

Before the Storm: America from 1815-1850 Mick Chantler, Instructor
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America experienced more changes in these thirty-five years than earlier societies did in two or three centuries. Great cities sprung up in the east, vast new farmlands in the west were opened to provide opportunities for millions of enterprising pioneers, and common, ordinary folk came to see “the good life” as theirs for the taking. All this came at a price: Native Americans were pushed out of their traditional hunting lands, the forests east of the Mississippi were largely destroyed, and a brutal slave empire grew up in the Southern states. It was an exciting—and tragic—era. In this lecture course, we will trace the impact of several key players in this dizzying drama: Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, James K. Polk, Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph W. Emerson.

Week One: Culture and Politics in Tocqueville’s America

In every sense imaginable, our young nation underwent a profound transformation during the years between the War of 1812 and the end of the Mexican War. During what might be called America’s national adolescence, our country stretched its domains all the way to the Pacific. Doubling their numbers every twenty years, the American people dreamed of a new spiritual and material order. Anything—and everything—seemed possible. Their economy, fueled by revolutionary technologies like the railroad and telegraph, grew at a startling rate. The Churches were rocked by raucous evangelical fervor, and a radically new democratic ethos transformed the old politics of the Founding Era. In our opening talk, we will discuss how the “torch was passed” from the Revolutionary generation to a new breed of restless, ambitious, and often ruthless men.

Week Two: Andrew Jackson—Man of the People or Genocidal Savage?

At Andrew Jackson’s first inauguration, hundreds of bearded, buckskin-clad frontiersmen trashed the White House while celebrating the election of one of their own to the Presidency. The 1828 election was portrayed by Jackson’s followers as evidence of the common people’s right to choose a President. No longer were Virginia aristocrats and northern bankers dominating national politics. Old class hierarchies were breaking down. Property requirements for voting were gradually eliminated. Newer, younger, and less affluent voters fervently supported General Jackson. In this lecture, we will delve into the colorful and sometimes horrifying career of America’s first populist chief executive.

Week Three: “Star of the West”—Henry Clay and the Rise of American Nationalism
Historians consider Henry Clay—Abraham Lincoln’s ‘beau ideal’ of a statesman—to be one of the four or five most influential Americans of the nineteenth century. A spirited

“war-hawk” in 1812, Clay devoted the last years of his life to keeping America at peace. He vigorously opposed President Polk’s Mexican War as an immoral land grab by America’s “slavocracy,” and in his last act of statesmanship he helped to craft the Compromise of 1850, which bought the country a temporary hiatus during its march toward civil war. He was an advocate of robust government involvement in the economy through high tariffs, a national bank, and government sponsored “internal improvements.” In this talk, we will examine the political career of a man who worked tirelessly to hold the fledgling nation together during an extremely stressful period of fragmentation.

Week Four: James K. Polk and the Conquest of Mexico

Dark Horse candidate James Polk rode Manifest Destiny all the way to the White House. A Tennessee Democrat and a slaveholder, Polk effectively harnessed the American people’s insatiable land hunger with a jingoistic outpouring of pugnacious nationalism to win for himself the highest political prize. In this class we will examine how Polk cleverly (if utterly unjustifiably) maneuvered the nation into a very avoidable war with Mexico. In so doing, Polk nearly doubled the size of our adolescent nation, and most importantly seized the greatest prize of all, the Golden State of California.

Week Five: Frederick Douglass and the Abolitionist Movement

Former slave Frederick Douglass was unquestionably the most important African American of the nineteenth century, and arguably one of our nation's most gifted orators. Born into bondage in Maryland, young Frederick escaped to the North at the age of twenty, and went on to become the foremost Black spokesman for emancipation. His career as an anti-slavery agitator spans over thirty years, and in the process he became one of the most respected—and reviled—figures of his times. As a lecturer on the abolitionist circuit, he probably reached more listeners than any other figure of his age, Lincoln included. In this class we will dive into this towering figure who astounded bigoted whites North and South with his mastery of the language, knowledge of the Bible and Shakespeare, and ability to stir his audiences to deep emotions.

Week Six: Rebels With a Cause—Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson

Of the many Americans who turned away in disgust at the developments in politics and society during this era, none did so more elegantly than Henry David Thoreau and his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Scientists, nature lovers, philosophers, and writers, these two men laid out an appealing alternative to the path that most of their countrymen embraced with such gusto. In their essays and lectures, the two men attacked traditional Protestant theology, consumer materialism, slavery, and politics in erudite terms that still resonate today. In this final lecture, we will trace the careers of these two maverick thinkers.