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The Newberry Library, founded in 1887, is an independent research library, free and open to the public, located on Chicago's near north side. The Newberry's holdings number more than 1.5 million volumes and 5 million manuscript pages. The collections concern the civilizations of Western Europe and the Americas from the late Middle Ages to the early twentieth century. For more information on the Newberry's holdings, visit www.newberry.org/collections.



New Nation / New Culture

The United States in the Age of
the Early Republic, 1770–1850

Karl Bodmer, "Niagara Falls," from *Maximilian, Prince of Wied, Travels in the Interior of North America in the Years 1832-1834* (Vault oversize Graff 4649 atlas)

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*The Newberry Library
Undergraduate Seminar
Spring 2009*



New Nation/New Culture

The United States in the Age of the Early Republic, 1770–1850

January 13 – May 5, 2009

By 1783, the political independence of the American colonies was assured. But victory at Yorktown did not immediately produce a national identity. A distinctly American identity and an identifiable national culture took somewhat longer to form.

The period between the American Revolution and the Civil War saw the struggle for national organization, the acquisition of territory, the development of new industries, and the blossoming of American arts and letters. Throughout this period of continual growth, the new nation was confronted with the question, what does it mean to be American? There were many competing answers, almost all stressing the uniqueness or novelty of the American experiment. Increasingly, American culture represented a multiplying chorus of voices: Hamiltonian federalists, Jeffersonian democrats, agrarian pioneers, New England textile mill workers, Southern planters, African slaves, and displaced Native Americans.

Focusing on the rise of literary and artistic culture reflected in novels, memoirs, letters, travel narratives, maps, works of visual art and architecture, seminar participants will investigate the connections between the latter cultural artifacts and the republican ideology and political climate of the times. During the first half of the term, the seminar will meet as a group to discuss readings such as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, the journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, among others. We will also study works of visual art, including portraits by John Singleton Copley, Charles Willson Peale, and George Catlin, as well as various drawings, prints, decorative objects, and buildings from the period. All of this study will help to ground participants in the issues of the period and the materials and methods of representing those issues

The second part of the course will involve one-on-one research training as participants devise projects according to their specific interests in the period. The breadth and depth of the Newberry's collections in early American history, literature, and culture will allow students in this seminar to pursue a particularly wide range of research topics. The seminar's faculty, as well as Newberry scholars and staff, will provide experienced guidance into the Library's extraordinary holdings of eighteenth and nineteenth century textual and visual sources. The range of potential topics that one might pursue is vast. In previous versions of this seminar, students researched the foundations of institutions such as specialty libraries or military academies; particular historic events, such as the Red Stick rebellion; particular sociological phenomena, such as the formations of communities of black Catholics in Maryland and Louisiana; and the development of fictional narratives dealing with a common theme such as social unrest or the dangers of frontier life.

In drawing together a wide array of sources under the general rubric of American novelty, we will come to comprehend the ways in which early Americans imagined themselves and their society and culture as vitally new, progressive, and—in some instances—revolutionary. By immersing ourselves in the language, material artifacts, and ideas of this period, we will build a broad, interdisciplinary understanding of a pivotal era in the nation's history. Moreover, by pursuing a more narrowly defined topic in significant depth, students will develop a deeper understanding of the scholarly enterprise and a mastery of their chosen topics.

The Newberry Library Undergraduate Seminar

This seminar is a unique opportunity for Chicago-area undergraduates to explore the humanities at one of America's foremost research libraries. Taught by a team of instructors from sponsoring universities, the seminar is offered each year from January to May and carries the credit of two courses. Seminar topics change each year, but all are related to the Newberry's holdings. Each class is limited to twenty participants who pursue common assignments and individual research projects.

About the Instructors

Larry Howe, Associate Professor of English at Roosevelt, is a literary historian and critic specializing in American literature and culture. He is the author of *Mark Twain and the Novel* (Cambridge, 1998), a contributor to the *Oxford Mark Twain*, and has published on a wide range of topics dealing with American literature and film. In his current work, he is investigating the emergence of the American novel. He was co-leader of the seminar in 1998 and 2004.

Diane Dillon is Assistant Director of Research and Education at the Newberry Library. Her research and teaching interests include American art, architecture, cartography, the history and culture of Chicago, and the history of museums. Her recent publications include essays on the representation of Indians at the 1893 World's Fair, map consumption, and the mapping of the American West.