

**HPSS 732-01 Passion for the Public Good: Debating America**  
**[in conjunction with FURN 2451]**  
**Spring 2018**

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*"There must be a positive Passion for the public good, the public Interest, Honour, Power and Glory, established in the Minds of the People, or there can be no Republican Government, nor any real Liberty: and this public Passion must be Superiour to all private Passions."*

--John Adams, Letter to Mercy Warren, April 16, 1776

**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 eighth iteration of the Witness Tree Project, we will work with diverse trees from the Adams National Historical Park in Quincy, Massachusetts. The Adams family was the first political family of the United States, with four generations serving the developing nation as presidents, statesmen, social reformers, educators, and historians. We will explore key issues faced by selected Adamses in their times: women's rights (Abigail Adams); the limits of free speech (John Adams); and public recognition of slavery (John Quincy Adams). Each of the issues will be prompted by your engagement with relevant contextual background in the times of each Adams. You will then research the contours of the same issue in the present day, bringing relevant content from the news, scholarship, and public discourse into class discussion and, finally, debate. The comparative movement between past and present will explore the nature of historical inquiry for contemporary understanding and directly inform your work in the Witness Tree Project studio. Essentially, as the Adamses served as witnesses to their own times, you will serve as witnesses to yours.

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

##### Required:

Joseph Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001. ISBN 9780393311334.

William Lee Miller, *Arguing about Slavery: John Quincy Adams and the Great Battle in the United States Congress*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. ISBN 9780679768449.

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

##### Recommended:

Margaret A. Hogan, ed., *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010. ISBN 9780674057050.

#### Evaluation

##### Basics: 20%

*Class Participation: Attending, Reading, and Speaking*. You are required to attend all classes and fully participate, 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 February 29th is essential; you are expected to travel with the class to Quincy for the full day.

##### Writing 40%

*Three Position Papers*. You must complete three formal writing assignments in which you take a position on an issue and defend it using class readings. Each paper should consist of a formal written argument (usually a claim of fact, value, or policy) of your choosing. No poetry, creative writing, or experimental narratives will be accepted. Each paper should be 5-6 pages.

##### Debating 40%

*Research and Participation in Oral Debates*. At the end of our study of each topic, we will engage in a formal debate. Debating teams will change throughout the semester; everyone must stand up and speak/debate during the semester at least once. Otherwise, you must participate in the preparation necessary for the debate, which will involve a written research summary, as well as discussion of strategies. Your debate grade will depend on the quality of your debate preparation in the research summary and your coherence, persuasiveness, and poise during actual debates.

#### 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

### Introduction

#### **Feb. 19 Republic of Letters: Debate, Discourse, and Civic Virtue**

Reading: website for Adams National Historical Park - <http://www.nps.gov/adam/index.htm>

#### **Feb 26 Fieldtrip**

Reading: Joseph Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams*

Note: We will spend the day at Adams National Historical Park, in Quincy, MA. Details TBA.

### Gender Inequality

#### **March 5 Remember the Ladies, 1776**

Readings:

Elaine Forman Crane, “Political Dialogue and the Spring of Abigail's Discontent.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Oct., 1999), pp. 745-774. (JSTOR)

*Letters of Abigail and John Adams* (Selections), Adams Family Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society website - <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/letter/>

1. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 27 November 1775
2. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776
3. John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 April 1776
4. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 7 May 1776
5. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 14 August 1776
6. John Adams to Abigail Adams, 25 August 1776
7. John Adams to Abigail Adams, 11 August 1777
8. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 30 June 1778

See also: Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 27 April 1776 -

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0257>

#### **March 12 Debate Prep**

Issue: Women in American Politics

“Women’s Voice Remains Faint in Politics.” Editorial Board, New York Times, September 13, 2017.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/opinion/nyc-city-council-women.html?emc=eta1&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/opinion/nyc-city-council-women.html?emc=eta1&_r=0)

Molly Bangs, “Women’s Underrepresentation in Politics: No, It’s Not Just an Ambition Gap.” The Century Foundation, September 21, 2017. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/womens-underrepresentation-politics-no-not-just-ambition-gap/>

Stephen T. Leonard and Joan C. Tronto, "The Genders of Citizenship." *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Feb., 2007), pp. 33-46. (JSTOR).

### **March 19 Debate**

\*Women in American Politics Paper Due March 25

### **March 26 Spring Break**

### **Freedom of Speech**

### **April 2 Alien and Sedition Acts, 1798**

Readings:

Alien and Sedition Acts, the Virginia Resolution, and the Kentucky Resolution -  
[http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject\\_menus/alsedact.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/alsedact.asp)

James Morton Smith, "President John Adams, Thomas Cooper, and Sedition: A Case Study in Suppression." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Dec., 1955), pp. 438-465. [JSTOR]

Marc Lendler, "Equally Proper at All Times and at All Times Necessary": Civility, Bad Tendency, and the Sedition Act. *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 419-444. [JSTOR]

### **April 9 Debate Prep**

Issue: Free Speech or Harmful Speech

"What Does Free Speech Mean?" United States Courts. <http://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/about-educational-outreach/activity-resources/what-does>

Lee Rowland, "We All Need to Defend Speech We Hate." ACLU. April 25, 2017.

<https://www.aclu.org/blog/free-speech/we-all-need-defend-speech-we-hate?redirect=blog/speak-freely/we-all-need-defend-speech-we-hate>

David Shih, "Hate Speech and the Misnomer of 'The Marketplace of Ideas.'" May 3, 2017. NPR.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/05/03/483264173/hate-speech-and-the-misnomer-of-the-marketplace-of-ideas>

### **April 16 Debate**

\*Free Speech or Harmful Speech Paper Due April 22

### **Confronting Racism**

### **April 23 Voicing Abolition, 1835-1845**

Readings:

William Lee Miller, *Arguing about Slavery: John Quincy Adams and the Great Battle in the United States Congress*

### **April 30 Debate Prep**

Issue: Racism and Public Memory

Alex Carp, "Slavery and the American University." *New York Review of Books*, February 7, 2018.

<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/02/07/slavery-and-the-american-university/>

James Chase Sanchez and Kristen R. Moore, "Reappropriating Public Memory." *Present Tense*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2015. <http://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-5/reappropriating-public-memory-racism-resistance-and-erasure-of-the-confederate-defenders-of-charleston-monument/>

Dean Saitta, "The Archeology of Public Memory and Civic Identity." Blog post, *Planetizen*, August 21, 2017.  
<https://www.planetizen.com/node/94378/archaeology-public-memory-and-civic-identity>

**May 7 Debate**

**Closing**

**May 14 Final Critique**

**May 18 Final Office Hours**

\*Racism and Public Memory Paper Due