# *Legendary Americans*

*Dr. W. Caleb McDaniel*

*Spring 2016, Thursdays, 2:30-5:00pm*

Welcome to a new semester of FWIS 173 at Rice University! You probably have some questions about this course. Below, I'll do my best to answer them. If you have a question that you don't see answered, feel free to email me or stop by my office, preferably during office hours.* You can also stop by to chat about anything that comes up in this course; I'd love to meet and get to know you better.

* My email address is `caleb.mcdaniel@rice.edu`. I'm also on Twitter as `@wcaleb`. My office is in Humanities 330, and you can find me there on Fridays from 2 to 4 p.m.

## *What is this course about?*

Some historical figures loom larger than others in American memory and popular culture. Harriet Tubman, George Washington, Sacagawea: these are names that you probably have known for as long as you can remember. But why do these figures matter so much to Americans? Are the stories we tell about them to each other and to our children historically accurate? If so, how do historians go about documenting their lives, and if not, what do the inaccuracies, exaggerations, emphases, or omissions in their legends tell us about different moments in American history? What function do legendary Americans play in our society and politics? Do we need them, or would we be better off without them?

These are some of the questions we will consider this semester. By consulting scholarly articles and books as well as historical documents and cultural artifacts, we will attempt to separate what we can establish about legendary Americans from the myths that have often become associated with them. At the same time, we will consider why and how "legendary Americans" have become iconic and explore the relations between history, biography, politics, and collective memory.


Figure 1: This isn't what I mean by "legendary." But do Suit Up! It's going to be a great semester.

## *What is a FWIS class?*

As a Freshman Writing-Intensive Seminar, this course has several general objectives. As outlined in the FWIS program's mission statement, you will:

1. Enhance your understanding of the central place of writing and communication in the learning process and in academic life.
2. Learn strategies for analyzing, synthesizing, and responding to college-level readings.

3. Improve your ability to communicate correctly and effectively in writing and in speech, taking into account audience and purpose.
4. Become comfortable with writing as a process and learn strategies—for instance, prewriting, outlining, and revision—for working through that process.
5. Learn appropriate use of the work of others, and, where necessary, specific practices of citation.
6. Learn to articulate oral arguments and to respond productively to arguments of others in formal presentations and in class discussion.

In addition to these FWIS-specific goals, this course will also teach you the basic methods historians use to learn about the past and why their work matters today. You'll learn to formulate, defend, and communicate your own positions on contested historical questions while taking into account plausible alternative points of view.

## *What should I be able to do by semester's end?*

In my view, the learning objectives provided by the FWIS program can be synthesized into four, over-arching *capabilities* that this course will help you develop.*

* These four points are important—as in, *really* important. So read carefully and reread often.

- **Position Taking:** Take complex, original positions that derive logically from available evidence and account for other plausible positions.
- **Audience Awareness:** Persuade or inform varying audiences based on an awareness of their expectations, prior knowledge, and possible beliefs.
- **Effective Communication:** Convey your ideas verbally with correct grammar, clear organization, fluid style, and appropriate degrees of emphasis.
- **Self-Reflection:** Honestly identify areas for improvement in your own understanding, and then execute and evaluate strategies for addressing them.

Developing these capabilities may sound deceptively simple; in reality, each one implies a variety of other habits of thinking that will be spelled out in class. On the other hand, some of these objectives may mystify you, but that is to be expected at the beginning of a course. Your aim this semester should be to learn better what these four things mean and how to do them. Read them often. Post them in your room. *Make them your mantras.*

## *What are we going to be doing, and when?*

At the beginning of the semester, I will create a Google Doc for each student and share yours with you, so that both you and I can edit it. All of your assigned work this semester will be added to this individual document, and it is also the place where I will give you feedback on your work.

### *Assignment Overview*

For homework, you'll be doing two things *every* week:

1. **Completing writing assignments in your Google Doc.** I will give you a writing assignment to complete outside of class that will be due *every* Wednesday by 11:59 p.m. You will complete this assignment in your Doc. Length and type of assignments will vary but will typically not exceed 1-2 single-spaced pages a week. The most common assignment will be to respond to specific questions about the readings that I will post each week on the course blog. Sometimes, instead of a topical prompt, you will be given a hypothetical audience or purpose for writing and asked to write something appropriate to that context. I will sometimes give you writing assignments to do in class; they will also be completed in your Doc, so whenever possible, bring a computer that can edit Docs with you.* Finally, I may sometimes pose a direct question to you when commenting on your writing; consider it part of your assignment to reply to such queries.
2. **Completing reading assignments.** Each week you will have assigned reading to do before coming to class, and often you will need to complete it before turning in your writing assignment. Expect to do a large amount of reading in this course (from 100-200 pages per week). But don't be scared or intimidated by the reading load. I will give you reading questions, as well as tips on how to read effectively and how to discuss a book in class. Part of our class time each week will be devoted to discussion about the readings you have done, so come to the seminar ready to share your thoughts about what you've read. Read the assigned books and articles with the goal of being able to discuss their major points and arguments; your goal is not total recall of all the specific facts and information in the text.

* If you do not have a computer or mobile device that you can bring to class, that's okay, but please let me know ASAP so we can make alternate arrangements on days when we work on Docs in class.

Note that the writing and reading assignments will *always* be related. You should read with the writing assignments in mind, and your writing must incorporate and be informed by things you have read. It is absolutely crucial, therefore, both to do the readings *and*

to put them to use. Anything that I tell you about in class or give you to read outside of class becomes part of the "available evidence" that you will draw on to take positions and complete writing assignments.*

There are no mid-terms; that means you can expect your basic workload to remain steady every week throughout the semester. I will announce and explain all writing and reading assignments using the course blog at `http://legendary.blogs.rice.edu`.

There will be one final assignment which differs from these earlier assignments. At the end of the semester, our class will work together to prepare a group, oral presentation about "legendary Americans" that we will deliver to an actual group of K-12 students from off campus. Each of you will speak for about 3 to 5 minutes as part of this presentation. You will have an opportunity to practice the presentation and receive feedback from me and your classmates before we deliver it to the off-campus students. More information will be distributed in class.

* Pop quiz: where have you seen the phrase "available evidence" on this syllabus before? Why is it important to have a grasp of all the available evidence?

*Schedule Overview*

*January 14: Introduction*

After class, you should work on acquiring copies of the following books, listed in the order we will read them. They are available at the campus bookstore and are also available for 2-hour checkout at the Fondren Library reserves desk.

- Francois Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (paperback, Penguin, 2007). ISBN: 0143111930
- James E. Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution* (paperback, Oxford, 2005). ISBN: 0195163508
- Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (paperback, Hill and Wang, 2005). ISBN: 0809077388
- Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (paperback, Oxford, 2008), ISBN: 0195341198
- Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance–A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (paperback, Vintage Books, 2011). ISBN: 0307389243

All other required readings will be made available electronically on OWL-Space.

*January 21: Sacagawea*

"Sacagawea" entry in American National Biography (Rice only)

Thomas P. Slaughter, "Porivo's Story," in *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections on Men and Wilderness* (New York, 2003), pp. 86-113 (available on OWL-Space)

Donna Barbie, "Sacajawea: The Making of a Myth," in *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*, ed. Theda Perdue (New York, 2001), pp. 60–76 (available on OWL-Space)

Scott E. Casper, "Revising the National Pantheon: The American National Biography and Early American History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (April 2001), pp. 449-463 (Rice only)


Figure 2: Sacagawea on a U.S. dollar coin. What do the image and the words around her convey about this woman?

*January 28: George Washington*

Francois Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2006), pp. 1-145, 233-239 (required book)

*February 4: Davy Crockett*

"Davy Crockett" entry in American National Biography (Rice only) and Wikipedia

Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, "King of the Wild Frontier," in *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory* (New York, 2001), pp. 230-253 (available on OWL-Space)

Margaret J. King, "The Recycled Hero: Walt Disney's Davy Crockett," in *Davy Crockett: The Man, the Legend, the Legacy, 1786-1986*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville, 1985), pp. 137-158 (available on OWL-Space)


Figure 3: The poster for the Disney movie that defined Davy Crockett for a generation.

*February 11: Davy Crockett*

James E. Crisp, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other Mysteries of the Texas Revolution* (New York, 2005), entire (required book)

*February 18: Pocahontas*

Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (paperback, Hill and Wang, 2012), entire (required book).

*February 25: Contemporary Debates*

James W. Loewen, "Handicapped by History: The Process of Hero-Making," from *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York, 1995), pp. 9-27 (available on OWL-Space)

Sam Wineburg, "Goodbye, Columbus," Smithsonian.com

Michael Frisch, "American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in Empirical Iconography," in *Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989), pp. 1130-1155 (Rice only)

Stephanie Simon, "The Culture Wars' New Front: U.S. History Classes in Texas," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 July 2009

Figure 4: "Harriet Tubman" by William H. Johnson (ca. 1945).

*March 3: NO CLASS*

*March 10: Harriet Tubman*

Milton C. Sernett, *Harriet Tubman: Myth, Memory, and History* (Durham, 2007), pp. 1-104 (available on OWL-Space)

Jean M. Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and Life Stories* (Madison, WI, 2003), pp. 133-172 (available on OWL-Space)

*Optional:* Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869 edition on Google Books), pp. 1-53

*March 17: John Henry*

Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of an American Legend* (New York, 2006), entire (required book)

*March 24: Rosa Parks*

Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance–A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (paperback, Vintage Books, 2011), pages to be determined.


Figure 5: A picture of Willy that I snapped on November 25, 2014.

*March 31: NO CLASS*

*April 7: William Marsh Rice*

Complete the packet of readings about William Marsh Rice distributed on OWL-Space.

*April 14 and 21: Oral Presentations*

We will rehearse our oral presentations on April 14, in preparation for our final presentations to area students on April 21.

*May 4: Final Day of Exams*

All assignments must be turned in and completed by 5 p.m. Failure to complete ALL of the course assignments from throughout the semester by this time will result in a failing grade for the course.

*How will my learning be assessed and graded?*

To answer that question, I need to distinguish between *assessments* and *grades*.

**Assessments** are judgments about how well you are progressing towards mastering the learning objectives of our course. Both you *and* I should constantly be making informal assessments of your learning throughout the semester. I will share my assessments with you in several forms, including informal feedback on your Google Doc and a progress report roughly every three weeks. These progress reports, based on a holistic review of everything in your Google Doc, will focus exclusively on how far you have progressed to *mastery* of the four capabilities I discussed on page 2. I will also frequently invite you to share your self-assessments with me.

Anything you produce for this class—comments in class, text in your Google Doc, replies to my comments on the Doc—may be relevant to an assessment of your progress as a learner. I pledge to make sure that all assignments relate to the learning objectives. Also note that in this class, all students are "presumed ignorant until proven understanding." That is, I can only base my assessment of your learning on specific evidence. Work on *showing* that you understand instead of *telling* me that you do.

**Grades** are formal certifications of your overall performance in a course, represented symbolically with letters that also correspond to numbers that the Registrar uses to calculate your GPA. I will only be giving you one of these, at the end of the semester, as required by the University. The grade also serves, in a sense, as a final assessment, giving you information about what you need to continue to work on that you can take with you into future courses.

At the end of the semester, if you have demonstrated mastery of all four of the main capabilities for the course—*position taking*, *audience awareness*, *effective communication*, and *self-reflection*—you will receive an A; if you demonstrate mastery of three, you will receive a B; two of the four, C. If you have mastered fewer than two capabilities, but you did complete all of the assignments in the course by the final deadline, you will receive a D. I reserve the right, but am under no obligation, to add a "plus" to your letter grade if you were close to mastering another area or showed significant improvement during the course.

**If you fail to complete all of the weekly writing assignments by the final deadline of May 4, I will report your grade for the course as an F.** I strongly advise you to keep up with your assignments from week to week and don't develop a backlog of things to complete.

*Wait . . . I only get one grade?*

Yes, but remember that a *grade* is not the only kind of *assessment*. I will be giving you feedback throughout the semester about how well you are advancing towards mastery of our learning objectives. Because of the regular progress reports, you will always have a sense of where you stand.

I will also be giving you a detailed rubric that describes, for each of the capabilities we are working on, what *emerging practice*, *developing competence*, and *mastery* look like. A draft of the rubric will be circulated and discussed in the first three weeks of class, and it will be finalized by the end of Week 5.

You should be making self-assessments of your own learning, too. After each of the formal progress reports I give you, I invite you to let me know if you believe that there is some relevant improvement in your work that I have missed. If done in good faith, such a dialogue between us can help clarify my expectations, reveal misunderstandings, and—most importantly—make new learning possible.*

This approach to assessment may feel unfamiliar to you. You and I both are more used to grades based on "points," "averages," "curves," and "percentages." In this course, I've broken with that approach to grading because of several frustrations:

- Point-based grading schemes often end up assessing things that are only loosely related to your learning history, such as punctuality or talking a lot in class.
- Course grades based on averages of assignment grades often penalize early poor performance (which is to be expected when you are learning something new) or prematurely reward early good performance (which, as subsequent struggles may prove, often gives only circumstantial evidence of true understanding).†
- A big red number or letter grade often distracts students from the more important, substantive feedback that follows.

This semester, let's work together to see if a different kind of grading and assessing is possible—one centered wholly on communicating with each other about how much you are learning and what you still need to work on. The sorts of capabilities this class is designed to teach are complex, and like most complex things, judging them requires the sort of wisdom that comes mainly from experience and practice, as well as the patience to acknowledge and celebrate signs of individual improvement.‡

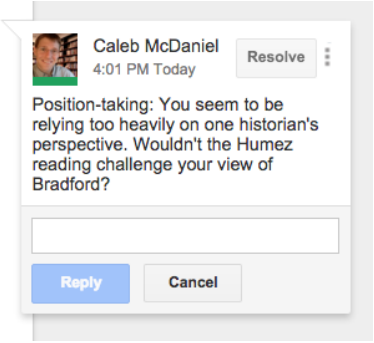


Figure 6: An example of an assessment, which I hope is more informative than "84.7 percent."

* Throughout the semester, I am willing to read and seriously consider any self-assessment of your work (that is, to include it as part of what I assess) so long as it is guided by the rubric and the learning objectives. Of course, final judgments about your mastery of a particular area are my responsibility.

† If you proceed to mastery of all learning objectives, shouldn't you get an "A" even if you didn't "get it" early on? Conversely, if you *seem* to "get it" early on, but do not consistently demonstrate mastery, shouldn't that be reflected in your final grade?

‡ My philosophy about assessment and grades has been shaped by leading pedagogy researchers Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, whose book *Understanding by Design* develops the rationale more fully.

### *What happens if I miss a class or turn in something late?*

If you miss a class, you will learn less. If you turn in something late, you will receive little or no feedback from me on that assignment, because I have arranged my schedule around the deadlines. If you don't turn things in at all, I won't have any basis on which to assess your progress towards the learning objectives and no evidence that you have mastered them (which, from a grading perspective, is the same as not having mastered them).

### *Should I Read the Fine Print?*

Yes. From the CWOVC: "You are encouraged to make appointments with the peer consultants at the Center for Written, Oral, and Visual Communication for your assignments in this course. These consultants do not proofread or edit your work, but they will provide feedback on topics such as the organization of your paper or presentation, the coherence of your argument, appropriate sentence structure, and grammatical errors. You can make an appointment at the Center's website: `http://cwovc.rice.edu`."

If you have a documented disability that will impact your work in this class, please contact me outside of class to discuss accommodations confidentially. You will also need to contact and register with the Disability Support Services Office in the Allen Center.

Plagiarism and intellectual dishonesty are violations of the Rice Honor Code and will be reported to the Honor Council. Plagiarism is defined by the Honor Council as "quoting, paraphrasing, or otherwise using another's words or ideas as one's own without properly crediting the source. ... The Honor Council assumes that, unless otherwise credited, all work submitted by the student is intended to be considered as his or her own work. Any time a student draws particularly or generally from another's work, the source should be properly credited."

Specific information about how to credit the ideas and words of other writers will be provided to you in class, but I, like the Honor Council, assume that all the work you submit is your own original work and that doing otherwise is a form of intellectual dishonesty. Because this is a seminar, some of the work you do in this course will require you to collaborate with other students, but since I will make clear when it is okay to work with other students, you should assume that in all other cases you must complete your work independently. If any of the course requirements are unclear, students are responsible for coming to me directly for clarification. For more information on these policies, you can also consult `http://honor.rice.edu`.