829-1850

This is a period of expansion: geographically, as Americans push westward, and politically, as states adjust voting rules to allow far more people to participate in choosing their representatives. This is also a period of high drama, including Andrew Jackson's controversial, larger-than-life presidency, the wars that led to the nation's modern borders, and the first attempts at open rebellion by states against the federal government.



Throughout, we see the evolution of the disagreements that would soon lead to the Civil War: the question of states' rights vs. federal power in relation to topics such as tariffs, treaties, and slavery, and the debate about the moral status of slavery itself, as it becomes increasingly clear that it was not on a path, as many of the founders had believed, to fade away on its own.

Topics include:

- The shift toward more expansive democracy
- Tariffs, banks, and the Nullification Crisis
- The Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears
- Technological developments, from steam to train
- The Texas Revolution
- Abolitionism and John C. Calhoun's response
- The Underground Railroad
- The Oregon Trail
- The Mexican-American War
- The Compromise of 1850

Example primary source: Andrew Jackson's veto message

Civil War

1854-1865

By the mid-1850s, compromises can no longer hold the country together. We explore the years leading up to the Civil War in depth, seeing the growing conflict play out in a variety of settings, from the fields of "Bleeding Kansas" to the chambers of the Supreme Court as they issue the infamous *Dred Scott* decision. Using primary sources, students will seek to answer questions that are still sometimes debated today: for example, what were the motivations and goals of each side? What was this war really about? We leave off with the question of how the South will be brought fully back into the nation—a question made far more difficult with the assassination of President Lincoln.

Topics include:

- Bleeding Kansas
- *Dred Scott* and John Brown
- The Secession Crisis
- Key battles and strategies of the Civil War
- Technology and the Civil War: weapons, communications, and photography
- Black and Native American experiences during the Civil War
- The Emancipation Proclamation



- Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

Example primary sources: Gettysburg Address; declarations of secession by several Southern states



Year Two — A Preview

Year Two picks up where Year One ends and proceeds from there toward the present. As mentioned above, the exact transition point from Year One to Year Two, as well as how far we progress into Year Two's content, can vary with each group of students. Also as above, this is not nearly a complete list of the topics that will be covered! If you'd like more information about my approach to anything in particular, please reach out.

Reconstruction (1865-1896): Competing visions of Reconstruction; the Reconstruction Amendments; collapse and the beginnings of Jim Crow

Gilded Age, Progressivism, and the First World War (1870-1919): Industrial transformation, inventors, and economic debates; Adam Smith and Karl Marx; the labor movement and early progressivism; World War I

The Roaring Twenties (1919-1929): The Red Summer, the Great Migration, and the return of the KKK; the First Red Scare; the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance; the Crash of 1929

The Great Depression and the New Deal (1929-1939): What led to the Great Depression, and what it was like to live through; Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal; the end of the Lochner Era; perceptions of the Soviet Union; isolationism and the rise of fascism in Europe

World War II (1939-1945): Why the United States joined the war; key battles; how Americans learned of the Holocaust, and how they reacted; the choice to use the atom bomb; the Nuremberg Trials

The Cold War (1945-1963): Containment, Korea, the arms race, and covert action abroad; McCarthyism and nuclear anxiety at home; the Cuban Missile Crisis and the assassination of John F. Kennedy

Civil Rights and Modern America (1954-1991): The ongoing fight for equal rights, in the courts and on the streets; Vietnam, Watergate, social upheaval and counterculture; stagflation and reactions to the Iranian Revolution; the Reagan Era and the end of the Cold War

Additional topics as time permits:

- **Post-Cold War to the Present (1991-today)**
- **Using History to Understand the World Today**
- **The Future**