

## National Identity in Van Buren's America

### Witness Tree Project Seminar, Spring 2015 HPSS 732-01 [in conjunction with FURN 2451]

"The thoughtful framers of our Constitution legislated for our country as they found it. Looking upon it with the eyes of statesmen and patriots, they saw all the sources of rapid and wonderful prosperity; but they saw also that various habits, opinions, and institutions peculiar to the various portions of so vast a region were deeply fixed."

--Van Buren, *Inauguration Address*, 1837

"America is an empty country"

--Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

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### Course Philosophy

The Witness Tree Project is a curricular initiative involving Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and the National Park Service (NPS). Witness trees are long-standing trees that have "witnessed" key events, trends, and people in American history. The Project arranges for a fallen witness tree to be shipped from a national historic site to RISD, where, in a joint history seminar and furniture studio, students interpret the history the tree witnessed and make relevant objects from the tree's wood. In addition to classroom study, the Project variously involves field trips, guest lectures, exhibitions of students' objects, and other events that highlight the significance of material culture, landscape, and design in learning about American history. Study in the seminar will be integral to work in the furniture studio and vice versa; assignments in both courses are intended to complement one another.

In this sixth year of the Witness Tree Project, we will work with an historic mulberry tree from the Martin Van Buren National Historic Site in Kinderhook, NY. Van Buren, the eighth President of the United States, first emerged as a national politician after the War of 1812, during a time of great change, from an industrial revolution to the acquisition of new territories. It was also a time of great anxiety, especially about issues of equality, citizenship, and the nature of American society. We will use study of the Van Buren Site and its history as a means to think about national identity in a nation where such identity was neither fixed nor clear.

### The Role of the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences at RISD

This course is offered by the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences (HPSS) at RISD. HPSS is a multidisciplinary department whose faculty members teach and conduct research in a range of fields across the humanities and social sciences, including American studies, anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. The coming together of such disparate fields in one department represents the cutting-edge of scholarship and provides a unique and rich learning experience in which you may readily learn and compare traditional disciplinary approaches to understanding the world (anthropology, history, philosophy), as well as explore newer, interdisciplinary fields of knowledge (e.g. gender and sexuality, media studies, race and ethnicity). Studying in HPSS will enable you to develop

your imagination and independence of thought, your ability to approach issues and problems from different viewpoints, and your communication skills --qualities integral to the creative work of any artist.

### The Role of Liberal Arts at RISD

HPSS is one of three departments (alongside History of Art and Visual Culture and Literary Arts and Studies) in RISD's Division of Liberal Arts. At RISD, the liberal arts are integral to the process of becoming an accomplished artist or designer. Creativity depends on curiosity, empathy, and communication—a desire to explore and share an understanding about the world in which we live. In fact, the word “liberal” in liberal arts comes from the Latin *liber*, meaning “free,” and it is meant to convey that learning about culture, history, and philosophy can liberate the mind and thus provide the foundation for truly imaginative and innovative work. Liberal Arts classes are intended to shape fundamental aspects of your vocation by instilling in you a lifelong curiosity about the world, enhancing your capacity to analyze situations and act on ideas with independence and confidence, and enabling you to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts.

### **Course Requirements and Expectations**

#### Readings

Ted Widmer, *Martin Van Buren*. Times Books, 2004. ISBN 978-0805069228 (hardcover, \$17.49).

Susan Schulten, *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century*. U. of Chicago Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0226103969 (paper, \$23.60).

Jill Lepore, *A is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States*. Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 978-0375704086 (paper, \$11.62).

...And articles from JSTOR and online sources, as indicated below.

#### Evaluation

The following factors will determine your final grade:

- Attendance and Participation 10%\*
- Translation Assignment 10%
- Mapping Assignment 20%
- Research Paper Literature Review 20%
- Research Paper 40%

*\*You are required to attend all classes, no excuses. The course meets only once a week, which makes missing a class a significant gap in your learning. Please note that the field trip, on March 9th is essential; you are expected to travel with the class to Kinderhook and to be prepared for a full day (12-13 hours).*

#### Grading Policies

- Grades will be based on a traditional A-F scale, where “C” equals “meeting the basic requirements of the course.” Everyone starts with an assumed C and goes up or down from there as they complete the coursework. Since this is a collaborative class Dale Broholm and I will do the grading together.
- All assignments, exams, etc. not completed by the last day of class will receive an F and be factored into the final grade, unless you have made other arrangements with me.

- Plagiarism is a serious offence and will result in an automatic F for the assignment and may warrant further judicial action. Be sure that you understand what constitutes plagiarism before you begin an assignment.

### **Class Meeting Schedule**

NOTE: All class meetings will be in a seminar discussion format. It is understood, however, that all seminar content will function as an integral part of students' work in the studio and vice versa. Crossover discussion, mutual insight, and collaborative activity will enhance the topic outline presented here.

#### I. Considering National Identity

Feb 16 Opening

Martin Van Buren, First Inaugural Address, 1837 - <http://www.inaugural.senate.gov/swearing-in/address/address-by-martin-van-buren-1837>

Feb 23 Biography

Ted Widmer, *Martin Van Buren*

March 2 Theory

Alexis De Tocqueville, "Principal Causes which Tend to Maintain a Democratic Republic in the United States," Vol. I, Chapter 17, *Democracy in America*, 1835 - [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/1\\_ch17.htm](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/1_ch17.htm)

#### **March 2 Translation Assignment Due (2-3 pages and a made-object)**

Contextualize and summarize a key point in Van Buren's First Inaugural Address in the form of a 2-3-page paper and in the form of an object.

March 9 Field

Day-long trip to Lindenwald, Van Buren's home & farm in Kinderhook, New York  
Start reading Susan Schulten, *Mapping the Nation*

March 16 Concept

Susan Schulten, *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century*

#### **March 16 Mapping Assignment Due**

Map Lindenwald, based on your interpretations from the class field trip. Maps may be visual, textual, 3-D or 2-D; all maps must include at least three "layers" of information. The idea is to convey what you learned about the site, using your careful attention to both its environment and your experience of it.

March 23 – No Class: Spring Break

#### II. Constructing National Identity

March 30 Language

Jill Lepore, *A is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States*

#### **March 30 Research Topic due (1 page)**

As a start to your research paper for the semester, you must choose an historical issue related to our study of American identities and describe the exact question you will consider.

#### April 6 History

Washington Irving "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) - <http://www.bartleby.com/195/4.html>

James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823), Chapters 1-3 -

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG02/COOPER/chapters.html>

Thomas Cole, "Genesee Scenery (Mountain Landscape with Waterfall)", 1837 -

[http://risdmuseum.org/art\\_design/objects/2475\\_genesee\\_scenery\\_mountain\\_landscape\\_with\\_waterfall](http://risdmuseum.org/art_design/objects/2475_genesee_scenery_mountain_landscape_with_waterfall)

#### April 13 Character

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (1837) - <http://www.emersoncentral.com/selfreliance.htm>

Thomas Augst, "Composing the Moral Senses: Emerson and the Politics of Character in Nineteenth-Century America." *Political Theory*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Feb., 1999), pp. 85-120. JSTOR

#### **April 13 Research Paper Literature Review Due (3-4 pages)**

Learning how to make an historical argument requires not only a thorough understanding of the possible variables influencing past events but the ability to convincingly persuade a reader that your understanding is the "most true." What sources will you use to make your argument? How will your position add to the scholarly conversation (likely) already underway? As a second step in your research, you must survey and summarize the relevant scholarly literature on the topic.

### III. Challenging National Identity

#### April 20 Scandal, Humbug, and Masks

Kirsten E. Wood, "One Woman so Dangerous to Public Morals": Gender and Power in the Eaton Affair," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer, 1997), pp. 237-275. JSTOR

Benjamin Reiss, "P. T. Barnum, Joice Heth and Antebellum Spectacles of Race," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Mar., 1999), pp. 78-107. JSTOR

Mary Cathryn Cain, "The Art and Politics of Looking White: Beauty Practice among White Women in Antebellum America," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 27-50. JSTOR

#### April 27 Citizenship, Inequality, and Protest

The Trail of Tears, 1830-39 - <http://www.chokeee.org/AboutTheNation/History/TrailofTears.aspx>

The Amistad Revolt, 1839 - <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/amistad/AMISTD.HTM>

The Dorr Rebellion, 1842, Providence Library - <http://library.providence.edu/dps/projects/dorr/>

#### May 4 Religion, Localism, and Disunion

John L. Brooke, "Cultures of Nationalism, Movements of Reform, and the Composite-Federal Polity: From Revolutionary Settlement to Antebellum Crisis," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 2009): 1-33. JSTOR

#### **May 7 Research Paper Draft Due (8-12 pages)**

Make an historical argument about the diverse formations of American identity between 1815-1862.

#### May 11 Final Critique

May 15 Final Research Papers Due (my office: Division of Liberal Arts)