

# Understanding the Civil War Syllabus

## Course Description

Pop culture portrayals of the American Civil War often show a peaceful country torn asunder by the arrival of the brutal conflict with the bombardment of Fort Sumter. This course is meant to show how the 1850's were not a calm before the storm, but a time of deep civil unrest, political violence, and cultural transformation. We will view this period through the lives of three northern abolitionists: Charles Sumner, John Brown, and Henry David Thoreau. Three men who were ahead of their time, but could not escape the unforgiving world they lived in.

## Discussion

There is a lot of ground to cover during the time we have for our course. For the enjoyment of all registered students I would prefer to hold off discussion until the last fifteen minutes of class. I will also be available after the class has ended each week.

## Course Outline

### *Lecture 1: The Mexican-American War and Civil Disobedience-*

The Mexican-American War was among the most polarizing conflicts in American history. Famous figures like Abraham Lincoln and Henry David Thoreau began their political activism by speaking out against the conflict. Many soldiers who would later go on to win renown in the Civil War received their first experiences of combat in places like Vera Cruz and Palo Alto. A war that the United States won sowed the seeds of the civil war less than two decades later.

### *Lecture 2: Bleeding Kansas-*

Bleeding Kansas was one of the most disastrous internal conflicts the United States has ever known. Only the massive scale of the Civil War that followed it could match the ferocity of the violence taking place in Kansas during the mid-1860's. It was during bleeding Kansas that a man named John Brown first came to prominence.

### *Lecture 3: The Caning of Charles Sumner-*

Charles Sumner was one of the most prominent abolitionist politicians in the antebellum United States. Through fiery speeches he brought attention to the injustices of slavery. However, he also made a lot of enemies in the slaveholding south. Sumner's abolitionist views came at a great personal cost, and the consequences of a particular speech would lay the groundwork for the civil war to come.

### ***Lecture 4: The Transcendentalists and John Brown's Raid***

Learn how John Brown carried out his famous Harper's Ferry Raid with financial support from transcendentalist authors. We'll discuss how a group founded on the principals of self-reliance and pacifism came to support violent revolution against slavery. We will also discuss how this change reflects a growing radicalization in all corners of 1850's America.

### **Instructor Biography**

Connor Monson is a grad student at the University of Illinois pursuing library science and public history. His undergraduate major was in American History with a focus on the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. He has published a senior honors thesis as well as two peer-reviewed articles with the digital history organization 'Sourcelab'. All three articles concern American political movements and parties. He currently serves as Sourcelab's Vice-Chairman. Connor has taught history courses at Parkland College community education for nearly two years. He hopes to one day attain a PhD in American History and teach at the undergraduate level.

### **Suggested Further Reading**

If you enjoy my lectures and would like to know more about the culture and conflicts of antebellum America than I would strongly suggest reading these books.

- *"Battle Cry of Freedom"* by James McPherson
- *"The Field of Blood"* by Joanne B. Freeman
- *"The Impending Crisis"* by David M. Potter
- *"American Transcendentalism"* by Phillip F. Gura
- *"Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men"* by Eric Foner
- *"To Purge This Land With Blood"* by Stephen B. Oates
- *"What Hath God Wrought"* by Daniel Walker Howe
- *"Frederick Douglass"* by David W. Blight